



A NOVEL

Box Shaped Heart

LAURA S. FOX

Box Shaped Heart

By

Laura S. Fox

Copyright © 2019 Laura S. Fox

All Rights Reserved

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this published work may be reproduced, stored, in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means without the prior permission of the copyright owner and the publisher.

Box Shaped Heart is a work of fiction. Any names, places, events, characters and everything else mentioned in the book are the result of the author's imagination, and are purely used for fictitious purposes. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, places, events and everything else is a pure coincidence.

M/M Erotica

Intended for Mature Audiences Only

This book contains graphic depictions of sexual intercourse and it is not meant for readers who are less than 18 years of age.

Acknowledgments

This amazing trip would not have been possible without my generous patrons

J, Z'Gameron, Nina, Maria, Mark, Brandon, Joseph Sh, Green TreeMan, Tai mau, Adam, Paul, Deidre, Ron P, Craig, Sévérine, J S, ExactoGirl, Janine, Natalie, deedee, Michaela, Maximilian, Jesus, Julia, Curtis, Aashaa_13, Theresa, Jalana, Sean, Timothy, Zsu, Doug, Leyton, Jared, Daniel, Sebastiano, MrTimTams009, Nicki, Caleb, Crystal, SARI, Hunter, Matthew, Robyn, David, Kevin, Kyle, Rachel, Tisha, DJ, Mayur, Muhammad, AC, redaerara, James, P Ber, Leanne, William, Thomas, Sarah, Tw, Ethan, Doug C, Earnest, Gicquel, Darryl, Jirina, Peethree, Kate, Derrick, T Ko, Ron C, Nash, EurghSireAwe, Away Throw, Katie, M D, David S, Anthony, Joseph St, Shanon, Erin, Anthony T, Ilze, Laura, Joshua, John, Vanessa, Judith, Candace, Evette, Todd, Douglas, Cooper, Jeremiah, Higgy, Blake, Murphy, Robert, C P, Chloe, John G, Oja, Jasmine, Tony, McAlister, Greg, Joseph, Lauren, crawfish, Kay, Dick, Chiny, Dan

Chapter One

When had it gotten so hard to do such a simple thing as opening his eyes? Carter had a mind to just bring his hands to his eyelids and push them up with his thumbs. That should have done the trick, if his hands hadn't been just as stubborn to get up as his eyelids.

This is getting ridiculous, he thought to himself, and, just for the sake of running a minimal test, he tried to move his toes.

That's better, the far right one seems to move a little, he thought. Yet, it looked like the little exertion had the power of making him feel very, very tired.

Drifting off the sleep, he had the weird impression that someone was calling for him.

"Mr. Ruskin," a voice with a small annoying lilt to it seemed bent on preventing him from getting his well-deserved sleep. "Mr. Ruskin, you really need to wake up."

Funny thing. His eyelids popped like a can of lager beer on a day in July. Not that it was that pleasant to have his eyelids suddenly listen more to a stranger, than to him. At least now he was awake and the annoying voice was going to stop pestering him.

His eyes landed on a round face with beady eyes full of life.

"Mr. Ruskin, you're awake! I always say that patients need just a little effort to get out of it. Just let me get the doctor. But, first," the woman, who seemed to wear some kind of white bonnet, matched with equally white attire, started to move around, "let me show you something."

At this point, Carter had to admit that curiosity was gnawing at him too badly to stop and think why on Earth he was called Mr. Ruskin. That name sounded familiar, but he was pretty certain it wasn't his. What was his last name? His brain seemed to be all messed up.

The woman returned with a weird looking thing that appeared to have the role to show someone's reflection. Or a mirror, for short. Ha, he could still remember simple things. But what was his last name again?

He examined the snake-shaped handle before raising his eyes to look at it. When he did, all he could manage was:

“Damn!”

That mirror had to be magical, because his reflection mouthing the word ‘damn’ like it was the least desirable word in the English language didn’t belong to him. It did belong to someone, of course, but not to him. And why was this guy staring back at him in such consternation? If there was anyone entitled to feel shocked by the unlikely occurrence that his face was not his anymore, that had to be him.

“Come on, Mr. Ruskin, do not frown. All these little scratches already heal up nicely,” the woman stared at him from one side of the mirror, making Carter think that she somehow looked like a leprechaun. Only that she didn’t wear green, but white overalls.

Wait, wait, wait! His mind screamed at him. He looked around. White walls, white window sills, white door ...

All right. He was going to faint.

“Mr. Ruskin!” the woman called for him from far away, seeming pretty much alarmed.

Well, let her sort this out, Carter thought gloomily, as he drifted away.

The second awakening was not that unpleasant. Carter smoothed down a few creases in the blanket. His hands were moving now, and listening to him, thank heavens, and he didn’t need the nurse – yes, he had gathered that much since he had waked up – to tell him to do this or that. The perspective of living like a puppet on a string, having to obey the squealed orders of an energetic woman, clearly dedicated to her healthcare oriented profession, was making him shudder in pure horror.

“Could you please show me the mirror again, Miss ...?”

Was he supposed to know the nurse’s name? Had he been conscious for even a minute since he had been brought to the hospital? And what the hell could have happened to put him in the hospital, in the first place?

“Oh, you,” the nurse waved one hand, and blushed like she was flattered. “It’s Mrs. Jones, actually, but you can call me Marge. How young did you think I was, Mr. Ruskin?”

He hadn’t exactly thought anything. Marge didn’t seem taken away too much with his lack of response, and dutifully held the mirror.

He inhaled. And exhaled. Instead of his brown hair, the apparition in the mirror had an ash blonde mane styled in a quiff. Damn, he hated that kind of hairstyle. He still wore his brown hair a bit too long for someone in his early 30s, but he didn’t give a damn. Yes, he was pretty damn certain his hair and his eyes were both brown. No, he wasn’t insane. Oh, look, he did remember things. Like, for instance, how he looked. Wait, what if this was some kind of prank, and he was shown not a mirror, but some digital device showing another person’s face just to make fun of him?

He examined the face in the mirror with a critical eye. Well, two critical eyes that were green and mischievous, instead of his dull ordinary brown eyes. Not that there was something wrong with his eyes. His actual eyes. He didn’t even have to wear glasses most of the time. So, his eyes were pretty much in good working order. But this guy was a looker. The kind to appear on covers of magazines. Or maybe not. Maybe except for his perfect face, the rest was flabby and unattractive. He touched his belly, but, no, it didn’t look like the guy currently impersonating him was fat. If anything, he seemed lean to the point of being considered thin. And there went his prank theory. His body could not have been replaced, like his face in the mirror. Which didn’t mean he was fat. Just certainly with a little bit of meat on his bones than this guy who was trying to pass as him. Or who he was trying to pass as. Damn, things were complicated.

But why was this reflection in the mirror familiar? Where had he seen this guy before? His brain was still in auto mode and could not take basic requests.

“Mr. Ruskin, maybe I should ask the doctor, but he said that you seemed fine, if a little tired. All the tests we’ve run on you point out that you’re out of any danger,” the nurse began an apologetic tirade, “and I take it upon myself to let your husband in to see you.”

“Husband?!”

Carter would have dropped the mirror, but he was not the one keeping it. So he just stood there, his mouth agape, staring at Marge in shock. When the hell had he gotten married? And to a guy?! If this was a nightmare, it was pretty damn fucked up.

“He is a wreck, dear,” Marge’s eyes filled with more than gentleness. They were on the point of swimming in tears. “He had been waiting for you to wake up for two days, now. I doubt he caught any sleep.”

“Wait, my husband? Who is my husband?” Carter squealed.

Great, even his voice was annoyingly pleasant. Even now, high pitched and in shock.

“Well, aren’t you a comedy act, dear?” Marge patted him on the arm, as she tried hard not to laugh. “The other Mr. Ruskin, of course. Aron Ruskin.”

Aron Ruskin? A flash of recognition shot up his addled brain, finally catching up with him. He hadn’t spoken to Aron in two whole frigging years.

“Alex!” Aron rushed to his side, squeezing him into a careful hug.

He hadn’t seen Aron in two years, either, besides keeping up with the no talking policy. Always done the best to steer clear out of the places where they could have bumped heads.

“I was so worried, so, so worried,” Aron cradled him into his big arms.

Aron had always been a big guy. Not big in the sense of fat, but well built, with the constitution of an athlete. Many had thought that seeking a career in publishing had

not been the smartest move for him. But Aron loved what he did. And he did take care of his body with the same dedication he did everything else in life.

Right now, he seemed maybe a bit bigger, but maybe it was just because Carter felt so damn small in the guy's huge arms. That he didn't remember. He was not as tall or built like a brick house, how Aron was, but he hadn't never felt so little and puny. Right now, he was like a puppet turned into a favorite toy of a giant. He grunted a little, and Aron pulled himself back right away.

"Oh, so sorry, does it hurt badly, baby?" Aron looked him with concern written all over his handsome face.

"Well, I'm afraid Mr. Ruskin here is a little laggish, after the little bump," Marge supplied right away information. "We will keep him on pain medication, until he recovers a bit more."

"A little bump?" he asked, moving his startled eyes from Aron to Marge and back again.

"Well, it was more than a little bump," Aron said while running his fingers through his short jet black hair. There were a few silvers in there that Carter did not remember. "You got hit by a fire truck."

"Ouch. That must have been unpleasant," Carter murmured.

Marge burst into laughter, something that was reminding him of a funny hedgehog he had once seen in a cartoon. Clearly, he was in a dream. Except for the whole hospital thing, and the fact that he was apparently married to his best friend, it wasn't that much of a nightmare. So he was going to enjoy it, or whatever, just live through it.

"He is such a dear," Marge commented, as soon as she could breathe again from her fit of laughter. "And has such a great sense of humor, doesn't he?" she turned towards Aron.

The man just looked confused.

"Alex? A sense of humor? Sure," he replied, but Carter could tell Aron was not convinced.

Aron's dark eyes were inspecting him now, and Carter felt a bit fidgety under that gaze. It felt like Aron was looking at something holy and perfect. Like he was in love. What a stupid dream. All right. So he was Alex, Aron's husband. Aron and Alex. They sounded like twins. Identical twins, even, although there could not be a more important difference between them, Aron being hard muscles and strong bones everywhere, and Alex almost as light as a feather.

Skinny asshole, Carter thought to himself. Aron's face changed from slightly relieved to averagely worried.

"Can you give him something else for the pain, nurse ...?"

"Ah, call me Marge," the woman replied chirpily. "But he's already drugged enough as he is, the poor thing, we cannot give him anything more, really."

"But he's still in pain," Aron tried to reason with the nurse slash happy sparrow. "Just look at his face, all contorted like that!"

Carter touched his face with his hands. What was Aron droning about? He felt no pain. But he was probably grimacing at the thought of having Aron looking at him with those lovey-dovey eyes. Yeah, he was probably making a face right now, like he had just eaten half a pound of lemons.

"I'm not in pain," he intervened, stopping the little quarrel between Marge and his, gosh, he could not really say it, could he? husband.

"You're not?" Aron looked at him, fairly surprised.

"No. I'm actually quite okay."

"Great! That's great," Aron sighed with relief.

"Well, it is great," Marge chirped in. "The other fellow, the poor thing, is in a terrible condition. He's still in a coma, and the doctor says he is not bound to get up anytime soon. Although, with a comatose patient, one never knows ..."

"What other fellow?" Carter mumbled, feeling cold sweat down his back.

"The other guy who was hit by the same fire truck as you."

What? Were they hiring blind people to be fire truck drivers these days?

“You don’t remember?” Aron looked at him with concern.

His mind was a mess. No, he could not remember. At least, not right now.

“Nurse, please, stop unloading things like that on my husband,” Aron turned towards Marge, feeling a bit embarrassed and extra concerned right now. “He is clearly not well.”

“No, that’s okay,” Carter intervened again. “Who’s the other guy?” he asked.

Aron opened his mouth to say something. The nurse looked at Aron, like she was asking for permission to talk.

“Well, his name is Carter Malis,” Marge finally spoke.

“Carter Malis?!” he almost screamed.

Finally. Now he knew his complete name. Just in case he needed to fill in some registrations or official papers. One just couldn’t walk into the world without a complete name.

“Yes, dear, but please, don’t over exert yourself,” Marge tried to appease him.

“Yes, I know,” Aron looked down, staring at his hands. “What could have been the chances? I haven’t seen him in two years, and now, involved in the same accident as you ...”

“Carter Malis?!” he asked again, wanting, no, needing to be told that it was all a mistake, and his ears were playing a trick on him. “Who the hell is Carter Malis?”

What he wanted to ask, no, scream, was: *I am Carter Malis!* If he was here, and Carter Malis was in a coma, that could only mean one thing. That he was on the brink of death, while being and feeling very much alive. While someone else was probably trapped in his comatose body.

“You might not remember him that well,” Aron began speaking. “He used to be my best friend. I told you about him.”

Carter’s eyes just glazed over him. All right, this was the strangest, most fucked up dream he had ever had.

“You know, the guy ... the homophobe at our wedding,” Aron added, growing more and more embarrassed as he shifted from one foot to the other.

Now Carter stared at Aron, and stared without blinking for about half a minute or so. The homophobe? Oh, that. That he remembered.

Aron had just come back to their city after building up a career away from home. Carter had been so excited to get together with his longtime friend. He had been pretty lonely since Aron had left, but it was not like he was going to admit it. He was always surrounded by so called friends. Guys he didn't particularly like. Not one like Aron. But now that Aron was back, they were going to have so much fun, hitting the bars together, playing basketball in the summer, hockey in winter, and drinking beer, and all that.

Yeap, things have been looking up until Aron, seated across from him in one of their favorite dives, with a few empty beers in front of him, and more on the go, had dropped the bomb on him.

“I'm getting married.”

He had said that matter-of-factly, with a bit of determination in the way he had held his palms flat against his thighs.

“Cool,” Carter had replied with a grin. “Who's the lucky lady? Does she have a hot sister?”

“Actually,” Aron had replied after a few awkward seconds, as he seemed concentrated on peeling the label out of one of the beer bottles on the table, “it's not a lucky lady.”

“Oh, she's not lucky?” Carter had grinned, not getting the gist of the matter. “Of course, she'll be stuck with your ugly mutt face for the rest of her life. Yeah, I get it why she's not lucky. But what about the hot sister? Any chances?”

“Carter,” Aron had been a bit too forceful in cutting him short. “It's a ... guy I'm marrying.”

If the dive hadn't been so busy at that hour, Carter was certain he would have been capable of cutting the silence falling between them with a Swiss knife. Or at least poke at it with a spork.

"You're joking," he had said flatly. "Right?"

Aron had stared at him, his original awkwardness now turning into something akin to confusion, just a short stop on the way to anger.

"Is that a problem?" he had asked, his eyes trained on Carter.

"Yeah it's a problem. You're not gay!"

A few other patrons had turned to look at them, and Aron had looked at him with reproachful eyes.

"Big news, Carter. It looks like I am, because I'm marrying a guy."

"Wait, wait, wait," Carter had raised both his hands off the table. "Where's the hidden camera? Who asked you to prank me? Was it your idea? Really, Aron?"

"Carter, there's no hidden camera," Aron had shaken his head. "Just your best friend who happens to be gay and in love with another man."

There had been another shocked silence from Carter. He could not face this. No, it could not be right. So he had just got up and left.

And seen the two at their wedding, which he had crashed while being terribly and helplessly shit-faced. There the memories were getting a tad blurry. He might have spouted a bunch of homophobic shit, until some dudes in dark suits had dragged him outside and thrown him into the street.

And that had been the last time he had seen Aron until today.

"The homophobe?" he repeated, like he could not believe it still.

From that moment onward, he had often wondered how come he had had no idea he was such a bigot. He could not care less if half the male population on the planet was fucking the other half in the ass. But Aron was a totally different thing.

He could not be gay. That was just plain fucking wrong. So maybe he was a homophobe only when it came to Aron. Otherwise, he could face an entire pride parade, and maybe even join in for a dance or two.

“Yes,” Aron confirmed, with a tired sigh. “Will it bother you if I go and check on him? He ... there is just no one close that could visit him at the moment, that’s all.”

“No, of course not,” he mumbled.

Aron was staring at him, like he could not make sense of him. Not of Carter. Of Alex. Because Carter was apparently in a coma, with no chances of getting up anytime soon.

“I thought you hated him,” Aron spoke softly.

“Well, the guy’s in a coma. What’s he going to do? Get up from the bed just to give me a thrashing? Hey, maybe that can be motivation enough for him to get up from his sick bed,” he said brightly.

Marge burst into laughter again. Funny how funny everything seemed to her. Carter wanted nothing else but to go see the body. His body. Well, it was not like he was dead. Just partially.

“I’m coming with you,” he tried to get down, and this time Marge hurried to push him back in the bed.

“Don’t worry, I’ll check on him,” Aron said, blinking like he could still not understand what was going on.

“No way, I’m going with you,” he began fretting, while trying to fight the nurse off. “Marge, I swear, this IV pointy thing will hurt,” he struggled with the small tube hooked into his hand.

Marge pushed his hand away from the other with a quick move and he dropped back on the pillows, with a loud groan. Apparently, he was so weak that he could not even fight a woman. Jeesh.

“Mr. Ruskin, play nice,” she chided him.

“What? I’m not longer ‘dear’ to you?” he jibed.

“You are a dear only when you don’t threaten me with the catheter,” Marge replied dutifully.

“Ah, is that how this is called?” Carter took a look at his hand and examined it carefully. He even had a manicure. “I thought that was the thing that goes into your ...” he swallowed his words, thinking that spouting four letter words in front of such a nice, yet devious, lady in white, was not exactly advisable.

“When you get better, we’ll go together to see him,” Aron promised him. “If you still want to, of course.”

“Then I should just get better soon,” he said and crossed his arms over his chest, as much as the IV tube was letting him.

“Stop frowning, dear. It will give you wrinkles,” Marge chided him, seemingly more concerned with his complexion and youthful appearance than anything else. That was highly unprofessional of her.

“So what?” he replied.

“So what?!” both Marge and Aron said together in shock.

Oh, right. Alex was some face lotion ad star or something. Great. He was stuck in the body of a total douche who thought his looks were enough to get him everything in life. Including an awesome guy like Aron, as a husband. Who was surely, undoubtedly, completely straight.

Alex must have used some magic on Aron. That was the only explanation. Seeing how he could switch bodies with Carter, just like that, that had to be it. Alex was Harry Potter. A gay Harry Potter. Or something.

Chapter Two

“Your memory of recent events seems to be a little fuzzy,” the doctor explained to him, while tapping against his desk with a slim golden pen.

Carter leaned against the wooden desk, his eyes wide and trained on the man in white. The guy appeared to be in his late 50s, so he had probably seen plenty of strange things in his medical practice.

“Actually, I have trouble remembering other things, too,” he whispered.

The doctor leaned closer, turning his head to one side, like he was trying to catch Carter’s words with his good ear. Maybe the guy was partially deaf. What did he know?

“Why are you whispering?” the doctor asked, but he was whispering, too.

“Why are you whispering?” Carter shot back, but still sotto voce.

“Because you are. We are focused here on a holistic patient experience. We want you to feel good and cared for. And understood,” the doctor explained, still continuing to whisper.

“Oh,” Carter leaned back in his chair.

Yeah, right. If he were to talk about the fact that he was not in his own body, but someone else’s, the nice doctor would just send him to the loony bin in a heartbeat. And that was the first stage of his plan: stay out of the loony bin. What he wanted to say was more related to survival.

“No, the point is that I don’t remember much about my life, in general. It’s like I don’t feel comfortable in my own skin,” he linked his fingers together and slashed gently through the air like he wanted to compartmentalize and understand the whole situation.

The doctor nodded thoughtfully.

“You went through quite a scare. A certain sensation of discomfort is normal.”

He needed to be clear or else he was going to fend off a lot of unwanted questions. Especially from Aron. He disentangled his fingers and pressed his palms against the doctor's desk.

"Doctor, I think I'm amnesic," he said in a heartbeat.

"What makes you say that?" the doctor spoke in a paternal voice, like he was chiding a kid saying that he could not understand basic math.

"Well, the fact that I don't remember stuff," Carter shrugged.

Wasn't it obvious enough? Or was the doctor just pulling his leg?

"Do you remember being married to Aron?" the doctor questioned.

The guy just had to go straight to that. Straight, huh? There was nothing straight about being married to his best friend. Ex-best friend. Current husband. Life was suddenly terribly complicated.

"Yeah," he drawled out the word, like he was not really convinced.

"Well, you did recognize him when he visited you," the doctor stared at him, now puzzled.

"I do know he is my husband, but I don't recall anything else. I mean, I don't know where I live. Or how I like my coffee."

The doctor began tapping the golden pen against the desk again.

"We could still keep you here, but you are perfectly fine, Alex," the man spoke gently. "You should see a therapist, if you feel the need. But frankly I believe that getting back to your life would help you remember everything. Surrounded by the things you are familiar with, you will slowly regain your confidence. I know you love your work and I know that everyone will be at your beck and call. You will surely find your way back to how things were in no time."

The man was watching him warily, although his words were kind. *He thinks I'm a diva, and he feels the need to placate me,* Carter thought. Well, he was not one to torture people, although he felt he was pretty much deep down in shit, so he decided to put the poor doctor's worries to rest. He was not going to dally. Ready

or not, he had to face the music and go home. Aron's home. Alex's home. The home the guys got after they had gotten married. So some house he didn't know at all. Damn, that was terrifying.

For the last two days he had managed to avoid Aron, by feigning to be asleep when the man had come around. Now that his husband was out of harm's way, Aron could return back to work and had plenty of it to recuperate. So that had not been a bother.

Yet, right now, there was no other possibility but go with the flow. Plus, if he was considered sane and perfectly capable to go back to what the others considered his normal life, he was going to be allowed to see himself, aka the body that lay in a comma, with probably Alex's bitchy personality trapped inside.

That, if an exchange had taken place. But Carter did not want to consider other possibilities. It was essential for him to stay close to his body, afraid that some cosmic connection was going to tear if he was going to be too far.

And for that, he needed to be Alex Ruskin, and pretend he liked it. He could do that.

He could not do that. The moment he was out in the street, the lights from what seemed like thousands of cameras blinded him on the spot. It was a good thing that Aron somehow managed to beat the crowds to reach him, because he was worse than a deer in the proverbial headlights. Aron's strong hand engulfing his was warm and reassuring. He quickly followed as Aron took him to the car.

"Wow," he managed as soon as the car began rolling slowly.

"Are you okay?" Aron seemed worried a little but his eyes remained focused on the road ahead, his hands flexing on the wheel.

For some reason, Carter's eyes lingered on those hands. There was something about Aron's hands he had always liked. It was like you knew you could depend on the guy just by looking at his hands, and nothing else.

“Not really. Those hounds out there,” he grimaced and pulled his jacket closer, “were about to tear me apart. And I’m all bones,” he added, touching his ribcage slowly. “I have no idea what they see in me.”

Aron flinched when the light turned red just before them, and brought the car to a halt with a tinny sound. He seemed a bit in a daze, while listening to Carter babbling.

“The doctor said you cannot remember everything. That things are a bit fuzzy for you.”

“That guy really likes the word ‘fuzzy’,” he commented wryly.

Fuzzy in a sentence.

Fuzzy logic.

Fuzzy memory.

That didn’t make him feel exactly warm and fuzzy. He shook his head like a fly had just gotten in his ear when Aron began speaking.

“Well, I should take you slowly, then,” Aron said, as he watched the lights. “Forgive me if I act a bit surprised. You just sound ... different.”

“Different?”

Of course he sounded different. He wasn’t Alex. But that was not exactly a good topic of conversation while Aron was behind the wheel, and they were navigating one of the most crowded areas of the city. Well, it wasn’t a good topic of conversation, period.

“I thought you would love the attention, after a few days spent away from your usual glamorous life,” Aron said with a small smile, and stole a quick glance to Carter.

To Alex. Aron was looking at him like this only because he thought he was looking at his husband. Damn, he needed to get used to his new body. It just felt like a too tight piece of clothing if he could say so. Or the world was suddenly too

big, like he was a kid walking in his father's shoes. He was obviously drawing unnecessary attention and needed to thread more carefully.

"You know what would help me?" he asked. "You telling me about the kind of guy I am."

That was a good start. What better way to get to know himself – Alex – than by asking the closest person to the guy?

"The kind of guy you are?" Aron turned slightly towards him with a small smile hanging on one corner of his lips. "You are ... gorgeous."

Carter could feel his jaw dropping like suddenly drawn by the Earth's gravity multiplied by ten, completely in no relation whatsoever with the rest of his anatomy. Why was Aron smiling like an idiot? And why was he leaning in? And why was he ...?

"The light changed," he almost screamed, and made himself little in his seat.

Wow, that had been close. Damn, now that was something that he hadn't thought about it. Of course, he was going to fend off Aron's attempts to ... oh, fuck, he could not even say it. Actually, he had just said it in his mind, the word starting with an f and ending with a k. Yeah, Aron would expect his husband to put out. That was going to be hard. No, not hard. He was not allowed to think of words like that. Hard was no longer in the dictionary. The word 'fuck' either. Only there to be used for cuss phrases, nothing else.

Damn, he was so fucked. Not yet. But soon.

"It's a pretty nice house," he spoke, as he entered the large hallway and sneaked a peek inside the large living room.

The light, filtered through the windows, fell just right, illuminating a piece of the carpet with its modernist pattern, and filling up the room with warmth. He was practically looking at a living room like in one of those magazines. Until this very moment, he had thought that those pictures were just perfect computer renders. Apparently, some people lived in such homes for real.

“That nurse, Marge, was right,” Aron said as he pulled out his jacket. “You do have a sense of humor. It’s been a while since you said a joke.”

“How come me saying the house is nice has anything to do with me being funny? Because I’m not,” Carter explained.

“You mentally destroyed that interior decorator until he got everything right and you were still not satisfied. The poor guy might still be in therapy, as we speak,” Aron said ruefully.

“I did? What a douchebag I must be,” he murmured, looking at the room in front of him with different eyes.

Aron burst into laughter.

“Did you really have to go through some kind of horrible accident to release this inner you?” Aron wondered and came closer. “What else are you hiding?”

You have no idea, Carter thought, with a mental eye roll. Aron put his hands on Carter’s lapel and began pushing down his jacket. The man’s proximity was doing nothing for his nerves. He was way too close, all up in his personal space. He could feel his breath quickening. So he took a step back, and then another. And Aron just followed.

“Ah, damn, Alex, stop playing,” Aron complained, but the same bright smile he had in the car was tugging at his lips now. “I missed you too much.”

Aron suddenly grabbed him and pulled him into a kiss. His lips were hard and Carter pushed back. That had the strange effect of a bouncy ball smacking against hard mass. Carter tripped and fell on his back, his legs in the air. Good thing he fell on the couch.

“You little ...” Aron chuckled and landed on top of him.

Crushing him. Spreading his legs wide. And hooking up his crotch against Carter’s. He could feel everything. Aron’s rough hands cupping his face. The guy’s lips on his. The guy’s tongue inside his mouth. Damn, that was too much. Ah, and his own eyes rolling inside his head, in sudden sensory overload. Had Aron always been so skillful with his tongue? The slow movement of that thing inside his mouth

was making him want to suck on it like it was a lollipop. Funny thing, he wasn't exactly crazy about sugary things. But Aron's tongue? That was something that could give him a sweet tooth.

His body's immediate response was something worthy of a case in biology books. He could feel the traitorous cock that, well, didn't belong to him, growing hard while pressed by Aron's heavy body. Of course, it was Alex's body, and the guy was probably used to be sexually assaulted by this mountain of a man. That was how their marriage worked. Probably. Well, not that he knew that exactly, since he had never been married, but it was quite clear right now that Aron was claiming his marital rights on the spot.

And maybe his body was ready, but his brain clearly wasn't. So he did the first thing that crossed his mind and bit on the man's tongue.

"Ouch," Aron complained, and withdrew, with a hurt expression on his handsome face. "What was that for?"

"Are you an idiot?" Carter began chiding his best friend, now husband by the weirdest circumstances in the universe. "I just got back from the hospital. Can't you see I'm not all there?" he pointed at his head.

"I can see some things that are all in their rightful places," Aron said with a smirk and sneaked one hand between them to cup Carter's very much up and about cock.

He was beyond mortified. A dude was grabbing his crotch. And he was hard. Damn Alex and his body! What a frigging whore! A little bit of attention and he was just ready for it. Not that he could exactly blame Alex if he just looked for one second at Aron. From up close, the man looked even more handsome, with his deep dark eyes, shadowed by long eyelashes, the hard planes of his face, and sensuous mouth. Not that he was impressed by any of that. He was just a straight dude in a terrible situation.

"I think this cannot wait," Aron added and laughed, as he squeezed Carter harder.

It was so unfair the guy was so big and strong. Carter felt like a puppet as he was manhandled with so much ease by Aron. Soon enough, he was seated on the sofa,

his jeans around his ankles – when had that happened so fast? – and his husband – by circumstances! – knelt in front of him.

“You can’t really lie when your dick’s like this,” Aron joked, and gave the smooth cock in his hand a long wet swipe from balls to tip.

Damn, what color were those stars that suddenly began to pop under his eyelids as he closed his eyes? He wasn’t sure he recognized that shade of pink. It was definitely impossible to find in nature.

“Fuck,” he whispered.

Well, the truth was he had been buried in work, as far as he could remember, and hadn’t hooked up in a while. So he was pent up. He hadn’t had a girlfriend in a long time, either. But this was not his body anyway. This was Alex, getting a blowjob from his hunk of a husband. Gods, Aron’s tongue flicking over his length was making him feel like he was about to burst out of his own skin.

Maybe just go with the flow? Once? What was he thinking? He tried to push away Aron’s head from his balls, where the guy was now doing a great job lapping at them gently.

This time it worked. Aron frowned a bit and got up.

“Okay,” the man said as he ran one hand through his short cropped hair. “If you feel like you need time, I’ll give you time.”

“Thank you,” Carter spoke as he pulled up his jeans, hooking up the fly.

Phew, danger averted for now. But it looked like he had a bigger problem on his hands now.

Aron’s mouth was set in a deep grim line and he was looking away, his eyebrows furrowed in thought, and clearly not a happy one. Well, that meant that he really needed to get his body back, and have Alex back to Aron, because the situation was getting creepier by the minute.

“Is this about that thing?” Aron turned his attention back to Carter.

“That thing?” he mumbled.

“About that time when I was on my last business trip,” Aron sounded irritated. “When you thought I was cheating on you.”

“Cheating on me?” Carter asked, alarmed.

He might have been shitfaced when he had crashed that wedding party, but he could still remember how happy Aron had looked. And the guys’ love story had been all over the place, seeing that Alex was such a celebrity and all. There was no way Aron could have cheated on his husband. He was too much in love. Like romantic movie level of in love. Plus, Aron was not the cheating type. He was way too wholesome for that.

“Yeah,” Aron snorted. “Like anyone could compare to you. Why would you even think that?” he snapped. “You know I love you.”

Aron seemed really upset. Carter could not help notice the silver hairs again. Much must have happened during the last two years. Aron was as handsome as ever, but right now, his shoulders slumped a little, he looked one tiny bit older than his 32 years. For some reason, he could not stand this.

So he stood up and walked over to Aron.

“I know,” Carter said gently as he caressed Aron’s arm.

Technically, he wasn’t wrong. Aron loved Alex, more than anything, probably, and Alex should have known it. So all the more reason to change back into his own body. The fact that his actual body was right now in a coma was upsetting, but as fucked up as it had to be right now, it was still his body and he was attached to it. Well, at least, it should have been, if not for the strangest twist of fate in his otherwise very predictable life.

“Yes. It’s easy to speak the words,” Aron just shrugged him off.

All this for refusing a blowjob. *Would it have hurt you that badly?* Carter scolded himself. *Who knows, you might have just liked it.* But no, that would have been just wrong. And it would have been Aron cheating, unconsciously, on his husband. And Aron was not a cheater, Carter thought with conviction.

“Hey,” he called softly. “I love you, too, okay?”

This time, Aron did look at him and the scowl on his face began to fade away.

“Were you scared? Because of the accident?” Aron asked.

“Yeah, like scared shitless,” Carter admitted, although he knew they were talking about slightly different things. Or totally different things. It was impossible for Aron to know he was scared about the body swap, because such things did not exist. “I still am scared. I’m sure I’ll be better in a few days.”

During which he was going to visit his body in the hospital, bump heads with it and make the exchange. That was going to work. Surely. And after that, Alex could go back to his awesome husband and have his dick sucked. Fucking lucky bastard. Carter was not that much of a phony not to admit that Aron’s tongue on his cock and balls had felt pretty much ah-mazing. From a gay dude’s point of view, of course. Not his. He was a homophobe, at least he had been one ever since he had learned Aron was marrying Alex. Actually, he felt his homophobic tendencies surfacing only it was about Aron. Otherwise, two drag queens could deepthroat each other in front of him, and he could not care less. But still, he was straight, so it was impossible for him to enjoy having another guy touch his cock. That had to be gross. He just had to repeat that in his brain until he was going to believe it. It was the truth!

“Come here,” Aron smiled and pulled him into a bear hug.

Aron’s cologne smelled so familiar. It was making Carter feel so relaxed. The guy was so consistent that he hadn’t changed that fragrance from probably the first time he had ever used cologne. All this time, he had probably missed this. Probably. Not that Aron was hugging him, Carter, like this. He was hugging his husband, Alex. Carter was pissed at Aron and Aron was pissed at him. And they were never going to be friends again. He buried his forehead into Aron’s shoulder and sighed.

“You’ll get better,” Aron slowly massaged his back. “I’m sorry I’ve been so snappy. Just that I thought you didn’t believe me. And then you got into this freakish accident and I was so afraid that ...”

“Hey,” Carter called firmly. “Let’s not get too emotional.”

He pushed himself back from that warm embrace. He needed to take distance or else he was just going to hug back too tightly and that was not an option.

“I’m fine,” he made a small pirouette. “See? All in one piece.”

Except for a tiny thing. Like the person that currently inhabited the said body.

“I see,” Aron said with a small smile. “I must say, Alex, that I’m quite relieved to see you reacting so well. I thought you were going to throw a hissy fit upon waking up, especially seeing that you got hurt, and especially your face ...”

Carter felt his face with his fingers.

“Come on, these little scratches?” he snorted. “They don’t even hurt. And they’re healing anyway.”

Again, Aron was looking at him like he was growing a second head. Of course, he slapped himself mentally. He needed to behave more like Alex for this to work.

“I mean, fucking bastard, daring to mess up my pretty face like this,” he tried to sound miffed, but to his ears he was nothing but a whiny little thing.

“Since when do you use such words?” Aron wondered, staring at him, wide-eyed.

Fuck, this wasn’t working, either. Damn pompous ass wasn’t even cussing now and then?

“Well, I’m pissed,” he tried to justify his earlier outburst. “This face is worth millions. I should sue the fire department,” he added, feeling invigorated by his righteous indignation.

Aron smiled.

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. The accident was not the driver’s fault. You just appeared in front of the fire truck from a dead angle; that was all. It was a good thing he wasn’t even driving that fast.”

Carter shut up. Okay, so learning about the circumstances of the accident could help.

“Ah, well, I don’t remember how it happened,” he shook his head.

Aron just hurried to embrace him again.

“You will, don’t worry,” the man said and placed a short kiss on Carter’s head.

“Hey, Aron,” he spoke. “I don’t think you cheated. You’re not a cheater.”

He felt like he needed to say that.

“Well, that’s good to know. Do you want to get some rest?” Aron said gently.

He was getting kind of bored with resting.

“What else is to do around here?”

Aron threw him a look loaded with innuendo.

“Not that,” he snapped. “Do you have a basketball hoop hidden around here, somewhere? You used to have one at home,” the words flew from his lips before he could stop them.

Aron threw him a quizzical look while pushing him slowly away, to stare at him.

“You remember that I told you that?” he seemed excited. “We do have one in the backyard. But you never join me for a game. You hate sweating.”

“Well, it looks like I’m in the mood to do exactly that. I spent way too much time just lying in bed. And after that, I want a slice of pizza.”

Now Aron was completely flabbergasted.

“Are you sure? The carbs ...”

Fuck Alex and his diet, Carter thought. He was not going to give up on a good slice of pizza over the idiot’s bad eating habits. Eating one slice could not hurt his slim frame. And maybe later, when their bodies were going to be changed back, the guy could wonder all he wanted about why on earth he suddenly craved carbs. Served him right for being such a douchebag obsessed with dieting.

“Yeah, I’m sure. You only live once,” he shrugged.

“The accident did change you,” Aron smirked. “Well, not that I wanted you to go through such a thing. But I kind of like the change.”

“You do?”

“We never shared a pizza. I can barely wait,” Aron said the words with one big exhale that made Carter wonder what else Alex had deprived Aron of, during these two years of happy marriage life.

“I need to change first,” Carter turned on his heels, but stared confused at the three different doors that were connecting the living room to other areas of the house. Which one was supposed to lead to his bedroom?

“Let’s do it together,” Aron pushed him gently in the right direction. “I need to check if you really are in one piece.”

Carter stifled a groan as Alex squeezed his ass a bit too hard. The man was at his wit’s end, probably. And so was he, but for totally different reasons.

Chapter Three

“Are these all mine?” he stared critically at the walk-in closet, without daring to put one foot in front of the other.

There must have been one thousand clothing items, without counting the shoes. Carter was the kind to have three-four changes of clothes, each one for a particular purpose. But this Alex dude was just so extra.

He remained there, staring and wondering how on earth he was going to go through this and escape unscathed. He flinched when Aron began undressing next to him. Apparently, the guy’s closet was just a regular one, and Aron knew exactly what to pick. A pair of gym shorts and a regular fit t-shirt, both a dark shade of blue, which he threw on the bed.

And then, Aron just started to undress. Carter stole one look toward the guy and then decided it was probably better to focus on the puzzle that was his personal closet. Walking into that space equaled going straight to Narnia, and that without even passing through the closet.

“Should I help you pick something?” he heard Aron speaking from behind him. “You have some sportswear, although you never wear it,” the man added.

“Sure, be my guest.”

Aron passed by him and crouched to fiddle with a drawer at the bottom. Carter’s eyes followed the curve of the muscled back and stopped at the dimples just above the guy’s ass. Then realization struck him. Why the fuck was Aron naked? Helpless, he turned on his heels and decided to wait outside the closet. For lack of anything to do, he sat gingerly on the bed.

“Here you go,” Aron threw a plastic bag at him. “All new, since I know you don’t like to wear old things.”

Carter was all for old things; don’t throw it if it’s not broken or damaged. That was his credo. He looked at Aron, and had an instant regret. The guy was just leaning against the wall, wearing nothing but a smirk. A sexy smirk. Probably. What did Carter know about a sexy smirk on a guy? It was not like he was gay. He was the

opposite of gay. He was so not-gay that scientists had to invent a totally new word, other than straight, just for him.

Yet, his eyes traveled on the man's hard body, the chest covered in dark curly hair, and followed the treasure trail, down to ... okay, he was not going to go there. He looked away and pretended he was busy taking out the t-shirt and shorts out of the plastic bag. It was just this stupid situation. He had seen Aron naked plenty of times before, only that he hadn't looked-looked at the guy on those occasions.

"Alex," Aron cooed, and Carter's fingers slipped on the package, making it slide to the floor. "C'mon, baby, you're looking at me like I'm a vanilla sundae."

"As you can see," Carter grabbed the plastic bag from the floor, "I'm not looking at you. And I hate vanilla ice cream."

Oops. No, he, Carter, hated vanilla in anything, not only ice cream. Alex was probably all for licking all the vanilla ice cream directly from his husband's perfect cock. Oh, fuck, why did he have to have so many gay thoughts? It was all Alex's fault. He was probably a horny bastard, too, always keeping Aron busy. This was harder than he expected.

Speaking of hard, Aron walked towards him and stopped inches away. Now it was impossible to ignore how the guy's cock was slightly bouncing with each of Aron's moves. Closer and it was going to slap him in the face.

He coughed and shifted, trying to move away.

"Fuck, Alex, you do know how to torture a guy," Aron whispered. "You're keeping me on a tight leash anyway."

Tight leash? Carter's ears twitched. Oh, that was going right into the data bank. So Alex did not like putting out too often? Was that what he should have gathered from what Aron was saying?

"Tight leash?" he spoke, fishing for info.

"Well, you know," Aron said somewhat aggressively. "It's not fair. You know how much I like your body. And one of the first things you said to me was that you liked my cock."

“On the first date?” Carter shouted, alarmed.

Aron had married a total whore. And all his life, he had thought Aron would settle down with a nice girl who knew how to be decent and wholesome, and Aron would have 2.1 kids with her. Instead, Aron had gone a completely different way and gotten hitched with a ... guy thirsty for cock.

His head moved so fast at that thought that his nose brushed by Aron’s cock. At least, he managed to close his eyes in time. But it was not exactly like he could ignore the faint smell of washed male, the pleasant scent of soap, mixed with something else. Probably Aron had taken a shower just before coming to take him home from the hospital. He wanted to inhale and store away Aron’s smell forever. No idea why. The truth was that he had never had the chance to smell his best friend from so up close. Really, how could a straight guy smell his best friend’s crotch? His mind was starting to slip again.

“Well, we hooked up within 5 minutes of seeing each other,” Aron interrupted his mangled train of thought. “Ah, right, you don’t remember things. But, really, not even that?” the man sounded hurt.

Carter drew a deep breath and considered his options. All he wanted was to get out of the room and enjoy a bit of fresh air, preferably without a dick in his face. No matter how nice it smelled. So he did the only thing that seemed sensible enough to get him out of the situation without hurting Aron more.

He grabbed the guy’s cock blindly and began to pump it while keeping his head turned. Maybe it worked if he kept his fingers crossed on the other hand and kept repeating ‘no homo’ in his mind. Yeah, that had to do it. And Aron was going to forget everything about this pseudo-fight with his husband, once he had his hard cock out of the way.

Aron cursed softly. Maybe he was doing it wrong? Well, guys were not supposed to be that complicated, right? Up and down, up and down, putting enough pressure ... maybe sliding the thumb over the head from time to time? Or maybe Aron was too sensitive for such maneuvers?

Well, at least, Aron was no longer upset. He wasn’t quiet, either, as he grunted, his head thrown back, his legs planted firmly on the ground, slightly apart to allow

Carter to jerk him off. Cautiously, he opened one eye, then the other. Well, he needed to see what he was doing.

Aron was a pretty endowed man. As to be expected from a guy of his stature. Carter felt a certain surge of satisfaction as the guy's cock swelled further in his hand. Hmm, that had to mean that he was doing a good job. Psh, piece of cake. It wasn't like he hadn't plenty of experience with that. Plus, it really felt nice how his hand was gliding up and down on that hardened cock. It filled with a certain sensation of satisfaction.

Well, it was a different cock than his, and this one was bigger and thicker but all the way the same thing. And Aron seemed to enjoy it if he were to take after all those soft small grunts and moans escaping the guy's lips.

Hmm, maybe he could do things a bit better? He made himself room between the guy's legs and used his free hand to grab Aron's balls and roll them slowly. Yeap, that was doing the trick. Aron was rocking his hips now, and Carter was enthusiastically rubbing the guy's dick with increased speed. Oh, those balls were getting tighter ... that was clearly a cue that ...

White liquid splashed him right in the face as Aron's grunts became louder and the movement of his hips jerkier. His surprise was so huge that he forgot to move his hands. Aron just batted them away and took matters into his own. A way of speaking, because he used one to continue to rub his dick to total completion while he held Carter's head with the other so he could paint his face with jizz.

His initial surprise wore off the next second and he pushed the guy away. Wiping his face with both his hands, he began to curse.

“Fucking douchebag!”

Great, now there was jizz in his mouth, too. He sputtered and spat, trying to wipe it all, but it was like the fucking white goo was magic and just spreading everywhere.

Aron had an idiotic grin on his face, too spent to care, apparently.

“What did you think would happen?” Aron laughed, just to add insult to injury.

“You could have said something!” Carter continued to try hard to clean his face, only managing to rub the thing more into his skin.

“You always say that facials are the best treatment for a perfect skin,” Aron added, as his eyes glinted with satisfaction.

Carter tried to throw the guy a murderous look. By how Aron’s grin spread wider, his laser gaze was doing zero minus infinite damage. He smacked his forehead in frustration, only to make more of the guy’s semen end up there, too.

“And did you have to come half a gallon?” he protested, as he just grabbed Aron’s t-shirt from the bed and began to wipe his face with it.

“Hey, I kept it all for you,” Aron explained. “And really, that’s my t-shirt.”

Carter threw the piece of garment into the guy’s face.

“Serves you right,” he said snappily. “And really, rub one out once in a while.”

“Are you serious?” Aron watched him, cocking his head to one side, like he could not believe he heard right.

“Yeah, watch some porn or something,” Carter shrugged. “No wonder you’re so pissed all the time.”

“You don’t really like gay porn, Alex,” Aron said, a bit more gravely this time.

“Of course I don’t,” Carter rolled his eyes.

Wait, was that really the right thing to say? What kind of gay guy was Alex?

“You said that you don’t like me watching other guys than you,” Aron continued.

Hmm, that required a very carefully picked come back. On one hand, he could not act too much out of character. On the other, Aron jerking off to gay porn meant having the guy off his back, literally. His back was surely in no shape to take it.

“Well,” he spoke, after a little pondering, “while I’m getting back to ... you know, my usual self, you can, ahem, do your thing. Jerk off,” he added with a bit more conviction.

“Okay,” Aron said slowly, like he was walking on eggshells with each sound he was making. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah,” Carter ran his fingers through his hair in exasperation.

Great, there was jizz in his hair, too. He had forgotten about that.

“Are you going to help me?” Aron grinned.

“Help you with what?” Carter was still busy trying to pull all that jizz out of his hair.

“With jerking off to porn,” the man chuckled, and Carter could swear he wanted nothing more badly than to punch his ex-best friend in the face.

“You don’t look disabled,” he glared. “Plus, I know you’re like a double-edge sword, so you can use both hands to ...”

The words died on his lips as Aron’s eyes grew wide while looking at him.

“When did I tell you that?” Aron questioned.

Damn, what the fuck did Aron and Alex talk about? Carter and Aron had compared, from a theoretical standpoint, masturbation techniques the soonest they had discovered sex was a thing, and using your own hand could do the trick.

“I dunno,” he shrugged. “Probably along with the vows,” he added. “It just came up or something.”

Aron started laughing, his hands on his hips.

“Oh, baby, you either turned into the funniest thing alive, or your lapse of memory just made room for things I don’t remember,” he spoke while wiping a couple of tears from his eyes.

Carter just made a small annoyed sound. This was going to be so damn tough.

The exercise was doing him good. Stretching his muscles, although they burned, was making him feel alive. How the hell was he going to return to his own body? It was probably just a cosmic mistake, and whoever watched over the earth, from up

above, was going to notice sooner or later. And that meant that any minute now, Carter was going to go back into that body lying unconscious in the hospital, most probably waiting to die.

The thought was not particularly cheerful, so it was for the best just to enjoy being alive while it lasted. But this Alex dude surely didn't like running because Carter had to over exert himself just to keep himself in the game.

And Aron looked like he had no qualms with wrecking him. Damn, the guy was ruthless. Well, it was nothing new, Aron had used to be a beast when they were playing together, no matter what sport. Only that Carter still had had a chance back then, unlike now, when he was just inside a skinny guy's body that clearly was against any kind of physical activity. Yeah, back when he and Aron were still friends, he could go head on with the guy and even hope to win once in a while.

He stopped to draw his breath, hands on his knees.

"So, did you have enough?" Aron teased while moving the ball from one hand to another, as he came closer.

Carter waved.

"Yeah, totally," he lied and suddenly stole Aron's ball and threw it over his shoulder.

Aron looked at the ball flying through the air, his eyes growing wider. Carter smirked as he pointed with his index fingers towards the clear sky. He must still have it. He didn't have to look to know the ball went through the hoop.

"Wow," Aron turned his attention on Carter. "I had no idea you could do that."

Carter shrugged, but he felt smug about it. He patted his friend's chest lightly.

"You still have a few things to learn, boy," he teased.

There was a small flicker of recognition in Aron's eyes, and Carter almost bit his tongue. He had to be more careful from now on. Alex Ruskin was not supposed to speak and behave like Carter Malis. The two guys had absolutely nothing in common.

“Oh, yeah?” Aron smiled. “That was just pure luck.”

“You wish,” Carter snorted.

“Do it. Put your money where your mouth is,” Aron challenged.

“Ah, we’re using money now? I’m in,” Carter ignored the little voice in his mind telling him he was blowing his cover like an idiot. Well, it was not like Aron was just going to start thinking his husband was no longer his husband. That kind of thing was impossible to believe.

“Well, I choose something else if you lose, and I win,” Aron grinned.

“Yeah? Like what?”

Aron came so close that their chests were touching, and Carter had to pull his head back to sustain the man’s hot stare.

“One kiss. French kiss. Tongue and everything. For like 5 minutes. Since you’re keeping me at arm’s length.”

Carter could feel one eye starting to twitch.

“Okay,” he nodded.

It was not like he was going to lose.

Nothing ever went as planned. Okay, there was no need to panic, as Aron walked over to him and pulled him into his arms. The man’s hand was warm on his chest, and the other strong arm was holding his waist tightly.

“You kind of cheated,” he glared.

“I didn’t,” Aron said slowly, as his eyes focused on Carter’s mouth. “I missed you, baby.”

Baby? All right, he was going to puke. Aron’s lips were firm on his, and he tried to protest, to smooth talk his way out of it, but the guy was now using his tongue, pushing it inside, like he was trying to force Carter to deepthroat him. Well, it wasn’t the right definition of deepthroat, but it was kind of the same, because

Carter had to open wide, to allow the guy to stuff his mouth with that wicked tongue.

He could do it, he could do it, he could it ... wow, he had no idea, hmm, were those lips doing that? What if he slid his tongue like this, yes, hmm, yes, this felt really nice, like really, really nice, and wait, what was that hand doing on his ass, oh, no, he wanted to groan internally, but that was impossible because damn, if it didn't feel good ...

Aron's lips were nothing like a woman's. They weren't soft and pliant, and they didn't cave in. Every little fraction of an inch Carter had to battle for, and letting the guy win was not an option. Well, he had no idea kissing a dude would feel like this. It was not like he had ever asked the girls he had been with about how a guy's mouth felt like. He was usually busy doing something else.

Supposedly, Aron had only two hands, but they felt like so many more. One was now in his hair, fingers scraping his scalp in a gentle motion, making him shudder while the other was on his ass, kneading one buttock, slowly trying to pull at the shorts and sneak inside. Which it did, and Carter felt deft fingers getting close to his hole.

"Wow, wow, wow," he protested while pushing Aron away. "Let's take it down a notch, okay? Frankly, I don't think my ass is ready for a dicking."

"Are you sure?" Aron pulled him close again. "Baby, come on," soft pleas poured into his ear. "I can barely wait to be balls deep inside you."

Carter was pretty certain that normally he could have gone against Aron in hand to hand combat. Well, that if he was himself, which he wasn't, because skinny Alex was no match for the monster. It was really annoying to feel so weak and easy to overcome. Maybe Alex liked it this way, to be manhandled by his husband and made to submit without too much fuss. But Carter was having none of it. Just to test his limited strength, he pushed against Aron's chest with all his might.

The way he groaned in exasperation made Aron stop.

"Alex," Aron growled. "Stop this game of hot and cold. You know I don't like it. Just be straightforward with me. What's wrong?"

Carter crossed his arms over his chest just to make sure that he could keep Aron at bay.

“I think my ass just pulled itself tight,” he came up with the stupidest explanation that crossed his mind. “I clenched my butt so hard when I got hit by that fire truck, and boom, I cannot relax anymore. The only way you’ll get your dick in there will be by ripping me a new one.”

Alex seemed confused.

“Did the doctor say anything about this? It’s a muscle condition? Should I take you back to the hospital? How on earth did they let you go with something like this?”

“It’s just psychological!” Carter yelled, hoping to stop Aron from suing the entire health care system, on grounds that his husband now had a tiny asshole that could not let anything in. “I mean, it’s not like it doesn’t ... work. I just need time,” he covered his lies with a small self-deprecating smile.

“Okay,” Aron stopped all of a sudden. “What would help? Soft music? Should I take it really slow, open you up?”

Carter could not believe he was having this conversation with his best friend on top of everything.

“No, no, just a bit of time, until I get back to my own self.”

Technically it wasn’t a lie. And now he had the image of Aron giving him a prostate massage with lubricating oils, with burning fragrance sticks around and oriental music playing in the background. He groaned on the inside and moved from one foot to the other in an effort to ease the heaviness he was starting to feel between his legs. It was like everything having to do with Aron was making him instantly hard. He was going to take the reins and dominate this body. And his brain should just stop with all the gay thoughts already.

“I think it would help us both if we got to our usual rhythm,” he spoke again.

“Well, our usual rhythm involves me,” Alex pulled him closer and kissed him hard on the lips, “ramming your ass at least once a week. And I should remind you that we’re sort of overdue.”

Once a week? Hmm, something he could work with ... Well, what the fuck was he thinking? No, there was going to be no ramming. No. Definitely not.

“Well, I gave you a handjob,” he began talking out loud. “How much does that usually last?”

Aron was now biting his lips not to laugh.

“Is this a new way for you to play hard to get? I understand that I’m big and you’re afraid you’re going to have a loose ass, but stop dodging everything by doing weird math. And I have no idea how much a handjob would last. You’re not particularly generous with those.”

Now Aron’s eyes were dropping lower, and Carter was pretty certain that was now where his eyes were, so he wondered if Aron suddenly had developed an obsession for his throat ... Or his mouth?

“You’re amazing with blowjobs, though,” Aron made everything clear and confirmed his suspicions.

“Ha, ha, no way,” Carter snorted.

Aron looked at him and frowned a bit.

“Did your mouth shrink, too?” he half-joked.

“No, no, but due to all that medicine, now I’m like ... bleah about everything.”

Especially cock. There was no way he was going to go down on his best friend. He really needed to get back into his battered body and let Alex deal with this sex hungry beast. And he needed to stop thinking right now about how his best friend’s cock must taste like. By its smell, it was probably ... *No, no, no, get back to being straight, you dirty little brain!*

Actually, if he was thinking about it, once a week was kind of lame. He had never been particularly aware of Aron’s sexual appetite, and also he had thought the guy was into girls, which put him pretty much out of the loop regarding sex habits and whatnot when it came to the guy. Still, he had the feeling that Aron was having it a little rough.

“I can give you handjobs,” he decided, and nodded mostly to himself.

Except for having his face all splattered with jizz, it hadn't been that much of a horrendous experience. It was something he could deal with, and that was just helping a friend, right? Lending his best friend a helping hand. Uh, he should not have gone there.

Aron leaned in and looked at him.

“Who are you and what have you done with Alex?”

There was no hint of humor in the guy's voice, and Aron seemed dead serious. Carter could feel his skin prickling with apprehension. What was he going to do now? He could not just blurt out *Hey, I'm Carter, your homophobic ex best friend, and by some freakish cosmic joke, I'm here, while your real husband is dying in the hospital.*

Aron burst into laughter.

“You make such a cute face when you're worried. Come on, baby, I'm just joking!”

Baby. Ugh. But he could live with that, too.

“Yeah, nice joke, what can I say? And stop calling me baby while you make fun of me. Should I call you Papa Bear just to get on your nerves?”

Aron's face clouded suddenly.

“Carter used to call me that,” he spoke.

“The homophobe?”

Shit, what was with him and his slips of tongue? Yeah, he had given Aron that nickname when they were in high school and they had started growing body hair like men in the making. Aron had been, by far, the one with the most hair in the entire neighborhood. Carter had liked to tease the guy over it. And Aron had hated that nickname.

“Yeah, him,” Aron replied abruptly. “I should go see him tomorrow first thing in the morning. If you don't mind, of course.”

“Why would I ...” Carter bit his tongue. “Actually, Aron, since I’m still on medical leave and I have tomorrow free, how about I go and check on him?”

“Would you do that? I thought you hated him.”

“Well, let’s not exaggerate. I barely saw the guy once in my life.”

“Yes, but you forbid me to talk about him after I tried to tell you about him. You were really pissed when you told me that. And it is still frigging difficult to talk about anything from my past because it’s not like I can pluck him away from all the memories I have. He used to be my best friend, Alex.”

Wow. Aron was making a case for him, Carter Malis, the homophobic ex-friend.

“Frankly, until I told him we were getting married, he never acted like that. If anything, he seemed open minded to me. Hell, he even had posters with Freddy Mercury all over the walls in his bedroom. I wished I could talk to him and ask him what made him behave like that.”

Carter could feel a lump in his throat, growing to the size and consistence of a tennis ball.

“What stopped you?”

Aron threw him a strange and somewhat resentful look.

“You. You were clear about it. You told me that I should choose and choose wisely. Of course I chose you. But still, I wish I had the chance ... He had the chance to explain himself. And now that he’s just lying there, in a coma, with minimal chances to wake up, I feel like I missed my chance to hear from him why he did what he did at our wedding.”

Damn, Carter could feel something swelling in his chest, threatening to get out and not the way it was supposed to. He pulled Aron into a hug, to hide how moist his eyes got just out of the blue.

“Hey, you’ll talk to him. He’ll wake up and you’ll talk to him.”

Aron said nothing back and just hugged him in return.

“I’m sure he’ll want to talk to you, too,” Carter added.

“Are you sure? We haven’t spoken in two years.”

“Yeah, I’m sure. It’s just a hunch,” Carter spoke quickly, “but I’m sure.”

It wasn’t like he had an explanation ready on hand, but he was willing to find one. To think that all this time, Aron hadn’t hated him.

“Well, how about that pizza? And some beer?” he patted Aron on the back.

He wasn’t ready just yet for so much emotional upheaval. And it was going to be over soon. Tomorrow, he was going to go see himself at the hospital, and everything was going to get back to normal. And, if he was to wake up, he was going to talk to Aron, and set everything right.

Chapter Four

“Would you slow down a bit? I thought you were still feeling a bit sick after all the medicine you took at the hospital,” Aron eyed him warily, like he was on the point of giving him the Heimlich maneuver if need be.

“I don’t need to slow down,” Carter shrugged as he stuffed his face with another slice of pizza. “Trust me, after you face your death like I did, you won’t have any issue with eating a whole pizza either. You know, the things that make you feel alive. And satisfied,” he groaned in delight, as he took another bite.

“Well, there are other things that can make you feel just as much alive, if not more,” Aron wiggled his eyebrows in the worst attempt for sexual innuendo possible.

Carter wanted to say something that would sting Aron preferably in places not seen by the sun under normal circumstances, but eventually chose not to.

“All in due time,” he replied, and reached for the beer, too.

“It’s funny, you know,” Aron spoke, as he ate, too, but at a much slower pace than his husband. “I never thought I would do this with you.”

“Eating pizza? Yeah, I know. You told me. I’m all against carbs. I promise I’ll go back on a diet. Soon.”

Preferably not, but he had to just say it, to confirm that he was Alex, not that Aron could ever suspect such a freakish thing as having his best friend trapped in his husband’s body. Ex-best friend.

Let’s keep the facts straight, Carter. At least the facts.

“No, not just eating pizza. You know, stuff friends do. We played ball together, we’re now having beer ... You never do stuff like this with me. And I get it,” Aron added and looked away guiltily. “Your career is important. It requires a certain lifestyle. And I knew that when I proposed. When I fell in love with you.”

“Hey, you don’t have to explain it,” Carter hurried. “Well, it’s not like I’m going to stay young and pretty forever,” he joked. “I’ll have to give up on all these ... restrictions, eventually. And then you’ll have me all to yourself.”

At least, he hoped that was something Alex would have said. Aron looked a bit down, not like he was depressed or something, but like he was contemplating whether admitting to have his husband consider his personal vendetta against carbs more important than their life together was a good or a bad thing.

“Hey, you do know how to cheer up a guy,” Aron chuckled softly and took another sip from his beer. “Thanks. But don’t threaten me that you won’t stay young and pretty forever. That’s not what I signed up for.”

Carter laughed.

“Well, honey, marriage is for life, and if you ever think of abandoning me in favor of some piece of fresh ass, I’ll gouge your eyes out.”

Was that enough to sound like the diva Alex probably was? He hoped so. But Aron became serious again.

“Please don’t talk like this. I’ve never cheated on you.”

Oh, that. That was a sore point right there. He shouldn’t have needled at it, but somewhat curiosity was eating him up inside.

“Yeah, I don’t remember that either. Why would I think that? You’re the perfect husband.”

He was totally talking out of his ass right now, but he wanted Aron to stop looking like a beaten dog. The verbal thrashing Aron must have gotten from Alex must have been of biblical proportions. And if Alex was suspecting Aron of cheating, he surely didn’t think he was married to the most awesome guy in the universe.

“If you don’t remember, that’s probably for the best,” Aron sighed. “Let’s just bury the hatch.”

Carter shrugged.

“If you say so.”

He was fine with everything either way, as long as Aron was okay with it, too. And he was pretty damn sure that Alex was an asshole to think his husband was a cheater.

They had spent the rest of the day watching TV and chillaxing. It was a tad unnerving how familiar it felt. Just another occasion to realize how much he was missing Aron's company. They had been best buds since first grade. They had always been together until that moment. Or, better said, he had always felt that, ever since Aron left the city, after college. Only that he didn't want to go there.

Why couldn't he live with the fact that Aron liked guys, not girls? He had never thought himself a bigot, someone ready to throw a bible at non-believers and whatnot. But he could still not explain it, why he had acted that way, that day. He wouldn't.

Shut up, brain. That's none of your business.

It had just felt like something had just been stolen from him. Like someone was doing that so that Carter could not have Aron anymore. Would he have acted the same if Aron had been marrying a woman? He could not tell. His gut instinct was telling him that he would have just been happy for the guy. No hard feelings. As he had always thought. Aron with some nice girl, in a nice house, with nice kids, inviting Carter over for beers and watching a game on Sundays. That had been a part of life that he had thought he had all figured out. Until that horrible day.

The fact that Aron was marrying a guy had struck him with the force of a lightning, right in the head and in the chest, messing him up in a single moment. He had hated Alex without even meeting the guy. The fact that he had learned about him later, that he was in the fashion business and all that, had only come to confirm his suspicions that a douchebag had stolen his best friend.

"Were there others before me?" he blurted out without thinking.

Aron's eyes grew wide in surprise.

"Look, Alex, I already told you that I didn't cheat," he said severely.

"Yeah, I know. But before me. Had you been with others?"

"What kind of a question is that? You know well I had," Alex exclaimed. "Are we going to go over all my past relationships now?"

“Why not?” This time, Carter was sure he didn’t want to let go. “Not that I’m jealous or anything. I’m just curious.” Curious how he could have been so blind not to notice his best friend liked guys. That went to prove what a head in the clouds could do, after all.

“Curious about new ways to fuel your paranoia?” Aron snapped. “You are always so obsessed that I might look at someone else in a way that you don’t like. Drop it, Alex. Seriously, I thought you were going to be more honest about everything, after being married for two years.”

Aron got up from the sofa, taking the bottle of beer with him. Carter stared after him, wondering. What kind of marriage did these two have? Sounded like a complicated one. Was he really going to intervene like this? All he wanted was to get to understand his best friend better. Ex-best friend. He had blown that all right.

And now he was just messing up the guy’s marriage even more, only because he was curious. The point was: Aron had made pretty good efforts to seem hetero, for as long as he could remember. He had been dating girls, while they were in high school and college. Who could have suspected Aron of being gay? He could not have.

But whatever questions he had, he needed to just wait until he was himself to get answers for. But what if he was never waking up from that hospital bed? Well, maybe it was all about punishment fitting the crime. He had been an asshole about Aron getting married to a guy and now he had no right to ask the questions he should have asked that day.

And, on top of everything, Aron was pissed. Maybe he should have just stuck to benign things, like light conversation and handjobs. That seemed easy enough. Maybe the same rule applied to body swapping experience as to time travel. He had no right to change things, just like time travelers were not supposed to change the past.

Now, it was up to him to set things right with Aron. No matter how much of a douchebag Alex was, Carter had no right to pass on a wrecked marriage, when they were going to go back to their own selves.

Aron was ready to go to bed, it seemed. Carter stopped for a moment and looked at the man. The guy probably slept naked, because all that Carter could see was his bare torso, as the rest was covered by a thin deep blue blanket. Aron was still pissed and he was pretending to read something on his laptop.

“Should I just go sleep on the sofa?” he asked.

Aron’s eyes snapped up, looking at Carter like he was seeing his husband for the first time. Ugh, this was growing old. Either Aron came to terms that the accident had irremediably changed his husband or Carter learned how to Alex and fast. Both alternatives had a failure prognosis of at least 50%. Or more.

“No, just come here,” the man said gruffly, but pulled the blanket to welcome his supposedly better half to the conjugal bed.

Carter slid under the cover, decided to just be good from now on, and not try to mess up delicate things like Aron’s marriage.

“You’re going to be hot if you sleep like this. Stop acting like a primadona already and get undressed. I’m not mad, I promise.”

Yeah, right. Carter was no fool. Aron was mad, and as his husband, Carter had to do something about that. A good start was to behave like he didn’t mind being ordered around.

Well, he was supposed to get changed into some pajamas or something. Carter was sure Alex was the type to wear all silk and stuff. But, for now, to appease a miffed husband, he needed to do something else. He had a vague recollection of how one of his ex-girlfriends had shared with him the secret of how to tame a pissed guy. Well, he hoped gay guys were not that different when it came to bedroom affairs.

After all, it was just Alex’s body and it was no foul play if he decided to use it. So, he got up from the bed and began to take off his t-shirt. How did those chicks do those striptease shows? He was supposed to have some languorous moves, right?

He tried to move his hips as he pulled the t-shirt over his head. At that inopportune time, a sudden swing of the hips made him lose balance and he just ended up fighting against the t-shirt that was now refusing to let go while trying to balance

his entire weight on just one foot. The lamp on the night stand made a dangerous pirouette, but eventually settled, rattling on its base.

“What on earth are you doing there, Alex?” Aron asked, exasperated.

“Just trying to get undressed,” Carter finally managed to pull himself free from the evil t-shirt.

“Can you do it without hurting yourself?”

A hint of a smile could be felt in those words. That was good. At least Aron was no longer that pissed. And Carter sucked at striptease. So he just decided to push down his pants and throw them in some indefinite direction. Dressed in nothing but a pair of underwear that probably qualified as tiny and cute by gay standards, he climbed the bed again. That small piece of clothing certainly didn't hide a thing.

Aron's eyes were on him, forcing him to look up.

“What?” he asked, but his throat was suddenly very dry.

“Take that off, too. I hope you don't think I'll jump you. And that kind of underwear may just excite me more than act like a barrier between you and what I want.”

Carter opened his mouth to say something, but Aron seemed pretty serious about each and every word he had said. With a shrug, he chucked down his underwear and grabbed the blanket to cover himself.

With a smile that was saying nothing good was afoot, Aron put away his laptop and turned towards Carter.

“Are you going to sleep?” Aron asked slowly, his words dipped in honey.

“Well, I should,” Carter replied, with a small frown. “But I suppose I can stay awake a little longer, for your sake.”

“Oh, His Majesty thinks he's doing me a favor,” Aron shook his head, like he could just not believe it.

“All right, what do you want?”

“Do you really think you have it in you to handle my answer? You can’t handle the truth!” Aron spoke in a thunderous voice and the worse impersonation of Jack Nicholson that had ever been made.

“Try me,” Carter challenged.

In a second, Aron was sneaking toward him, navigating under the blanket like a U-boat on a mission. The way the guy pinned him to the bed with a swift move was almost funny. Almost. Carter was not amused.

“Hey!” Carter protested, but the guy was way too strong for him.

He was pretty damn certain that their dicks were touching now. Alex was between his legs, and was grinding slowly against his husband’s body. And no matter how detached about it all Carter wanted to be, he could not deny what he was feeling. The feeling of another dude’s cock on his.

But the friction was nice.

“After pissing me off like that, the least you could do is give me some sugar,” Aron punctuated every word with a push of his hips.

Carter groaned and closed his eyes.

“Do what you must, beast,” he said theatrically. “Defile the poor innocent maiden ...”

Aron snorted.

“Trust me, baby, if I wanted to defile you, I would have taken you on a different tour right now.”

Carter opened one eye, to stare at Aron. What could the guy mean by that?

“What, do you have some dungeon hidden somewhere?”

“No, but you’re making me think that I should at least get a spanking paddle,” Aron replied and grunted as he continued to rub himself dry against Carter’s naked crotch.

“A spanking paddle?” Carter protested. “How will I explain my red butt at work then?”

“C’mon, Alex, it’s not like you’re showing your ass there. Or are you lately?”

“Yeah, right, everyone just loves my face. No one cares about my butt.”

“Oh, I care about your butt. I care about your butt very much,” Aron confirmed as he slid one hand to cup Carter’s ass from below.

Aron leaned in for a kiss, and Carter let him. What was he to do anyway? Aron was such a great kisser, though. It almost made him feel no regrets that he was basically forcing the guy to cheat. Whatever, what he didn’t know could not hurt him. So he decided to just wrap his legs around the guy, to help him.

Aron groaned into his mouth, but he didn’t let go. Carter was starting to get the hang of it. The man had a pretty wicked tongue, and Carter was not going to deny that he liked it. He could suck on it, too, and that seemed to be something Aron definitely appreciated, by the way he increased the rhythm of his movements.

It was clearly a far shot to come from just this kind of humping, but Carter was more than willing to give it a try. It was all just happening because he was trapped in a gay guy’s body, anyway. He wasn’t the one liking it, but Alex. His body, his pleasures. Sounded like a great rule. The golden rule of being gay.

Aron withdrew and pushed himself back on his knees, in a half sitting position. Carter watched in fascination how the man was pumping his dick. It was a sight to behold, and even he, a not-gay guy, could admit it. The man’s bulging muscles, the strong grip on that fantastic cock ...

Aron was a handsome man, good muscles everywhere, nice body hair, and the face of a sinner. Yeah, Carter could see it. He wasn’t blind. Any guy in the universe could have said the same thing in his place. And it was pretty nice to see a good looking guy like this going about his business, with a small frown on his face, his long fingers wrapped around his cock, trying to bring himself to shoot a load.

“Turn,” Aron said curtly.

That sounded dangerous. If he turned, he was going to be exposed to the guy's cock. No, his ass was going to be exposed. So he remained there frozen, saying nothing.

"I won't fuck you," Aron promised. "I just want to see your ass. Come on, baby, don't keep me hanging."

That was supposed to sound like a plea, but it was actually an order, with an underlying hint at how much the guy was strung right now. Whatever, he had tried earlier to do a striptease show. This was even easier to do.

He turned and pushed himself up on his fours, without being told to. Probably that was how Aron was normally taking his husband, from behind, doggy-style. He only had to behave like his girlfriends from before. Show some ass, wiggle some tail. Easy-peasy.

Aron's hand was hard and demanding on his ass cheek, as the man was trying to push it aside. Oh, he wanted to see the asshole. The tiny asshole that wanted no fucking. Carter sighed, but grabbed his other butt cheek to spread wide. There was a strange tickling sensation and he could feel something like a small vibration right under his cock, only at the thought of being watched like this. By now, Aron had to have a pretty cool view. Not that he could call that a pretty view. How could he tell? He hadn't had the time to stare at himself, now that he inhabited the body of a fashion icon or something. Local fashion icon. Not like an international one. But still.

"Grab your ass with your hands, and keep it open like this," Aron ordered, and Carter obeyed.

He could feel his hole twitch, and by the way Aron was whispering dirty encouragements, he was doing a pretty good job. Now he only needed to think of something else. Not of how his ex-best friend was staring at him like he was a sex object, and how much his dick seemed to appreciate the situation.

What could his girlfriends think about while they had been staying like this, while he had been in the same position as Aron right now? Had they been wishing that the guy should just hurry up and fuck them? Or they had just been bored and

already thinking about how much nicer would have been to be on the phone and play Candy Crush Saga?

Aron's labored breath behind him did not let him concentrate. What was he supposed to do to avoid thinking of dangerous stuff? It felt kind of weird to keep his asshole open like that. It was like he could feel a little breeze. Could one catch a cold like this? A butthole cold. He had to check that online. It probably was a thing.

He caught his breathe as he felt something warm and liquid hitting his backside and pouring down his ass crack. A small shudder crossed his body. Well, at least Aron seemed to be easy to satisfy. That was good to know. Until Alex was back, ready to take care of his husbandly duties, he could act as a passive replacement. Oh, no, he had just thought the word passive? It was like he was getting gayer by the second. Was it possible to become contaminated with gayness?

A quick slap on the ass made him purse his lips and groan.

"Thanks, baby," Aron spoke and lay down on his side of the bed. "Good night."

Carter stared at his husband feeling a little robbed of something, for some reason he could not exactly pinpoint. So he was left with jizz pouring down his ass, while the fucker was just turning on one side to sleep. With a murmured curse, he stood up and traipsed toward the bathroom. Alex probably didn't usually sleep with jizz all over his asshole, so it was all right to take a short shower.

By the time he got back to the bed to sleep, Aron was already in the land of dreams. With a shrug, he just sneaked under the blanket. Well, it did feel nice to sleep naked, and, somehow, the steady rhythm of Aron's breathing was making him feel relaxed.

Tomorrow, he was going to see what the hell was going on with this weird body swap thing. After that, maybe he was going to be friends with Aron again. Provided that he wasn't going to act like an uncontrollable jerk.

Chapter Five

It was surprisingly easy to gain access to Carter Malis's room, aka himself, with Alex Ruskin's looks. Everyone knew him and everyone was certain he was some kind of friend to the man lying there, trapped in his own mind, and hooked on medical devices that barely kept him alive.

The nurse fretted around him for like a minute, during which he didn't dare to look at the pristine white bed. A single glimpse of a pale arm resting on top of the sheet was close enough to make him heave. Eventually, the nurse, another, not Marge, let him be.

"I let you two boys catch up. Talk to him, Mr. Ruskin. Hearing a familiar voice might help him find his way out of this coma."

She knew nothing. Alex's voice was nothing familiar to Carter. Yes, he knew the guy from all the ads, and the tabloids showing Aron and him attending various social functions. But, otherwise, if it was Alex Ruskin or one of the Kardashians, that was pretty much the same thing for Carter. He wasn't watching TV, either.

As soon as the nurse left, he gathered enough courage to walk towards the bed. His actual face was an unpleasant shade of deep purple, with dark spots in places. The device placed over the nose was slowly filling with air, condensing on the plastic. The rhythmic sound of breathing and the small beeps from the machines keeping the man alive were the only things breaking the silence of the room.

The nurse had told him that Aron had taken into his care to pay for Carter's medical bills, assuming that he already knew that. Aron hadn't mentioned it, but Carter was glad he still had a friend in his ex-best friend. The room where his body had been placed was nice, away from the crowded areas, and it seemed cozy. Not that the guy lying on the bed could care less about it all. He was obviously dead to the world.

"Hey," he whispered.

Could comatose people hear anything from what happened around them? He did not know. The stupid articles he had read on the topic completely by accident told all kinds of horrendous stories. People in coma seemed trapped in a nightmare, not

able to move, or speak, or do anything. Just watch their dear ones debating whether they should pull the plug or not.

Well, he wasn't there for that.

"Hey, Alex," he spoke again.

What if Alex wasn't inside him? What if he was just trying to speak to an empty shell? He watched the screen on which the vitals beeped softly. The thought was rushing through him like murky water released through a draining pipe.

"It's like the weirdest thing happened, okay? I don't want you to freak out," Carter continued to speak gently. "But it looks like I'm Carter Malis and I'm trapped inside you, and, well, you're here, in a coma, and you're in my body."

The vitals continued their monotonous pattern. It was stupid to believe a comatose patient could hear anything.

"So I'm going to touch you, okay?" Carter spoke, refusing to lose hope.

He was hesitant to touch the inert hand resting on the sheet. But eventually he took it and held it. He had no idea what he was supposed to do next. It was not like he was an expert in body exchange or whatever this was.

Hmm, maybe he was supposed to be closer? He hoped he didn't have to do something gross like kiss himself. But there were so many theories that the soul could travel out of the body through the mouth, via one last breath, or something like that. Maybe he could at least get closer to his comatose body.

The bed was wide, so it was pretty weird to try getting closer. Eventually, he chose to climb the bed, and lay next to Carter/Alex. Now he was side by side with the body, but he didn't feel anything. He focused and tried to even keep his breath, but there was still nothing.

All right, maybe he could try the kissing part. If Alex's soul wanted to get out of there, it couldn't because of that thing over his mouth. Gently, he pulled it up a little and attempted a kiss. Suddenly, the vitals began running amok, and, in pure surprise, Carter slapped the plastic mask back on his body's mouth.

A nurse rushed into a room and remained dead in her tracks for a fraction of a moment and then rushed to examine the patient. Feeling awkward enough, Carter got off the bed and watched the nurse adjusting the plastic mask on the patient's face. The vitals returned to normal. What if he had just missed his chance?

“What were you doing? Trying to kill him?” the nurse admonished him.

Well, it wasn't like he didn't know that thing kept the body on the bed alive, but it was a risk he had to consider. Or maybe the kiss theory was just a load of crap. He was so lost in his own musings that he didn't realize that the woman in white overalls was still waiting for an explanation.

“No, no!” he protested, a bit too forcibly. “I was just ... trying to get a reaction out of him.”

“A reaction? By suppressing his air supply? His lungs would not work on their own, you know? I realize that you are some big star, Mr. Ruskin, but that definitely doesn't make you an expert in healthcare,” the woman glared at him over her thick-rimmed glasses.

Wow, someone who didn't like him. Didn't like Alex, actually. Well, that was refreshing. But that didn't change the fact that whatever he had tried hadn't worked. He must have had a really desolated look on his face, as the nurse's pursed lips began to melt into an apologetic smile.

“Are you close to Mr. Malis?”

“Not really, my husband is friends with him, but the fact that we were both involved in the same accident ... makes me think I have a duty towards him. To help him get well,” he said quickly.

The nurse came close to him and patted him on the arm.

“Leave that to us, dear. Visit him, talk to him, but please don't ever touch anything again. We're hoping that he will get up soon.”

“Okay,” he nodded.

Well, it looked like the nurse now no longer wanted to leave, which meant that visitation hours were done for the day, or at least for him, the guy who tried to not so accidentally kill the patient by taking off the mask.

“I should get going,” he said and the nurse nodded at him with a hint of relief in her myopic eyes.

Great, now he was nothing short than the enemy of the state in the woman’s eyes. He wondered if he would get another chance to be alone with his own body, and try to reach Alex on the other side.

Well, it looked like he was going to spend at least some time in this body, so it was for the best to get to know it. He took off all his clothes and stood in front of the full-size mirror in the bathroom. Vanity was too little a word to describe that space. It was a temple worthy of a beauty queen. Carter had browsed through all the lotions, creams, and whatever other stuff was, just to get a bit acquainted with Alex’s lifestyle.

He had given up by the time he read on a cream that said it was for afternoon treatments. He hadn’t lived under a rock, and he had a vague idea about beauty regimens since he had once had a girlfriend obsessed with her nighttime treatment, but having a cream for afternoon care sounded pretty extra.

Now it was time to examine himself a little. It was quite strange that he no longer felt that uneasy inhabiting another dude’s body. Wasn’t supposed to be a rule about this or something? You shan’t feel good except in your own skin? Maybe he was still trapped in a nightmare and this was going to end soon.

No, dreams could not be this long and vivid. He was just trying to fool himself, nothing else. For lack of anything better to do, he began examining Alex’s body in the mirror. How could the guy survive while being this skinny?

The most annoying part was that he didn’t look bad like this. Alex was fine-boned, and had a harmonious, lean body. There weren’t bones sticking everywhere; if anything, he had the body of a young dancer. And seeing that Alex was what? 25? 26?, that said something about the fucker’s good genes.

And everything about him was so flawless and symmetrical. His face was really worthy of starring in commercials. Alex had striking green eyes, perfect eyebrows, probably manscaped, of a darker ash blonde compared to his hair, hair that was shaved fashionably high to complement the quiff.

It was so easy to change facial expressions that Carter found himself fascinated with making faces in the mirror. A little pout and the guy looked like he could convince Cleopatra to surrender her throne just to see him no longer miffed like a child. A small smile and he looked sexy. Yeah, that was a panty-dropping smile, right there. Well, that if the guy had been into girls, which he was not. Anyway, he clearly could charm anyone out of their pants, and probably not only.

Carter sighed. So the guy was perfect. A look at the plump lips made him instantly think of Aron's words. *You're amazing with blowjobs*, the guy had said. No wonder there. The guy had the most beautiful lips Carter had ever seen, and it was not that unfathomable to imagine him getting on his knees and servicing his husband with his mouth.

He groaned, as his eyes traveled lower. His damn cock was springing up to attention. He could not remember ever having gay thoughts in his life before the accident and this stupid body swap. But all this had to happen because Alex was gay, and this was his body, hence gay thoughts. Although the brain seemed to belong to Carter, for now.

But was he really sure about that? From a physical point of view, the brain actually still belonged to Alex. And the neural pathways or whatever those were called were trained to think of blowjobs, and gay sex, and a sexy husband who had gone down on ...

Carter straightened up and exhaled. Could this make him gay? Living inside a gay guy's body? Was it really cheating if he slept with Aron, while being Alex? It was basically the same body. Wait, what was he thinking again? The episode from last night was already making him think that he was crossing barrier after barrier like he was a runner on steroids.

But, seriously, now he was starting to get a bit curious. How would it be to ...? He turned to examine Alex's backside. A cute, pert butt came into view. Hell, Carter

was straight, and yet he could still appreciate that sight. Slowly, he grabbed his buttocks and pulled them apart. From there, a small pink hole was staring at him like it wanted to ask him what the fuck he was looking at. That was the thing Aron had stared at last night and jizzed all over.

Carter had seen Aron's cock. He had held it in his hand. And that thing was huge. There was no way that cannon could pass through that tiny hole. No wonder Alex was such a fussy lover. That had to fucking hurt. Yeah, Carter could sympathize with the guy. And Aron could just go suck it.

Actually, no, not suck it. That had instantly brought images of Aron on his knees, looking at him with hooded eyes and swiping his tongue all along Carter's shaft. It hadn't mattered that it was basically Alex's cock; Carter had felt it. And it had felt pretty darn good.

Well, at least, his theory of having too tiny an asshole to withstand a fucking from his beloved husband was holding water. The proof was right there, in front of him. Aron should have known better than marry a skinny guy, no matter how beautiful, with a tiny fuck hole. Everything Aron was enduring now was his own making.

He was pleased with that realization. He was not going to regret fending off Aron's advances from now on. It was only right to do that and he was sure of it. All he needed to confirm his decision was to take a look at Alex's tiny asshole in the mirror.

How could he change back into his body, though? Maybe he could just ask Google. People were talking about the weirdest things online right now, so if anyone had happened to go through the same experience, they were likely to share their experience and thoughts on social media.

Half an hour later, Carter was still as unknowledgeable on the matter as he had been when he had opened the laptop. He was about to just go to the kitchen and grab something to eat, when he heard, quite distinctly, a phone ringing.

He searched with his eyes until he noticed the smartphone on the nightstand. A pretty thing dressed in a rose gold case and decorated with Swarovski crystals. That had to be Alex's phone, there was no other explanation.

He had a mind to just let it ring. But maybe it was Aron, worrying about one thing or another and wanting to check on his husband. Eventually, Carter decided to grab it from the nightstand. It wasn't Aron. He just put it back, decided to continue his foray in the knowledge of body-swapping that was the Internet.

The phone rang again. Well, he could not avoid being Alex forever. Maybe just talking to someone Alex knew on the phone was a good start. Plus, he didn't want to rise any suspicious and he didn't want to have doctors really look at his head and decide that he was the perfect candidate for a visit to the loony bin.

The name on the screen said Yolanda. Sounded like someone working in the fashion business. Well, he had to do it, anyway. So he inhaled and swiped right. The phone wasn't locked.

"Alex, I am so going to kill you!" a high-pitched voice made him take the phone away from his ear and grimace as if he had just had lemon wedges for lunch. That was probably the kind of meal Alex usually indulged in.

"Hey, Yolanda," he answered, a bit unsure.

"Don't hey, Yolanda, me, you fucking diva," the female voice on the other end reached an even higher pitch. It was probably out of any musical scale in existence, and it broke the sound barrier better than a supersonic jet. "Get your ass right here, right now. And if I catch a single mark on that beautiful face of yours, I'm sending you to Switzerland for a full recovery treatment!"

Carter jumped to his feet and hurried to look in a mirror. He was in no mood to go to Switzerland. His body was still in the hospital. He exhaled in relief as he noticed that there was no trace of the scratches from before on Alex's handsome face.

"No, I'm totally perfect," he hurried to communicate the results of his examination in the mirror.

"Good," the woman seemed a bit appeased. "So what are you doing at home? Get your ass here right this instant!"

“I’m still on medical leave,” he said sharply.

Whoever this Yolanda was, he didn’t like her. She was a shrew and a slave driver. Supposedly.

“Honey, you’re on medical leave if you have a medical problem. Can you stand?”

“Yeah, I can,” Carter replied.

“Then chop-chop! Come to work or else.”

“Or else what?” he tried his luck.

A growl that might have belonged to a lion on a diet or a pissed wild cat was the only answer.

“Alex, you don’t want to know what else means in my vocabulary,” Yolanda said sweetly, but Carter was no fool.

That woman was probably sharpening her nails right now. He shuddered at the sudden image of a Cruella de Vil crossed with Meryl Streep in *The Devil Wears Prada* flashing in front of his eyes.

“So, do you need me?” he examined his face again in the mirror. “Like right now?”

“Like this morning, but let’s just pretend that I can live with you being fashionably late.”

“Fashionably late? It’s 1 pm,” Carter snorted.

“Yes, like in the definition of a rock star on coke, dear. Come now, don’t keep mommy waiting.”

Mommy? He was damn certain that devil of a woman had not a maternal bone in her skinny body. Well, she had to be skinny.

“Wait, I need to eat something first,” Carter said.

“Eat? Come now, Alex, fashion icons never eat. Come lean and hungry, dear. This is what brings home the dough.”

Carter shrugged. He was just going to grab a burger on his way to wherever Alex was working.

“Okay. Just give me the address.”

“What?” the voice reached the top notes from before in less than a fraction of a second.

“Ah, didn’t I tell you?” Carter said airily. “I’m kind of amnesic.”

“Shit,” the woman seemed appeased now, but, surprisingly enough, she sounded more human. “Should I let you rest then?”

“Nah, the doc says I should go back to familiar things, and it will all come back to me.”

“Great! Don’t worry! I’ll be here for you!” Yolanda said brightly.

He wasn’t sure he liked it when she said that.

He was more than content with the cheeseburger he had on the way to work and he was now ready to face that harpy named Yolanda. Lean and hungry, my ass, he thought to himself. He was not one to be denied his protein. Maybe he could fatten Alex a little while at it. The guy was going to throw a hissy fit when they were going to get back to the way they were supposed to be. And when that was going to happen, he was ready to grab the popcorn and watch the show.

The fashion studio was housed by the same building sheltering a beauty mag and a fitness club. It all looked hip and, of course, fashionable, and it sort of intimidated him. But, as he passed through the chrome plated revolving doors, he could only think of one thing.

Don’t blow it.

A doorman dressed in livery that looked taken from a musical hurried to welcome him, offering him a pass since he naturally didn’t have his. From there, he was guided to an elevator and sent directly to Yolanda’s office.

He could tell, even without looking, that everyone was talking about him. In hush-hush voices, but all a smile as they greeted him. And all these people looked like they were candidates to Next Top Model. He had to admit that he felt thankful he was walking in Alex's shoes for a change. All these beasts dressed in designer clothes looked like they were about to rip him to shreds and the only thing keeping them from doing that was that Alex had creed. Like fashion creed, not street creed, and in this people's eyes, loaded with too much mascara, that was all that mattered.

He was ready to face Yolanda Jones, as he read the name on the door. Yeah, he could take her.

"Alex," a woman measuring no more than 5.1 sauntered from her desk and hurried to him.

She looked nothing like Meryl Streep or Cruella. She was just a short lady, dressed smartly in a pants suit the color of duck eggs, sporting a black bob with blue reflections. Her small round eyes reminded him of Marge from the hospital. And where he expected to see cruelty and the determination and lack of human empathy necessary for swinging a whip, he saw only kindness in the woman's eyes.

"So glad you're fine," she said as she began touching him everywhere like she wanted to make sure that he had all his 206 bones. "You had me worried, pumpkin!"

"Yolanda?" he said expectantly. Maybe this woman was just the secretary.

"Yes, dear?" she said quickly.

"I thought you were going to have my head over the phone."

"Why would I? You're here," she said matter-of-factly. "Well, sometimes you need a little kick in the teeth. Figuratively speaking. Trust me; you bring out the worst in me. Before you, I almost never used four-letter words. Now, onto serious business. We have to prep you for the shampoo commercial at 3 and then we need to talk to the guys from that cosmetics company, you know, the one with the organic products. Dear, please do bear in mind to channel the bitchiest you, because we need to be tough. These people think that if they add a smidge of green to a label, they're suddenly emissaries from God Almighty. In other words, they

think they are entitled to a cheaper deal. Are you with me? And are you really fine, sweetie?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. And about all you said, sure thing, boss," Carter said with a small smile.

Yolanda Jones was not a wild cat, but more of a mother hen.

"Okay," she said, shaking her head and making a few hairs flew out from her perfect bob. "You never called me boss," she added.

"Well, you're the boss around here, right?" Carter shrugged.

Maybe the more he was blowing his cover, the more the powers that be were going to notice the mistake they made by misplacing him and Alex Ruskin. It was an alternative to consider.

"Right," Yolanda said hesitantly, but didn't pursue. "Go make yourself pretty. Ah, and your new assistant should arrive around 5, after we're out of the meeting. Please, Alex, don't be harsh on the boy. I told him not to come since I didn't know for sure that you were going to be here. You know he has amazing references ..."

"Don't worry, I won't be hard on him," Carter waved.

He could sense Yolanda was uncomfortable around him and he wanted to put her mind at ease.

"Promise?" the woman stared from below.

"Yeah," he shrugged.

Maybe it was a good thing he had a new assistant. He was going to be able to relax in the presence of someone who didn't know Alex Ruskin personally. But, until then, he had plenty of things on his plate.

A few hours later, he was groaning while letting his head drop on his desk. He even had his own office. Now he sort of felt for Alex. After having his hair washed, brushed and styled for at least five times until the director shooting the ad

was satisfied, he could tell that his scalp wanted to be part of a syndicate and ask for humane working conditions.

At least the part with the organic cosmetics company had been a bit less demanding. The poor guys had been so scared by the frown on his face that they had decided to accept all the conditions pushed under their eyes by a dutiful and very professional Yolanda.

Now he was just going to wait for his new assistant and then he was free to go.

A playful knock on his door made him raise his head.

“Come in,” he shouted, unsure if that could be easily heard through the metal door. It made him feel like he was in a bunker.

Someone slid through the door swiftly, like he was trying to come in unnoticed. The visitor was a guy in his late 30s, prematurely bald, and, by the size of his belly, the kind who didn’t seem to mind seconds.

“Yes?” he asked, seeing that his guest was busy stealing glances towards the door like he was prepared to see someone walking through it and following him.

“I don’t have a lot of time, but I did arrange ... those for you,” the man spoke, as he began to unhook his belt.

Carter stared at the man’s fatty fingers struggling with the fly. What was this guy thinking? That this was the toilet? When the guy pulled out a flaccid cock, Carter just looked away. Okay, so Alex Ruskin could indeed make everyone lose their pants, but what the hell was this?

The man finally seemed to notice his lack of response.

“Alex, please, you promised,” he began to beg.

Carter was cringing so hard that he thought he was going to puke. His eyes traveled to the guy’s cock and he winced.

“Put that thing away, man, what the fuck?” he spoke.

The visitor stopped, hanging his fingers awkwardly on the edge of his pants. He was now staring at Alex.

“Come on, you promised,” the man said, now more impatiently.

Carter took one deep breath.

“I have no idea who the fuck you are and what you say I promised you. But I’m a married man, so take your dick out of here.”

He hoped he looked menacing enough as he pointed towards the door. The man cursed as he pushed his dick back inside his pants.

“You said you would suck my dick if I helped you with those,” the man pointed a fat finger at him.

Carter snorted.

“Like I would get on my knees for you. Whatever you did for me, undo,” he said nonchalantly.

The man now seemed on the point of choking.

“Really, dude, don’t have a heart attack here. I don’t know CPR,” he warned, again pointing at the door.

The guy finally understood and crawled towards the exit. To Carter’s surprise, another shady looking character sneaked inside as the first one left. He had a hunch this one was also going to wave his naked dick at him, by the look he gave him.

The difference was that shady character number two was a handsome young man, with a swarthy complexion and a sleek air about him, like he was an animal grown for his coat. What was the name of that little critter? Ah, a chinchilla. The truth was that he was not that shady. His eyes were shifty, though. Carter took in the tall man, and his lean build smartly dressed in a designer suit. Was he probably a model buddy or something? He definitely looked the part.

“Seriously, Alex, to get on your knees for that guy. I knew you to have standards,” the new comer pointed towards the door. “And, for fuck’s sake, be a little less obvious. If people are seen coming and going like from a public toilet, you’re going to have people talking.”

“Duly noted,” Carter said dryly.

Of course, if guys around here were used to visit Alex's office, dick in hand, the comparison was probably correct.

"Now who the fuck are you, and what brings you here?" he gestured towards his guest with a pointy pen he just grabbed from his desk.

The model buddy looked hurt when his eyes trained on Carter.

"Are you for real, Alex? Don't pretend you don't know me! What the hell?"

"I've just been released from the hospital. It looks like I have amnesia," Carter spoke.

It was the easiest way to fend off these creeps. His mind was a blank slate, pristine and untouched. Unlike Alex's dance card, obviously.

"Oh," the man spoke, a bit taken aback. "Well, I don't mind refreshing your memory," he seemed to bounce back rather quickly and started to walk towards Carter with a sly smile on his lips.

Carter raised his hands in defense.

"How about you stay right there and tell me your name."

He dutifully grabbed a notebook from the desk and set his pen on a blank page. And then he looked at the guy.

"Wow, you're serious," the guy spoke. "You really don't remember me? Wait, do you remember others, or you simply don't know a thing?"

Carter swung his head from one side to the other, with a forced smile on his lips.

"Well, I do know and remember the important stuff. And people. Like Yolanda." He was such a huge liar. "And Aron." Not an equally big liar here.

"Aron? Your cheating husband?" the man threw him a look like he couldn't believe a word.

"He's not a cheater," Carter protested.

"Well, I don't blame the guy. If he knew how much dick you get on the side ..."

Even Carter was taken aback by how the pen in his hand flew like a projectile. He had apparently squeezed too hard. The guest looked at him surprised.

“What?” he asked innocently. “It’s not like I’m going to tell,” he glared. “I don’t want to be at the receiving end of your wrath.”

“Well, until I get the hang of everything around here,” he said slowly, “how about we, ahem, suspend our little arrangement?”

The man looked at him pensively.

“Are you kicking me at the curb?”

Carter pondered for a couple of seconds. On one hand, Aron didn’t deserve to be cheated on like this. Well, not like this. Not at all, actually. On the other hand, he had the time travel slash body swapping rule of not intervening. What was he to do?

“You know what?” he told the guy, smiling widely. “I just realized that I’m happily married and that I want to stay this way.”

“Really? After Aron cheated on you?”

“He didn’t cheat,” Carter said slowly.

“How can you tell?” the guy snorted. “Come on, you’re a catch, Alex, but it’s not like Aron is not a looker. He can make a lot of guys drop to their knees and show their appreciation. And you know that.”

“I had a recent head-on with Miss Death. I think it was a signal for me to mend my ways. So this is what I’m doing. Plus, I took a vow when I got married. I’m not going to sully that by sleeping around. Well, at least not anymore.”

“I’ll be damned,” the guy whispered. “Are you sure? What about me?”

“What about you?” Carter shrugged.

The man’s frown deepened. There was something in the way the guy looked at him that told Carter that the guest was pretty shaken by the change in what he knew. He was too young to hide his feelings well.

“All right, Alex. I’ll give you a few days. You’ll come around. And think whether Aron is really the faithful husband you think he is. He could have anyone.”

“Ah, well, he has me, and I have him,” Carter said sharply. “Now, I believe you have plenty of other things to do.”

“I freed my schedule so I can see you,” the guy protested, and his sweet brown eyes turned pleading.

Ugh, he could not stand the puppy eyes look. When some girl did that to him, he somehow always ended up buying something expensive for her.

“Too bad,” Carter reined in his temptation to give in to the temptation to comfort the guy. “See you around.”

The man left without a word. Funny, he hadn’t mentioned his name. That was pretty rude. Plus, he hadn’t even cared to ask whether Alex was all right after that freakish accident he had been involved in. Ah, well, chinchilla slash puppy eyes guy could go fuck himself.

He let his head rest on the desk again. So Alex was a huge jerk, sleeping around and keeping his husband on a tight leash at home. What if the guy was engaging in risky sex behavior on a constant basis? He could feel cold sweat on his back. Maybe the guy had some STDs or something. Damn it! And Aron had no idea! He needed to get this stupid body tested. What if the guy didn’t even care about using protection?

Another knock on the door made him groan. He shouted for the new comer to come in. Without lifting his head off the desk, he just raised his hands, exposing the ring finger on the left with the wedding band and pointing at it with the right.

“Married! Happily married!” he yelled, hoping that the new guy was just going to leave without additional explanations.

“I know, boss,” a young voice said brightly. “I know everything about you.”

Carter raised his head and took in the new apparition. A young man in his early twenties, with a messenger bag thrown casually over one shoulder, wearing a plaited shirt and washed out jeans, was smiling at him from the door. He wore

thick rimmed glasses and seemed to have done that before it was cool, and his preppy chestnut hair was perfectly glued to his head.

“Hello, Mr. Ruskin. I’m Mark Williams, your new assistant. Pleased to meet you,” the young man hurried to him, keeping one arm stretched.

Carter stood up and shook the guy’s hand, surprised that it wasn’t another man wanting sexual favors from him.

“Hi, Mark. And welcome. Sorry if I’m a mess. I just got back from the hospital.”

“Yes, I heard,” Mark kept his hand in his.

For a second, Carter thought he saw the assistant’s eyes flickering in kaleidoscopic colors. But the next one, they looked just an ordinary brown. It had been, probably, just a trick of the light.

Chapter Six

Carter had never known the blessing of having a personal assistant, but as a programmer, it wasn't like he needed one. He wasn't even a good team player, and he worked as a freelancer for that reason. But leaving everything in Mark's professional hands had made him feel relieved. Tomorrow, he was going to go to work and have his entire schedule well prepped by his new assistant, while he only had to worry about being pretty, as Mark had said while almost throwing him out the door.

He did not complain. Half a day of working in the fashion business and he felt pissed, hungry, and not in the mood to socialize for like a week.

Plus, that douchebag Alex was a huge motherfucking cheater. How could he do that when he had such a great guy like Aron at home? Well, it was true that the guy's bed manners lacked finesse, but Carter was a dude, too, and it was not like he had never gone out like a light after sex or just a handjob, when done right. Of course, a diva like Alex must have considered such a thing a personal affront and had had Aron sleep on the sofa on more than one occasion. Presumably.

Now, he was frankly really worried about Alex's bed manners, and, specifically, his habit of sleeping around at his workplace. Wasn't that really risky? It seemed so easy for some info to just leak, especially with so many paparazzi that Alex seemed to have on his tail, at least, at formal events.

What if, a thought crossed his mind, what if Alex wanted to be caught? And Aron to hear about it? If the guy believed that Aron had cheated, maybe he wanted to pay his husband back with interest for that. Well, he could not tell what made him think that, but something in the way the guys had been pushing the door to his office today was making him believe Alex had just recently started rain sexual favors over his poor servants' heads.

Or maybe it was what that puppy eyes dude had said. Mentioning Aron's alleged cheating episode had been meant as a hit below the belt. But the guy had wanted to use it as leverage to convince Carter that cheating was totally worth it.

Yeah, sell it to someone with less than half a brain, puppy eyes, he thought. Was there a possibility that the guy was pulling his leg? What about the fatty boom

boom from earlier then? It was clear that the guy had been pretty sure that he was going to get his dick wet.

Well, he wasn't going to risk it. He needed to get Alex's body checked for any kind of disease that he could pass to Aron by accident, and if the results were going to come back positive, he was just going to bite the bullet and tell Aron to get checked, too.

Of course, he hoped things were not going to end up in such a snafu. It was not at all in his interest to wreck Aron's marriage, and if he could help it, he was going to protect it. Even if Alex was a douchebag, Aron didn't deserve that. So, since destiny had put him in Alex's shoes, literally, it was up to him to set things right. Of course, when Alex was going to be back into his body and Carter in his, things were going to change. For now, however, it was up to him and he was decided to do his best to make sure that Aron was not going to be unhappy.

But how to go about it? Whether he liked it or not, he was a public face, and he could not just walk into any clinic and ask to be tested for STDs. That kind of thing was bound to make waves, and that was the last thing he needed. If anything, he needed to navigate under the radar.

Mark had dutifully informed him, just before kicking him out the door that all his medical files were kept at that fancy clinic, where both he and Aron were registered, as the clinic also offered regular check-ups and medical services pertaining to a GP's area of expertise.

He knew it! He was just going to ask for more extensive investigations on the grounds that he was a tiny bit paranoid and he thought himself ill. He was just going to slip that he wanted STD tests in-between those and act like a diva on the point of a nervous breakdown. That douchebag Alex could afford it. Maybe he was not making millions, as he had exaggerated when talking to Aron, but Alex Ruskin definitely brought home the dough. He was no kept prized toy, although Carter would have liked to believe that.

Aron had always been well off, and his family came from money, as far as he remembered his own parents commenting one time. It was just the guy's choice to work and not just live the life while spending away his family's cash. Plus, seeing

how decent and modest the type of life Aron's parents preferred to lead, such a nasty behavior would have just been a slap in their faces. And he knew one thing well; that Aron loved his parents above anyone else.

Hmm, maybe not anyone else, now. Well, he was not one to deny the facts. That fucker Alex was handsome and photogenic like a Siamese cat. Of course he was well paid.

He had just gotten out from the taxi when his phone rang. He stared for a moment at Aron's smiling face in the photo used for the caller ID, and rolled his eyes when he read the name under which the guy was saved in Alex's contacts. *Hubby*, he shook his head. He swiped right.

"Are you going to be late?" Aron questioned him from the other end.

"Yeah," he answered, keeping himself with some difficulty from adding 'hubby' to that.

"I was wondering if you wanted to go out or stay in tonight."

"In," he replied without hesitation.

Aron did hesitate on the other hand, making him want to bite his tongue. The socialite in Alex was probably hungry for social events on a regular basis. But he was in no mood to go out and try fending off who knew how many people who wanted who knew what, starting with a blowjob and ending up with ... Okay, that was enough gay imagery for one day.

Focus, Carter, focus.

"I'm tired," he said quickly, to alleviate Aron's suspicions. "I just want to chill."

"Netflix and chill?" Aron joked and Carter could swear he could picture the guy wiggling his eyebrows in that funny way of his.

"Don't push your luck," he growled into the phone, but he could barely keep from laughing.

How many times had he used that phrase with his casual hookups? He could not picture Aron using it, though. And especially with a guy. Well, probably Grindr wasn't that different from Tinder. Just guys doing ... other guys.

“What are you up to?” Aron asked, as his low chuckle was doing strange little things to Carter's ear, like there was suddenly a flock of butterflies there, trying to tickle him.

“Just some last minute errands.”

“What errands?”

Now wasn't Aron a curious little shit right now?

“I need a new hand lotion,” Carter said snappily.

Aron sighed loudly on the other end.

“You have like one thousand.”

“Well, I need one thousand and one,” Carter lied through his teeth.

Even Aron was annoyed with his husband's obsession for cosmetic products. It was a normal thing, really. By the amount of crap that guy had in the royal size bathroom, he was probably mummified on the inside from all the chemicals in those nice smelling bottles.

“Come on, baby, don't be mad,” Aron cooed, but Carter could tell the guy was just trying to pull his leg.

“Then don't make me mad,” he replied sternly.

“Okay, someone is a little pissed,” Aron joked, obviously fishing for info. “What happened?”

“Nothing. I just need this thing, that's all. And I'll have to go all over town for it. So, feel free to eat without me.”

There was a small pause on the other end.

“I thought about cooking your favorite if we weren't going out,” Aron eventually spoke.

Aron? Cooking? Carter could not picture his best friend in the line-up for Master Chef, trying to undermine the other contestants just for a chance to suck up to Gordon Ramsay.

“Oh, yeah?”

He was kind of hungry. But Alex’s favorite was probably something vegan and out of whack that could not pass for edible stuff. That was how fashion icons kept skinny, he could bet. *Oh, I’m vegan; actually, I cannot eat this shit, so I’ll just go hungry. Or you would not believe how much I pig out and I still look like this ...*

Aron’s small cough on the other end cut short his mental verbalization.

“Yes. I know you only eat it on special occasions, but seeing that you faced death ...” Aron explained with a small chuckle. “Really, baby, you know how much you love lasagna. Just come home.”

Lasagna? Okay, he could live with that. And he could feel his mouth water just at the sound of that. What if Aron sucked at cooking or it was some kind of lasagna only fashion victims ate? It didn’t matter at this point. If Aron was cooking, he was going to make the effort to eat it. And say that it was awesome.

“Well, you convinced me. I’ll try to finish here and get home as fast as I can,” he spoke quickly as he went through the door.

The perfunctory female voice over the speakers started at the most inopportune time.

“Where are you, Alex? I think I heard ...”

“I’ll be home soon, gotta go, bye,” he said and ended the convo abruptly.

All right, he had panicked like an idiot. But there was no way he was going to let Aron guess where he was. With a purposeful stride, he walked over to the reception and let the woman tending the front desk know who he was and what he wanted.

It had worked much better than expected, and except for the un-pleasantries of having biological samples collected, everything had gone smoothly. The doctors at the clinic were more than happy with running tests. That was just easy money for them, so the guy in charge hadn't even questioned him about the real reason he wanted the investigations to be carried on.

Now he felt a tad more relieved, but it was just going to take a while to have the results back. Until then, he had to make sure that Aron didn't fuck him by accident.

By accident? Who was he kidding? Aron was going to be all over his ass. Cooking? The guy behaved like he was trying to impress some chick. Carter had only tried it once. The girl he had been dating back then was nice; she had worn a cringing little smile all the time while trying to make sense of what lay there on her plate, as if it was trying to reach her from beyond the grave like Carrie's hand.

But Aron had clearly done it before, probably quite successfully, which could only mean that Carter was going to be well prepared for the offensive. It was extremely weird to be the one wooed. He needed to do something about it. Aron was bent on fucking his husband soon, and Carter needed to sort out a lot of things before that guy's dick got within an inch of his backside. One of them being, of course, the fact that he needed to change back with Alex and let that guy get the well-deserved dicking from his beloved 'hubby'.

In the meantime, he needed to juggle things, and he had never been a good juggler. He needed to make sure he was not going to blow things up at Alex's workplace, he needed to maintain Aron's marriage to the douchebag floating and he needed to figure out a way to get back to his own body.

How was he going to do all those without fucking up really badly? He had no idea. But he was sure as hell going to try it.

About one hour later, an incredible smell hit his nostrils the moment he walked into the kitchen, where he supposed Aron still was, like the dutiful, loving husband he was. He made a small sound of delight, before he could control himself. Aron's eyes were shining as they were quickly trained on him.

Carter could almost feel the need to gulp. He could not be that easy. Well, at least he had one thing in common with Aron's real husband: they both loved lasagna.

Aron wiped quickly his hands on his pristine white apron and walked towards Carter. There was a strange dance going on between them as Aron leaned in for a kiss, and Carter had no idea how to maneuver himself in such a way that Aron would just kiss him on the cheek, instead of lips.

With a small chuckle, Aron grabbed him hard, and, for a second, their eyes met, and Carter felt the strangest thing. Like he was on the verge of suddenly feeling very sick, or just his stomach was doing some weird flip-flops, or it was just going to become airborne and wanted to come out through his throat ...

Aron leaned in and kissed him, softly the first time. Carter could now feel his eyelids doing their own show of a hummingbird impersonation. Great. What part of his anatomy was going to misbehave next?

Err, okay. Aron just went all in for a second kiss and this time he was using tongue. And the guy's hands were starting to wander, too, clearly aiming for his behind. Now it was not time for him to get lost in all these games. He needed to put an end to the circus his entire body was planning on putting.

So he kissed back, a bit too forcibly, and with a loud smack, but at least, Aron's tongue slipped from his mouth like a weasel.

"Well, where's that lasagna? I'm starving," he began talking quickly.

"Hey," Aron cooed, while embracing him. "I'm trying to offer a proper welcome here."

There was nothing proper about the way Aron's tongue was trying to give him a full dental inspection.

"Well, do a good job then, and put some food on the table," he joked.

Aron frowned slightly, but only for a second. He went straight to the oven while Carter excused himself to change into some home clothes and wash away the grime of being in the fashion business for a day. Half a day. Half a work day. Whatever, he really was starving and he could not think clearly.

“Wow,” he said, as he patted his belly with unhidden satisfaction. “That was great, Aron. Thank you.”

“Glad you liked it. I wasn’t expecting you to call for seconds, but it was my pleasure. And I can assure you, I used 97/3 beef for the recipe. I know you would accept nothing less. Let’s watch that waistline,” Aron said with a smile.

“I’ll work out later, to compensate,” Carter waved, earning another quizzical look from Aron. “What?”

“Your ballet instructor will definitely have a feat hearing you talk so casually about working out. We don’t want bulky muscles like Arnold, Alex,” Aron spoke in a weird voice with a little lilt, probably impersonating the ballet instructor.

“Ballet?” Carter’s face fell and was now probably crumpled on the floor somewhere.

There was no way he was going to do ballet. He had two left feet, and not good left feet. He was athletic as a general rule, but grace was something that had always evaded him.

“Don’t look so down. I know that you always end up bossing poor Pedro around. I think he is grateful when he doesn’t have you in charge.”

“Ah, well …” Carter let the sentence stop mid-way.

He was speechless. And mortified. The mere idea of being dressed up in pants tight enough to reveal the entire anatomy of all his ancestors, not only his, was making him squirm.

“So, did you manage to go see him?” Aron cleared his voice.

“Hmm?” Carter asked, too caught up in his own mind.

“Please tell me you went,” Aron said, a bit sternly. “To see Carter.”

“Ah, Carter. Yeah, yeah, I was. The poor guy,” Carter shook his head. “How come I escaped only with a few scratches, and he’s fucked up so badly?”

“The details are still unclear. The driver didn’t really see you at all. Or Carter. He just felt that he hit something. Heard the sound of something smashing against the truck, according to his statement. The police don’t seem to have too many details on the circumstances.”

Carter gulped as he reached for his wine glass. It felt eerie to hear about all this.

“So, no eye witnesses? When did it happen? Was it late in the evening?”

“I was hoping you could tell me more. But you don’t remember anything,” Aron said, his eyes drifting away for a brief second. “It happened in the afternoon, on a narrow street. The street camera didn’t catch more than the fire truck stopping abruptly. The police said that it was an impossible angle. As for eye witnesses, there is a girl in the footage. But she just jumped in a streetcar moments later. She must have seen something, but she didn’t stick around to offer information. The only things we know about her are that that day she wore her hair in a ponytail and had a huge backpack. Street view cameras don’t have that great resolution, unfortunately. The police launched an appeal on their Twitter, but, so far, there has been nothing.”

“Damn,” Carter took a sip from his wine. “I feel a little guilty, you know? He’s lying there, while I’m here, eating lasagna and drinking wine. How could we be both hit by that fire truck and I escape like this while he’s in a coma?”

“Maybe you were just quick to cross the street and you weren’t that badly hit,” Aron explained, as his eyebrows furrowed. “But don’t feel guilty. I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Well, better him than me,” Carter said wryly.

The irony was apparently lost on Aron.

“I didn’t say that,” Aron murmured and looked down. “Regardless of what he said and did at our wedding ... I still care about him.”

Carter could tell it was taking Aron nerves of steel to admit that in front of his husband. Why had he had to fuck up so badly that day? Why had he gotten drunk and crashed Aron’s wedding? All he could remember was that he had felt pissed like hell and that he had just needed a scape goat for what he was feeling. Or,

simply put, he was such a closeted homophobe that his best friend getting married to a dude had been needed to bring that to the surface. Was it like a reversed closet thing, maybe? If gay guys needed to get out of the closet to realize who they were, homophobe dudes in denial needed to enter the closet?

That kind of reasoning was just taking him to one of the biggest conundrums in history. *Do cats eat bats? Or do bats eat cats?* He shook his head. If he was going down the rabbit hole, he would rather have his wits about him. And cats ate bats. He was sure of it. Or was it the other way around?

He must have been making all kind of faces for the last minute or so, because Aron was now eyeing him warily.

“Please say something,” Aron said as he stood up to clean up the table.

He really needed to get out of his own head and take care of his temporary husband and what looked like quite fragile feelings. Aron was 6.4 tall, but Carter could bet Alex was bullying the guy like there was no tomorrow.

So he reached out and caught Aron’s wrist.

“I’ll do the dishes,” he said solemnly.

Surely, his sacrifice had to count for something. He only had disposable cutlery in his home, simply because he could not bring himself to do the dishes. It was an inefficient loss of time, as far as he was concerned. There was nothing to win from washing dishes and losing precious time while doing so. Except if you were Agatha Christie and this was a way for you to come up with new ideas for your next book. No wonder the lady had felt in a murderous mood when doing that. Yeah, washing dishes sucked balls.

Aron looked at him without saying anything. Maybe instead of washing the dishes, he needed to do something else. With a sigh, he nudged Aron to sit down.

“Look,” he started. “I know how things went down.” No, he didn’t. “But I’m not mad at him anymore.” Alex was going to throw a hissy fit when they were going to swap back. “So just feel free to talk about him, without feeling guilty.”

“Really?” Aron looked at him carefully, but somewhat hopeful. “Please, Alex, tell me this is not some new idea of yours to torture me.”

Carter bit his bottom lip hard. He felt for Aron, but it was still a bit funny to see him so pussywhipped. Cockwhipped. Asswhipped? Ah, what the fuck was the gay equivalent to that? He had always known Aron to be his own man if a little stubborn and hardheaded at times. So this was a tad funny.

“Why are you grinning?” Aron’s eyes narrowed.

Carter quickly schooled his face into a more neutral expression.

“Sorry, I have a scattered brain these days.” At least, that was partially true. “What I mean to say is that you can talk about Carter. I have no issue with it.”

“Okay,” Aron spoke, although clearly not completely convinced. “And just know that everything is in the past anyway. And that you have no reason to feel insecure.”

Carter smiled. There, there, everything was fine. Wait, insecure? What was that supposed to mean?

“Why should I feel insecure?”

Aron shot him a strange glance.

“You know, about what I told you about Carter. I suppose that set you off more than the words he threw at us at the wedding. Although the guests were pretty much mortified. Really, how much of a cliché can I be?” Aron smiled ruefully as he ran one hand through his short black hair.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Carter murmured and, for some reason, his eyes remained glued to Aron’s mouth.

In passing, Aron wiped his bottom lip with one thumb. It was like he was trying to keep himself from smiling. A fond smile, with just a smidge of irony in it. Self-deprecating a little.

“You know,” Aron let his shoulders fall and looked away.

He could swear the guy was embarrassed. But for the love of all that was holy, he could not imagine why. So he just asked.

“Why?”

“Why what?” Aron tried to dodge the question.

“Why would you consider yourself to be a cliché?”

“Eh,” Aron pursed his lips. “Come on, we’ve all been there. Well, probably not you. Do you really need me to spell it? And you already know; it’s just that you are either blocking that particular weird and uncomfortable conversation we had or you just enjoy seeing me squirm.”

“Aron.”

Hubby.

Jeesh, that was never going to grow old.

Back on track, Carter, back on track, now there’s no point to dally on distractions, we’re on to something here. Maybe we’re going to find out why Aron doesn’t really hate us.

Why on Earth was he talking to himself like a bad impersonation of Deadpool?

Back on the fucking track.

“Aron. Just tell me. Come on. The truth will set you free. What cliché are you talking about?”

Aron linked his fingers and pressed both hands against his chest, like he was just preparing for a sudden strike.

“You know. Me. The gay guy. Crushing on my straight best friend.”

Carter could swear the room just made a sudden tilt and swerve.

“Say what? What best friend?”

His IQ was searching its soul right now. There was nothing there, but a vast ocean of nothing. Maybe one last neuron was still standing. Last nervous cell standing. Sounded like the title of a B-rated horror movie. Or C.

Aron stopped his mental ramblings.

“Quit playing, Alex. I’m talking about me crushing on Carter.”

Chapter Seven

Carter took the glass of wine from the table with a methodical gesture, brought it to his lips and took a long sip of ... nothing.

“Do you want more wine?” Aron asked him.

“Just give me the bottle,” he mumbled.

He needed more than that, but he had to make do with whatever he had at his disposal. So he just drank straight from the bottle, while Aron continued to just watch him in absolute shock and silence.

“You knew that,” Aron eventually spoke. “That is why you were so pissed.”

He could not talk right now. He was way too busy drinking wine straight from the bottle to reply to that. Okay, maybe he was starting to feel a light buzz ... Nope. He could handle his liquor a bit too well, it looked. Maybe just another thing in common with Alex. Good alcohol tolerance.

“Do you have anything stiffer?” he looked at the wine bottle with regret.

“Alex, don’t get drunk. C’mon, for how long are you going to run? We’ve never had this conversation about Carter. Maybe it’s time to have it. I want to tell you one thing before you go ballistic or, whatever, drunk. I intend to talk to him if he ever gets up from that coma. And while I do care about what you think and I love you very much, Carter is my best friend, and I must settle things with him. It was completely out of character for him to act the way he did. I deserve an explanation and I’m going to get it.”

Carter could feel the muscles in his legs going all soft. And there was something happening somewhere in the middle of his chest again, but he had no intention to go there, to be honest.

“Carter is your best friend?” he needed the confirmation on that.

“What?” Aron looked at him, like he could not get it.

“You said it like he still is your best friend. Not ex-best friend.”

Aron sighed.

“If you want to fight, fine. But this is one decision you cannot make me come back from. No matter how much you pout. You are my husband and you should support me, even if you don’t always agree with me.”

“I don’t want to fight. I just want to know,” Carter rested the empty bottle against his forehead. There was no way for him to face all this on a clear head. But the cool sensation was making his tangled thoughts a tiny bit clearer right now.

“Okay. You know,” Aron spoke, still a bit irritated.

Carter had no idea how to react to that. Aron? Crushing on him? How? Why? When? Why? Oh, no, he was repeating himself.

“Fine,” he placed the empty bottle carefully on the table. “I mean, I’m fine with it. I mean, with Carter still being your best friend. Not with you crushing on him, though. That is weird as fuck.”

Of course it was weird as fuck. And how come he had no idea about it? He was trying hard now to remember things, situations that should have given Aron’s crush on him away. But, at this point, he was just coming back empty. And there was no amnesia to blame it on. Anyhow, there was a solution to that, and, until he could clear his head and decide what to do, a bit of info could not hurt. Or it could. But he needed to hear Aron out.

“You have no reason to be jealous,” Aron spoke. “It’s all in the past. But he is still my best friend, and, despite his homophobic tendencies, he might come to live with the idea of me being gay. I need to make him see things how they are. He was such an important part of my life for so long. The fact that I’m married to a guy shouldn’t matter this much. He just needs some adjusting, that’s all.”

“Stop making such a case for him,” Carter cut Aron short.

What the hell. Frankly, now he was feeling embarrassed. Aron wanted so much to forgive him that he was willing to just forget about all the idiotic things Carter had said at the wedding. Carter wasn’t so sure he was supposed to be forgiven.

“Well, I have to. He’s not here to defend himself,” Aron replied. “And who knows? Maybe ...”

Aron didn't speak the words and just looked away. Carter got up, thankful he was not drunk, and walked over to Aron. He wasn't sure how to comfort the guy, seeing that they were actually talking about him. So he just awkwardly embraced him. Aron embraced him back and, for a few seconds, they stood like that.

"Better?" he caressed the other's back slowly.

Aron threw him a grateful look. Excellent. Now he felt even more of a douchebag than before. He got back to his chair.

"Care to tell me about it?"

Curiosity was needling him to ask. He had to ask.

"About me crushing on my straight best friend?" Aron chuckled. "Are you sure?"

"100%," Carter nodded.

Maybe he was blind. But a weird kind of blind, the kind that could see things, except for important stuff like his best friend crushing on him.

"Well, where do I start?" Aron said slowly, as his eyes became a tad unfocused, smiling at the memories.

"From the start," Carter shrugged. "When did you fall in love with him?"

"Ah, that's a difficult question," Aron laughed. "I cannot really tell. Maybe since forever. But I'm not in love with him now," he added quickly, stealing one nervous glance at his husband.

"Stop fretting. I can take it."

Well, not exactly true, but he needed to know and that was final.

"I realized something was not quite right about it all, one night, when we were in 9th grade."

"When you were 14 year old?"

"Yeah, about that time. Carter was so upset that night. I can still remember everything like it was yesterday. He had just seen some girl he liked kissing another boy. He was so inconsolable. It is true that he had a tendency of being

overly dramatic, but when you're only 14, it's not like you have too much of a choice but to be overly dramatic. He was sleeping at my house and, for the entire evening, while we were supposed to go to sleep, like good boys, he just complained about that girl. Before eventually wishing me good night, and after making very strange and elaborate plans of how to impress the girl or just beat up the boy who had stolen her from him, he told me this: 'I wished so much my first kiss to be with her.' And he fell asleep after that, and I just stood there, without turning off the lamp, and stared at him. At his lips. And all I could think of was how could that girl be so blind and not see how awesome Carter was. And that moment I knew who I wanted my first kiss to be with."

Carter could feel his throat getting drier and drier. And the bottle was just so, so empty.

"And?" he dared.

He remembered that night, too. Particularly a strange thing, like the dream he had had right after falling asleep. Like he had just walked into that dream.

"I did a stupid thing. Not that I exactly regret it, in retrospect. Maybe it was then that I started to realize I was gay. Not immediately. I was still a kid. But maybe it was a good thing."

Aron was staring at his hands.

"C'mon, Aron, what did you do?"

Carter was pretty sure he was holding his breath right now.

"I got up from my bed," Aron began talking after a few seconds, his eyes still lost or, better said, fixed on a vision floating in front of him from times past. "I tiptoed to Carter's bed, and I looked at him, for minutes, I think. Or less. It all felt so surreal. He was deep in sleep. His chest was rising and falling. His lips ... Damn, I can't believe I'm telling you all these."

"I cannot believe it, either," Carter mumbled, cradling the empty bottle to his chest.

"Should I bring you some water?" Aron made a move to get up from his chair.

“No,” Carter manipulated the bottle to point at Aron. “Sit down and confess everything.”

“It’s like I’m being grilled by the police,” Aron joked.

“Shut up and talk,” Carter said, this time more irritated.

Aron opened his mouth to comment on the absurdity of that request, but he was a wise man. He knew when not to dally.

“I stared at him and I just thought of how beautiful he was to me. The most beautiful person in the world, that very moment. So I just leaned over him and I placed my lips on his mouth. I had no idea about kissing, either. But I supposed it was enough to count as a kiss. So, there you have it. I stole my best friend’s first kiss. What’s the verdict, judge?” Aron made a small attempt to joke, but it was clear to Carter, clear as day, that the guy was nervous.

He remembered that night. All too well. The dream he had had, the girl’s soft lips on his, all well in his imagination, he, the chosen boy, not the other. Funny thing, he could not remember her name, or her face, or anything about her right now. Only the sensation - the imaginary sensation - of her lips on his.

And now, at 32, 18 years later, 18 frigging years later, he was learning that it had been no imagination, but a real thing, and it had not been that girl, but his best friend?

He got up so fast that the chair dropped with a loud thump on the kitchen floor.

“I think I need a bit of air,” he said and walked stiffly out of the room, still holding the empty bottle close to him, like it was the most precious thing in the universe for him right now, a link to the real world, because if that crazy body swap had not managed to convince him he was crazy, this ... this could not be real.

He took a seat on the steps outside. The street was quiet at that hour, and there was no one around to see him just staying there, looking most probably like a perfect lunatic with an empty bottle held close to his chest.

And he felt betrayed all over again like that time when Aron had told him he was marrying some guy.

What was he to do with that information? Aron had been the first guy to kiss him. No, that wasn't right. The only guy to ever kiss him. And the first person to ever kiss him.

It seemed childish to be mad. And he wasn't. He was just ... confused. He didn't know what to feel, what to make of it. He had been curious about it the moment Aron had mentioned his old crush. And now he only had more questions. Why did Aron have to be so ...

Gay? Was this really why he was fretting over things? When had he been bothered, ever, by such things? Live and let live. Make love, not war. Blah, blah, blah. Still, he believed in such things.

Everything was such a mess because of Aron. Because if Aron hadn't liked guys, it would all have been straight and simple. Straight, he snorted. But it was not like Aron could help it, right? He could not just choose not to be gay.

Damn, everything was so confusing. What if he was the one fucked up in the head? Aron had said that he had realized he was gay because he liked Carter more than just a friend. Wait. Did that mean that he had made Aron gay? Was it something he did? They had always been close, but ...

No, that was stupid. Even he knew that. He groaned, his shoulders slumped. What the fuck was he going to do now?

He froze as he heard Aron opening the door behind him. He wasn't ready to talk to him right now.

"Hey," Aron touched his elbow gently.

"I'm okay," he mumbled. "It just came as a shock, that's all."

"You really don't remember, do you?" Aron asked, with a mix of hurt and disappointment in his voice. "We should take you back to the hospital, run some tests, maybe ..."

Carter could feel Aron's mistrust. Alex must have been a class A diva if no one believed him that he was amnesic. And the truth was he wasn't. He was just not Alex.

“And?” he asked. “When did you fall out of love with Carter?”

“When I met you.”

There was no trace of hesitation in Aron’s voice now. God only knew what Aron could see in Alex. Oh, okay, he knew what. The guy was beautiful and not only by gay standards. But his personality seemed to be the problem. Or maybe Carter was just jaded about the guy stealing Aron from him. But he was not that much of an asshole not to admit that he was unfair. For their teenage and youth years, he had basically friendzoned Aron. Unconsciously, yes, but still. And if there was one thing Carter had always hated was this friendzoning thing. He had never tolerated girls doing it and now he was finding out that he was the one who had friendzoned his best friend.

“Well, at least, you’re not crushing on him anymore,” he tried to be philosophical about it.

“No,” Aron confirmed. “You’re the only one for me.”

The other’s touch was gentle. Aron slowly guided him so they could face each other. Carter could not deny that the way Aron moved his thumbs slowly, caressing his jawline, had a calming effect. Aron brought their foreheads together and exhaled.

“I’ve never been unfaithful to you. The moment you walked into my life was the happiest. Until that moment, I felt like ... I was just running. Away from something. Not one moment toward something. And then you happened. And you made me the happiest man alive.”

Maybe it was the wine, but Carter could not remember ever feeling so touched by a romantic confession. Some girlfriends had been optimistic enough to drag him to chick flicks, but more than half the time, he had just dozed off or thought about other stuff.

But this, this felt real, and the worst part was that he wasn’t Alex, and, no matter how much of a douchebag that guy was, he deserved to hear this from his husband. He had his work cut out for him all right. If he wasn’t pushing Aron away, he was

forcing his best friend to become a cheater. If he was pushing Aron away, he was just making his best friend unhappy. What the fuck was he supposed to do?

Aron, apparently, had no idea of the turmoil Carter's mind was in right now. And he had his own agenda because he leaned in closer and began brushing his lips against Carter's.

There was no way to fight this. Carter drew a long breath and exhaled, making Aron stop.

"It's okay," Carter mumbled. "At least you're not in love with Carter anymore."

He should have felt relief at that simple statement, but, as Aron's kiss deepened, he could not help a small sensation of ... loss. It went away, as Aron's tongue probed his mouth, and he had no other choice but to open wide.

He was supposed to still be a little upset over Aron stealing his first kiss. But the truth was, back then, at 14, and right now, Aron was an incredible kisser. How else could the memory of that kiss from such a long time ago be so vivid in his mind? He could feel the guy's hands on his back, holding him gently, his fingers moving ever so lightly, comforting him.

For lack of anything else to do, he let his hands rest on Aron's shoulders. His large, solid shoulders, on which, Carter had once thought, all the weight of the world could rest. He missed his best friend so much that even this he could accept. Kiss back, like he meant it. It was just a kiss.

A gay kiss. Yet, still, he could not have it in him to push Aron away. It was more than just a kiss. And not because it was heated and there was so much tongue in it or because it felt so good. But because it was ... a real kiss. The only fraud was he, no one else. And playing nice meant protecting Aron's marriage to that douchebag. Aron loved his husband. And the least he could do was to try to behave like Alex for a while. Like a loving husband.

It was so damn hard to keep a line of reasoning with that nifty tongue caressing the inside of his mouth like it was making love to it. It was pretty strange to touch Aron's face, like he was on the point to stop him. It was pretty strange to be in this

situation, period. Never before had he caressed the person he was kissing and felt short stubble instead of a smooth cheek.

Regardless of how much of a homophobe he was, he was kissing back now, and even the small burn from Aron's stubble felt ... nice. Well, he was a homophobe only when it came to Aron and his marriage. But it didn't matter. He was practically repenting his sins by letting Aron kiss him. By kissing back.

He moved his tongue, too, and Aron made a small, frustrated sound. Soon enough, he was pushed on his back, right there on the stairs, with Aron on top. The guy was quick to sneak one hand under his t-shirt and touch his chest.

No, that was not the right term to describe what Aron was doing to him. His rough hand was grabbing Carter's right pec, teasing the nipple, catching it lightly between two fingers and playing with it.

Fuck. The sensation was almost unbearable. Like he was weak in the knees, but hard between his legs. Wait, wait, wait. Okay, so it was Alex's body. A gay guy's body. It was totally normal to have his nipples teased and get a hard-on. He just needed to accept that explanation once and for all.

Aron was humping him through the clothes, and Carter could feel the man's huge erection rubbing against his. Damn, he was sure this was how bad decisions happened. With a tongue in his mouth, nasty fingers now pinching both his nipples - how on earth did that happen, because he could not remember? - and a guy's cock making good on his.

"Get a room already, people!" an angry shout made them stop.

Carter felt pretty much confused when he looked at a grey haired guy in jogging pants waving at them with both arms, like he was a strange giant bird, from across the street. He also wore a weird hat - the kind one would take when going fishing.

Was that the uniform of the cock block police these days? It was pretty lame, but the cock block police was pretty lame, no matter what way he looked at it.

"No worries, Mr. Armstrong," Aron waved back, while straightening up and helping Carter to his feet, too. "I'm taking my husband inside right now."

“You better,” the elderly man shook his head energetically. “There could be kids, you know?”

“I know, Mr. Armstrong,” Aron said, obviously interested to appease the man. “We will just get back inside right now.”

“Good,” the man nodded, and began jogging again, but he continued to watch them, from beneath his fishing hat, with hawk like eyes.

What a fucking douche! Carter thought. Aron smiled apologetically and made a small sign towards the door. Was Aron really fleeing the scene without fighting back? He shrugged.

“Hey, Mr. Armstrong,” he yelled at the nocturnal jogger. “Watch me take my husband inside,” he added with a smirk, and planted one hand firmly on Aron’s ass, as the guy was already heading back to the house.

Aron half turned to look at him. Carter challenged him with his eyes.

“I can barely wait to sink my teeth into this tight ass,” he said loudly and stared back at the nosy neighbor.

Mr. Armstrong didn’t have the chance to express his indignation. The sidewalk must have magically tilted because, one second later, the guy was plastered to the ground.

“Mr. Armstrong, are you all right?” Aron made a move to walk towards the guy, while Carter guffawed.

“I don’t need your help!” the man struggled on the ground, like a giant tortoise. “Young people today,” he mumbled as he gradually made it on one side with difficulty. “They think they can do whatever they want.”

Aron was still walking towards the man while Carter was holding his belly with both hands. Eventually, Aron made it to the man and helped him to his feet, profusely apologizing. Carter leaned against the door frame and watched. The neighbor was now holding Aron’s arm with one gnarly hand and was telling him something in a low voice. Aron seemed to listen intently.

Okay, maybe he could just head back inside on his own. But somehow that would have seemed like a dick move. Never leave a comrade behind. Especially Aron. Maybe the guy needed backup? The neighbor was clearly bent on teaching Aron how not to kiss his gay husband in public.

Before he could decide on a strategy of extraction for his best friend caught in the line of fire, Aron said goodbye to the neighbor and walked back to him with a purposeful stride. Something in the way Aron stared at him made him stand straight. The look in the man's eyes was not a good sign, either.

He shrugged and went inside on his own. No point in fretting over a fallen mate if the guy was actually alive and kicking. Aron followed close. And then, the shoe dropped.

“Really, Alex?” Aron began his tirade as an angry whisper. “After all we’ve been through to get in Mr. Armstrong’s graces?”

“When did you turn into such a wimp?” Carter snorted.

“A wimp? Really? You insisted so much that we should make sure to be seen as keepers of the morale code of the neighborhood and now you’re dissing the guy who’s practically the so called keeper of these values?”

“Well, you were the one with a tongue down my throat,” Carter pointed out.

Aron looked away, seemingly embarrassed.

“Sorry, I got carried away. I just ... wanted to feel close to you.”

“Stop looking like a kicked puppy. And just admit it, it was frigging funny. The way the guy made acquaintance with the sidewalk. Bang! You know, like in those funny vids on YouTube. If no one gets hurt, then it’s funny,” he gestured with his hands.

Aron looked at him for a second, his brow furrowed, and he burst into laughter. Carter joined him.

“Yeah, it was,” Aron admitted while wiping tears from the corners of his eyes, after a couple of minutes. “It’s just that, baby, I thought you cared about such things. You were the one pestering me that we should be seen as pillars of the

community, not as the gay couple that cares only about, well, gay stuff. Gay sex stuff. You even said that we should set an example for morality.”

Carter’s grin died away. Alex was making the tour of the office, offering blowjobs like candy and he wanted to be the moral pillar of the community. Fuck, he needed to know if the guy’s body was clean. Aron could be in danger of catching something and that was no laughing matter. Maybe Mr. Armstrong’s appearance had been providential and stopped him from doing something stupid. Not that he had thought of doing something stupid. Actually, he had not thought at all, too preoccupied to give Aron a thorough oral checkup with his tongue and ground their cocks together.

“What’s wrong?” Aron asked him, immediately sensing the change in atmosphere.

“Nothing. I just remembered I need to get up early,” Carter lied through his teeth.

Aron’s face fell. Clearly, the guy had gotten his hopes high after that torrid kiss on the front porch. He couldn’t blame him. He would have howled, but safety first. Wait, was he really thinking about getting in bed with Aron? Having sex with him? Gay sex? Penetrative gay sex?

All right, thinking in clinical terms was putting things in perspective.

“I could just give you a hand,” he offered as he walked towards Aron.

The guy just dodged him and walked towards the bedroom.

“I’m not your charity case, Alex. Take care of whatever you think is happening with your ass and your head because I need my husband back. And, by the way, the least you could have done was offer a blowjob, not a lousy hand.”

Oh, so that was the way out of that sort of situation? A blowjob? Aron slamming shut the door made him flinch. All right, tomorrow he needed to do some research. The Internet had to have all the answers.

And he had to really consider going down on his best friend.

Chapter Eight

The sofa was clearly there only to for visual appeal and nothing more. Carter tossed and turned, but no matter what he did, how he coiled and uncoiled himself, he could not find an ideal sleeping position. Eventually, he settled for throwing his legs over one end, and lay there, like the perfect crash test dummy.

There was no way he was going after Aron, like before, or sleeping in the same bed. In a way, this was convenient. He wasn't going to engage in penetrative gay sex with his best friend if they were rooms away.

Which left very few options, but what was he to do? Until he and Alex were going to switch back, he needed to make this marriage work. Even if there was barely a chance in hell for Aron to find out about the body swap – and believe it – he didn't want to be the cause of Aron's divorce from the douchebag.

So, for the moment, he had to consider giving Aron a blowjob. How hard could it be? He had had it done to him dozens of times. Girls seemed to like blowing him. He could even remember asking one of his girlfriends why she liked to give him head so much. When she had looked at him, licked her lips, and told him he was delicious, he had almost wanted to test that.

Unfortunately, he wasn't nimble enough to give himself a blowjob. Wait, what if Alex's body could? The guy was skinny and had the body of a dancer. That could definitely serve as a starting point. He wasn't sleepy anyway, so he quickly shed off all his clothes and sat on his ass.

How was he going to go about it? Maybe if he leaned in. The problem was he wasn't hard. He tried to remember that girlfriend and how she used to suck his dick like it was some magical lollipop. The way she had lapped at his dick was almost making him in the mood for that, too.

Great. Now he was hungry. Maybe he could search for something in the kitchen. Something with zero carbs, preferably. He needed to take care of the asshole's body and he had already made a pact with himself to eat just one hamburger a day. He wasn't that much of a scumbag to return Alex a flabby body, with sky high cholesterol levels. And he was going to work out, to keep in shape.

Now, back to the task at hand. His dick was still soft. The mental detour about food hadn't helped, apparently. Now, what to think about? Maybe he could browse for some porn. He fumbled with his jeans dropped on the floor, to take out the phone. Wow, he was going to taint a gay guy's phone with straight sex.

Hmm, his fingers hovered over the screen. Maybe he needed to watch some gay porn? It was Alex's body, after all, maybe it wasn't going to react to pussy and tits. Well, gay porn would also be instructional, he thought philosophically. After all, he was preparing to give a guy a blowjob.

Well, it was supposed to be easy.

Type in the biggest porn site, go to the gay section ...

He put the phone down. What on earth was he doing? There was no way he was going to watch gay porn. He wasn't ready for it. Not that he had never seen gay porn.

But it happened only because:

- a. It had been an accident
- b. Out of curiosity
- c. Not, definitely not, with the intention to jerk off
- d. All of the above

He hadn't been under a rock, but, those times, when he had accidentally seen some guy stuffing another guy with cock, his eyes had just slid away, and it had meant absolutely nothing. Right now, he even had a tough time to bear in mind that he was supposed to be a homophobe. A homophobe and a straight guy. A non-gay guy. The opposite of all things gay.

Who was going to blow his best friend, so he wouldn't blow his cover. It made so much sense. All right. He needed the instructables on this. Maybe he needed to start slowly. Google the question.

How to suck dick? Was this the right question? Thousands of search engine robots were just waiting for the chance to jump at all the information available on dick sucking and deliver it to him on a shiny phone screen. 21 million results. He whistled.

Just how many people need to learn how to suck dick every day?

Apparently, there's a lot of dick sucking happening on the planet.

He drew a long breath. A lot of advice was for girls, so they could offer oral satisfaction to their boyfriends, husbands, lovers, bosses, or whoever. The flowery language was almost making him sick, like he had just ingested a whole cake.

What the hell. He was a guy. He had a dick. The only thing he needed to do was to think what he liked and go from there. It was like he was a secret agent with an inside job. A blowjob, to be precise.

Back to trying to self-suck. But how to get hard?

Think of something that should get you hard.

All right. No biggie. When was the last time you got a blowjob, Carter?

Apparently, some time ago.

He began stroking his dick while trying to concentrate on his past sex life, but, as seconds passed, he found himself more and more frustrated. It was like that part of his brain got erased or something. Oh, right, it was Alex's brain, so straight sex memories might not work that well. What else did he have? No, he wasn't going to watch gay porn. As already mentioned, he wasn't ready to watch gay porn with the intention of getting hard, and that was final.

Aron. He was in Alex's body, so he needed to think about Aron. The memory of how the guy had drawn that long swipe all over Carter's dick popped right away. And, along with it, his cock, too.

"Look at you," Carter shook his head as the familiar surge of pleasure got a hold of him.

It was so easy to stroke it to full length now. All right, that was a good go-to image. Aron with his husband's cock on his lips. It definitely worked.

Carter leaned and tried to angle his body. Maybe if he pushed his tongue out, as much as he could? Nope, not possible. He should just change the position. He lay on his back and brought his feet up, making sure to curve his spine. There had been

a picture he had once seen of a guy sucking himself and that was how the guy was doing it.

Well, that seemed to do the trick. His dick was closing in, and he could almost reach it. Alex was a really flexible guy. What had Aron said he was doing? Ballet? The moment his tongue connected with the tip, he grimaced. It was somewhat salty. He shrugged. He still needed more so he could wrap his lips around the head.

He was about to do it. But he stopped. This was not okay. He was practically going to suck another guy's dick. And if he was going to do that kind of sacrifice for someone, that was going to be Aron. Not douchebag Alex. He had no intention to suck Alex's cock, even if, given the circumstances, that was his cock, for now.

Maybe he needed to use fruits, or something. Try to swallow a banana. At least, it was not Alex's dick. He swatted the hard cock.

"You're really fucked up," he wagged his finger at it and just decided to go back to sleep.

He also needed to visit his body again, at the hospital. He really hoped he was going to switch back just in time for Alex to get back to his husband and on his knees to serve him properly. That image was making his cock hard again, just when it was starting to grow soft. He had seen Aron's cock at eye level. The rest wasn't impossible to imagine. He turned on his belly and began rubbing against the rough coverlet. Well, his dick had to do with that for now.

His neck was killing him, and his back wasn't in a better condition, either. With a groan, he got to his feet, and to the bathroom. The house was silent, which meant that Aron was not up yet. Good thing he had the bathroom all to himself.

He didn't care about dressing up after taking a quick shower, so he just headed to the kitchen. He felt hungry like hell and he needed something to eat, now. He was about to open the fridge when his eyes fell on the fruit bowl on the kitchen table.

"Swallow a banana ..." he talked to himself, now remembering about the unsolved quest from the prior night.

He grabbed one long yellow fruit from the bowl and watched it warily. Maybe Aron was thicker. Yeah, definitely thicker. He had held that thing in his hand. Well, he shrugged. It was a start. Getting the tip in was not that hard, but as he began pushing towards the back of his throat, he felt like gagging. Maybe he needed to get adjusted to it, so he took it out a little. Hmm, it was a little better, he guessed. Now, he only needed to try harder. In and out, in and out. What do you know? It wasn't THAT hard.

“What are you doing?”

He turned to stare at Aron, with the banana sticking half out of his mouth. Aron's eyes clouded for a couple of seconds.

“Explain to me why I shouldn't bend you over that table and fuck your brains out right this moment,” Aron spoke again, as he placed his hands on his hips.

The guy was wearing nothing but silk pajama pants, loose on his hips. Carter's eyes traveled up and down the man's beautiful torso, partially covered in black curly hair. Eventually, his brain registered that he needed to defend himself. Pulling the banana out, he managed to speak.

“Health and safety regulations?” he attempted an answer to Aron's statement from earlier.

His husband just threw him a weird look.

“It's a new diet I'm trying,” he explained, gesticulating with the fruit. “Eating a whole banana. Without peeling it.”

Aron sighed and looked up, like he was asking for celestial help to deal with his husband.

“Look,” Carter spoke and took a bite from the unpeeled banana.

Aron made a disgusted face.

“Well, next time, try your new 'diet' with some clothes on. It's unfair of you to dangle that sexy ass in front of me first thing in the morning, without any intention to put out.”

Carter looked down. Oh, shit, he was naked.

“And weren’t you supposed to be somewhere early?”

Oh, yeah. Damn, what was he going to do right now? Swallow the disgusting mush in his mouth? No way, he was squeamish. He just went for the trash can, opened it and spat.

“Well, it’s not working,” he glared at Aron who was still looking at him like he was a lunatic.

“How can you tell?” Aron said, and the irony wasn’t lost on Carter. “How long have you been trying it?”

The man moved to the fridge to grab something to eat. Carter could feel his stomach rumble. But, well, he needed to get out and fast.

“Enough to know it’s not working,” he said snappily, and began marching out of the room, in what he hoped looked like a dignified stride.

Which was rather hard to do, as Aron’s heavy hand landed on his ass in passing, almost making him stumble. That had not been a playful smack. Carter could feel it.

Reining in the temptation to just turn and punch the guy in the face, he ground his teeth and continued to walk away.

“Oh, baby, I so love watching you go,” Aron added insult to injury and began laughing behind him.

To think that he was going to go down on the asshole tonight. The things he had to do for love and friendship. Not his love, but his friendship. With Aron. Damn, that slap still stung, he thought, as he rubbed his behind.

“Mr. Ruskin, I’m sorry, but I cannot let you in. Visitation hours start later.”

He had a hunch that the witch in white just didn’t want him to see his body. Putting on his sexiest smile – he hoped that was how he looked like and he wasn’t just grinning like a psychopath – he leaned over the receptionist’s desk.

“He’s in a coma, darling,” he cooed. “He must feel so alone.”

“At the moment, the patient is unconscious. We will let you know if any changes appear. Your husband,” the woman looked at the screen, at something that was outside his field of view, “left clear instructions in this respect. If you want to see the patient, please come back later.”

“Later I have work,” Carter tried to reason with her.

“We all have, darling,” the woman smiled sweetly, but by the way her mean eyes glinted, she just loved to get on his nerves.

Was his charm-o-meter broken? Alex’s looks didn’t seem to work on this woman, and she wasn’t the only one around who appeared immune to this guy’s charms. Maybe the healthcare industry as a whole was not big on Alex Ruskin.

“Then I’ll just stick around until visitation hours begin,” he said, pursing his lips.

“Sure thing. We have fashion magazines in the waiting room. Maybe not enough to fill two hours, but you will find something to entertain yourself with, right?” the receptionist spoke.

This witch was downright rude.

“Of course,” he shrugged.

Well, if he was going to wait, that was it. His phone went off that very moment. Carter looked at the unknown number, wondering what kind of surprises were waiting for him on the other end.

“Yes,” he answered, making sure he sounded as irritated as he felt.

“Hi, boss,” Mark’s energetic voice came through. “I just wanted to make sure you’ll be here in time. You have a meeting with Yolanda at 8.30, just to give you a heads-up. Then, you have your appointment with Gladys at 10. Yolanda says she doesn’t need you until 1, so you can take your time grooming. Then, you have ...”

“Ah, damn, what’s the point of being a star if you’re a slave,” Carter mumbled, interrupting his assistant. “All right, I’ll be there.”

“Boss, don’t you want to hear the rest? I made sure you can start your ballet classes at 5, so you can still be home by 7 tonight,” Mark spoke. “Also, the reporter from New Entertainment keeps pestering me about your interview. I think he tries to play me since I’m new. Did you agree to speak with this guy?”

“No, I didn’t,” Carter said abruptly.

From her desk, the receptionist was watching him with mirth. He had no choice. For now, his body had to stay put in that hospital room and he needed to take care of Alex’s career. Whoever up there fucked this up so badly had some real explanations to offer. That if there was really a hierarchy in Heaven, and that was where things like crazy body swaps were coming from. Or maybe there was some logical explanation that science could not really cover at the moment, for lack of information, and credible subjects.

“Boss?” Mark called from the other end, after a few moments of silence.

“Yes, Mark. I’ll be there in a jiffy.”

The receptionist was still looking at him with that irritating smirk on her face.

“Gotta go,” he told her, and her smile widened. “You’re wearing way too much makeup, darling. And crimson red is a complete no-no when you’re over 40.”

He had no idea if what he had said was true. Well, maybe his eyes had slid over some other titles while reading Cosmopolitan the night before. Those glossy magazines, even in online form, had everything, from advice on dick sucking, to what colors to wear when walking your dog.

At least, the receptionist’s smile faded. And that was plenty satisfying. This time, he was the one to smirk as he walked out of the hospital.

“What happened to you?” Yolanda almost screamed while pushing herself towards him, like a homing missile.

She was right under his nose and was inspecting him from down there, like he had suddenly grown horns.

“What do you mean?” he stopped from taking one step back.

The little woman could be intimidating when she wanted.

“This,” one of her index fingers landed right under one of his eyes. “Dark circles. Did you not get your beauty sleep?”

Not exactly.

Carter kept it to himself.

“I’m going to call Aron and tell him he should not keep you awake. I thought he knew your regimen.”

Maybe when his husband wasn’t pissed due to lack of sex, he thought.

“And stop grimacing. It gives you wrinkles. I know you’re answering to me in your own head. What? Are you afraid I can’t take what you want to say to me? I have plenty of training,” she pushed her finger as if she wanted to put his eye out.

“Stop it,” he batted her hand away. “I just slept on the sofa, that’s all.”

Yolanda almost staggered as she took a step back. She covered her mouth with one hand and looked at him in shock.

“What happened?” her voice was now normal, Yolanda back to her maternal self. “Don’t tell me you two had a fight.”

Carter shrugged.

“It happens.”

“Aron adores you; what could have gone wrong?” she asked, looking more and more worried.

Carter was starting to feel a bit awkward. And now Yolanda was watching him like she wanted to ask: *What did you do?*

“I didn’t do anything,” he answered to the unspoken question. Damn, he sounded so defensive. “Couples fight. Sometimes.”

“Not you and Aron,” Yolanda shook her head. “Come on, Alex, don’t make me lose hope. Perfect relationships exist because of guys like you and your husband,” she continued in a reproachful tone.

Obviously, she had no idea Alex was spreading the love, aka blowjobs, all over the place. That was so not the perfect relationship. Yolanda was way too gullible, the poor thing. And he had a hunch Aron had been upset with Alex before. Yeap, there was trouble in paradise.

“It wasn’t anything serious,” he tried to calm her down. “Just a small quarrel between lovers. I almost forgot why we fought. Don’t worry; we’ll be all lovey-dovey by nightfall.”

Well, he hoped. There was no way for him to get close to his real body today with a packed schedule and everything. That meant he needed to perform that blowjob and do a great job while at it. Damn, he needed help. Professional help. But who to ask?

“If you say so,” Yolanda spoke, looking not terribly convinced by his insincere assurance. “Well, we’ll have to use more concealer to deal with those raccoon eyes.”

She was clearly exaggerating. But, of course, Alex, aka the douchebag, had to be flawless. How horribly irritating.

“Yeah, put that on me, and let me be,” he waved. “What do I have to do today?”

“Well, today, you will be mostly pampered. We’ll look over a few ideas for the new ads and, in the afternoon, we will go meet some clients.”

The anti-socialite in Carter cringed at the news. He could go through a few meetings, but why was everyone so bent on seeing him? He was supposed just to make himself pretty for the camera and nothing more. At least, that was what he thought.

“Come on, don’t make that face,” Yolanda pinched his cheeks. “You’re a charmer, everyone loves you! And you need to do that interview with that reporter from New Entertainment. You know how much you love seeing your face everywhere. Why not this week? Plus, when was the last time you gave an interview? Hmm, a

couple of months ago? We let more time pass, and you'll be declared officially dead. Fashion wise."

Carter winced. How much was Aron willing to pay to keep his body in that vegetable state? Soon enough, he was going to grow tired with all those extra medical expenses, and then ... Carter didn't want to think about it. No, Aron, as he knew him was going to keep his body connected to those machines for all eternity. He pushed away the thought that his parents didn't seem to have bothered to come see their son. They hadn't spoken in a while, and he knew that, and probably they were doing Alaska right now or maybe Antarctica, but seriously, this was a life and death situation. The problem was, Aron was his lifeline. And, at the moment, his husband's lifeline, too, although Aron had no idea.

Maybe he needed to take care of some things himself. Alex was not going to be bothered if Carter spent his money to keep him alive, right? If anything, he was probably going to be thankful.

"Hey," Yolanda snapped her fingers in front of him. "Why are you spacing out so much? Come on, sweetie, I didn't mean it. You're not fashion dead. Just a little fashion disabled, at this point."

"What a cheerful thought," Alex replied dryly. "Tell me again, why should I do this interview?"

"To get back into the spotlights, of course. Come on, everyone wants to know how you got through a terrible accident and escaped almost unscathed. They want the whole story."

"I don't have the whole story," Carter replied, alarmed.

"They don't know that," Yolanda waved her manicured hand. "Just steer the direction towards the new organic line we're promoting. You know what brings home the dough. And mommy needs a new Gucci bag, you know?"

Carter groaned and shook his head. Yolanda wanted to act all superficial, but after just one day after meeting her, he knew that was not true. She was just very invested in her fashion business; that was all.

“All right, I’ll go there and sell the hell out of that organic line,” he agreed, and Yolanda kissed him loudly on one cheek. “Just tell me what to say, and I’ll do it.”

Yolanda began chirping happily. He had a tough time concentrating, but he was doing his best. Yet, his thoughts were still a mess, and everything Yolanda was saying was slowly turning into a mush.

Organic is amazing, blah, blah, blah, do you want all those chemicals enter your blood stream, and how about parabens and phthalates, ee i ee i o, this stuff is fantastic, hey, Macarena ...

Damn, being in the fashion business sucked. Why did he have to remember all this stuff? It made no sense. That was why he loved numbers. They were cold and straight. And he liked all things straight.

“Can you give me the tl;dr version?” he eventually stopped Yolanda’s wordy waterfall.

“Organic is the best shit for everyone,” Yolanda said promptly and started to laugh. “You’ll do fine, don’t worry. And Aron will forgive you. I’m sure that is all you’re thinking about right now.”

Not exactly. But it was somewhat close.

“Yeah,” he admitted and looked down.

“Hey,” Yolanda called gently. “Don’t worry, okay? I have yet to see a guy more in love than your husband. You’re not his little sunshine, dear. You’re his whole sun.”

Just the words he needed to hear. So not true. Damn. If this body swap didn’t get reversed soon, all of Aron’s love had to go somewhere. Did that mean that he was going to put his ass up? Only the thought was making him break into cold sweat. There was no way he could live through that. He almost wished he could push Aron away, once it would come to that.

And that was not just the not-gay guy in him talking. He had other reasons to be afraid of that. So, back to old MacDonald had a farm ...

Chapter Nine

“Your husband called a few times,” Mark chimed in, holding the door for him and seeing him to his desk like he was crippled.

Carter threw his assistant a confused look.

“You dropped your phone here, before heading to your meeting with Yolanda. I didn’t answer. But it’s all for the best that you didn’t have your phone with you,” Mark added in a low whisper. “I heard she’s a beast if something or someone interrupts her meetings.”

“Really?” Carter asked in a dry flat tone.

Mark was even newer than him there and he already knew the pet peeves of the upper management. His fresh-faced assistant was clearly a pro.

“How old did you say you were, Mark?” he asked, as he took the phone and stared at the missed calls for a couple of seconds.

Aron must have known he was not to be interrupted during his meetings with the higher-ups, even if, by higher-ups, he only meant Yolanda. Aron must have known everything about his husband. That meant that it was some emergency.

His tongue turned to sandpaper in his mouth. Could it be that Alex woke up and found himself in Carter’s body? His hands trembled slightly. How was he going to explain to Aron he had played the role of a fake husband all this time? Damn, the situation was becoming more and more complicated. Could they send both him and Alex to the loony bin, provided that they seemed to share the same psychosis? Wasn’t that enough proof that they weren’t actually crazy?

And how was Aron going to feel about him, when all this was going to blow up? Just as things seemed to be on the mend somehow.

“Boss?”

He stared at Mark, shaking his head, like a bunch of bees were trying to find their queen in between his ears.

“Have you heard my answer? I’m 22. But I can assure you I am a professional.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” Carter just nodded quickly. “Sorry, I am a bit ...” he ran one index finger in a circle, pointing at his temple.

Great, now he was admitting to his assistant he was insane. He crooked his index finger, trying to do something with it, something that didn’t necessarily point out at the mess in his head. Eventually, he just let his hand down and placed it in his pocket.

“Don’t worry, boss,” Mark said brightly.

“Please, don’t call me that, it makes me feel old and crappy. Call me Ca ... Alex,” he caught himself right in time. “Alex will do. It’s my name,” he gestured towards his chest like he was Tarzan trying to tell Jane his name. Yeah, he was Tarzan all right, minus the testosterone and the cave man charm.

If Mark was surprised by his boss’s behavior, he didn’t show it. He was, indeed, a pro.

“Ah, I cannot do that, boss,” he said brightly. “You have a reputation to uphold. What if anyone overhears me calling you by your first name?”

“What kind of reputation is that?” Carter looked, puzzled, at his secretary.

Mark took almost a military stance, placing his hands behind his back, and looking somewhere above Carter’s head. For a second, he had the distinct sensation that the guy was going to sing the national anthem.

“Alex Ruskin is known for his incredible looks, of course, but apparently, he has the reputation of a slave driver and a taskmaster. No personal assistant seems to be capable of surviving his verbal whip for more than a few months. A slip of the tongue made the last secretary of the famous and infamous Alex Ruskin shamefully exit Beauty X through the back door. Allegedly, the unfortunate PA failed to address the local fashion icon properly when in polite company.”

Carter stared at Mark, curious to see if the guy was still breathing after saying all that in one go. Miraculously, he was.

“Who said that?” he pointed his phone at Mark.

“New Entertainment, of course,” Mark answered promptly.

“That is ...”

Not true, he wanted to add, but it might have been.

“... a misunderstanding,” he chose instead, just for the sake of being diplomatic.

“Sorry, boss, even if that’s true, I don’t want to seek employment starting tomorrow. If I make it under you, then I can make it anywhere. So you’re boss to me for now.”

“Wow, bossy,” Carter shook his head. “Well, you seem to have everything figured out. Don’t let me stand in your way. What’s next for me on the do-to list for today?”

Mark was about to reply to that, when Carter’s phone went off.

“Sorry, I have to take it, it’s Aron,” he said quickly.

Mark saluted, and with a smack of his heels and a one eighty, he went out the door, leaving Carter alone.

He took a deep breath. There was no point to postpone this.

“Hi,” he answered in a meek voice.

“Hi,” Aron’s voice called from the other end.

Strangely enough, Aron seemed just as chastised as Carter was.

“I called to tell you that I’m sorry,” Aron added quickly, after a couple of seconds of awkward silence.

“Um? What for?” Carter asked.

This could not be about Alex waking up in Carter’s body. He felt strangely relieved.

“For last night. For leaving you sleep on the sofa. For this morning. I shouldn’t have ...”

“Eh, let bygones be bygones,” Carter sat at his desk.

“No, I must ask for your forgiveness. I would like to take you out tonight. Someplace nice. I really need to make it up to you.”

“Nah, I’m not really in the mood for that. And I was an ass, too. I was actually planning to blow you to make it up to you.”

The moment the words left his mouth, he knew he was the biggest idiot in the whole universe. That was why it was better if he remained silent most of the time, and not let whatever he was thinking fly out like that.

“Wow,” Aron replied, but his tone was playful now. “Then I have something to really look forward to, for tonight.”

“But we made up,” Carter said quickly. “You said you’re sorry.”

Even to his ears, he sounded unconvincing.

“No way, you’re not talking your way out of this,” Aron said, his voice dropping lower. “And really, you’re not upset?”

“No, I’m not,” he sighed. “But I must warn you. I am a bit rusty. Sorry if I’ll gag.”

Aron burst into laughter on the other end.

“You’ve only been in the hospital for a few days. How rusty could you have gotten?”

Especially with all the practice around the block, Carter thought, as he began to pinch the bridge of his nose. He was worse than a nutty cartoon duck navigating a minefield. He just kept blowing stuff up. Blowing ... He shook his head.

“Don’t worry, babe. I’m sure it’s like riding a bicycle. It will all come back to you once you get back in the saddle. Speaking of which,” Aron’s voice dropped another note or two. “How long do you plan to keep me waiting until I can have your beautiful ass?”

“I had some blood tests done,” Carter answered. “What if I got some bug while in the hospital? What if I give it to you, too?” he continued, almost congratulating himself for this new idea that had just come to him.

“We kissed and ... Okay, but when did you turn into a hypochondriac? I know that no one is supposed to ruffle your feathers, but you didn’t use to have this obsession with illness.”

“Hey, it’s not like I face a situation like that every day. I need to make sure I’m healthy.”

“All right,” Aron admitted. “I can wait to fuck your sweet ass. Especially since you plan on giving me blowjobs as compensation,” he added with a small chuckle that seemed to work wonders on Carter’s ear, brain, spine, and the entire nervous system.

Aron’s words were setting him on fire. Figuratively. And they also made it hard for him to concentrate. What were they talking about? Ah, blowjob. Blowjobs. Hmm, blowjobs?

“Blowjob,” Carter said quickly. “Without the s, like in one versus ... more than one. I can only agree to one.”

Aron laughed.

“Don’t be so picky about everything. I know how much you like to blow me,” Aron spoke, his voice husky and low.

Carter winced as a strange jolt went up his spine, making the hair on his head stand on its ends. Funny, it felt like he was aroused. Just to check, he pressed one hand over his crotch. Was that thing working overtime? He threw an incredulous look at the bulge in his skinny jeans.

“Ah, damn,” he whispered.

Great. Now his voice sounded low and sexy, too.

“Are you alone?” Aron questioned him.

“In the office? Right now? Yeah,” Carter murmured.

Was that AC still working or what? The stylish room thermometer on his desk showed that the temperature was perfect. Why on earth he felt so hot, all of a sudden?

“Me too. I’m going to lock the door, just in case.”

Why was Aron locking the door to his office?

“Don’t you have work to do?” he whispered, like he was afraid someone might hear him.

The feeling that whatever he was doing right now was somewhat of an illicit nature was starting to bother him.

“Do the same,” Aron whispered, and Carter moved, like he was in a trance.

“I did. Happy now?” he tried to sound casual, but he kind of suspected what Aron wanted.

Not the entire animal farm singing could save him at this point. He was trapped. But it was not like he was going to run away. Maybe that was needed. Maybe Aron had to discover his husband was not his husband, by accident or otherwise. And then he was just going to ask Carter what the hell he was doing in Alex’s body.

“Tell me what you are planning for tonight,” Aron cooed in his ear.

The door was locked, but Carter could still feel himself exposed. He slid under his desk and coiled into a corner, holding the phone glued to his ear.

“Um, I’m going to blow you,” he said with half the conviction needed and double than what he felt.

“Could you please go into details?” Aron continued to speak in the same husky tone.

Carter could swear he was hearing rustling of clothes. And the way Aron’s drawl was tickling his ear, like he was right there, next to him, wasn’t of any help. He needed to concentrate. He bit his lips, trying to rein in the shudder of excitement coursing through his body.

“Are you, ahem, touching yourself?” he asked.

“Would it bother you if I was?” Aron chuckled.

Aron was kinky. His best friend was a kinky bastard and wanted to rub one off at the office.

“Are you sure no one can see you?” he asked worriedly.

“I have a small break until the next meeting. I asked not to be bothered. I expected to spend at least half an hour apologizing to you. We could put this time to good use.”

“Fine,” Carter admitted, but his throat was dry and speaking normally was a challenge.

“I can start first,” Aron offered, his voice all silk wrapping around each word like a stripper around a dancing pole.

“Will you blow me, too?” Carter remembered the source of inspiration he had used to get hard the night before.

It was obvious that all rational thinking, along with his blood, was drained from his brain and now used only by his cock. The problem was that he couldn't entirely blame everything on Alex's body at this point. He could not bear to be that much of a hypocrite.

“I'd lick you head to toes, baby,” Aron drawled. “I'll eat your ass good, even though you still don't let me fuck you. And I'll make you scream until you won't be able to use your voice.”

Damn, Carter cursed internally, feeling the front of his jeans turning into a torturing device over his strained cock. How could he have been so oblivious all these years? Aron was a fucking sex bomb. Not that he ... Not that, whatever ... He straightened up to give his cock a bit of a breather and this time he cursed loudly as his head connected with the desk.

“What's happening?” Aron asked, obviously worried.

“I hit my head,” Carter replied while rubbing the crown of his head.

“How?” Aron's voice was now intrigued.

“I hit the desk,” Carter explained. “With my head.”

“How could that happen?” Aron questioned.

“I’m under the desk,” Carter offered the prompt reply.

“Why?” Aron was now confused.

“So that no one can see me.”

“That building is only concrete and metal, Alex.”

“And glass. Have you seen the size of those windows?”

“Yes, and they’re tinted. Plus, do you think someone will stare at you while flying around the fifth floor?”

Aron could afford to laugh at crazy imaginary things. Carter had no such luxury. He was practically living in another man’s skin.

“Who knows?” he said, convinced that sounding like a lunatic was his only way out of that situation.

“Well, whatever floats your boat, baby,” Aron said in a soothing voice.

Wow, this guy really needed to jerk off, Carter mused. All right, it was good practice, after all. The more he got Aron off, the less trouble was going to be for him. Aron was not going to pay attention to the little things that were making his husband not his husband at all. Why was he switching so much back and forth between wanting and not wanting Aron to find out? No, Aron should not find out, he decided. Plus, he wasn’t sure he could control that thing in his pants. If he wasn’t going to give in this time, maybe it was going to turn into a monster and devour him in his sleep.

Great. Now he had to act like the gay hotline. What was he supposed to say?

“I like your cock,” he said bluntly.

That was so damn lame, compared to Aron’s little speech from earlier.

There was a short silence at the other end. Hmm, he was dumb as a brick when it came to seduction. The truth was chicks who digged him always came on to him. He was not that much of a seducer. A girl had once said to him that it was a good

thing he was so handsome or he wouldn't have gotten any, with his non-combat attitude. He had no idea what that girlfriend meant by that. He wasn't particularly handsome if he remembered correctly. Not not-handsome, either. Just ...

Back on track, Carter, we have a situation here.

Right.

Yes, he did have a situation on his hands, and the said situation had a difficulty rating multiplied by one thousand because he had to make a guy bust a nut.

“Hmm, what do you like about it?” Aron asked.

Well, it wasn't like he had to demonstrate the Dijkstra algorithm. Actually, that seemed easy compared to this, in retrospect. He drew one deep breath and pushed his own erection down. He needed a cool head for this, not to think with, well, his other head. He pictured Aron's cock in his mind. He licked his lips unconsciously. Or maybe it was better if ...

“It's a nice cock,” he spoke, his voice sounding too loud to his ears, although he was practically whispering.

“Come on, baby, give me more,” Aron encouraged him.

He rested his back against a wooden wall.

“I like the way it grows so big in my hand when I touch it.”

It was the truth. That had been pretty rewarding, that day when he had given Aron a handjob. From this point forward, he needed to use his imagination. What could a gay guy like to hear when having phone sex?

“I'll start by licking the head. You're leaking so much precum, I can't believe it,” he began playing the scenario in his head. “It's salty, but it's like I can't ... have enough. So I just ... swirl my tongue over it and then I push it in my mouth. Damn, Aron, you're big,” his voice came out strangled, loaded with meaning.

And honesty.

His own breathing was hitching in his chest. He could feel his cheeks burning, and now the hand that was supposed to keep his dick in check was moving up and down, giving him pleasant jolts with each passing.

“Your cock is so tasty, I just want to take it so deep,” he uttered with difficulty, not because he was trying to lie, which he wasn’t, but because it was difficult to control himself. He could feel his cock throbbing painfully in his jeans.

There was no way he could do this while being restrained like that under the desk. Like a drowning man, he grabbed one arm of the chair to save himself. He was quick to open his fly and, knelt in front of the office chair, he grabbed his erection. Aron’s deep breathing into his ear was making his own fall in sync.

“Damn, Aron, I want so much ... To feel you deep. I want you to fuck my face, to use me ...”

Aron’s breathing was starting to become more erratic with each word. It was quite obvious that Carter’s little scenario was making both of them hot beyond believe.

“Are you jerking off, too?” Aron asked.

“Yeah ... I can’t believe I’m so horny right now,” Carter admitted, and his whispers sounded pained.

“Then ... say what you said, but you doing it to me,” Aron asked, a tad hesitant.

“What?” he asked, confused.

Probably too much of his blood was in his dick right now and there was none left for the head that was supposed to do the thinking.

“Tell me how you would like to fuck my face,” Aron’s voice became urgent. “Just for my sake, baby, please.”

Aron on the receiving end of dominant play? Carter could swear there was a surge of something like a shot of adrenaline right under his balls, at the root of his penis.

“I’ll keep you down and straddle you,” Carter finally allowed his imagination to run away with him. “I’ll push my dick into your mouth, making you gag.”

Was this too much? But at this point he could not help it. His own dick was doing the thinking, and hence the talking. And it was swelling and swelling in his hand while his hand was just moving more and more frantically.

“I’ll just force my way in, because I want to give it to you hard. I want you to rub your dick and moan around mine. I want to use you ... use your throat until I blow my load, and then wipe my dick on your face. I want to see my cum on your lips ... Fuck, Aron, is this what you want me to say?” he pleaded.

“Yes, baby, yes,” Aron encouraged him.

He was getting all worked up with that image. Who would have thought Aron, so big and strong, liked to be dominated? He had no time to analyze things. His hand was moving so fast on his cock that it could probably be a practical demonstration on how to make fire with nothing but a dick at hand. What could a guy who loved this kind of play want more? He just went with the flow.

“And then I’ll take your cock and rub it, and I’ll squeeze your balls hard ... and then I’ll watch you come ... for me,” he whispered and began coming all over the leather chair, as his thoughts became an incoherent string of flashing images.

Aron’s moans on the other hand, deep and masculine, made no more sense at that point, either. Carter was breathing hard, watching in disbelief the load he had blown. Through a daze, he listened to Aron coming, too.

For a couple of minutes, they just breathed and listened to each other. And the strangeness and intimacy of the situation were making Carter feel like floating in a dream.

Aron was the first to speak.

“That was ... incredible, baby,” he said. “I’m sorry if I pushed you.”

“No sweat,” Carter mumbled.

“I have no idea what came over me,” Aron said in an apologetic tone.

“Stop speaking,” Carter warned.

He had no idea why Aron wanted to apologize, but his head was hurting already. He was the one who needed to think what the fuck meant that he had just had phone gay sex with his best friend and blown one of the hugest loads in his life.

Aron chuckled softly.

“Thanks, baby. I can barely wait to see you tonight.”

“Wait,” Carter spoke, but Aron had already hung up.

How on earth was he going to clean that? Really, he was at that point when he needed to google everything. Maybe the worst part, however, was that he needed to endure Mark’s strange looks when he was going to send him after the cleaning supplies.

Now that had escalated quickly.

Chapter Ten

All right, at least he had managed to make the leather chair look decent after the online BDSM groups had supplied him with useful information on how to clean cum off leather. The best part was that he hadn't needed to call Mark to the rescue, and a tissue and some rubbing alcohol that he had luckily found in the small vanity cabinet available in his office, had done the trick.

He dropped his head on his arms, as he stood there, knelt before the chair that had so silently accepted his semen tribute just earlier, and allowed himself a long sigh. How was he going to face Aron? Why was this happening? Only because he was in Alex's body? That was the quickest, easiest explanation.

The only silver lining in that kind of explanation was that Alex still loved his husband. That was good. Maybe Alex wasn't that bent on cheating. Maybe he was just used to the attention. Maybe the guy was flirtatious by nature, and that made people think they were entitled to ask him about blowjobs and whatnot. For Aron's sake, he hoped that was true.

And that was getting him off the hook. Only the thought of having done what he had just done with Aron should have made him feel sick to the stomach, like the homophobe he was. But the truth was that he didn't feel sick. He didn't feel anything.

Actually, if he was to be honest, that wasn't exactly true. He felt like his bones were made for something mushy and loose, and it was like he wanted to doze off. There was something delicious, pouring smoothly like dark honey, right into his bloodstream. And all he wanted was to close his eyes and ...

Dream of Aron.

All right, he shook himself off and got to his feet. There was simply no point in indulging in that kind of thing. Aron was his best friend. Carter was straight.

Tomato is a fruit.

Oranges are sweet.

Let's make a salad.

Good. He was back in charge of his own thoughts. No point in them wandering off to greener pastures. Those were beyond the horizon line, therefore uncharted territory. Luckily, his shepherd dogs were in top shape, and now all the silly sheep were back to the herd.

The steady knock on his door woke him up from his reverie. Good thing Mark hadn't bothered him while he was still engaged in that hot session with Aron. He had a hunch Mark wouldn't have judged him, but he was glad he had been spared the embarrassment.

Well, not exactly, he realized when he opened his mouth to urge the secretary to come in. He needed to unlock the door. What if Mark was going to ask him why the door had been locked? What was he going to say?

The knock repeated, this time a bit more energetically. Oh, damn, he needed to face the situation as it was. He walked quickly to the door and opened it. Mark smiled at him, in that professional way of his, but still full of warmth.

"Simon from Marketing wants to see you, boss," Mark spoke softly.

"Why didn't you use the phone?" he asked, out of curiosity. He had noticed the landline phone among the first things on his desk and now he was looking at its sibling, installed comfortably on Mark's desk.

"I heard you locking the door earlier," Mark said, his eyes wide open and innocent. "I just wanted to gain some more time by just walking to your door and knocking."

Gain some more time for me, Carter mused. Now he looked over Mark's desk through the glass doors. Mark didn't have the same luxury of privacy as he had. The secretary was practically working in a fishbowl.

He squinted as he examined the guy waiting in the hallway. How nice of Mark to keep the guest waiting there, Carter thought somewhat cheerfully. He recognized the swept-back hair, the smart suit and the attitude. The guy was seemingly examining some impressionist painting clone on the opposite wall and he was standing with his back to Carter and Mark. By his position, he was crossing his arms over his chest in what probably looked like a disapproving gesture.

"All right, you can see him in," he sighed.

He turned to walk back into his office but stopped dead in his tracks. He was pretty sure the room must have smelt of sex right now, even if he had just jerked off.

“Mark, do you happen to have ...” he turned towards his secretary.

Not that was professionalism right there. Mark placed the air freshener tube in his hand and went back to his desk like that was completely natural and no explanations were needed.

“Thanks,” he murmured. “Just send Simon in, in one minute or so.”

Maybe it was his imagination, but Simon looked at him like he was suspecting something. The guy was handsome, model beautiful, but Carter still could not shake off the sensation that there was something artificial about the guy. He was trying too much.

“Have you gone under the knife?” he blurted out the first thing that came to his mind.

Simon dared to look affronted.

“What gave you that idea? What did you hear?” the guest asked, obviously distressed.

“What gave me that idea?” Carter snorted. “Your perfect nose. That thing cannot be in real life.”

Simon brushed his nose with one hand and shifted in his chair. As Carter began to smile, he straightened up, removing his hand from his face and pretending to clean some invisible lint off his lapel.

“Gosh, you’re even more obnoxious than usual. And I thought your little brush with death made you a better person. At least, that’s the gospel around here.”

“Don’t believe everything you hear,” Carter bared his teeth in what he hoped looked very much like an insincere smile. Maybe the guy was going to take the hint and fuck off. “To what unpleasant reason do I owe this visit?”

“Aren’t you happy to see me?” Simon threw him an equally fake smile.

The guy must have had his teeth done, too. Maybe they were fake. Nah, the guy was too young for that. But what did he know?

“Do you really need an answer to that? Look, man, I’m married. Whatever you think it’s going on here, it’s not,” Carter decided to put the cards on the table.

“That didn’t stop you before,” Simon looked at him, his eyes at half-mast, in what was probably a seductive stare.

It was. The guy was handsome, and he knew how to play that card well.

“Before was before,” Carter shrugged. “Now is now. Do you think you can find the door on your own, or do I need to show it to you?”

Simon raised his hands in surrender.

“Chill, Alex. I’m here just to invite you over to lunch. Stop and don’t protest just yet. Yolanda told me I need to show you the new materials for the organic line ads, and that you’re quite busy today.”

“Okay,” Carter said shortly. “See you at lunch, then. Don’t forget to bring those materials. If you come without them, I’ll kick your ass.”

Simon opened his mouth and, for a few seconds, he gaped like a fish. Carter could not stop thinking that this whole body swap thing was starting to be funny. Not funny like in he wanted to roll on the floor laughing, but enough to feel satisfaction while staring at Simon, across his lacquered desk that had probably cost several thousands of dollars.

“What’s gotten into you?” Simon accused, his eyes narrowing to slits. “It’s not like you to be crass.”

“What can I say, man?” Carter chuckled. “A little brush with death changes one’s vocabulary. Are you ready to leave, or do you still have some unanswered questions? I don’t have all day, you know?”

Simon tensed his jaw, but for a brief second. His perfect face metamorphosed back to straight, flawless lines, and he smiled.

“I like it when you’re bossy,” Simon spoke, his voice languorous and filled with promises.

Carter could swear the guy's words were doing something funny to his ears. Ticklish. That was the word.

“Look, Simon. You're a handsome dude. Just go bone someone who's into you. I'm sure you have plenty of guys fighting over you.”

Simon leaned in and pouted like a child. Carter had no idea why the guy was working in the Marketing department. He clearly had it in him to pose for ads, just like Alex did. Simon was an expert in pushing buttons. But Carter was not that gullible.

“But I want you,” Simon complained. “And, you know,” his eyes darted sideways, “it's not like, if you want to, I won't let you do the ... boning,” he added the last word with a grimace, seemingly a bit unsure of what he was saying.

“I can't,” Carter replied sharply. “That seat's taken. I'm boning my husband.”

The strangest thing about what followed was that he was just as surprised as Simon. What could have gotten into him to say that? Was it true? An image of Aron's manly body stretched over the bed, ready to be taken, whatever that meant, flashed through his mind, with the power and speed of a short circuit. He swallowed nervously. Could Aron expect that from him? But the guy seemed bent on wanting to be the one on top. It was much easier with a straight relationship. At least, there, he knew who was the fucker, and who was, well, the ... fuckee.

Great, now he had to go through the day trying to chase away images of Aron on the receiving end of a good shagging.

Go away. Go away, you filthy thought, he struggled.

“You're fucking Aron? You've never told me that,” Simon reproached when he finally got his voice back.

“And why should I tell you I'm fucking my husband?” Carter shot back.

“Because you said to me that you're a complete bottom and you don't care about, well, boning anyone.”

Great, he groaned internally. Now he was going to ruin Alex's reputation as the perfect passive partner. Ah, well, he could not care less.

On the upside, that was giving him hope. What if he was the one to jump Aron's bones, not the other way around? How hard could that be? He had gone to town with several of his ex-girlfriends; it was not like he didn't know how to do it. Well, he was going to fuck a man, not a woman, but an ass was still an ass if he was to be philosophical about it. And that was just going to solve his problem with not being ready to be the one to take it up the ass. Aron was the gay guy between them two. So he must have had at least more experience than him in that particular department.

"I must have lied to you," he finally replied, seeing Simon still sitting there and watching him like Carter had just told him Santa Claus didn't exist.

"I thought we had a connection," Simon glared.

"You thought wrong," Carter said back. "The only guy I'm having a connection with is my husband."

Well, at least that was true. Aron was the most important guy in his life. Always had been. Even more important than his dad. But he was not going to go there right now. He had this hot potato, shaped like a male model, on his hands, and he needed to deal with him.

"Simon," he sighed. "Just go fuck someone and forget about whatever ... happened between us."

"Damn, you're serious," Simon whispered. "You really don't remember. But everyone said it was just a light injury, whatever you've been through."

"Well, I don't remember."

Simon opened his mouth again, but this time, he closed it with a small smile.

"All right, Alex. I'll come take you from the spa and then we'll have lunch."

What did it feel like Carter had to wait for the other shoe to drop? Simon stood up and leaned over Carter's desk, to stare into his eyes.

"Gods, you're beautiful," he murmured.

Carter rolled his eyes. No wonder Alex was so entitled. People were just lining up to kiss his ass. That kind of thing could only inflate one's ego to obnoxious levels, especially if there were people as beautiful as this Simon dude doing that.

"I'll refresh your memory over lunch," Simon walked quickly to the door and threw the last words over his shoulder.

He needed to protest to that, but the guy was already off the door. Great, now he was going to fend off the dude's advances over lunch.

"The car is here, boss. At two, after your lunch break, Yolanda will take you for a spin with our newest clients. But I need to ask you, boss. Are you going to do the interview with New Entertainment? Yolanda insists," Mark added quickly.

"Yes, I'll do the damn interview," he sighed. "It's already settled. No need to work hard to convince me. Yolanda did that for you."

"In that case, I will have to reschedule your barre class," Mark said thoughtfully. "Will it be okay to put it Thursday? So that you don't have to work so hard on Friday."

"Barre? What the hell is that?"

"The ballet workout," Mark replied promptly.

"Ah, then I would like to say never, but it's not like I really have that option, now do I?" Carter commented wryly.

He could put up with having concealer hide his dark circles, and his hair washed and brushed until he was heaving, and meeting new clients, and fending off all kinds of creeps with a stick. He was even going to put up with the grooming stuff that he was supposed to go through. But he could have lived much much better without doing ballet.

"Boss, you're so funny," Mark giggled. "You love your barre workouts," the guy added, with so much conviction that Carter wanted to strangle him. "People say that it makes you really flexible and supple. Is it true? I'm just the no workout kind of guy."

Well, Alex clearly was able to self-suck just in case he was going to ever get stranded on a remote beach with only women and dolphins as companions. The perfect bottom Alex was could not flip, even in dire circumstances, Carter was convinced. So that barre thing clearly worked its magic. He just couldn't picture himself in tights doing splits and spreads and whatever else those movements were called.

"Yeah, it's true," he said with a sigh. "So, really, you're too skinny, Mark. Put some meat on those bones, or some wind might knock you over."

"I only eat fast food," Mark admitted plainly while chewing on a pencil.

Carter glared at him.

"That's bad for you," he wagged his finger at his secretary. "Do you do any sports?"

Mark made a funny face.

"I'll fire you if you don't play sports," Carter joked, and now Mark's face went from funny to terrified. "Just pulling your leg. But you're young, Mark, and you surely don't want your liver to swim in fat by the time you're 30. Let me tell you this secret: the only way to keep up with stuffing your face with hamburgers is to sweat it off on the court."

"And how do you know that, boss?"

Mark's eyes seemed a bit strange as the guy spoke. Carter squinted. What kind of strange colors were in there? He blinked and looked again; the guy's eyes were just a normal shade of brown. He was just seeing things, and it wouldn't have been the strangest thing that was happening to him right now.

"I just read it somewhere," he waved, realizing that he was supposed to be against sweating or something.

"Okay, boss," Mark said cheerfully. "Have fun at the spa. Simon said he is going to take you to lunch. I will prepare the info you need to have for the meeting later. I will reschedule the barre class to Thursday, and talk to the host at New Entertainment to let him know you're going."

"Aren't you forgetting something?" Carter asked, putting on a straight face.

“What, boss?” Mark’s face fell.

Carter laughed.

“Nothing serious. Just take a break, too. Maybe eat something healthy at lunch. I have a reputation to uphold here,” he joked. “We’re like all organic and shit.”

Mark burst into a fit of giggles and saw him to the door. Ah, so he was just going to relax at the spa for a few solid hours. Well, at least there were perks to being a fashion star.

What the fuck was this? He grunted for the umpteenth time as Gladys, as the name of his tormentor was, expertly pulled another strip of clear wax off his chest.

“Come on, Alex, it’s not like you to be a crybaby,” the woman gave him what she probably thought was a reassuring smile.

“Easy for you to say,” he glared. “No one is skinning you alive.”

Gladys laughed, showing rows of perfect small white teeth. Her nickname should have been Jaws, the tiny version.

“You know it’s not that bad. You’re just anticipating the pain; that is why you’re so fussy about it. Admit it. It doesn’t hurt that much.”

Well, it was true. But she was basically stripping away his dignity as a guy. Never in his life had he considered shaving, except for his face, let alone waxing. This was a torture born in hell, as a price for beauty or something.

At least, the skin on his legs didn’t hurt as much. Although he had no idea how could that woman hunt the smallest hair on his body. He could have sworn Alex’s body was completely smooth before coming here. Well, according to his standards, at least.

“Great, now on your belly.”

Ah, she probably needed to do the back of his legs, too. He felt a slight change in the massage bed. Apparently, Gladys was adjusting it for some reason. Whatever, he was not there to question her abilities as a grooming expert, slash Torquemada.

“Let’s have this out of the way first,” Gladys said a bit cheerfully for his liking.

He hated to have his back at her like this. Especially since she just expertly untied the towel he had over his midsection and pulled it out, making him raise his hips a bit. Great, now a woman whom he had no plans to have sex with, was staring at his naked ass.

And what was that thing, a bit too warm, pouring over his ass crack?

“Eh, what are you doing?” he asked in an unsure voice.

“Just stay still and it will be over before it even started,” Gladys said, her words followed by a short move.

“Mother fucking I swear to fucking hell what the fuck!” expletives poured out of his mouth without control, as the sudden pain hit.

Behind him, Gladys was laughing. Not ironically, but good-naturedly. It was official. Being in the fashion industry fucking sucked.

At least, the full body massage and the face treatment after had been nice enough to compensate about 0.0001% of the horrid experience he had been forced to go through. The only good part in all that was that he didn’t need another treatment like that for another month or so, according to Gladys. That wasn’t good news, as that demonic woman thought. It was just a reprieve.

Maybe until then he could be back to his own body and rest peacefully in a comma. This was proving too much of a ride for him. To think that Alex enjoyed that kind of thing; he shook his head. The guy was just fucked up.

True to his word, Simon was waiting for him in the parking lot, leaning against a sports car that looked way too gaudy for his tastes. Who was the asshole trying to impress? Obviously, the idiot was pleased with his car and himself, as he pushed up his sunglasses and smiled at Carter.

“How was it? All baby smooth now?” Simon cooed as Carter walked over.

“Shut the fuck up,” he said through his teeth.

Great. So this asshole and probably the entire building where Alex worked knew he was getting his ass waxed today. Some people really had to rethink their lives if they were interested in stupid stuff like that.

Simon just laughed and pulled open the car door on his side. Carter circled the vehicle and climbed in front, cursing Simon for driving a car with only two seats. With a huff, he pulled the safety belt and crossed it over his chest.

Something shadowed his field of view and it was too late when he realized what was happening. Simon was pressing him into his seat, and his lips were on Carter's mouth.

The guy was too brash. Carter pursed his lips and pushed the guy away.

"What the hell, idiot?" he spat, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"Just trying to have you remember," Simon spoke, looking somewhat wounded in his pride.

"You're bullshitting me," Carter mumbled. "Why would I be with you, when I have Aron at home?"

"Aron is cheating on you," Simon ignited the engine, making it purr.

Well, that was a nice sound, Carter had to admit. But no, he was not going to get derailed by the sound of a nice car right now.

"He's not!" he protested.

"He is!" Simon said back, his hands flexing on the wheel.

He almost felt tempted to challenge the guy to a stupid childish game.

"No shit," he said aggressively. "So that is why I just feel the need to get on my knees for any cock in the company."

"Well, it's not like that. Actually, you were pretty cruel to tell Bernie you were going to suck him off for whatever he has to do for you. He really believed it, the poor shmuck," Simon laughed.

"You were the one to say that everybody goes in and out my office like a public toilet," Carter said defensively, this time.

“I was pissed at you for telling Bernie that. Plus, when I saw him getting out of your office, struggling to pull up his pants, I swear, Alex, I thought I was seeing red in front of my eyes.”

“Yeah, right,” Carter snorted. “You were cold as a shark when you came in.”

“Yeah, of course I was. I know well not to act jealous around you. You say you find it bothersome. Funny thing coming from a guy who’s perpetually jealous.”

Carter’s ears prickled with apprehension. What was this all about? Alex jealous? Why? Aron was not a cheater.

“The truth is you have been suspecting Aron for a while,” Simon continued his annoying chatter. “Only when he turned back from his last business trip, though, you were sure. You didn’t get to tell me why, but you were sure. You said you had some proof or something.”

Hmm, things were getting convoluted now. What was this proof Simon was talking about? Of course, the dude could just talk out of his ass.

“It’s not what I feel now,” he said stubbornly. “I love my husband and I would never cheat on him,” he said, hoping he sounded convincing enough.

“Well, you already cheated on him,” Simon said through his teeth. “With me.”

Carter’s heart sank. That couldn’t be true. Yeah, Alex was a scumbag for stealing Aron and making him gay - yeah, Aron had had other gay stuff going on before, apparently, but Carter was sure the guy was just experimenting and stuff - but he could not be that much of a scumbag. Why would Alex cheat on Aron when Aron was perfect?

During lunch, Simon proved he knew how to be professional, talking only about business. Until he pushed his phone towards Carter, with a silent plea in his eyes. Carter stared at the offending object for a while, before asking.

“What am I supposed to do with this?”

Simon continued to stare at his folder.

“Just look at the pictures. Pictures of us. Maybe then you’ll remember.”

Well, that could not be faked, right? He took the guy’s phone and stared at the first photo. His felt the instant need to grind his teeth. The scumbag sitting across from him wasn’t lying.

Chapter Eleven

Carter was chewing the nail on his index finger like a Duracell rabbit at a carrot tasting. The initial shock was gone, but he still held Simon's phone in his hand, not wanting to let go. But it was not like those offending pictures were going to disappear by magic. There, on the shiny screen, Alex Ruskin was locked in a heated embrace with the guy currently sitting across from him, in the poshest cafe Carter had ever set foot in.

And that was not all. If anything, it was just the peak of the iceberg. What lay under water was much, much worse. Apparently, the two clandestine lovers had had no qualms with taking pictures in all sorts of compromising positions. Carter was certain that he had seen enough dick and man on man sex to last him for a century. And Simon, the dickhead, was right; in all the X-rated pictures, Alex was the one with the other's cock in him. Now that was plenty of ground for divorce, right there.

Eventually, he took away his eyes from the man's phone and handed it back to him. There was no point in trying to erase them and then blame it all on a slip of the hand. Simon surely had copies lying around, on his computer and whatnot. He could not be that stupid.

"So?" Simon looked at him with a small, knowing smile.

Some people. They just liked asking for a punch in the face. Alex Ruskin was a damn cheater and a two-timer, and Carter had to deal with it. Should Aron learn about it? It was painful but necessary. But he was not going to find it from Carter. Not like this. And there was maybe still time to save Aron's marriage. Regardless of what he thought of guys marrying other guys and whatnot. This was not about him and what he wanted to believe of Aron. There was a marriage at stake and he needed to do everything in his power to save it. After he and Alex were going to swap back, it was completely up to Alex to decide. And Aron was going to find out. Eventually. There was no way in hell to tell what kind of thing was going to set that off, but it was going to happen.

Right now, though, Carter was in a terrible conundrum. What was he going to do? Tell Simon off? He wasn't putting it behind that guy to blackmail him, to keep quiet. There was no way he was going to sleep with Simon, to maintain the so-called order in Alex's life, either. So he just needed to grab the bull by the horns.

“What do you want?” he asked, frowning and playing with his thumbs, for lack of anything better to do, until he decided to just let his hands flat on the table.

Simon looked at him with a mix of confusion and angst. Carter shook his head. The idiot was a real charmer, with those dark caramel eyes. He preferred darker, black eyes. Like Aron’s.

“Do you really need to ask?” the man asked, and the pain in his voice was real. “I want us to be together. As you promised. You said that you were going to leave Aron, walk away from him, and be with me.”

Simon made a move to capture one of his hands, but Carter was quick enough to pull both of them away and hide them under the table. His eyed remained on Simon’s hand, still half open, until the man flexed his fingers, curling them in, and withdrew.

“Look, if you want to blackmail me, just tell what will take for you to keep quiet,” Carter spoke, looking at Simon.

“Blackmail you? I have no intention to do that!” Simon protested.

Ugh, now that was a relief.

“But I don’t intend to leave you alone, even if that’s what you’re asking. I don’t care that you say that you don’t remember! I don’t know what game you think you’re playing, and, if this is your idea of testing me, don’t worry, I won’t quit!”

Carter frowned and took a look around. Simon’s heated speech was starting to draw attention.

“Calm down,” he hissed at the other and then smiled affably to a woman wearing cat-eye sunglasses who was already stealing glances their way.

Simon seemed to have a bit of difficulty to rein in his emotions, but, eventually, he chose to shut his mouth. His dark complexion made him look even more upset, with the frown and the pursed lips and everything. He was making Carter think of a character from some Gothic tale. Simon did look like he was ready to turn to the dark side.

“What are you going to do, Alex?” Simon asked, straightening up in his chair and looking straight at Carter.

Yeah. What the fuck was he going to do? He had never two-timed in his life and he was not going to start now. It wasn't only for Aron's sake. He had his own dignity to think about.

"I'll think about it," he said, a bit too brightly while trying to force out a smile.

Ugh, to think that he already knew how this guy looked naked. He had nothing against naked bodies, per se, but, right now, he felt like he was sitting across from a porn star or something. Simon did have a nice body.

"Is this all you have to say? Do you mean that none of this sparks any memory of us?" Simon pointed at the phone lying on the table.

"Nope, nada, zilch," Carter shrugged.

The problem was that he might not be able to forget what he had just seen. Now that was the kind of thing people used to say about that what was seen could not be unseen.

"I cannot believe it," Simon murmured and leaned back in his chair, shoulders slumped in defeat. "I ..."

The way the guy pressed his fist against his mouth was a bit too theatrical, and he was playing the hurt lover card too much, but Carter had to say that he kind of felt Simon's pain. Kind of. Alex was still a cheater, and Simon was no better.

"What the fuck are you doing with a married man?" he blurted out, as usual, without thinking much.

Simon's eyes narrowed.

"Really, Alex? You seduced me," the man accused. "Did you really expect me to resist you? Who could resist you? Tell me, please. Tell me that this is not a game."

"It's not a game," Carter shot back quickly.

The situation was getting more and more uncomfortable. Alex was a damn fucking douchebag. Carter had been right all along. He could, after all, get Alex divorced from Aron while the body swap continued. But no, that was not an alternative to consider. Aron loved Alex, and maybe their damn marriage could be salvaged,

somehow. He had no idea how, but whatever. He was not going to break Aron's home even if his husband was a fucking cheater.

Hmm, maybe after they swapped back bodies, he and Alex, he could just send Aron an anonymous message to let him know of his husband's straying habits. Nah, too cheap, too sleazy.

No, he was just going to maintain the status quo until Alex was back into his body, and ready to sort out the mess his life was. Until then, Carter was just going to be neutral. Switzerland level of neutral.

"Why are you nodding?" Simon asked him.

Great, he had been caught up in his mental verbalization so much that he had no idea he was making faces.

"I'm going to be neutral," he claimed right away.

"Neutral?" Simon questioned, making a confused face.

"Like Switzerland," Carter said with determination.

"I have no idea what you are talking about," Simon sighed.

"Look, man, I'm amnesic, all right? Until I remember everything, let's just be ... err, co-workers?"

"You couldn't even bring yourself to say that we should be friends," Simon huffed. "Don't worry. I know what this is all about."

"You do?" Carter could feel his eyebrows arching at a perfect angle. All that manscaping could not go to waste, obviously.

"It is about how you think that I don't deserve you. You seduced me, and I was too easy for you."

"Whatever," Carter shrugged.

Were all relationships this complicated? Or only the gay ones? He was the most agreeable boyfriend, as far as he could remember. One girl had even told him once that he was really easy to break up with. That was him; the most accommodating ex in the history of relationships.

“I know what I will do,” it was Simon’s turn to show his determination. “I will win you back. I will be the one to seduce you,” he pointed at Carter.

Damn, this guy was an idiot. Not an agreeable ex, that was for sure. Although agreeable, as far as his physical appearance went, that he was.

“There’s no need for that,” he replied.

“Oh, yes, there is. There is plenty of need for that,” Simon smiled, his dark face finally lit up with a smile.

The guy was smitten. A smitten idiot.

“Look, Simon, take a breather. Don’t annoy me,” Carter spoke.

“Have I not been passionate enough?” Simon questioned.

“I’ll strangle you,” Carter said quickly. “If you don’t stop, I’ll run you over. With a car. I’ll find one,” he said with conviction.

“I don’t mind getting run over by you,” Simon grinned. “You look really sexy behind the wheel of that car of yours.”

“Wait? Do I have a car?”

Simon looked at him like he was a lunatic.

“The Spyder? Do you not even remember that?”

“Spyder? Like in Porsche Spyder?” Carter was certain his brain was slowly coming to a halt.

“I wondered why you didn’t come to work in it. But I assumed it was because of the accident.”

“I drive a car. That kind of car,” Carter said only to confirm it to himself.

“Yeah. You used to say that whenever you feel hungry, you only need to think of that car, and it’s the best diet tip ever,” Simon smiled at him.

Carter shook his head.

“Let me take you someplace nice tonight. Out of the city. Somewhere private. Where people won’t talk. Come up with something so that Aron won’t suspect a thing.”

Carter groaned and let his head on the table, making the little teaspoon tremble against the porcelain saucer.

“Simon,” he spoke from there, “stop being a fucking idiot. Tonight, I’m going home and I’m fucking my husband. And you should better stay away.”

“Or else?” Simon asked, a bit aggressively.

“Or I’ll think of some terrible way to make you regret it.”

“I see. You’re playing hard to get. I can deal with it. But, as I said, I won’t give up.”

“Whatever,” Carter murmured.

Yeah, now he was certain. Being gay was complicated. Being gay and a two-timer even worse. But this had nothing to do with being gay. It had all to do with Alex being a fucking asshole.

He had endured Simon squeezing his knee shortly before getting out of the guy’s car. This was going to get tough. The languorous looks Simon had thrown at him all the way back to work had given him the willies. The fuck was he going to do? Damn Alex and his idiotic two-timing habits. Just thinking of Aron was making his heart clench.

He went through the day, being pretty much a wallflower, but Yolanda had managed just fine as he stood there, looking pretty.

At the end of the workday, he felt emotionally exhausted if that was a thing. He had no idea how he was going to fend off Simon’s amorous assault, and he had a gay husband at home who was not going to be denied conjugal rights forever. Talking about being between a rock and a hard place. More like being between a hard cock and another hard cock, if the pictures he had seen of Simon and Alex earlier were any proof of the guy’s sexual prowess. As for Aron’s cock ... yeah, that was, ugh, pretty much a challenge, too.

The only silver lining in all this was that he was going to drive a fucking Porsche Spyder. Yeah, he deserved that after everything he had to put with for the entire day. He needed that beautiful car if only for a single ride. How come the fucking douchebag could earn that kind of money? In retrospect, having his asshole waxed and stripped bare along with his dignity was maybe worth it. Yeah, from a douchebag's point of view.

Just thinking about it made him want to grind his teeth. At least, he was going to get home and relax. He could barely wait.

"I'm off," he told Mark, as he grabbed his phone and headed for the door.

"Boss, did you forget about the interview? The New Entertainment show?"

"Show? Isn't it a newspaper or something?" he asked, intrigued.

"A media company," Mark promptly spelled it for him. "You're going to be on TV tonight, boss."

"Stop basking in my misery," he moaned. "When is this interview scheduled?"

"You have to be there at 6 pm, and it starts at 6.30," Mark supplied the information. "They need to prepare you," he added.

"What? Do they let me know the questions in advance?" Carter asked.

"No, they prepare you with the makeup and everything," Mark explained. "Don't worry, boss, I'll be there with you."

"I'm not worried," Carter protested.

Shit, he was worried. If he felt the need to practically hide behind his 22-year old assistant, there was something wrong with his head. And that was the only solid truth in this.

"Shouldn't your work day be over?" he added, a bit irritated.

Mark showed no signs that he was fazed by his boss's behavior.

"My workday ends when your workday ends."

Carter shook his head.

“Keep it like this and you’ll get a promotion, Mark. What’s better than being my assistant?”

Mark giggled.

“I just want to focus on being that for now, boss.”

“Cool,” Carter commented dryly, but he was thankful for Mark’s presence.

At least, he was not going to face that idiotic interview, completely alone.

He could deal with this. If he repeated that mantra enough times in his head, he was going to go through this unscathed. There was so much ruckus around him, so many people wanting to talk to him, that he felt a bit nauseous. He wasn’t exactly a big fan of crowds and a reason why he preferred to telecommute as a freelancer instead of working in a cubicle, stuck with dozens of similar cubicles, slaving for the man from dawn till dusk. If he was to think about it, working a cubicle job was probably just as lonely, but he hated corporations, as a principle. At least, while working as a hired mercenary, he could pretend he was not part of the problem.

Now the problem was that he had to face a different kind of animals, as he looked around. Everyone at the studio seemed pretty excited about having him over, but he was not going to let himself fooled by the fake smiles. If this were a horror movie, the straight fake teeth would soon turn sharp, the manicured fingers into talons, looking to dig into his flesh.

Just a proverbial sacrificial lamb; that was what he was. Mark, blessed be his soul, was trying to stave off the unnecessary attention, by keeping back the throngs of assistants, makeup artists, or whatever those were called, and other people whose probably only job was to gawk at guys like Alex Ruskin like he was their last meal.

Eventually, the man in charge, aka the host and producer of the show, came to see him.

“Alex,” the man called, stretching both his hands, probably waiting for him to take them and shake them.

That was a pretty awkward thing to do, but he attempted to grab the man by both his hands. For a few awkward seconds, the man shook them while looking at

Carter as if he was his next of kin. That was enough for him to examine the host. A man in his late 40s, with a bit of a receding line, still green, but getting ripe, with a smile so huge that it went from ear to ear, Michael Cathaway - as Carter had learned his name was - clearly knew what show business was all about. He had that artificial socially accepted warmth about him that made Carter believe that TV host was the first human job that could be successfully replaced by robots.

“So, are we ready to begin?” Michael began looking around, while still keeping one of Carter’s hands.

The man’s skin felt like dry sandpaper; maybe the guy was a mysophobe and used way too much hand sterilizer. Carter was not going to hold it against him. He was here for half an hour and felt like he needed a shower after being touched by so many strangers who cared not an iota about personal space.

It was worse than a wedding cortege that followed them, as they finally took their places in front of the bright lights and cameras. Carter could not believe how much warmer it felt. Maybe that was why they were talking about life under the hot lights.

He was so amazed by everything, the way he could practically break the fourth wall, by looking straight at the audience behind the cameras, neatly arranged on multiple colored chairs, that he missed the introduction given by the host. Michael had to repeat the question to pull him out of his musings.

“It was such a terrible accident, Alex,” the host spoke in a soft, yet thunderous voice. “Why do you think you escaped with almost no injury?”

“I don’t know,” he shrugged. “Maybe some of us have a guardian angel or something.”

His eyes traveled to Mark like they were pulled towards his assistant, for no apparent reason. The young man was shadowed by the cameramen moving about, but there was something in the way he was demurely keeping his hands together that Carter thought odd.

“An interesting concept, that of a guardian angel,” Michael piped in, for lack of anything better to say.

“Well, yeah, I mean, there’s gotta be an explanation for stuff like this,” Carter tore away his eyes from his assistant.

“Or maybe you’re just a lucky fellow,” Michael laughed. “And we’re so lucky to have you here,” he turned towards the audience that started applauding on cue.

Was this so-called interview going anywhere? Carter suddenly remembered Yolanda’s training.

“And do you know another reason why we’re all lucky?” he managed to start speaking. “We have a new organic line project that I’m so excited about.”

Luckily for him, Michael took the bait, so, for five minutes straight, he yapped his mouth about the company’s new client. Apparently, Michael seemed to be quite knowledgeable in that area, finishing Carter’s sentences, and making the interview one of the most agreeable experiences he could have hoped for.

Until Michael decided to simply change the subject.

“Alex, you’ve been known as the poster boy for marital bliss,” Michael said.

There was a change in tone right there, and Carter’s inner danger alarm went in high alert right away. Oh, so the gloves were off, apparently. Michael was looking at him with a bit of malice in his dark eyes.

He laughed, feigning embarrassment and looked down.

“Aron is an amazing guy,” he said.

“Two years of marriage,” Michael pressed his index finger against his lips, his elbows on the desk. “How do you manage that?”

“Come on, man, it’s not like that’s much,” Carter snorted. “Ask me again when we’re celebrating our 50th anniversary.”

The audience laughed agreeably, and this time it wasn’t on cue.

“That’s pretty ambitious,” Michael smiled, but the smile wasn’t reaching his eyes.

“Totally doable,” Carter said with confidence.

He had no idea how he could be such a good liar. But he was speaking the truth, sort of. He only had to focus on what Aron meant for him. For him, not for Alex. And he was pretty damn certain that he was going to feel the same way about Aron

50 years from now. Even if Aron was not going to speak to him at all for all these 50 years. So, all in all, it was easy.

“Then what do you feel about the latest rumors?”

“Rumors?” his eyes searched for his assistant as if the guy could help him.

“Some would say that there is trouble in paradise,” a cunning smile was now lighting up the host’s face. “Could we please have the pictures up?” he turned towards his team.

The decor behind him changed. He did not dare to turn. What kind of fucked up things had Alex been caught doing?

“Alex,” Michael called for him, in a paternal voice. “Could you please turn and take a look?”

All right, whatever it was, he could deal with it. Unless it was one of those pictures on Simon’s phone with Alex chocked full with dick. Eh, he was just going to claim that the pictures were shopped.

Well, it wasn’t that bad. Just a succession of pictures showing Alex and Aron in what looked like a heated argument, taking place in front of a posh restaurant.

“Can you please tell us what that was all about?” Michael woke him up from his reverie.

The audience was watching him all wide-eyed and bated breath.

He chose to play it cool.

“Couples fight. Sometimes. It just makes the makeup sex all the much better,” he added with a small, knowing smile, looking straight at the audience, like he wanted to hear a confirmation from the guys and gals gathered there that evening.

A confirmation that immediately followed, in the form of a few genuine laughs and agreeing murmurs.

Michael Cathaway, however, was not that easy to sway.

“What were you two fighting about here, anyway?” the host insisted.

Carter turned his attention on the interviewer. Now that was the boss level. All right, he could do it.

“Your paparazzi didn’t manage to get audio, too?” he smiled, but this time he was the one to watch the other with cold eyes.

The host had the nerve to look affronted.

“Hey, it’s a legit business. And you two were in a public space,” Michael pointed out. “Of course, you may choose not to tell us about it,” he added, faking courtesy.

“No, that’s okay,” Carter grinned. “It was about the dishes. Aron never washes the dishes,” he made a gesture like he was really fed up with the situation. “And he’s really obnoxious about it! You wouldn’t believe it! Sometimes, I think he deserves a night on the couch for that reason only. Amirite, ladies?” he flashed a smile towards the audience.

The women in the stands had no qualms to agree with him, quite noisily.

“You two were just walking out of a restaurant,” Michael insisted. “How did washing the dishes come into your conversation?”

“Aron just commented that it was such a good thing that he didn’t have to do the dishes, and that really pissed me off. Really, it’s not like it’s always his turn,” Carter added with determination.

“We have a few other pictures to show you, Alex,” Michael proved right away that he was not going to give up so easily.

Hmm, what could follow? Okay, this was a bit worse. In the next set of pictures, Alex was climbing into Simon’s car. Still, there was nothing compromising about them. So he shrugged.

“That’s a co-worker’s car,” he pointed out, without dropping his smile one inch.

His jaw was starting to hurt a little.

“Are you always this affectionate with your co-workers?” Michael’s face lit up with a shark-like smile.

Eh, truth be told, in the next picture that rolled on the screen, Alex was embracing Simon.

“I was teaching Simon how to hug. That guy, he has no idea what he’s missing in life. He just has this no hugs policy,” he explained promptly.

He just hoped the next picture was not going to show Alex French kissing Simon. He still had that Photoshop theory up his sleeve. Luckily, that was all the host had on him.

“No hugs policy,” Michael spelled the words like they were some kind of dead foreign language.

“Yeah, some people are weird like that,” Carter added quickly. “And I won’t have a non-hugger around me. There you have it. One of my strongest pet peeves. I can’t stand non-huggers. They’re the worst.”

It was clear as day that Michael still wanted to press the matter further, as the screen behind them returned to the show’s intro. Apparently, someone was telling the guy something in his earbud, by the way he was frowning.

“So you would say that your marriage is completely fine?” the host displayed his artificial warm smile from the beginning of the show.

It was like the guy was turning back to factory settings. It was kind of fun to watch.

“Fine? It’s fantastic!” he grinned.

Ugh, close call, but he had managed it.

“I love Aron,” he said simply. “He’s the perfect guy for me. I am the happiest man in the universe to have him.”

The artificial smile froze on the host’s lips while the audience broke into an endearing awww.

“And this was our show for today. There you had him, ladies and gents! Alex Ruskin!”

What? Was it over? The audience’s applauses were making him a tad dizzy, as he stood up and shook hands with the host.

Aron opened the door as he fiddled with his key. For a couple of seconds, they looked at each other, Aron a shadow in the door. Carter could make the silhouette, a man with his arms crossed over his chest. Dressed in some tight fitting t-shirt that even in the semi-dark, showed Aron's strong shoulders and arms.

"So I don't do the dishes?" Aron asked, his voice a bit strained.

Ah, damn, Carter thought. His mind was struggling for a solution, but now his neurons just decided to play dumb. Or dead.

Luckily enough, Aron decided to save him from his predicament by moving quickly and pulling him into a hug.

"I love you, too, Alex," Aron whispered in his hair.

His neurons twitched but decided to just continue their newfound routine. There was no comeback to that.

Chapter Twelve

Carter inhaled Aron's warmth, as they stood there, in the door. Okay, he hoped the guy was not going to get all sentimental because he had absolutely no idea how to deal with such a thing. As his best friend, Aron had never gotten so mushy over him, or over anything. He had been Carter's rock, well, at least, until they fell apart.

Aron broke their hug and grabbed him by the neck in an affectionate manner. Carter let out a long breath, and together, they walked into the house. He was about to say something, when Aron grabbed him again and this time pushed him with his back against the solid wooden door, once inside.

"Shit," he mumbled, but Aron's mouth was all over his, shutting him up.

Fuck, why did Aron taste so nice? He had only kissed girls all his life, and this was so out the scale that he could not even think straight. Maybe Aron was one of those guys meant to make straight guys question their sexuality or something. Not that he was questioning his. Not in the least.

The tongue in his mouth was doing a funny dance. He moaned against his better judgment. Aron withdrew only to nip at his lips, gently for a bit, harsher a moment later. Like the guy was hungry. Carter had a mind to ask Aron if he had dinner. He surely didn't want to serve as a replacement.

"Seeing you there," Aron pulled him closer, and tongued him deep again, making him feel weak to the knees. "Hearing you say it like that," he added, as soon as he cut Carter a small breather. "Just made me want to fuck you," Aron pressed him against the door, catching his hands in a deft grip and pulling them up.

Carter arched his back, his breathing shallow, caught in his chest. Aron was biting his lips, not painfully, but enough to shoot a throng of sensations down his spine, and into his ... no, no, this was ...

Fuck this. He stuck out his tongue. He was no saint. Aron playfully sparred him with his own, and their kiss turned a bit dirty. The good kind of dirty. For who knew how long, they took jabs at each other with their tongues, chasing one another, Aron, the fucker, at an advantage as he kept Carter pinned against the

door, with his arms up, and using his strong thighs to push against the other and making their bodies rub like in an languorous, yet rough dance.

This was going nowhere. They had too many clothes. It wasn't enough. Carter leaned forward, trying to capture Aron's mouth. But Aron moved away, with a smug smile on his face. Carter growled in response.

"Don't tell me you're going to leave me hanging," he complained.

He could not believe his voice. Not his voice technically. This was just making things easier, actually.

"Leave you hanging?" Aron smiled. "No way. I just want to take this to the bedroom."

The bedroom. Where the sex stuff happened. Carter turned stiff and not the good kind of stiff. He still had no idea if Alex's body was clean. Also, he wasn't ready for all the sex stuff.

"No butt fucking," he blurted out.

Aron's eyes squared on him like attack helicopters. They were probably shooting lasers, too, but Carter knew that was not possible.

"The tests," he mumbled, and looked away.

Aron dropped Carter's arms from where they were pinned against the door. They felt heavy and numb as they fell down. Carter winced and moved passed Aron.

"I'm just going to take a shower," he added, and quickly made himself scarce in that direction.

Shit, things were really getting out of hand here.

The warm water on his back was doing nothing for his nerves, though. Carter could not believe he was such a mess. He wasn't even questioning himself or his sexuality. All people were bisexual, to some degree, or so he had read somewhere, probably some shitty magazines that could not really be considered reliable sources of knowledge in the field of human sexuality.

Why had he responded so well to Aron's kisses? Well, it had happened before, from the first moment Aron had kissed him, and Carter still thought himself straight as an arrow.

Of course, he could always play the card of having to impersonate Alex, with all that entailed. Including the gay sex. Gay sex with Aron. The thought was enough to short circuit his brain. He was a damn fucking monkey, a primate, an un-evolved piece of garbage in the animal reign. And all because of a damn kiss.

Aron was too good a kisser. *Yes, blame it on that, Carter*, he thought and shook his head. Never before had he felt attracted to a dude. And it had to be Aron, of all people. Not the guy who was bringing him the newspaper because he thought he was a good neighbor. Was that guy doable? From a gay guy's point of view. He had no idea. But the image of being entangled in a dirty kiss with his newspaper-bringing neighbor had no effect on him. What about the guys he used to hang out with? Nope, no matter how much he tried to picture himself in some kind of amorous situation with any of them, he came up empty.

There was only one explanation if he was honest. He was, sort of, gay for Aron. Damn, what a fucked up thing. Maybe it was just something he needed to fuck out of his system. But no, it was wrong. Aron had no idea. And he still didn't know if Alex was clean, the two timer, mother fucking cheater.

Wait, what was he doing? Again considering the possibility of butt sex? One or two more adventurous girlfriends had fingered him, and, at the time, he had thought that kinky and fun, but ...

All right, he just needed to calm down and take things one step at a time. He was spending all this time in a gay dude's body and that was probably the reason.

Stop fooling yourself, Carter.

But I'm not gay!

Well, tell that to yourself from 10 minutes ago, while you were stuffing Aron's mouth with your tongue.

He could not spend the entire night in the bathroom, pretending to take a long shower. It was time to take the bull by the horns. The gay husband by the dick. Or whatever.

All hope that Aron might already be asleep was soon gone as he took in the man's grave stance, as Aron lay on the bed, pretending to watch television. Carter had decided to use only a small towel to hide his nether parts, but he knew that such a semblance of modesty was not going to hold water. With a small sigh, he let the towel drop to the floor and climbed into the bed.

Aron was watching him from a corner of his eye. All right, so he was naked and almost on top of his husband. What was going to be next? He cleared his throat and hummed, like he was about to break into a serenade. Aron huffed and turned his eyes to the TV screen.

Now it was the right moment to know what he was doing. The bad part was that his mind was blank.

"Are you going to sit there, with your ass up, all night?" Aron asked, without turning his head.

"No," Carter said slowly. "I'm gonna ... I'm ... hmm, ahem ..."

"Jeesh, Alex," Aron exhaled. "Look, it's okay. I got carried away. Seeing you on that TV show reminded me of everything I love about you. But if you're not ready, I understand."

With that, Aron changed his position, and extracted himself from the not so clever trap Carter had thought he was making with his own body.

He looked after Aron, as the guy moved. The silk pajama pants were hanging obscenely low on the guy's hips. Carter could clearly make the nice curve of Aron's ass through the sleek fabric. He licked his lips and gulped. His throat was dry. This was happening way too often while he was around Aron.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

“I think I’m the one who should sleep on the sofa,” Aron replied, his back still turned, as he began fishing for a t-shirt in a drawer. “I cannot control myself around you,” he added, with a self-deprecating sigh. “And you do need your beauty sleep. Yolanda called, and threatened me with something that pretty much sounded like a thoroughly planned bashing if I didn’t know her better.”

As the door closed, Carter lay flat on the bed, hiding his face in the crumpled sheets, still smelling of Aron. He groaned. Why was he such an idiot? In all his past relationships, he hadn’t been this wishy-washy. He was not the one to make the first step, okay, but he hadn’t tormented any of his girlfriends, by sending mixed signals. Or maybe he had? Maybe he should contact the girls, and make a focus group, or something?

Focus, Carter. This is serious.

He got off the bed, and went out the door. Aron was in his own house, and he was not going to sleep on the sofa.

It was funny to see Aron struggling to fit on the sofa, seeing that he was bigger than Alex, and Carter still remembered the night before with all its struggles.

“What are you doing up? Go to sleep,” Aron ordered and pushed himself on one side, only to have one leg drop to the floor with a thud.

“You’re not the only one who cannot control himself,” Carter spoke in a sparse voice.

Well, it was true. Seeing how he was gay for Aron, and not for anyone else, his brain had been obviously hacked. Aka, no control.

Aron’s head peaked above the sofa. The man was staring at him.

“Go on,” Aron said slowly.

“All I could think of today,” Carter spoke with some difficulty, “was to just come home to you and ...” damn, he was going to say it to the guy’s face, wasn’t he? “stuff my mouth with your dick.”

Aron groaned, and pushed the heels of his palms into his eyes.

“Alex, stop doing this to me. I’m just a man! Are you willing to have me sent to jail for marital rape? Because I don’t know ...”

Carter moved fast, jumping over the sofa, and kneeling in front of his best friend. For whom he was gay or something. He gulped, but his hands were firm as they grabbed the hem of the silk pajama pants. He licked his lips.

Aron was now silent, too. He was obviously stretched to his limit by the way his taut belly was raising with each small breath.

Carter pulled the pants down, in one swift move. Well, when Aron wasn’t hard, that thing was not that impressive. Hell, who was he kidding? And that thing was now slowly growing, without even being touched.

“Don’t be cruel,” Aron whispered.

“Um?” Carter mumbled, fascinated with the way Aron’s cock was slowly growing longer and harder, until it sat flush against the man’s muscled abdomen.

He placed one palm along the shaft, taking pleasure in the silky sensation of stretched skin. He slowly grabbed it, wondering at how the mushroom was pulsing slightly. Half closing his eyes, he brought it to his lips and licked.

Aron’s small groan made him frown. Was he doing it wrong? He licked away, only to have Aron groan again. It was quite clear, that was an appreciation moan. That was encouraging.

And the taste wasn’t that bad. There was a pearly bead leaking off the head, and he lapped at it. Ha, no wonder chicks digged this. It was enough to open one’s appetite.

Guided by his new found lust, he engulfed the engorged head into his mouth, licking at it, to his heart’s content. Aron’s murmurs were unintelligible now. Carter released the man’s cock with a loud pop, and stared with satisfaction at the glistening head. Damn, the way the thing was now hard as a rock in his hand, was making him hungry.

Could someone be hungry for cock? For real? Well, he was right now. And Aron loved it, by the strained sounds he was making. So, all in all, it was 'kay.

He pushed the hard cock into his mouth, trying to take more in. Damn, who knew this could taste so delicious? It was making him feel regretful he could not self-suck, like the douchebag Alex could. But it was probably for the best. He might just end up doing nothing all day but suck his own cock.

Actually, he had an inkling now that it was better to have your mouth filled with another guy's cock. Aron's, at least, was fucking tasty.

It was a tad frustrating that he could not push it all in his mouth, but he set into a rhythm, bobbing his head up and down, and tasting as much as he could. Flicking his tongue over the head over and over again, he was fueling his lust with Aron's precum. It was just making him feel excited about what would come later.

He caught the base of the cock with one hand to gain more control. If Alex was a blowjob master, Carter had to be one, too. Aron could not be left unsatisfied.

But that was not the only thought on his mind right now. He was being selfish. He was doing it because it fucking felt right, and it was the only way for him, Carter, to do such a thing with the guy.

He increased the speed, helping himself with the hand. At least, it served that Aron was pent up. He wasn't going to notice his husband's lack of skill, provided that Carter was a total noob in this department.

Well, it was definitely a skill he was willing to learn; he hollowed his cheeks, to further increase pressure. Aron began massaging his neck with slow, hesitant moves. Carter brought up his free hand to place it over Aron and mimicked the action he wanted. It was like Aron stopped for a brief second, only to grab Carter's neck firmly now, and push him with his head down.

It was a bit too much, but Carter needed that. His enthusiastic sucking could only take him this far. He needed to put Aron in control, so that the guy could let go.

And let go he did, as Carter felt Aron's cock growing even stiffer if that was possible. The guy's groans were growing louder, too. Soon enough, Carter's mouth was flooded, and he tried to stay still and swallow.

For long seconds, Aron kept him there, feeding him with cum. Which, apparently, was not as unpleasant as he thought since it was coming from another guy's supply.

He did make a face, however, as he extracted himself slowly from Aron's grip. The man he had just satisfied with his mouth was breathing deeply and loudly, and there was a sense of pride in that, because, hell, Carter had been the one to make Aron come undone like that.

And that made him look up pretty smug about it, as he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He was about to say something, just to know they were okay now, when Aron leaned in to watch him in the eyes, from just a couple of inches away.

It was too late to protest when he realized what Aron was up to. The guy had grabbed his shoulders with one hand, sneaking the other between Carter's legs, palm firmly planted on the ass, and now was manhandling him like he was a toy, standing up, and then slamming Carter with his back against the sofa.

He grunted, not from pain, as there was none, but from surprise.

"Aron," he breathed out.

Sounds died in his throat as Aron pressed his lips against Carter's neck, biting him a second later, like a jaguar bent on its prey.

"Ah," he managed, all rational thought gone from his mind.

Aron moved lower, biting Carter's chest, planting small kisses on his way down. Carter could feel each breath hitching in his chest, anticipating the pain of each bite, and feeling all the more surprised with the immediate response of his body and what was left of his nervous system.

It was just the kind of conquest he knew he could not resist. Was he spreading his legs? Was this some sort of conditioned response that nobody cared to talk about in the books?

It didn't take Aron much to reach his actual point of interest.

"Mother fucker," Carter moaned, as Aron simply took him in his mouth.

Man, the guy was taking that thing deep. Carter felt a pang of jealousy as he felt Aron's warm breath on his pelvis. Well, Alex didn't have that big a dick, what could he say? Carter was certain he was bigger, so that had to be for now.

"What the fuck," he murmured and straightened up a bit to watch what was going on.

Aron was somehow stuffing his mouth with Carter's balls, without letting go of the dick. That was not fucking fair. Aron withdrew to breathe, and Carter shot him a miffed look. The guy winked at him and his lips stretched into a huge smile.

Aron pulled him by the legs, and pressed them up, until Carter could swear they were behind his ears.

"What are you doing?" he struggled, trying to see in what ways Aron was planning to defile him.

A tongue. In his ass. He made such a funny sound, that he was certain he could no longer be considered a man.

"Oh god," he managed.

"Thank you, baby," Aron stopped for a second, only to lap again at Carter's exposed back side, like it was some sort of ... whatever thing was good licked, because Carter could not really think of anything right now.

He could feel Aron's tongue probing him, and that was making all the hair on his head feel electrified. Was this normal? Was it a gay sex thing? He had no idea the ass could feel like that.

"I think you're plenty lubed," Aron joked.

What? Was the guy going to fuck him? Now? He had no time to even think of fighting back, as two fingers delved into his back entrance, down to the first knuckle.

"Oh, fuck," he complained.

It wasn't hurting. It was just the fucking shock. Carter was pretty certain he was going to develop post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms after this. He could

totally understand how a guy navigating a minefield in World War I must have felt. He could not recover from one blow, as there was another lined up just for him.

Aron let him straightened up a bit and let down his legs, without removing his fingers from Carter's ass. He kissed him shortly, and then sank to his knees, like Carter had done earlier.

He was not going to fight this. It was impossible. He closed his eyes, as Aron put his mouth back where it fit so well. He moaned softly, as Aron began working his cock like a blowjob expert. At the same time, the fingers in his ass began moving, just a little, at first, then deeper and deeper, as Carter felt his ass giving in.

Each jab of the fingers in his ass was making his cock twitch. He was certain he was leaking precum like a fountain, but Aron showed no signs of being bothered. The guy was doing a fine job, he clearly knew how to do it, and it wasn't helping Carter's sanity one bit.

Carter was certain his body was hot like a furnace and was currently melting the sofa. Soon enough, his ass was going to hit the floor. Only that his body was having other plans, pushing itself upwards, fucking Aron in his mouth, his cock sucking, tongue kissing mouth, and it felt so damn good that Carter was certain his eyes were going to pop out of his head.

Aron didn't need to help himself with his free hand to get Carter as close as the most explosive climax in his life, as he could ever be. The way he sucked was making Carter think that the guy could suck the life out of him, and he was still not going to care.

"Fuck, I'm going to ..."

Words were lost on him, as his head hit the sofa, and Aron's fingers remained lodged deep inside him, keeping him there, and making him feel like he was coming for ages.

He was going blind. Or he could not open his eyes. Or both. He was utterly destroyed and he probably now had the IQ of an insect.

"Hey," Aron called softly after he let go of Carter's ass.

He could smell jizz on the guy's breath and it wasn't bothering him. If anything, it just made him feel a small jolt coursing his body. Aron kissed him tenderly, and he just opened his mouth. They could practically taste each other now.

"Let me take you to the bedroom," Aron cooed in his ear, as he broke their kiss.

It was a good thing Aron was so strong. He could hold Carter in his arms, like he was a child. On cue, Carter wrapped his legs around Aron's strong body and let his head rest on a strong shoulder.

"I got you, baby," Aron spoke softly, holding Carter's ass with one arm, and using the other hand to caress a sweaty back.

The bed was so nice and cozy. Carter wanted nothing but to bury deep into the mattress and live there for all eternity.

Aron placed the blanket gently over him.

"Do you want me to bring you a t-shirt? So you don't get cold," Aron asked, in an equally gentle tone.

"Just wrap me with your body," he whispered.

Well, that sounded corny, but he was too tired to care about filtering everything that crossed his mind, the permanent ruckus in his brain.

"Sure thing, baby," Aron caressed Carter's ear with his lips.

You're so going to hell, Carter Malis, he barely managed a jab at himself, as Aron pulled him into his arms and draped one leg over him.

Chapter Thirteen

He woke up with the first rays of sun gently invading the room through the curtains. He could not remember ever feeling so well rested. Usually, he was a fussy sleeper, as there always had to be something ready to annoy him, be it a crumpled sheet, a pillow all in knots, or his own mind trying to solve this or that.

“Morning,” Aron nuzzled his neck, waking up with the first stir from Carter.

“Um,” was the only thing he could say.

Last night, he had sucked his best friend’s dick and had his own sucked back. How the fuck was he going to come back from this? Alex was going to get pissed when he was going to get his body back. There was no way the douchebag was not going to suspect that something had happened.

Or maybe Carter’s body was in such a deep coma that Alex’s soul was not conscious, either. For the guy, maybe it was just going to be like waking up from a coma. And that was all that was to that.

“What’s with the frown?” Aron pressed his index finger between Carter’s eyebrows.

Great, he was making faces again.

“I have such a crappy day ahead,” he said right away.

“Really?” Aron seemed surprised. “Yolanda may sound like a shrew from time to time, but I know she loves you.”

“No, it’s not her,” Carter replied. “It’s Thursday, right? I have barre.”

His voice was so despondent that he was going to sink the Titanic if need be.

“You used to like it,” Aron said slowly, like he was trying to find his words.

“Yeah, but come on, do I really need to prance around in tights? There’s no other way for me to keep in shape?”

“I believe you told me that it was after much deliberation that you decided on ballet.”

Now Aron looked confused. But it was a good occasion as any to find a way to get rid of that kind of fitness regimen. Only the thought was giving him the willies.

“I think I’m ready to turn the page,” he said with conviction. “What’s the point of being a star if I cannot do fun stuff? Like basketball,” he added.

“As you say, Mr. Star,” Aron chuckled.

“Mr. Star?” Carter snorted. “I thought I was Mr. Ruskin.”

Now it was Aron who looked at him with stars in his eyes.

“You made me so happy when you told me you wanted to take my name.”

Carter bit his lower lip. Why was this making him feel like he was turning to mush inside? And hey, he wasn’t Alex. Period. He needed to repeat that enough times in his head. He was so obviously getting ahead of himself with this whole body swap thing.

“I did, didn’t I?” he said ruefully, as he yawned and stretched, to cover whatever he was feeling inside.

“We didn’t talk yesterday,” Aron let one hand caress Carter’s closest flank slowly.

“What about?” Carter asked. “Ah, the dishes. Well, I had to say something to deflect that son of a bitch.”

Aron laughed wholeheartedly.

“You know, for a moment there, I thought I would not recognize you.”

“Why?” Carter asked, puzzled. “You said that it reminded you of all the reasons you loved me, or something,” he added quickly, looking away.

“Well, you used to be a lot like this in the beginning. So much fun. You reminded me of Carter ... oh, damn, baby, I didn’t mean ...” Aron stumbled on his own apology.

Carter’s head almost snapped as it turned to watch his friend.

“You mean you fell in love with me because I reminded you of Carter?”

Aron's face clouded. He was looking down and he was clearly distressed.

"So sorry, baby, trust me, I didn't mean to bring him up, it's just that ..."

Carter pressed one hand over Aron's mouth to stop him. Well, normally, Alex should have been mad at the mentioning of that old flame. But Carter wasn't Alex, and, well, he was pretty damn curious.

"I'm not mad," he said, looking Aron in the eyes, to make sure his words were understood. "I just want to know. I'm going to remove my hand now, okay? And you're not going to apologize again."

It was like he was kidnapping Aron and needed to make sure the guy was not going to yell. In a way, he was doing something illicit, and it was damn wrong, but, well, just like last night, Carter was pretty much convinced that he was going to hell anyway.

Aron nodded, Carter's hand still clamped hard on his mouth. Carter moved his hand away, slowly, like he really expected Aron to shout for help.

"Now speak," he demanded.

His harsh tone wasn't helping things. He could feel Aron shutting down on him, and he didn't have the time, or the skills, to deal with this.

"Aron, what of me reminded you of Carter?" he managed to tone down his voice.

Aron groaned and lay on his back, looking at the ceiling.

"You cannot let this get between us," Carter had a sudden flash of memory from a movie he had once watched with one of his girlfriends. One of the few movies when he hadn't fallen asleep or used the time to solve stuff in his head.

If it worked for that particular romantic character, it had to work for him, too.

"All right," Aron spoke, but he sounded like he would very much like to be someplace else completely.

There was a short pause, during which Carter took in his best friend's profile. Aron had always been a handsome fellow. Not that Carter noticed such things about

guys. Well, Aron was different. How come he had never wondered why Aron had never gotten involved seriously with girls? How come he hadn't, either?

"When I met you," Aron started, with a small huff, "I was after a string of hook-ups and one night stands, and, well, a few failed attempts at relationships. I could not stop comparing everyone to Carter. I know, it's stupid, and it was sex, anyway, pretty damn good sex, sometimes. Why the fuck do I stutter?" Aron covered his eyes.

"How could you compare the guys you were fucking to Carter? Did you ever fuck Carter?"

Now that was a horrid thought. What if something had happened when Carter had been shit-faced after a night drinking with Aron?

"No, of course not," Aron allayed his fears right away. "Just how insecure can you be, Alex? With your looks, anyone would think you're one of the lucky few who don't have to worry about being cheated on."

"Well, you're the one in love with your best friend," Carter snapped at the irritation in Aron's voice.

"Was," Aron shot back.

"Continue," Carter crossed his arms over his chest.

It was no insecurity talking for him, but frustration. He just needed to know.

"Only if you stop pouting," Aron turned his head to him.

"Who's pouting?" Carter frowned.

"You," Aron accused.

"No shit," Carter counter-attacked.

Aron rolled his eyes.

"I cannot believe I'm letting you convince me to shoot myself in the foot."

"You're not. Just talk, okay?" Carter sighed. "I'm not coming after you with this. Just, let's just get Carter out of the way."

It sounded so wrong. But he had no idea how to put it.

“So, you were after fucking some dudes ...” he made an attempt to pick it up where Aron had left off.

“Yes, and I met you, and you were amazing,” Aron said quickly.

“Not so damn fast. What of me made you think of Carter?” he drove home the point.

“You were, I don’t know. You were laughing, in that bar, that evening, and I just turned to see who was having so much fun on a dull Wednesday night. Carter used to laugh a lot, at least, when we were young. We used to have so much fun. It’s true that sometimes he laughed at me, but he was coming up with such shitty jokes, that I could not be mad at him.”

“So, I was laughing like him, was that all?” Carter asked.

“No, of course not. And it was not like I thought about similarities right away. Must I remind you what happened?”

“That would be great,” Carter said.

“Okay, so I noticed you laughing and I just decided that it wouldn’t hurt to try since I didn’t have anything to do anyway, and just drinking the evening away didn’t sound so swell without company.”

“Yeah, being a sad lonely drunk is not your style,” Carter commented.

“Did I say that to you about me, or you just noticed?” Aron frowned and looked at Carter.

“I noticed,” Carter said, deadpan.

Shit, was any knowledge he had about Aron overlapping, at least one bit, with what Alex knew? Damn, what a mess.

“Anyway, I offered to buy you a drink as soon as you stepped away from your friends, and five minutes later, we were in my car and you were with your hands buried deep in my pants. The next day, all my waking hours, I wondered if I had

been dreaming that this awesome guy had blown me in my car the other night. Then you texted and we started dating.”

“Ah, well, at least you knew what you were getting yourself into,” Carter said philosophically.

“I thought it was just going to be a fling, but I felt so at ease around you. When I was with you, I felt like I could be myself. And you looked at me, like I was the center of the universe or something. Carter used to do that, too,” Aron laughed softly.

Talking about being a conceited bastard. But it was the truth, Carter mused. And Aron had used to be the center of his universe. His only true friend. The only human being in the whole world he could completely rely on.

“I know it’s not easy to explain. But I felt like I could be myself with you. Well, when you weren’t working. I love you, baby, but you’re driving the fear of heaven and hell into those who are working with you. Otherwise, you were so easygoing and fun, it just felt to me like I ... never mind.”

“Hey, what did I tell you?” Carter demanded. “Cards on the table.”

“Well, if you insist,” Alex blew air noisily through his nose, in an annoyed gesture. “It felt to me like I found a second Carter. A gay Carter.”

Carter felt himself sinking slowly under the blanket. There was just no way!

“Why are you hiding under the blanket?” Aron asked.

“I’m nothing like A ... Ah, Carter, damn it!” he shouted from underneath. “He plays basketball and eats pizza!”

“Apparently so do you,” Aron pointed out and grabbed the blanket to tear it off Carter. “Hell, you’re having even more in common with him than you think.”

Carter chose to look miffed as he stared at his friend from his disadvantageous position.

“If it bothers you so much, why do you keep asking me about him?” Aron insisted and managed to pull the blanket all down.

A warm hand rest atop his protruding hip bone. Carter could swear that was enough to make his body temperature rise a few degrees. They were both silent, and Aron's hand began to move in small circles, his thumb going lower and lower, until it brushed by the side of Carter's cock.

Carter shivered, and he was pretty damn sure it wasn't because of cold. But he was not going to let himself swayed from learning the truth.

"If you were so in love with him, how come you never told him?" he blurted out.

Aron's hand stopped. He was thankful for that.

"And risk losing him as a friend? Carter is as straight as they come, Alex," Aron sighed. "Just look at how he reacted when we got married. That man is straight, end of story."

Yeah, definitely, Carter thought, shaking his head, mentally at least. A straight guy with a new found taste for his best friend's cock, apparently. This time he shook his head for real. That had been just an accident. A one-time-thing. Could heavens just hurry and make him go back to his own body? He needed that old and familiar shell. He was pretty certain that he was not going to think about giving blowjobs once everything was going to be back to normal.

"Wow," he commented, with a small grimace. "But how did you manage to hide it from him? I mean, all this time ... how long have you been in love with him?"

"Seeing that I kissed him when we were 14 ... until 29, when I met you, that would be 15 years, if I'm doing the math right."

"Holy shit," Carter murmured. "Really, how did you manage?"

"The high school years were the toughest, I believe," Aron began speaking. "I didn't know exactly what I was feeling at the time. I was starting to have a pretty solid suspicion I was gay, but I didn't exactly want to admit that I had the hots for my best friend. Straight best friend, do keep that in mind, baby," he added.

"I do," Carter sighed.

"In college, we hanged out together plenty, and then I was starting fooling around with some cool guys, so I was taking the edge off, so to speak. After that, I left the

city. More like I fled, because I just could not stand him anymore blabbering about this or that girl.”

“Was he sharing his sex adventures with you?” Carter pretended to be disgusted, just trying to stay in Alex’s character at his best of his abilities.

“No, it wasn’t anything like that. But, with him, it was like the current girlfriend was the best woman in the world for exactly three days, after which he almost didn’t speak about her again.”

Had he really done that? He liked to think he was courteous in his relationships with women. Was he that much of a scumbag? No wonder Aron thought he was much like Alex. Just two douchebags doing their douchebaggery thing.

“Wow, what a bastard,” he commented, feeling much in the mood for a mental lashing.

“He wasn’t like that,” Aron immediately jumped to his defense. “He’s like a head in the clouds kind of guy. And I think he compartmentalizes a lot. He gets annoyed if things are not in their little boxes. I suppose he wanted his girlfriends to fit into one of those, and none of them did. When that happened, he didn’t know what to do, so he just fell out of love.”

Why did Aron have to be so accurate in his description of Carter? Well, his relationships were usually longer than three days, but it was true that he often became disinterested quite fast. And he did like things in boxes. Compartmentalized. They were just easier to deal with, while he could see about his usual thoughts involving solving this or that.

“What I cannot understand,” Carter began, “is what you see in that guy. He’s just so plain.”

Aron pursed his lips and seemed a bit annoyed.

“He is clearly not as beautiful as you,” Aron said cautiously. “But the girls thought he was cute, and I, well, I thought he was pretty damn handsome and sexy. I don’t mean to make you jealous or anything, baby, but that guy has a really nice ass. Not that I care about that now,” Aron added quickly and looked away.

“You must be joking,” Carter murmured. “What about that guy is handsome? He only has plain brown hair and plain brown eyes, and I don’t remember his butt, but ...”

“Alex,” Aron stopped him. “Stop being jealous of him. And you were the one curious and asking questions. If you don’t like the truth, fine, we’ll just stop talking.”

“Fair enough,” Carter agreed. “All right, your taste in men is fucked up, and I’ll leave it at that.”

Aron glared but said nothing.

“So, all this time, you did nothing to raise his suspicions?” Carter chose to turn back to the conversation thread. “You’re quite the stoic, man.”

“Eh, let’s just say that I knew it was wrong,” Aron shook his head. “And I did my fair share of stupid things.”

Carter froze.

“What did you do?” his words barely came out.

“He used to sleep at my house a lot, even after growing up.”

Yeah, he remembered that. He was certain he had slept more at Aron’s house than in his own bed. In a way, Aron’s house was more his home than his real one. Even Aron’s parents ... whatever, it was old history.

After a small dramatic pause, Aron continued.

“I once stole one of his t-shirts. Well, not exactly. But I told him that my mom won’t be bothered if I threw some of his stuff in our washing machine. I loved his smell. Especially after a day out, playing ball.”

“You fucking pervert, what did you do?” Carter mumbled.

Aron laughed. He had no idea what danger he was in.

“I won’t go into details. Let’s say that that wasn’t my proudest fap. My mom was so startled to find me fiddling with the washing machine. Let’s just say that there were some traces of ...”

“Too much info,” Carter said quickly.

Now he was mortified. His best friend had fapped to his t-shirt? Well, not the t-shirt, but the smell ... okay, he needed to admit it. He was way out of his league here.

“At least, I didn’t kiss him in his sleep again,” Aron laughed. “Although I did let him kiss me a few times when he was drunk. He is very affectionate with several drinks in his system.”

When had that happened?! All his neurons, dead or alive, grabbed protest signs, ready to unionize.

“He kissed you,” he said, hoping that he had just heard it all wrong.

“Yeah, well, it was nothing. Who can make sense of what drunk people do? And he never remembered anything the next day.”

“He kissed you,” Carter repeated, “on the mouth?”

Aron chuckled, getting even more on Carter’s nerves.

“Yes, full on the lips.”

“Tongue?” Carter inquired, in rapid fire.

“What is this? You’re grilling me?” Aron suddenly moved and climbed on top of Carter’s body, pushing the blanket all the way down, and making him spread open.

Carter set his chin, seeing that otherwise he was immobilized as Aron was holding his hands down, too, into his.

“Tongue or not tongue?”

Aron rolled his eyes.

“I wished there was tongue in there. No, he was just smooching me loudly, saying crazy stuff, such as I was the single person in the world who could understand him.”

“Why was that crazy?”

“Well, Carter is the type of person that is well liked, even though god knows he’s not making any effort in that direction. Well, that was after we went to college, because in high school ... But never mind. I’d say he sometimes even tried to do the opposite, to drive people away. But no one took him seriously. He is just endearing like that, I guess. And it explains why so many women like him. I can safely say that the guy will never suffer from a shortage of girlfriends.”

If Carter thought correctly, he hadn’t had a girlfriend in almost two years. Ever since Aron had gotten married to the douchebag. Like he had been in mourning, or something.

“Don’t tell me you’re upset now that he didn’t use his tongue when kissing me,” Aron glared from above.

“You could have kissed back,” Carter retorted, without thinking.

Why was his mouth running away without him? He needed a sewing kit to solve this once and forever.

“And take advantage of my best friend while he was drunk?” Aron frowned. “I hope you know I’m better than that.”

“Show me how he kissed you,” Carter demanded.

There was no way he had been that much of an idiot. Aron was lying. He had to. It was impossible. Although Aron never lied.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Aron grimaced.

“Yeah, show me.”

“Okay,” Aron shrugged and straightened himself up, and then pulled Carter to him.

Being so close, face to face, eyes to eyes, was making his heart beat faster. Good thing he could not focus as Aron leaned in. It was a good a reason as any to close his eyes.

“Ouch,” he yelled in surprise.

Aron was pinching both his cheeks hard. And then he planted a loud kiss on Carter’s lips.

“See? This was what he did.”

Carter began massaging his cheeks.

“And you let him?”

“I just told you I did,” Aron replied.

“No, not the kiss, this,” he said as he continued to rub his face. “It fucking hurts.”

“Don’t be such a cry baby. Jeesh, can you be more like Carter? He didn’t like it when his aunts came around to do that. Makes me wonder why he was doing it.”

“Well, do you like it?” Carter grabbed Aron by his cheeks and pulled as hard as he could to the sides.

Aron laughed, making Carter’s fingers slide away.

“You’ll have to do more than this to hurt me, baby,” he said with a small smile.

“Do you want me to hurt you?” Carter asked, bent on making Aron pay for his little confessions.

A small shadow passed Aron’s face, his smile fading a little. Carter knew the guy well. At least he thought that. And right now, Aron’s breath was deepening, his eyes were becoming hooded ... this was not exactly something familiar to Carter.

He cleared his throat and swallowed the moth ball at the back of his tongue. Aron pulled him close and their cocks and balls were now touching. Funny how that felt. Like he could make the outline of Aron’s manhood in resting phase with his own.

“I never kissed Carter with tongue,” Aron chuckled, “but I sure as hell want to kiss you with tongue now.”

Carter made a small whining sound as Aron caressed his jawline slowly. He leaned into the touch, like a cat dying to be petted. This was so terribly unfair. Aron brushed his lips against his, teasing at first, making Carter want nothing but to open his mouth and let the guy do whatever.

Why did his best friend have to be such a great kisser? He could not remember anyone making him feel like this. And also wish for the earth to open up, so that the pits of hell could swallow him already, no stop in purgatory for ice cream, or anything.

“Aron,” he mumbled, as the guy just continued to nip at his lips, driving him crazy. “Aren’t you supposed to leave for work?”

Aron grunted in response.

“Is that a yes? Or no? Sorry, I don’t speak the language,” his words came out funny, while Aron pulled at his bottom lip using teeth.

“It means I want you,” Aron whispered against his lips and this time delved in, pulling Carter’s head with one hand, to deepen the kiss.

This was nothing but tongue-fucking. He could live with it, if that was all. But he couldn’t even act surprised when Aron pushed him back against the bed, folding his legs and pushing between them.

They were literally rubbing their cocks together. It was like dry humping, with the sole exception that it wasn’t exactly dry. He could feel Aron’s cock weeping a little on his belly, and that was probably starting to happen to him, too. Damn, he was so easily excited by anything Aron did.

“You like this, baby?” Aron asked, letting him breathe for a change.

“Are you kidding me?” Carter murmured.

Aron laughed.

“Not exactly good with this, but I think I can manage,” Aron apologized.

Carter had no idea what the guy was talking about, but when Aron straightened up a bit, to align their cocks together and grabbed them in his large hand, he began to

understand. It was like a normal jerk off, only that it wasn't. His cock felt nice being pressed against like that. It was like he could feel Aron's cock pulsing, but that could not be, right?

Aron was a bit rough, but it wasn't like he was complaining. Carter was just breathing hard now, holding Aron by his shoulders and looking down in disbelief at what was going on.

"Tell me how you want to hurt me, baby," Aron cooed.

Hurt Aron? What the hell was the guy talking about? Oh, like in BDSM and stuff? Carter could not be further out his knowledge range. He had a vague idea of leather and chains, but nothing really could count as a memory he could use. Well, Aron would have to settle for whatever crazy thing Carter could think of at the moment.

He let his mind wonder. How would Aron like to be hurt? Put on his fours and given a good spanking? Nah, that sounded strange and awkward. He tried to imagine the scene. Aron's ass was nice, curved, strong, as he could remember from last night when he had stared at the guy's back through his silk pajama pants. How would Aron look ...

"I'd ask you to put your hands against the wall, feet apart," he began speaking breathily. "You're naked and not allowed to turn ... I'd caress your ass, squeezing it, prepping it for what will come next ..."

Aron's mouth was a bit slack now, and his eyes hooded when he looked at Carter.

"I'll hit you hard the first time, to make sure you're paying attention ..." he whispered.

Aron grunted in response, and his hand on their joint cocks became frantic. Carter could feel his eyes rolling in his head. That rough rubbing felt too damn good. And the imagined sight of Aron, his strong body, obeying, all at his mercy, was sending flares straight to his brain, and eddies of warmth and cold down his back.

"I won't let you know when I'll land the next hit ..." he murmured, feeling more and more far gone.

“What are you using? Your hand? Or something else?” Aron’s voice was as rough as his hand, but Carter now knew there was nothing but raw desire there.

“Hmm, a spanking paddle?” he remembered Aron’s words from before when he had threatened his husband with a bit of discipline.

He could hear the sound of the wooden device connecting with Aron’s firm flesh in his mind. Over and over again. The moans, groans, and pleas from the imaginary Aron mixing with the sounds his best friend was making now.

But that wasn’t what he wanted. He actually wanted to be able to caress the abused flesh afterward and turn Aron to face him and with a kiss, to make this strong amazing man drop to his knees in front of him.

“I don’t want to hurt you, Aron,” he whispered, “but I do want you on your knees, sucking me off,” he managed, and dropped on the pillows, squirming in Aron’s hand and exploding all over his chest.

It was like a fountain going on forever, as he arched off the bed. It took him some time to realize that Aron was doing the same thing, all his cum spraying all over Carter’s body. It was official: he was lusting after his best friend in the worst possible way.

Aron moved to crash by his side.

“Am I supposed to go to work now?” Carter complained after a while, to break the comfortable silence lazily stretching between them.

Aron laughed.

“You do have a nice glow now. Yolanda will surely appreciate it.”

Carter laughed, too.

“I suppose,” he looked at Aron.

He wasn’t the only one with a nice glow, by the looks of it.

“So, if you’re not doing barre after work, what are your plans?” Aron asked.

“I don’t know. What are yours?”

“I’ll go visit Carter, see how he’s been doing. I know the nurse always tells me over the phone that the situation hasn’t changed, but I want to see him, as often as I can,” Aron spoke, his face slowly clouding.

“I want to come with you,” Carter said, without overthinking anything.

“You do? I mean, that’s great,” Aron’s face lit up a little. “I know this isn’t easy for you. But I’m thankful you’re willing to overlook his stupid outburst from that time. You’re really supportive and I appreciate it, Alex,” he added and reached for Carter to caress his chest. “Let’s go wash, you’re a mess,” he chuckled, as he spread their combined essence all over Carter’s skin.

“And whose fault is that?” he protested.

Even now, after they were both satiated, Aron’s fingertips were raising goose bumps all over.

“Aron,” he whispered.

What could he do? Blurt out something like ‘I’m not your husband’? The prospect of being sent to the looney bin was no more attractive than it had been before. And what could be the upside in that? In the crazy off-chance that Aron believed him, everyone was just going to end up hurt. And that was when, for the first time in his life, he realized he was being nothing but a fucking coward.

“I noticed that you didn’t take your car to work,” Aron commented as they walked together towards the door, and Carter was fiddling with his phone to call a taxi.

“My car?” he mumbled.

His car was currently a Porsche Spyder and he felt like he was going to just commit another sacrilege by getting behind the wheel of that beautiful beast. Well, he needed to be a bit philosophical about it. Was it worse than getting down and dirty with Alex’s husband? In comparison, driving the guy’s car didn’t seem like such a big faux pas.

“Yes, dummy,” Aron mistook his prolonged silence for something else, and ruffled his hair.

If Aron was going to tickle him behind the ears, too, he was certain he was going to start purring, or roll on the floor with his belly up. He had never had a dog, nor a cat. He was a bit uncertain about the behavior of pets. But he definitely liked being treated like one by Aron.

“Have you ever thought of Carter as your pet?” he asked, without thinking.

“My pet?” Aron looked at him, amused. “I prefer to think of him as my best friend. I doubt thinking of him as an animal ever crossed my mind. But where does this question come from?”

Maybe from me wanting you to take me home, Carter thought, and, again, he had no idea why some of his thoughts made a move to escape their confined spaces, when he least expected.

“Alex? You really are a scattered brain this morning, aren’t you?” Aron said affectionately and pulled him into a hug.

“Yeah, I guess. I just say stupid things,” he made a lame excuse explaining himself, but relished in Aron’s warm embrace.

“I’m so happy I have you back,” Aron talked into his hair, refusing to let go.

“I wasn’t badly hurt,” he spoke.

What could Aron have felt like when the news had reached him about his husband involved in a traffic accident? He wasn’t sure he wanted to think about that. Aron, as strong as he was, must have been scared. And that he could not live with. The least he could do was to offer the man some reassurance. At least, his husband’s body was in one piece. The rest, he needed to have it figured out. Somehow.

“I’m here, don’t worry,” he caressed Aron’s shoulders in response.

This was something people would say, right? Given the circumstances.

“This is not only about the accident,” Aron continued, without letting go. “I feel like you really came back to me.”

What could that mean?

“You’re yourself again, no longer as angry and insecure as you were lately. Should I attempt to run you over a little to have the real you?”

The real you. Simple words, stabs through the heart. He patted Aron’s back.

“Come on, man. I need to get to work and you’re leaving spots on this fancy jacket with your tears,” he made an attempt to joke.

Aron ignored him and embraced him even more tightly.

“Who’s crying, dummy?” Aron chided him and let him be only so he could kiss Carter on the lips.

Was this how this is going to be? His knees were weak and he could swear his eyes felt funny, like they were prickling. He was in hell and not entirely sure if it was of his own making or not.

He stopped for a moment and took in the magnificent vehicle in front of him. A sense of unworthiness was washing over him, but he was getting used to it. So much that he wore it like a second skin.

He moved like in a trance and climbed on the driver’s seat, accepting with a clammy hand the keys Aron had almost forced into his palm. The smell of genuine leather tickled his nostrils and he exhaled as he ignited the engine. Yes, that was beautiful.

“See? No point in being nervous,” Aron chuckled and leaned to rest his elbows on the rolled down window.

“I guess not,” Carter beamed at his best friend.

“I didn’t mention it in the house,” Aron spoke, “but thank you for ... you know, putting that behind us.”

“That?” Carter stared at Aron and blinked.

“That thing with Simon,” Aron sighed and looked away.

Carter looked at Aron, and he could swear his blinking eyelids were making small, tinny sounds. He was on auto mode and had no idea what to do. Aron straightened up and patted the hood of the car in passing.

“What about Simon?” Carter called after him.

“It doesn’t matter,” Aron waved. “It’s all in the past now. And you’re mine!” he declared with pathos, turning towards Carter and opening his arms wide.

Damn, Aron looked so happy right now. But the not so bright part was that Aron knew. But what exactly did he know? How much did he know?

Chapter Fourteen

Was living like a star always like this? Carter had to admit that while the wild ride to work in that car had been awesome, the stares he got while waiting for the lights to change, along with all the giggles and even a few not so veiled invitations from both men and women, had made him feel rather ... icky.

Maybe driving a fancy car was really not for him. Alex's lifestyle was so overdone. It made one wonder what could be hiding underneath.

He was about to go into his office when Yolanda called for him from the other end of the hallway. Something in the way the tiny woman marched towards him with a determination made him think he had done something wrong. Which made his surprise even greater when Yolanda launched herself at him, almost plastering him against the door to his office.

Ah, she was hugging him. She was squeezing him like he was her lifeline. Was she ill? Had something bad happened? He patted her on the back.

"Yolanda, are you okay?" he asked, now really concerned, seeing that the woman had no plans of letting go.

"You make me so proud," Yolanda spoke while letting him breathe but only a fraction of an inch.

Were those tears in Yolanda's eyes as she looked up to him? Why were all people so sentimental these days?

She suddenly let go and punched him in the chest with her small fist.

"How on Earth I didn't know you're a hugger?" she inquired, now switched on to vengeance mode.

"A hugger? Who ..."

Oh, damn, the TV show. Great, now everyone was going to start hugging him out of the blue. He needed to find a way to remain locked in his office until people forgot all about that.

"Alex!" someone called, a guy in a pinstripe suit that he was certain he had never seen in his life.

Of course, the guy wanted to hug him. And soon enough, a girl with purple hair working for who knew what department wanted her fair share of hugs.

A beeline was forming in front of his office, and he was passed around from one embrace to another like he was a coveted Disney doll, everyone in the room wanted to touch.

“I should charge you, guys,” he joked.

Yolanda clapped her hands loudly, to draw everyone’s attention. Arranging her perfect bob by hovering with her fingers over it, she cleared her throat.

“Enough, people. We still have work to do today, even if we just discovered that our beloved Alex loves hugging.”

She was breathing a bit too hard and her eyes were shining, but at least she was the only one sane enough to put a stop to that.

“Thanks, boss,” Carter whispered, leaning in, as soon as everyone was gone, murmuring in contentment among themselves.

“Sure thing, everything for my favorite employee,” Yolanda pinched his cheek and smiled.

“Wait, when haven’t I been your favorite employee?” Carter joked.

Yolanda feigned taking offense in that.

“You do have your days, Alex,” she shook her head and laughed. “But that’s what makes you a star.”

“Glad to know,” he chuckled and finally walked into his office.

“Hi, boss,” Mark beamed at him.

“Do you want a hug, too?” Carter sighed and opened his arms.

“No,” Mark shook his head. “I was there with you, boss, remember?”

It was a bit unnerving to just remain there, left hanging.

“I know you didn’t mean it,” Mark added and made himself busy with the coffee machine.

How could Mark know he hadn’t meant it? He felt a bit cheated out of a small victory. Maybe he didn’t deserve it, after all.

“Here you go, boss,” Mark handed him a cup.

He was still frowning when he reached for the sugar bowl. His assistant stopped him.

“I’ve already added two cubes,” Mark said.

He exhaled and looked at the young man.

“You really did your homework, didn’t you?” he smiled.

It was sort of nice to have someone tend to your needs and even know how you liked your coffee. Well, it was certainly just a coincidence, as Mark had no idea he wasn’t Alex, and, apparently, he had one other thing in common with Alex, that being how they both liked their coffee. How they both liked Aron.

Fuck his brain. Actually, he now had the distinct impression that he was liking Aron even more than the guy’s gay husband, and that was so damn fucked up, seeing how he was a straight dude just accidentally trapped in a perfect bottom’s body. Ah, damn, that reminded him. If those tests came back clean, he needed to have a talk with Aron and tell him the accident had flipped him and he only wanted to top now.

Fuck, he thought again, fiddling with his coffee cup. Just the flash of an image showing Aron nicely presenting his muscled back and ass was making him want to make a run for the bathroom and take care of business there. He was pretty damn annoyed with the thing between his legs springing to attention at the slightest mention of Aron. Well, his brain was to blame, of course. It was the main body part not listening to him. And those freakish skinny jeans he was supposed to wear were probably showing his erection in all its glory right now.

Yeah, the accident had flipped him all right. Not from bottom to top, but from straight to gay. Gay for Aron. He was damn Flipper. Why couldn’t he be Nemo and just search for his father? Or was it the other way around? Ah, yes, the name of

the movie was Finding Nemo, so it had to be that. Which reminded him. Where the hell were his parents?

At least, now he was cool and normal. He was going to ask Aron tonight if he had any luck finding his parents. He had a vague idea about their whereabouts, but he could not go to Aron and tell him that. It would have looked damn suspicious.

“Boss, are you going to lunch with Simon again today?”

His assistant’s voice brought him back to the real world. Or what his real world was right now.

“Should I?” he grimaced.

Mark smiled, like he was suddenly very proud of his boss, unlike earlier.

“I can come up with something, so that he doesn’t bother you,” Mark replied.

“Excellent!” Carter said with unhidden glee. “And, Mark, if you get me off the barre class, too, tomorrow I’ll be the one to make the coffee. Hell, I’ll make coffee all week, or until ...”

I get back to being myself, he wanted to add but caught himself in time.

“No worries, boss,” Mark giggled. “I love making coffee.”

“That’s like the weirdest hobby in the history of mankind,” Carter laughed, too.

“So I’ll cancel the barre. What should I say to your instructor?”

“Tell him that I just want to try something else for a while. And, I don’t know, don’t cancel the membership or whatever that is. Let the man have his money until I’m in the mood for barre again.”

Wasn’t he an expert in juggling everything like a pro circus worker, or whatever the professional name for jugglers was? No one was going to get upset like this.

“There will always be someone to get upset,” Mark contradicted him.

What? Had he said that out loud? It seemed unlikely.

“Why do you say that?” he eyed his assistant, wondering if the guy was reading minds.

It was preposterous to think that, but being in another guy’s body was impossible, too, yet, hell, there he was, prancing around pretending to be Aron’s husband, a male model driving a Porsche Spyder.

“Are you reading minds?” he asked while continuing to look crossly at Mark.

“No,” Mark asked after a short moment of hesitation that didn’t go unnoticed to Carter.

What the hell? Who was this guy? Mark was staring at him now, and something in the way the guy linked his hands together like he was expecting to be thrown out the door made him change his mind. His young secretary must have said that by simple coincidence. And now he was expecting a scolding.

“Don’t worry,” Carter patted the young man’s shoulder as he went inside his office. “No one is getting you fired. I promise,” he added over his shoulder.

He could swear he heard a sigh of relief from Mark as he walked in. Alex Ruskin truly was a scumbag if he could make people believe they could get fired only by giving the undesired answer. Still, he could have asked Mark what he wanted to mean by that. Ah, well, the moment was lost now.

The day was uneventful and Yolanda had gone the extra mile to make him feel in no shortage of hugs, but that was something he could live with. The worst part was that he had to make an effort not to get too used to it. After all, there was no saying when he was going to be pulled back to his actual self, and then he wouldn’t have that many people lining up to hug him.

Maybe it was his fault. People thought he was easy company, pleasant, but he didn’t really get attached. One girlfriend had once told him he was like a nice pair of shoes. Everything seemed right as long as the shoes were on the shelf; pretty, comfortable, excellent price tag. But once one bought them and brought them home, the buyer had the unpleasant surprise that they didn’t fit. So she just had to take them back and ask for a refund.

The story of his life. He wondered briefly if his parents hadn't thought the same thing after they had brought him home from the hospital. Well, not right away, when he had still been a screaming baby, although he could picture his father in his mind pursuing his lips and shaking his head at a small scrunched up bundle of flesh, yelling from the top of his little lungs.

But maybe later, as he grew up to be more and more a disappointment for them. His parents were explorers, always in search of a new adventure. Carter hadn't inherited their thirst for visiting places that were as unknown to the humankind as they were dangerous. If anything, he preferred to have his own cozy place so that no one could disturb him. Was it possible that he was not his parents' son? Maybe adopted? But no, that wasn't it, because he had asked when he was 11. The answer from his mother had been prompt, elaborated, and sustained by facts. He wasn't adopted. But somehow, his father's explorer genes had neutralized somehow with his mother's adventurous nature, and they had produced a son who couldn't care less about what was happening beyond his house fence.

Well, that was a way of thinking. He had inherited his parents' scientific mindset, at least. And he had avoided, at all costs, being a crybaby. That had led overtime to all sorts of weird situations, in which a few kids had considered him courageous or a badass when he had been anything but. Others had just thought him plain weird. Girls had found him pretty cool, too, but that also happened after high school. The mark of 'weirdo' had kind of attached to him during those teenage years. Still, the situation had changed later, when he was in college.

The girls just thought he was a huge marshmallow under that so-called cool act. But it wasn't an act, and he was no marshmallow, either. Guys had found him easygoing and manageable, always ready for a game or a drink. The thing was he never cared to say no, and that was his only secret. And it had come to him what to do to avoid trouble, by simply taking after Aron in the strange art that was being human.

When Aron had left the city, to follow his career, Carter has thought, for the first time in his life, that maybe he could leave, too, and follow his best friend. As a freelancer, he could work from anywhere, but he hadn't had it in him to leave. And, apparently, Aron had tried to run away from him or something.

He sighed and pushed his fists into his eyes. But Aron had returned, and Carter had been so damn happy, like a fool. Aron had done that only because he had found a husband that, coincidence or not, was from the same city, so he had had no qualms

about coming back. And, at the same time, Aron was cured of his crush on Carter, so he had no issues with living in the same place again.

Maybe today was the day when the swap back was going to happen; he tried to cheer himself up. He had gotten a message from Aron and the guy was already at the hospital. He only needed to head there, too.

What was going to happen when everything was going to be said and done? Was Alex going to remember anything? Anything at all? How were they going to keep on living? Well, by the way his body looked, maybe he shouldn't have worry about that. He was probably the only one who was not going to keep on living.

There was no point in being sentimental about it all. If that was going to happen, he could do nothing to stop it. So the sensation of emptiness trying to rear its head somewhere in his solar plexus just had to go back where it came from.

He grabbed his phone and headed for the door. Getting cozy in Alex's body and Aron's married life was not an option. He needed to keep his head straight. Yeah, straight. Regardless of his pretty gay behavior as of late. It was just a phase. Once back to his own body, he was just going to like women again.

Are you sure you're going to forget all about Aron? How he kisses? How he looks naked? Don't you think the curve of his ass is abso-fucking-lutely delicious?

Shut up, brain. You're fucked up.

Or maybe you are.

Look who's talking.

Funny thing, in all his conversations to himself from before, he had never lost an argument. The truth was he had no argument right now. Just a sudden need to see Aron and tell him ... Okay, enough with that.

He went out the door, after waving goodbye to Mark.

Engulfed in his thoughts, he failed to notice someone coming from the opposite direction and almost crashed into them. He was about to apologize but stopped when he saw who it was.

Simon pushed him firmly through a door, and he just walked backward, too surprised to react right away. He looked around.

“Why the fuck are we in the bathroom?” he asked the other guy.

“You asked your obnoxious assistant to keep me away from you,” Simon reproached, crossing his arms over his chest and looking him up and down.

“Jeesh, don’t you know when to give up?” Carter groaned. “And really, there’s nothing romantic or funny about this setting. What do you want? To bend me over the sink and fuck me up the chute?”

Simon gaped like a fish, and his dark complexion colored slightly.

“Is that what you want?” the man breathed out.

“Of course not! Are you deaf or stupid?”

Simon seemed hurt by his words. Was this guy made of glass or something? Carter almost pitied him.

“I need to go see my husband,” he said with determination and walked towards the door.

“Wait,” Simon put one hand on his chest and grabbed him by the waist with the other. “Why don’t you give me a chance? I know what you like, Alex,” Simon brushed his lips against his ear.

That was ticklish, so he grimaced and shuddered.

“Would you cut it out?” he tried to shake the man off.

But this time Simon was having none of it, apparently. He pulled Carter closer and forced his mouth on his.

Why the fuck were dudes all over him? Ah, yeah, he was draped all over in the perfect body of a fashion star, and he was also gay as fuck. That didn’t stop him from pushing Simon away.

“Look here, Simon,” he wagged the finger at the guy who was staring at him with the same look of a kicked puppy all over his face. “Do that again, and I’ll kick your ass. I mean it.”

“Alex,” Simon begged. “Why are you so cruel?”

“Are you really that fucked up in the head? I don’t feel anything for you. You should just mind your fucking business!”

He needed to set this right.

“You’re not letting me prove anything to you. You don’t let me kiss you, you don’t let me hug you, you don’t let me take you to nice places ... How can I prove myself to you?”

Carter could swear his head was going to explode.

“I’m not going on any romantic date with you. I don’t feel a damn thing when you try to put your tongue in my mouth. So understand, once and for all. I have a husband whom I love and bang, okay?”

“Kiss me. If you still don’t feel a thing, then I’ll back down,” Simon promised.

Hmm, that pretty much sounded like a trap, but, hell, if it could take this stupid kid off his back, it was worth a try.

“Come here, asshole,” he gestured for Simon to get closer.

No wonder there, the idiot obeyed like a well-trained dog. Carter grabbed the guy’s head and kissed him hard on the lips. Simon gasped and Carter pushed his tongue inside. He was rough and uncaring on purpose. And, as he had expected, he felt nothing. But, in his arms, Simon was turning into putty, moaning and trying to kiss back.

He tried to get away from the guy’s hands, but Simon just slid on the floor and buried his head into Carter’s crotch, rubbing his face against it.

“Alex, I missed you so badly, I want to suck your cock, please, please, let me ...”

There was no way he was going to put his dick into that guy’s mouth. Well, at least he knew he wasn’t gay because the sight of that gorgeous man at his feet was doing nothing for him.

But that position was more than compromising. He had a mind to just kick the guy away, but he didn't want to do that. He had been wrong about thinking of Simon as a chinchilla. He was just a big puppy, and what kind of man kicked a puppy?

While he was busy trying to solve yet another moral dilemma in his head, Simon set himself to work, managing somehow to pull down the zipper on Carter's jeans and reach inside. Carter reacted too late. The guy's mouth was all over his cock.

"What the fuck, dude? Cut it out!" he tried to push Simon's head away.

"No, please, let me," Simon asked, looking bereft with his mouth a bit slack, as Carter extracted himself and pulled his zipper back up.

"You should really chill, dude," Carter pointed the finger at him. "And do you see? Completely limp."

"I don't believe you," Simon said, refusing to get up from his kneeling position.

"Fine! You know what? Here's your limp dick," Carter was the one to pull his cock out of his pants and dangle it in front of Simon's eyes who was looking at him with a mix of horror and desire if such a thing was even possible. "So, what are you waiting for? Come suck on limpy here. Maybe then you'll leave me the fuck off!"

Simon dragged himself on his knees to Carter and put his warm mouth on the soft cock. Carter decided to just look at a point on the wall, and try to solve some shit in his mind, while the idiot was going to try to make him get it up.

Simon pushed the entire soft cock into his mouth. It was just wet and warm, nothing special. But the guy didn't seem fazed by the lack of reaction in Carter's nether parts and now he was using his tongue to reach Carter's balls and even somewhere under them. Fuck, that was kind of a weak spot for him, Carter realized with dread.

Fuck no! Think of sad things, you stupid brain! Like dead puppies! An ocean of them! What could be sadder than that? Come on, you're not going to get hard to that, right?

Phew, it was working. He was in control. But he needed a tissue right now. He was about to push Simon way again when the door to the bathroom opened.

Carter could swear that was the type of moment in movies when the camera panned and everything started moving in slow motion. His hands were too weak to push Simon away properly, and his eyes met Mark's without fail.

His assistant stopped in his tracks, his eyes moving from Carter to the man knelt on the floor, his entire face falling gradually with each increment his eyes moved down. Carter thought for a second that the guy's face was going to disintegrate at the end of that journey downward.

"Mark," he said.

But his assistant schooled his face into a neutral demeanor - not a smiley one - and spoke quickly.

"I am so sorry, Sir."

With that, he turned on his heels and walked out of the bathroom.

"Wait!" Carter yelled after him, now managing to get rid of Simon, by really kicking the guy. "Weren't you supposed to pee or something?"

But the door was already closed, and that stupid question was going to remain without an answer. Fuck! How was he going to explain that? Talking about mistakes that couldn't be fixed. Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

"He won't talk," Simon commented behind him. "If he knows what's best for him. And he looks like a smart guy."

Carter turned towards Simon, feeling the need to just blame someone for the shitstorm that was just starting.

"You know what, Simon? Fuck you and your stupid shit!"

"Why the hell are you mad? And you were just starting to get hard," Simon pointed out. "Since when do you care about your assistants?"

"I do care, idiot! So just ... Fuck you!" he groaned in frustration and lack of ideas. "And no, I don't mean it in a sexual way!"

"Alex, stop pretending. Just seconds ago you were growing hard in my mouth," Simon spoke.

“Oh yeah? Maybe I’m a stupid hoe!” he yelled and pushed his fingers through his styled hair. “But I’m my husband’s stupid hoe, not yours!” he finally found his salvation.

Simon was just smiling.

“Don’t get near me, or I’ll break your legs!” he now threatened.

“I’m not scared,” Simon shrugged.

“Well, you should be,” Carter said, feeling miffed for how not menacing he looked in front of this guy.

He hadn’t broken anyone’s legs or any other bones until now, but he felt like there was a start for everything. Now he had to explain everything to Mark and hope for understanding and forgiveness. Not that he deserved any.

“I’m already late for meeting my husband,” he tried to calm himself down while arranging his clothes.

“I’m telling,” Simon spoke. “If you keep on rejecting me like this, I’m telling.”

I’m telling, Carter mimicked in his mind. Simon hadn’t sounded that childish and boy, he was definitely more dangerous than a kid.

“Ah, so you’re finally showing your true colors,” he said through his teeth.

“Give me something, anything,” Simon asked, but this time he wasn’t begging. “You cannot leave me like this.”

What to give the guy? A handjob? A blowjob? No way, the only guy in the entire universe he was doing that kind of thing with was Aron, not this sleek bastard. He needed an idea, something to save him from this shit. Ah, bingo! It had to work.

“I don’t like you because you’re not kinky, Simon,” he said with conviction.

The guy looked at him and his determination seemed to fade now.

“I can do anything you want.”

“What? A lousy blowjob? I can go to any glory hole in this city, and get better service, I’m sure.”

Were there any glory holes in their city? He had no idea. But maybe Simon didn't know, either.

"All right," Simon sucked in a breath. "Tell me what you want me to do and I'll just do it."

"I find normal sex boring," Carter began. Well, just another reason to burn in hell. There was quite a case building itself against him. "I want things a limited person like you could never understand."

"Just speak," Simon said aggressively.

"I get off on ignoring people. Like completely ignore you," he said promptly.

Was this stupid shit really going to work?

"I want to ignore you and bask in your suffering. I want you to realize that for me you're not even an afterthought."

"Will that turn you on?" Simon asked, in shock.

"Yeah, definitely," Carter lied.

"Um, okay," Simon agreed. "But how is that sexual?"

"I don't know, jerk off or something," Carter shrugged.

It was a good thing the guy had his looks. He was clearly dumb as a brick. He almost jumped when the guy took out his cock with swift moves and began to pump it. Weirdly enough, the guy was already half hard. Maybe all this talk was really making Simon excited.

"Like this, master?" Simon whispered.

Carter could feel the hair on his head rising and he shuddered. He meant it in private, but Simon just had to go and whip out his dick.

"Okay," he exhaled.

The idiot could jerk off all he wanted. That wasn't Carter's business.

His mind went to Aron. Aron wanted to be dominated, too. What the hell was happening to these guys?

“Please tell me what to do,” Simon whispered, back to begging now.

“Turn your back, and don’t look at me. Jerk off while looking at the wall or something.”

“You’re not going to leave, right?”

Damn, that was exactly what he planned to do. He sighed.

“No. I’ll be right here, ignoring you.”

Would Aron like that? To be ordered around? The thought was making his skin a bit warm. Apparently, this wasn’t lost on Simon.

“Oh, fuck, it’s working ... Your eyes are all hazy now,” Simon whispered. “All right, I’ll do it. But please don’t leave.”

“I won’t,” Carter agreed.

He could hear Simon beating his meat now, sighing and grunting. He took out his phone and began playing a stupid game of shooting ducks. Shitstorm averted. For now.

He got to the hospital late, after all the shenanigans with Simon. He had had to pat the guy on the head and ensure him that he had done a great job, and the lovesick puppy looks Simon had given him were still making him feel dirty and like the biggest asshole in the universe.

The receptionist let him in this time and he hurried down the corridor. He was about to open the door to the room where his body was kept when he noticed through the window that Aron wasn’t alone.

His friend was apparently leaning over someone, offering comfort and a tissue. When Aron moved away, Carter felt his heart clenching in sudden pain, so harsh that he could not breathe and doubled over. He could not remember one moment in his life when he had seen his mother crying.

Chapter Fifteen

It was late in the evening when he finally went home. He had taken the car and driven aimlessly for hours, trying hard to ignore the mess in his brain.

Like a burglar, he sneaked into the house. Maybe Aron was already asleep and he wasn't going to offer any explanations now. He took off his shoes and began to walk slowly through the living room. Maybe he was just going to crash on the sofa.

The sound of a door opening and the light flooding the room made him stop. He turned slowly only to face a very quiet and angry Aron who now had many more clothes on him than the nights before. Funny, how he wished he could just stare at Aron's naked chest right now more than anything in the world. But the guy wore a tee, and he was clearly pissed.

"You didn't come to the hospital, after all," Aron said.

"No shit, Sherlock," Carter murmured as he crushed on the sofa.

He felt so damn exhausted.

"Where have you been? Where do you come from at this fucking hour?" Aron said, loudly this time.

"Work," Carter shrugged.

"I know you've not been at work until now, Alex. So I'm asking again. Where the fuck have you been?"

All right, Aron wasn't exactly shouting, but he was close. And Carter had a migraine that could kill an army of divas.

"Stop shouting, what the fuck?" he groaned.

"Have you been with Simon? Again?" Aron asked, in the same aggressive tone. "I thought you were through with playing around with that guy."

"Playing around?" Carter snorted.

He was so damn tired.

“I know that it must be rewarding for you to have someone like him lick your feet, but really, you should just leave that guy alone. And you should be more careful. You cannot always dodge rumors by claiming you’re practicing hugging!”

Ah, so at least Aron hadn’t been fooled by that cheap trick. But, wait, what did Aron know about the whole Simon affair?

“What do you think I’m doing with Simon?” he asked directly.

Aron huffed.

“You like to lead him by the nose. I know you like the attention, but I don’t want to be called the poor cheated husband in all this. And that guy should find someone who would be interested in reciprocating. Plus, since you’re not sleeping with him, like you swore to me you’re not, what the hell are you two doing for hours?”

“I’m not sleeping with Simon?” Carter blinked in confusion. “Then what the hell I’m doing?”

“You tell me,” Aron shot back. “Ah, wait, it’s your amnesia!”

Aron didn’t believe him he was amnesic. Aron thought Alex and Simon were some sort of buddies. And he was simply dumb about the whole thing. Carter felt so exhausted that he just wanted to throw in Aron’s face that Alex had already cheated and that he had had Simon’s cock up all his usable holes. But no, he had tried so hard to keep things in check.

So why weren’t they? Why the fuck were things not in check? And why was his mother crying when she just had to be ... her usual self? Logical? Restrained? Always caring about her next exploring mission?

“Alex, have you been crying?” Aron suddenly asked in shock, his voice a complete one-eighty from before.

No, he hadn’t been crying.

“Your eyes are all red and puffy,” Aron hurried by his side.

“Just dust getting in my eyes,” he mumbled.

From all the driving with the windows down. He had felt the need for air like he had been on the point of suffocating.

Aron pulled him into a hug, ignoring him, and damn it felt good. It was so warm in Aron's arms. He rubbed his forehead against Aron's shoulder.

"You don't have to worry about Simon," he mumbled. "I have it all figured out."

Sort of. Still better than nothing. Still better than cheating. He could not believe that scumbag Alex. Why was he cheating on Aron? Why the fuck was he doing that? Aron was ... everything.

He clung to Aron hard. This was not supposed to happen, but he needed Aron more than anything now. So he held him tight, just as tight as Aron was squeezing back.

"You're worrying me, baby," Aron cooed. "You're not your usual self."

Carter felt like laughing.

I'm not, Aron! I'm not your lying cheating asshole husband! I'm just your lying idiot best friend!

Words that were just meant to remain unspoken.

For the moment, he just felt naked. Not physically, but as if his soul was exposed and every little bit of it was left out to dry. So he just needed to take Aron's strong body and drape his bare soul with it. Only that way he could get out of it, away from his own mistakes.

His breath was shallow as he angled his head to kiss Aron. He could tell the man was a bit surprised. No, it wasn't a kiss like a peck on the lips. It was needy and raw, and, now Carter could admit it, if only for this moment, sexual.

This wasn't the cold kiss he had given Simon earlier. All his need for Aron was molded into it. He bit Aron's lips softly, despite the thrumming in his blood. Aron exhaled, and Carter pushed his tongue inside hard. He wanted to taste Aron, to eat him up whole, and make him a part of him. If only for this moment.

"Baby," Aron cooed.

He didn't care for Aron's soft words, for his worry and pity. He wanted, no, needed, something else. So he moved and straddled Aron's thighs, enjoying the way his crotch rubbed against Aron's silk pants, as he leaned forward.

At least, Aron had no mind to protest. Instead, his large hands wandered down Carter's back, landing on his ass and squeezing hard.

It was Alex's body Aron loved and cherished. But Carter had to make things right for his own sake this one time, and imagine how Aron would touch him, his body, not the one he was renting right now not by his own volition. How would Aron's hands fit on his muscled back? He wasn't as big and strong as Aron, but still, he was nothing like skinny, doll face Alex. He was a man, wanting and needing another man.

What would Aron think of him if he were to see him naked? He still remembered the comment the guy had made about his ass. Maybe he really did have the type of ass Aron liked, although he had no idea how that could be. He didn't care to understand. He just wanted to have Aron, even if only temporary.

"You're so hot tonight," Aron whispered through the kisses. "Are you really okay, baby?"

"Is it wrong for me to want you?" Carter asked, painfully aware that Aron could not understand the question.

"No, no, why would it be wrong? I want you so much, baby," Aron whispered and began licking Carter's neck.

He was a fraud. A trickster of the worst kind. But tonight, he could not help it. There was just one thing.

"Condoms? Do we have any?"

Cheater Alex still had a body that needed to have clean test results before sleeping with his husband.

"I'll find one," Aron put him down, a bit too abruptly.

He sat there, on the floor, not moving. He was insane, but, by the way his body looked in that hospital, he was probably going to die soon, so heaven could forgive him for wanting this, wanting Aron. The whole of him.

Aron was back and Carter let himself manhandled now, his jeans pushed down, and his body bent over the sofa.

“Oh, fuck, baby, I’m so going to fuck you,” Aron caressed his ass, squeezing his buttocks and sending small shocks up his spine.

He could not be more beyond himself with want. For once in an eternity, he was honest with himself. If there was one single thing he wanted in the world right now, after he had seen his mother crying, that was not to lie for a moment or two.

Aron’s fingers were cool and slick against his ass, and he pushed back, wanting the hardest part to pass, the one that he didn’t want to think about when he was going to just surrender one part of him that he had thought was not going to belong to anyone else. The foolishness of that was almost painful.

He willed his body to relax. He had no clear idea about gay sex, but he knew how the human body worked. His nerve endings were raw, and just getting more and more overstimulated by each thrust of Aron’s fingers.

“Ready, baby?” Aron whispered, his voice loaded with desire.

He had no term of comparison. He didn’t know. But he wanted to find out.

“Fuck me,” he said simply.

He clenched his hands into the leather sofa. Most probably there were going to be traces left from his blunt nails, but right now he had no time to think about everything. Aron was big, gigantic at his backside, and he wondered if this was going to work, after all. Perception was clearly skewed; he knew exactly how big Aron was. And this wasn’t it. He just had to let go. Aron had fucked his husband. It wasn’t impossible. And he needed Aron deep inside, he needed him so badly, that it had to work.

Aron was grunting, expressing his strain. It was obvious that it wasn’t easy for him, either.

“Sorry, baby, I don’t want to hurt you,” Aron spoke.

“I want you to hurt me,” he whispered.

Because then I won't be able to feel anything else, he continued in his mind. And not feeling anything else is everything I want. There's only room for you here right now.

Home. That was Aron for him.

He cried out in surprise as Aron's began sliding in, the lube finally doing its job. The sensation of fullness was maddening. Like he could not breathe, but who needed to breathe anyway? Aron grabbed his slender waist with his hands and pushed himself fully inside.

Like a sword in its sheath. Carter would have laughed at the comparison, if not for the stabbing pain in his backside. But he could live with it because it was everything he wanted.

"I'm hurting you," Aron caressed his ear with his lips.

"I want you to hurt me," he repeated like a mantra.

Aron eased himself from Carter's body, and Carter wanted to protest, but the man pushed himself back in, and weirdly enough, it was no longer hurting as much. The fullness sensation was still there, but it was like he was regaining some of the sensibility in his nerves. His ass reacted by squeezing the hard flesh inside.

"Oh, fuck, baby, you're going to make me blow too soon," Aron complained.

Carter willed himself to relax again, but, at this point, his body was taking over. He felt like an animal in rut, something uncontrollable. His cock was hard, slapping against his abdomen, with each move Aron was making.

Aron was giving it to him hard now. Carter moved his hands to grab his buttocks and part them as much as he could. He wanted more of Aron inside, everything, even though it wasn't possible.

"Damn it, Alex, why do you have to be so hot? Fucking sexy, I'll rip your ass in half if you're teasing me anymore."

No, it was perfect. Except for one thing. He needed to hear it, even if just one time. He clamped his ass hard on Aron's shaft again, milking the man with all his strength.

“I’m close, baby, I’m going to blow! Fuck, Alex!”

“Call me Carter,” he whispered.

“W-what?” Aron stammered, but he was too far gone to stop his hammering.

“Call me Carter!” he shouted as he felt his eyes rolling in his head.

“Carter,” Aron whispered, unsure, trying to slow down.

“Tell me what you want to tell him,” Carter continued. “Please, Aron, do it!”

“Argh, fuck, baby, what are you doing?”

“Say it, say it!” Carter demanded in a strangled voice.

His cock was hitting the sofa, sending shots of pleasure from tip to root. At the same time, he was slamming against Aron’s larger frame, swallowing up the guy’s cock over and over again.

“I fucking want to fuck you, Carter! I want to ... breed you, make you mine!”

Oh, fuck, the condom was in the way! Carter swore in his mind. Aron breeding him, filling him up like Carter was his. That would have made him complete. He came in short bursts, clamping down hard on Aron’s cock, dragging the guy with him.

He could feel the guy’s cock pulsing inside his tight as hell channel. Aron withdrew after a few minutes spent doing nothing but breathing.

“I don’t think I want to know what that was all about,” Aron mumbled.

The guy sounded guilty. And Carter felt guilty, too. So, it had been a mistake, after all. But could one more matter when it was just part of a long string of wrongdoings? Going down in flames had to stand for something.

Aron had dragged him to bed after that, and he had slept fitfully through the night. Why was everything so fucking fucked up? Couldn’t hell just open up already and claim his lousy existence? It wasn’t like anyone was going to miss him.

Stop lying, idiot. The image of his mom crying came unbound, like a wave cleaning everything in its path. It wasn't so easy to let go, after all, now was it?

He woke up, feeling more despondent than he had ever felt in his life. Aron was no longer in bed. Maybe the guy just had to be early at work. With a long sigh, he woke up and headed for the bathroom.

Aron was probably in the kitchen, he thought. Or hopefully already out the door. He wasn't sure he could face the guy right now.

He moved about the house, wondering what the hell he was going to do next. There was quite a list of things, actually. He needed to see his real body at the hospital again, find out what the hell was happening, and the medical prognosis. Then he needed to apologize to Mark, as soon as he was back at work. He needed to cut Simon loose, without all the blackmail, if possible.

And he needed to talk to Aron and apologize to him, too. For him, there was no winning in this. And the more he had tried to make things better, the worse things had gotten.

What the hell was that in the door? He squinted. Luggage? Well, a carry all by the looks of it.

"I'll be away this weekend," Aron spoke, somewhere from behind.

"Why?" he asked right away.

"I need a small break," Aron replied. "Don't throw a tantrum, please. I'm coming back on Sunday."

"Don't leave," Carter interrupted. "I need to talk to you."

Aron set his jaw.

"It can wait until I get back."

"You don't have work today?"

"I'll leave from the office," Aron explained. "Alex, look," he added, in a firm tone that could barely hide his exasperation, "I don't understand what games you're

playing anymore. God knows I've tolerated enough. But this is just too much. You can't use my feelings against me like this."

"You mean, the feelings you have for Carter?"

"No. The feelings I have for you."

Carter opened his mouth and closed it back. Everything was backfiring and he had no bulletproof vest.

"Do you still care about Carter?" he insisted.

"I do," Aron said aggressively. "But I've been trying all my life to walk away, and you, with your stupid games, are not helping. Really, Alex? Do you want me to pretend I'm fucking him when I'm with you? You really are something. No one could have thought of a better way to torture us both. And just when I thought we were starting to get along a little better. Well, you can't have everything. You can't have Simon to use as your personal ego booster, you can't have everyone kissing your feet or otherwise you get pissed, you can't pretend to be Carter so that I love you more!"

"Pretend?" now Carter felt a bit scandalized. "How did I pretend?"

And he had made so much effort to pretend to be Alex.

"Just last night. What you did was wrong. And what I did was wrong."

"How the fuck was what you did wrong?" Carter almost shouted.

He was the only one to blame for that situation.

"Because I really felt like I was fucking him, not you!" Aron shot back with anger. "And that is fucking wrong! I need to leave now. I don't want to say things I'll regret later!"

Aron grabbed his luggage and pulled the doorknob so fast that it was a wonder the thing didn't fly off its hinges. Carter flinched as the door slammed shut. This was going to be tough.

The trip to the hospital was, at least, uneventful. He could not see his comatose body, being still out of visitation hours, but the nurse in charge had let him know that the doctor was pleased that the patient was stable. Given the circumstances, a recovery was possible.

Well, that was good to know. Maybe he wasn't going to see his mother crying again. Yes, that was a good thing.

He climbed behind the wheel and ignited the engine. There was still time before he had to head to work. He just wanted to know, to see with his own eyes.

A few people in their late 70s stopped their gardening chores to look at his car, as he entered his old street. His parents' house was still there, hidden almost completely under the shadow of the big oak.

He stopped the engine and looked at the house for a while. Why was he here? He had no idea what he wanted, but he needed to see this place. He was lost in thought, his eyes no longer seeing anything.

A knock on the car window interrupted his train of thought. It felt so surreal to look at his mother through the glass. Her white hair was cut short now, even shorter than usual. And she was smiling, her usual smile, somewhat detached and distant. He rolled down the window.

"You're Alex, right? Aron's husband?"

"Yes," he said, his throat dry.

His mother nodded, with a sympathetic smile, but still waiting to hear from him what he was doing there.

"I just wanted to say that I'm sorry that I couldn't make it yesterday to see Carter," he said in one breath.

The smile faltered, the wrinkles around the mouth deepening.

"I ... Thank you, Alex. That is very kind of you," his mother talked, after a short moment of hesitation. "He is ... Carter, I mean, he is stable, doctors say. That's a good thing, right?"

It was like his mother was suddenly shrinking before his eyes. She was holding a pair of gardening shears in her hand, clutching them like they could offer the right answer.

“Yes, definitely,” he nodded.

His mother let go a small sob and covered her mouth, dropping the shears on the ground. And then, Carter knew why he was here. He opened the door and got out of the car, catching his mother in his arms.

“It’s okay, Mrs. Malis,” he whispered, as he held her in his arms. “Carter will be fine.”

She sobbed there, against his chest, for a while.

“Ellen!” someone called and Carter saw his dad walking towards them.

His father looked a bit disheveled, his trimmed beard the same, but a few strands of grey hair were in disarray as if the man had tossed and turned for the entire night, and forgotten to comb properly.

“It’s all right,” his father took his mother from him.

Carter remained with his arms raised, feeling bereft.

“You are?” his father asked, his clear brown eyes studying him with a hint of suspicion.

His mother made an effort to recollect herself.

“He’s Alex, Aron’s husband, dear,” she said and accepted the handkerchief her husband offered her.

“I see,” his father replied.

He was inspecting Carter with his scrutinizing eyes.

“I just came around to apologize for not being at the hospital yesterday,” he hurried to explain.

His father just nodded and pursed his lips further.

“Thank you for your concern, young man. But now, if you’ll excuse us, this is a difficult time for our family and ...”

“We should have never left!” his mother suddenly spoke, clutching the handkerchief in her small bony hand. “I should have never left my boy alone!”

His father seemed embarrassed by his wife’s outburst.

“Let’s get back into the house, dear,” he dragged his wife towards the door.

Carter leaned against the car, his knees too weak to keep him. His mom’s cries were ripping his heart into tiny pieces.

His father looked at him a few times over his shoulder, and awkwardly waved at him, as they went into the house.

He stood there, immobilized, incapable even to breathe. The sound of the phone ringing startled him.

“Hello, boss,” Mark’s voice came through the phone. “Yolanda is asking when you’re coming.”

He could hear the strain in the young man’s voice. Throwing one last look at his parents’ house, at the opaque windows, he finally managed to move and climb behind the wheel.

“I’m coming, Mark,” he said wearily.

His soul was aching all over. His body, too. A sign of how Aron had been there.

“All right, boss. I’ll let her know,” Mark replied.

“Mark,” he hurried, afraid that the assistant was just going to cut off the conversation. “I need to explain ...”

“You don’t need to explain anything to me, boss,” Mark said, a bit too brightly.

“I do,” Carter insisted.

“No, boss, ...”

“Hey, who’s in charge? I say I need to explain, that’s how it is,” he replied, now irritated with the other’s deflections. “Or you just call me boss, because you find it funny?”

“No, boss,” Mark whispered.

“Good. Make sure you’re at your post because I have some explanations to give,” he tried to invest his voice with as much authority as he could.

“Yes, boss,” Mark answered, and Carter could tell the guy had already calmed down a little, which was a good sign.

It was a good thing that Alex’s job only consisted of looking pretty, because if someone had asked him to use his head, he couldn’t have done it. There was so much to take in. His parents were devastated, Aron had chosen to leave rather than stay with him, and he hadn’t even said where he was leaving, and Mark was upset with him because he had caught his boss stuffing a co-worker’s face with cock.

Typically, this should have been the kind of situation to make him want to curl under a rock and wait for the storm to pass. But he had no intention to do that now. It was up to him to set things right and hell, he was going to try.

He had no time to sit and talk to Mark until lunch break. Deciding that apologizing for what counted like promiscuous and unprofessional behavior over fast food sounded decent enough, he asked Mark to order some takeout and have it brought to the office.

When Mark entered with his arms full of nice smelling food, Carter was as ready for a confession as he could possibly be.

“You ordered for yourself, too, right?” he asked Mark, and his assistant just nodded, as he quickly made enough room on the large desk to place the food tray.

Everything smelled delicious, but Carter wasn’t in the mood to eat and that was saying something.

“So, Mark,” he decided to start. “Ahem, what you saw yesterday wasn’t ... Well, it wasn’t what it looked like.”

“I didn’t see anything,” Mark looked down right away, fiddling with a napkin.

“Gosh, you really want me to say it,” Carter shook his head. “Okay, let’s try this a bit differently. Yesterday, and please don’t interrupt me, you caught me with my, ahem, sexual organ inserted in the oral cavity of ...”

“Boss, it’s okay,” Mark interrupted him. “Really.”

“No, it’s not okay,” Carter protested.

Using clinical terms wasn’t working. Mark was closed like a shell, with no intention to give in.

“I’m sorry,” he spoke, throwing his arms down in surrender. “I’m sorry for being a fucking douchebag.”

“You’re not a douchebag,” Mark said back. “You just don’t know how to say no.”

“What are you talking about? I am the king of nay-sayers!”

“It’s not all about saying the word. It’s about acting on it,” Mark explained.

Hmm, it was annoying to admit, but Mark had a point there.

“Well, I just wanted to prove to Simon that he can’t get me hard ..., argh, what the fuck I’m talking about?” he scolded himself.

“Was that really necessary?” Mark questioned.

“Well, he wouldn’t leave me alone, and also he’s black ...”

Fuck, he was talking too much. Mark didn’t have to know about that blackmailing bit.

“Simon is black?” Mark asked, looking extremely confused. “Like from a grandgrandmother or something?”

“No! I mean I don’t know! And even if he was, that’s got nothing to do with anything!”

It wasn’t like he had some kind of interest in learning about Simon’s ancestry.

“Okay,” Mark said slowly.

“Sorry, I’m just making a mess out of this apology,” Carter buried his face into his hands. “Look, Simon is ... He’s a bit hurt right now.”

“And why do you care?” Mark questioned.

“You, too, Mark?” Carter looked a bit miffed at his assistant. “Well, let me put the cards on the table. Simon may be a douchebag, but, before I got into this accident that left me a bit amnesic, it appears that I lead him on somehow. I need to let him down gently.”

And make sure that he doesn’t show those stupid pictures to Aron, he continued in his own head. No point in acting like Mother Theresa, but he had to justify the situation somehow.

“Ah, so he just wants to take it off where you two left it,” Mark said.

“What? What’s this ‘it’ you’re talking about?”

“Your affair. With Simon.”

Carter gaped like a fish. He was pretty certain he looked like one of those stupid carps on TV nature documentaries. A stupid fish with an open mouth and an eternal surprised expression etched on its face.

“You know?” he barely managed. “Does the entire universe know?”

“No,” Mark said, looking a bit affronted. “But it’s my job to know such things.”

“Great,” he dropped his head on the desk. “My marriage is over.”

“No, it’s not, boss,” Mark said right away. “You just need to give Simon the boot.”

“That doesn’t sound very humane, does it, Mark? Plus, have you ever looked into those puppy eyes? I’m afraid he’s going to cry.”

“Boss, you need to. He’s just getting in your way of being happy with your husband.”

Carter exhaled.

“I supposed you’re right. But he might choose to go to Aron with some, well, compromising materials.”

Mark seemed to ponder, but he remained silent.

“Well?” Carter asked, unnerved by the silence. “What should I do? If Simon spills the beans? Aron will be pissed. That’s grounds for divorce!”

“Boss, you can’t have your cake and eat it. You have to risk sometimes. Go beyond the fence and see what’s there.”

What was with this talk of fences? Mark was pissing him off. The guy made awesome coffee and was a godsend, but he was an annoying little shit, at the same time.

“No, I’m sorry, I can’t risk Aron’s marriage,” he said in a heartbeat.

“You mean your marriage,” Mark threw him an odd look.

“That’s what I meant,” he murmured and ran his hands over his face in exasperation. “I’ll have to indulge Simon for a bit.”

Mark made a small sound that could only be interpreted as zero interest in Carter’s reasoning.

“That will not turn out well, boss.”

“Don’t worry, it’s not like I’m sleeping with him,” Carter waved his hand, annoyed.

“Only indulging him in trying to get you hard,” Mark pointed out promptly.

Now he wished he could fire Mark. No, no, no, what was he thinking about?

“I think I found the solution,” he said with determination. “Simon will just get fed up with me, and I don’t have to have sex with him, either.”

“If you say so, boss,” Mark grimaced while he fished for the last fries. “But are you really sure Simon is going to break up with you on his own accord?”

“Trust me, I’ll put that boy through hell,” Carter said, quite pleased with himself now.

“That boy? You’re what? 26? Boss?” Mark wondered.

“Ah, well, I’m still older than him,” Carter replied.

“Simon is 23. Only three years ...”

“Yeah, shut up,” Carter cut him short, but without malice.

Well, at 32, which was his real age, he could look down a little bit on 23-year olds. As Alex Ruskin, that didn’t make that much sense.

“Will you support me on this, Mark?” he asked directly.

“You’re my boss. Through thick and thin,” Mark nodded. “Speaking of thin, you didn’t eat anything.”

“Not really hungry,” Carter shook his head.

Maybe Alex’s metabolism was kicking in. He was in no mood for food.

“Okay, you’re forgiven today,” Mark said brightly. “But I’ll have to take measures if you’re not eating right.”

“Oh, really, I’m shaking,” Carter joked.

Mark chose to look rather miffed at that blatant lack of confidence in his skills.

“I have my means, boss.”

“I’m sure. Well, now you can get back to work, and I will just go sit pretty for a few more hours. How did it go with the barre instructor? I didn’t ask.”

“He sounded strangely relieved,” Mark answered. “And he was very thankful for the free money.”

“Great,” Carter said, feeling pleased with solving at least one thing without any drama.

“I have all your schedule for the rest of the day,” Mark said. “Would you want me to read it to you? There’s more than just sitting pretty.”

“No rest for the wicked,” Carter clucked his tongue. “Go ahead, shoot.”

His mind traveled back to Aron and their conversation from that morning, while Mark began reciting the string of obligations he needed to tend to.

The house felt eerie with just him there. But he was too spent to care. Friday evening meant microwaved food and going to sleep early.

On Saturday, he was woken up by an energetic knock on the door. How much did he sleep? Ah, well, it was already 9 o'clock and he could not understand how he managed to sleep until now. His sleep had been plagued by weird dreams again.

With a groan, he left the soft confines of the bed and headed for the door.

He stood there like struck by lightning when he saw who the visitor was.

“Master, I am at your beck and call,” Simon said joyously while sitting there, dressed in casual slacks, and a white polo shirt that brought out his olive skin and dark eyes.

He didn't even say anything. He just closed the door in the guy's face. The knocking resumed. It was going to be a long Saturday.

Chapter Sixteen

There was no possible way to reason with the guy, nor did he take hints. Simon was like a stupid dog that needed a lot of training. After closing the door a few more times in his face, and a few others telling him to just go home already, Carter had had to open the door wide and try to have a conversation with the guy.

“Do you have any idea how this looks? The neighbors will see your car parked in the driveway!” he pointed the finger at Simon.

“It’s not the first time I come to your house,” Simon said defensively. “And I’m a co-worker. People will just think that I’m here about work. Plus, it’s not like I’m visiting you at night. That would look suspicious.”

“Wait, how do you know Aron is not at home this weekend?”

“At all?” Simon’s eyes lit up. “I didn’t know. Ah, that means that I can sleep over, even.”

“Wait, you didn’t know?”

“No,” Simon shrugged. “But I’m glad he’s not. Because I want to show you something.”

With that, Simon pulled his polo out of his slacks and began dragging it up. Carter was just about to tell the guy to stop undressing in the doorway, when his eyes fell on the strange leather belts crossing the guy’s chest.

He put his head out the door, and looked to the left, and then to the right. Oh, no, fuck, someone was coming. He grabbed Simon by one arm and pulled him inside abruptly.

His back against the door, like he was expecting someone to come knocking it down, he stared at Simon in disbelief.

“The fuck do you think you’re doing?” he whispered angrily.

“I thought about having some initiative, seeing that you are into this master thing,” Simon replied, rather miffed.

“So, you thought about coming over, dressed in this harness or whatever it is, and showing it to me?” Carter began to massage his temples.

Great way to start the day. Just fucking great.

“Pretty much, yes,” Simon confirmed.

“What if Aron was at home?”

“Then I would have just talked about work. And, the moment we were alone, I would have shown it to you,” Simon said with a very pleased smile on his face.

Damn, the guy looked like a kid who thought he got all the answers right at a quiz test.

“You are ...” he was lost for words.

“What? You don’t like it? I’m sorry, I’m new to this submissive staff,” Simon spoke, now looking a bit embarrassed. “But I’ll do anything. I want you to like me.”

“All right.”

Stop staring at me with those puppy eyes.

Great, now he needed to play the master or whatever.

“Well, it’s Saturday, so all I want to do is chill. If you want to grab some popcorn with me and watch some sports, you’re invited,” he made a sign for Simon to make himself comfortable, while he headed for the bathroom. He needed a shower and to wake up properly.

“You’re testing me!” Simon exclaimed, looking happy for some stupid reason. “You want to see if I’m good as a submissive. So, no, master, I could not share your popcorn with you. I will be your coffee table, so you can rest your feet on me.”

What kind of logic was that? He stared at Simon in shock for a couple of seconds and then shook his head. Okay, the idiot looked happy. Let him do whatever. He just turned on his heels and went for his shower.

He grabbed his bowl of popcorn, throwing a few in his mouth on his way to the living room. The sight in front of him made him almost drop the bowl.

Simon was on his fours, carefully placed in front of the sofa, his head hunched between his shoulders, looking down. He was naked, save for the leather straps that were hugging his lean body tightly, and it was quite clear that a thinner one went straight through the guy's ass, parting his buttocks, and then going a bit wider to cover his balls.

If Carter had been a gay guy into submission play, he might have just appreciated the view. Simon was a beautiful male specimen, and the attire was not looking ludicrous on him at all. He kind of understood why Alex liked the beautiful idiot. Simon was like a cute dog, with perfect pedigree, and the ideal length between ears and tail, or whatever counted as a sign of a pure breed in canines. So, it didn't matter that he was so damn dumb.

With a sigh, he jumped over Simon's prone form and dropped himself and the popcorn bowl on the sofa. Maybe it was too early for TV and popcorn, but he wasn't in the mood for anything else.

It was awkward as fuck to flick through the channels while Simon sat there, completely silent and unmoved.

"Please rest your feet on me, master," Simon begged, eventually.

The truth was he didn't have enough room for his legs, so it was easy to just lift them off and place them on Simon's smooth back, trapped in leather straps. Eh, it felt kind of nice. He sank into the sofa. Simon shifted just a little, as Carter found the most comfortable position.

It was probably the most idiotic thing he had ever done in his life, but he had no idea what else to do. He had been the one to hint at that kind of play, and Simon was just eagerly obliging. Like a dog wanting to be in his master's graces.

The game was interesting enough, so, soon enough, he forgot about thinking how weird the whole thing was.

"Do you want any popcorn?" he angled his head to look at Simon.

"Will master feed me? I cannot move," Simon spoke.

He sighed and grabbed a few popped corns, careful to avoid the duds, between his fingers, bringing them closer to Simon's mouth. The man took them delicately, his lips brushing slightly by Carter's fingers.

He ignored the slight frisson climbing up his arm and pretended to watch the game, but he started alternating throwing popcorn in his mouth with handing Simon his fair share. The lips caressing his fingers began to grow bold, but for a while, he didn't make anything of it.

The game was in recess when he noticed that he had forgotten to move his hand, and now Simon was sucking his fingers gently. Looking at the guy's sultry eyes was a bad, bad idea. He withdrew his hand, and Simon looked down right away. The second part of the game happened without feeding the dog. Aka the unexpected visitor.

He turned off the TV and decided that the game happening in the living room had gone for too long. Putting his feet down, he began thinking what could he say to Simon to send him on his way now.

"Was I good, master?" Simon whispered.

"Yeah, good pet," he patted the guy on his head.

Simon pushed his head into Carter's palm. This was insane. What if Aron liked the same kind of play? But Carter was pretty certain he wanted to be the pet, not the other way around. Or, if Aron wanted, it didn't matter.

"Can I jerk off, master?" Simon asked.

"Jerk off? Why? Does popcorn make you horny? Were the corns sprinkled with Viagra or something?" he threw an odd look to the bowl on the sofa.

"You make me horny," Simon replied. "You're so good to me, master. Can you please be a little more?"

He had no idea about this kind of roleplay and he didn't care. So maybe Simon knew the rules or something.

"Then go ahead, by all means," he threw his hands up in surrender.

Simon leaned back on his heels, and now Carter could take a good look at how that weird getup looked from the front. Damn, whoever created that thing had a kinky mind. Metal circles were neatly placed over the guy's nipples, showing them off. And the material was stretched over the guy's nether parts, leaving no room for mistake. The guy was sporting a pretty nice bulge.

How would Aron look in that kind of thing? Simon was smooth and lean, and the bondage attire was making him look vulnerable. In Aron's case, a fully grown man packing muscles everywhere, that would have looked ...

Damn, he was not going there.

"Jerk off already," he said, his voice strained.

"Could master lend me his foot?"

"What?"

Simon didn't care to explain further, and just grabbed Carter's right foot by the ankle and pressed it against his bulge, using it to rub himself.

"That's the dumbest shit I've ever seen," he mumbled through his teeth.

Simon threw him a mournful look.

"Just do it," he waved. "And this is me, ignoring you, as I told you."

He grabbed the TV guide from the real coffee table and began browsing through it, trying to ignore how his foot was used as some sort of masturbation device. Blocking the sounds Simon was making was even harder.

But, at least, the guy didn't take long. Apparently, this whole situation was to Simon's liking, much more than his. Of course, if he were to play with Aron ...

No, shut up, brain. Why the fuck are you thinking about Aron? He left you prey to perverts, like this one.

He shook his head and looked at Simon. The guy mouthed something softly, his eyes sultry and hazy, and began coming.

Carter rolled his eyes. That was, hands down, the most fucked up sex he had ever had. Not that usually, he was particularly adventurous.

“You ruined your leather thingy,” he noticed.

Simon was breathing heavily, but also laughing, as he looked down.

“Alex, I gotta say, this whole BDSM thing you’re getting me into ...”

You’re getting yourself into this whole BDSM thing, Carter commented in his own head.

“Great!” he clapped his hands, as Simon let his foot down gently. “Now get out!” he added brightly.

Simon’s face fell.

Carter grimaced and then whispered.

“It’s all part of the roleplay, okay?”

Simon’s handsome face lit up. Carter could swear there was no other, more gullible guy in the universe. Simon was like those dodo birds, threatened by extinction. He needed to be protected by all means.

“So ... out!” he pointed at the door, and the guy stood up quickly to get dressed.

“Can I come to see you again tomorrow?” Simon asked as he pulled his polo shirt over his leather strapped torso.

“Aron comes back tomorrow. I don’t know the hour.”

“Okay,” Simon nodded. “Can I kiss you?” he asked, his puppy eyes directed straight at Carter.

This was getting him weary.

“No,” he said, and just walked over to Simon and placed a small kiss on the guy’s forehead. “Now off you go,” he added and patted the guy’s ass while pushing him towards the door.

“Ah, Alex, you play such a great master,” Simon murmured but posed no resistance to being thrown out the door.

“Of course. Because I’m me,” Carter said cheerfully and pushed the guy through the door.

“See you at work,” Simon barely had the time to say, before the door closed in his face, again.

Carter sank on the sofa and clenched his fists into his hair. Clearly, there had to be a place in hell with his name written all over it.

Lingering around the house with nothing to do was just making him feel tired. He didn’t want to think about anything, not about Aron, who was now doing who knew what, not about Simon who was getting into rough play because he thought his lover was into it, not about Mark and his silly warnings, and definitely not about his parents in tears.

By force of habit, he logged into one of the servers he used for collaborative coding, letting the hours fly by. In the end, he just ended up dozing off on the sofa.

He woke up by midnight, from a frightful dream. The strangest thing was that now, fully awake, he could still recall the nightmare in vivid colors.

It was like the day of the accident was replaying in his head. That morning, he had woken up from a bad hangover after a previous night spent in a dive with a bunch of people whose sole purpose seemed to have been to drink him under the table. He had taken a shower, eaten something, and then headed for the basketball court where he was to meet up with some guys.

That day had been so sunny, like blinding bright. Or at least that was what his dream was picturing it to be. Barely a gentle breeze in the air. The exercise on the basketball court had done him good and now he was heading back home.

And on any day, since forever, he had thought of Aron and how much he wanted nothing of that to have happened, not Aron’s marriage, not him leaving, not him being no longer friends with Carter. He had been walking down an empty street, his head filled with memories of other summers when he and Aron had had so much amazing fun together.

How many casual embraces had he missed? He had never made too much of them, back then, when he had had no idea that Aron was crushing on him. By all means,

he should have suspected something. A hand left to linger on his shoulder one second too long, a head resting against his shoulder on Sunday afternoons while watching sports, the sometimes hooded eyes searching his.

It had been surreal to notice that the guy walking in front of him, bouncing on his designer's loafers, was actually Aron's husband. He could not have been able to turn, at first, but, at one point, the guy had stopped and turned to look at something in a shop window. Carter had slowed down the moment he had realized who the guy was. Then he had let the guy gain an advantage on him again.

The day in the dream was gradually getting hotter, the image brighter and brighter. The silhouette walking in front of him was getting thinner and thinner like it was about to disappear.

The strangest thing about his dream was the silence. The deepest silence Carter could ever remember witnessing in his entire life. Like everything was going terribly still, the entire existence holding a breath. Waiting for what?

He had stretched one hand in front of his eyes, flexing the fingers as if to capture the vanishing silhouette walking further and further away. And then, like in a fantastic movie, his hand had begun to grow larger and larger, covering the man in front. All of a sudden, his arm had broken free from his shoulder, following the hand in its motion, and Carter could feel the pain like it was real.

Just like that, he had woken in the hospital again, making him wonder if he was trapped in a loop like Bill Murray in Groundhog Day. Luckily, a second later, he had woken up for real. So it had been just a dream in a dream in a dream ... Like Inception!

What if everything was a dream? Like everything-everything? Carter shivered. There was no point in getting all Schopenhauerian, without at least getting a blanket. He was freezing and his shoulder hurt like hell. He dragged himself to the bed in the bedroom and there he finally returned to sleep.

Half the Sunday he spent around the house, trying to find something to do. He could just go back to coding, but the fact that he was anticipating Aron's comeback wasn't letting him concentrate. In the end, after being done with eating, showering and watching TV for half the day, he decided to blow off some steam in the half basketball court in the back.

He had never run short on friends after high school. Acquaintances, he considered them. The term 'friends' was just unsuitable. If no one called the next day, he could have not cared less. And he doubted anyone could have been disturbed by his prolonged silence or even disappearance.

Maybe he was a loner at heart. But there was one thing that didn't fit in that picture. Or better said someone. Aron. Carter was the noisiest when he was with the guy. He was the funniest. Most girls he had been with had approached him after seeing him in Aron's company, only to be slightly surprised later when they were witnessing this duller version of him. It was like Aron was there only to ... make him whole.

Women thought he was too cool to care. Guys thought he was laid back and fun. But what did Aron really think of him? How could Aron crush on someone like him? Apparently, it had something to do with him being funny. Strangely enough, he wasn't doing or saying anything funny on purpose. It just happened. But was that really enough to make someone like Aron crush on him?

Ah, the guy had said something about him being handsome. Well, women had often told him the same thing, so there had to be some truth in that. He had never particularly cared for his appearance. He wore his brown hair too long, he was just a normal guy, and he could not imagine anything that could make him stand out.

He sent the ball through the hoop again. Well, even playing alone was nice. So, what had those girlfriends used to say about him?

Oh, Carter, you have such kissable lips.

Ah, so he did make a good kissing partner; that was good to know.

I like it that you're a bit rough.

He remembered that girlfriend well. Apparently, she had enjoyed it best when he hadn't been shaved and liked to kiss her everywhere. Or maybe that girl simply liked having rashes everywhere.

Hmm, Mr. Muscles.

Hmm, was that the correct way to describe him? The woman in question had really had a thing for mapping his entire body, muscle by muscle, like she needed that for

some anatomy lessons. He was well built, apparently, not as Aron, but, clearly, women liked him that way.

So why hadn't he liked them back enough? He enjoyed sex just like any other guy. He liked to take girls out and make them feel good. But he could not recall, for the love of all that was holy, how he had felt about this or that girl. It was like all the relationships he had ever had were turning into a mush in his brain, and recalling names and faces meant absolutely nothing.

He sent the ball flying again.

Aron had said something about his ass. What kind of ass did he have? He could not recall ever trying to look at his own ass. Ah, well, it was true that his most adventurous ex-girlfriend, the one who had fingered his ass, had told him something about him having a fuckable backside. She had even proposed to peg him, but he had backed away. A finger or two had been enough to heighten the sensation while fucking, but a whole dildo up his ass?

He had had Aron's cock up his ass. Significantly larger than what now seemed, in his memory, as a really non-frightening dildo attached to a strap-on the girl had shown him while smiling and telling him that she was just going to take him slow.

But, and that was a big but, he had taken Aron's cock and loved it while at it. Maybe it was just a psychological thing, not a physical barrier. But wait, maybe he had taken Aron's cock so easily simply because he was wearing Alex's body, and, well, a gay guy who was a self-declared absolute bottom, should not have had any troubles with that.

Although, Alex was a fussy lover, according to Aron. Maybe that was why the guy preferred Simon. He hadn't exactly looked closely at Simon's cock, but the young man was average, at best, and, by no means, in the same league with Aron who was sporting a real cannon between his legs.

With a wince, he adjusted his cock and balls. Why the fuck was he insta-hard the moment he thought about Aron and his big cock?

The truth was, the guy had an amazing manhood. A memory from growing up came to him. They were in high school and after PE. Since it had been the last class, they had decided to head back home and have a shower at Aron's place.

Carter had never had qualms with being naked around Aron. They were like brothers. But he had never looked at the guy, inspecting him or anything. It would have seemed rude, and also, his head was always full of stuff, so, for most of the time, he was just chatting away, while Aron listened, so he had had no interest to stare at the guy.

But that day, they had gotten in the shower together, and instantly started fooling around. He had grabbed the shower hose and directed the spray into Aron's face, which had promptly caused the guy to snatch it away from him and return the favor.

He could not recall exactly what had happened while they were busy making a mess in the bathroom, but at one point, while Aron was keeping him in a headlock, his eyes had landed on the other boy's manhood.

"Dude, your cock is huge," he had commented.

Aron had let him go instantly. Like he had felt embarrassed or something. That was thinking retrospectively, but, at the time, Carter's curiosity had gotten the better of him.

"Damn, it's like ... Wow," he had said and just reached for Aron's cock, to feel it in his hand.

"Hey, fuck off," Aron had batted his hand away.

Hmm, something had been clearly happening then to Aron, because the massive sleeping cock had been starting to lengthen while Carter had been struggling to touch it. In the end, Aron had managed to overpower him and make him promise he would behave.

That moment, he had wanted nothing more than to touch Aron's cock, and Aron hadn't let him. Which was rather weird, because Aron rarely told him 'no', even when he was coming up with the stupidest ideas.

Okay, so he was getting hard just by thinking of his best friend's cock. That was insanely annoying. But he was a practical guy. He began feeling his hard-on through his shorts. Maybe he could just head back inside and take care of business. It was a good pastime if he was to think about. And he had plenty of jerk-off material in his more recent memories of Aron's cock, and no one was going to get hurt.

He was palming his cock harder and harder now. It did feel nice like this. Not like when there was someone else doing it for him, but still, it was something. He could just close his eyes and think of Aron. He didn't even need to get inside. The fence was high enough so that no nosy neighbor could look at him doing that.

So he just whipped out his cock, dragging the elastic band of the shorts beneath his balls for extra pressure. Damn, it felt like he hadn't come in a while. Well, he had come once on Friday night, when Aron had fucked him, and the simple memory of how the guy had filled him with cock was making him tremble slightly.

Fuck, it felt good. He began picking up speed, as the events from Friday night played in his head.

"Aron," he whispered.

"Nice," he heard right into his ear, and he almost had a heart attack.

Aron embraced him from behind and chuckled into his ear.

"You're jerking off in broad daylight, thinking of me?" Aron whispered, making his hair stand all on end.

"I ..."

Well, it wasn't like he could deny it. His guilty hands moved away from his cock right away.

"I didn't hear you," he said instead.

"Well, I saw you through the window, and I could not resist catching you in the act," Aron cooed and followed with a small flick of the tongue on his ear.

"Ah, shit," Carter shook his head. "I was just ... you know, chilling."

"Hmm, I like your way of doing this chilling stuff," Aron laughed.

He could feel the guy pressing him from the back and it was like nothing he had ever experienced. Aron moved one hand to press it against Carter's cock, squeezing with clear intent.

"I'm going to fuck you," Aron said into his ear while making him walk until they both landed on a patch of green on the side.

“Here?” Carter mumbled. “Like here, here?”

“Well, you didn’t seem bothered earlier, with your cock out,” Aron commented while pushing Carter down on his back and climbing on top of him, decided to make him stretch his legs wide.

“What if we appear on Google maps? We don’t know what satellites must be doing right now,” he protested, trying to fend off Aron’s determined attacks of pulling his t-shirt up.

“As far as I know, you love publicity. What’s wrong with being caught while getting fucked by your husband? You know you look great, and I’m pretty sure I’m not bad either. We would look good in those pictures,” Aron joked.

“They don’t have that good resolution,” Carter mumbled.

“See? We’re safe,” Aron chuckled. “And I’m just kidding, baby. I’m the only one who should see you like this.”

Aron was definitely hard by the way he was pushing his erection into Carter’s thigh.

“I thought we were going to talk or something,” he tried to delay the inevitable.

“I’m done talking. You’re my husband and you should get it into your pretty head that I don’t want anyone else. Now shut up and take it.”

Aron’s mouth on one of his nipples made him grunt. Fuck, was this really going to go down like this? Friday night, well, back then, he had just felt vulnerable, and he had been ready to take it, but, right now, his ass was clenching in warning.

It’s not going to be easy, he imagined his asshole talking.

Yeah, like I need you to tell me that, he replied.

Oh, fuck, Aron was practically sucking his nipples, one, then the other, like he could not decide which one he liked best. And it was making Carter harder and harder with each flick of the tongue. The guy was an awesome tit sucker or something. He had had no idea.

And that was not the only thing the guy was an expert in; with quick moves, Aron managed to get undressed and Carter's shorts were also flying through the air, following an uncertain trajectory and landing on the ground like a surrender flag ignored by the enemy.

"I'm going to take you really hard," Aron promised, biting his ear.

He froze.

"Fuck no," he protested. "Not without the rubber."

Aron pushed him back, keeping him down.

"You don't have any health problems, Alex, so just be good once in a blue moon."

"You cannot know," he protested and tried to break himself free.

"The good doctor worked overtime to get your test results," Aron pushed him back again. "He sent me a copy, too, since I'm always keeping track of our health records."

Carter frowned.

"And he didn't think about sending me one?"

"Maybe you didn't check your e-mail," Aron shrugged.

Could Aron be lying to him? He eyed the man with unease, but Aron just seemed dead serious. He inhaled, then exhaled.

"Okay."

Oh, fuck, his ass was going to get ruined. Aron smiled and pushed Carter's legs up.

"Fuck, I've been dreaming all weekend about fucking you," Aron whispered, while he somehow managed to produce what looked like a tube of lube and began spreading the thing on Carter's ass.

Oh, so you will just let him ruin me, his asshole complained.

Shut up, asshole. It's not like you don't deserve it.

But why?

Well, for starters, for being such an asshole.

His breath stopped for a couple of seconds, as Aron pushed his cock through the small pathetic ring of muscles. All right, he was a fucking coward, so he just chose to cover his face. This was going to fucking hurt.

Aron growled above him.

“Stop being such a drama queen.”

“Who is?” he let his hands down.

“You are. But now I know how to deal with you,” Aron smirked. “I’ll make sure you understand who you married.”

“I think I know that,” Carter glared, but his words died on his lips, as Aron pushed in another inch. “You’re going to rip me apart, you know,” he complained.

“I don’t think so. I think you need a little stretching, just so you know your husband’s cock better from now on.”

“What a fucking bastard,” he drew another breath.

But, fuck, it felt good to hurt like this. Hurt was probably not the right word now. It was more like a burn, but his body was quick to adjust.

You’re such a whore, asshole, he chided his back door.

Takes one to know one, came the immediate reply.

Yeah, probably. He was pretty much a whore for Aron if only he was to take after how easily he was opening wide for the guy. And still, it wasn’t like he was gay or anything. Just some guy plenty willing to take a big dick up his ass, as long as the said dick belonged to his best friend.

“Fuck, you’re big,” at least he found it in him to complain a little.

“Well, I don’t think that’s news for you, baby,” Aron laughed, as he continued to push inside.

It was strange enough that his back wasn't hurting, by the way the guy was plastering him to the ground. The grass wasn't only greener here, it was also softer. He could not remember ever doing it out in the open like this. And, even if he ever had, he could not have been the one on his back.

"Oh, yes," Aron expressed his satisfaction, as he pulled back just a little, so he could slam back inside.

"Motherfucker," Carter exclaimed, as the guy's cock connected with something deep inside his ass.

"Hold on tight, baby, cause I'm going to take you for a ride," Aron said with a small chuckle.

That was not a pun. It wasn't a way to say stuff. He was fucking used like a fucking sex doll. Why had he never thought about his best friend being such a sex-crazed maniac? Aron was really doing a number on his ass, taking him hard, and making him shake with each thrust. And, with each thrust, Carter felt the need to curse and grab at the grass blades around his fingers, like they could save him from that heavy pounding.

It was fucking pleasant. And that was the problem. Because he could not imagine why the fuck he was about to come from his ass, just because Aron's cock was there. Well, that was it. That had to be it. Aron's cock was to blame. His own cock was slapping against his abdomen and it didn't look like Aron cared to rub it for him. And he was too busy trying to hold on to his ... whatever.

Aron was starting to sweat above him, and Carter licked one drop that fell on his lips.

"Fuck, baby, I'm so going to fill your ass," Aron issued the warning.

What? So soon? But he still wasn't ... Aron stilled above him, gathering him into his strong arms, while he jerked a few times inside.

No, no, no, this was so not happening. Carter pushed the guy away from him, and Aron rolled to one side. He didn't let the guy say a word and climbed on top of him.

"How would you like a fucking, you jerk?" he spoke.

Aron seemed surprised but didn't push him away.

"Where the fuck is that lube?" he began to search through the grass with his hands, not wanting to let go of his vantage point, on top of Aron.

The man began to search, too, much to his surprise. Aron handed him the lube, with an amused expression on his face.

"Thank you," he said, feeling rather miffed of being beaten to it by his so-called victim. "And stop grinning like an idiot. You're so going to get it," he threatened, as he sat back on his heels only to spurt some lube on his dick.

"Alex, you never top," Aron said affectionately. "Are you upset you didn't come? But you usually ... Here, let me help you," the man made a move to grab his cock.

"Fuck off," Carter batted the man's hand away. "I'm going to fuck you, so just stay there."

Aron shrugged and continued to look at him with unhidden curiosity. Carter sure hoped he looked like he meant business, as he made Aron spread wide, and expose his asshole. All right, he thought.

Was he going to do it?

Do it!

That was his cock talking.

Who put you in charge?

He shot back, in his own head.

I'm your other head; it's obvious I know better.

"Having second thoughts?" Aron stopped his mental verbalization.

"You wish," he snorted and acquiesced to his better head and its wants.

Damn, it was hot and fuck, so tight, he almost felt like losing his breath again. There was a small surprised grunt from Aron, but he didn't back down.

“Easy, tiger,” Aron caressed his chest slowly. “Let’s not have you pull a muscle, here.”

“Shut up,” he mumbled, annoyed with his lack of skill.

Aron did shut up but began helping him, by guiding his cock to his back door with a firm hand.

“Slowly, like this,” Aron said gently.

Well, it was working, and it was annoying like hell that he could not teach Aron a lesson and fuck him as hard as the guy had done it to him earlier. But it felt good, so he was willing to work with what he was given.

“So fucking tight,” he expressed his wonder.

“Not my fault you’ve never done it before. I lack practice,” Aron replied with a small chuckle. “Go ahead, just stick it in, I can take it.”

“You have an amazing asshole,” he expressed his thoughts out loud.

“Should I thank you?” Aron joked, but soon he followed with a grunt.

Gotcha! Carter smiled. So Aron could not be that cool with having his ass penetrated like this. He was rather annoyed Alex’s cock wasn’t big enough. Should it have been his own cock ... well, he knew he was one of the lucky winners at the gene lottery, and he was just being honest. Unlike his ass, at which he hadn’t looked, he knew his own cock well. For now, Aron had to do with what Alex’s dick was like.

So he began fucking, holding Aron’s legs, and doing his best.

“Wow, baby, I had no idea,” Aron’s strained words flew freely.

“Stop calling me baby,” Carter said through his teeth, as his thrusting was beginning to pay off.

“All right, tiger,” Aron chuckled. “How do you want me to call you?”

Oh, shit. That was a fucking trap.

“Just ... call me Alex,” he admitted and closed his eyes.

Of course, Aron wasn't his. He was not going to ruin things again. So he endured, with his eyes tightly closed, as Aron said his real husband's name, over and over again, praising him, as Carter came undone.

"Fuck," he whispered, as he fell on top of his best friend.

He was pretty certain they were both dirty and sweaty, and just mingling everything together, but he could not care less. He had just come into Aron's ass, and it had been fucking amazing.

Aron pushed him away just enough so he could kiss him.

"Only you and me from now on, I promise," Aron continued to caress his hair and rain small kisses on his face.

And that was pretty fucking hurtful.

Chapter Seventeen

Aron had made him walk into the house in nothing but his sneakers, commenting something on how nice he looked with jizz pouring down from his ass, and he had had to just take the guy's word for it.

Now, under the hot spray of the shower, and Aron's wandering hands, he was starting to doubt whether the fact that he had given in like a whore was for the best or the worst.

Points in favor of this being the best thing ever:

1. He could not remember having come as hard as he had just done.
2. Aron was ah-mazing, like a fucking ah-mazing lover, knowing where and when to touch.
3. He had fucked the tightest thing ever, aka his best friend's backdoor; that was the kind of thing to write down in a diary, under 'best places to visit before you die'.
4. Did he mention that Aron really knew how to make a grown man discover he had nipples?

Hmm, he could not continue this list. There were going to be way too many up points, and listing the downsides was going to become somewhat irrelevant.

So, points in favor of this being the worst thing ever:

1. He, Carter Malis, was going to burn in hell for all eternity, for basically tricking his best friend.
2. Aron was not fucking him, he was fucking his husband, and Carter was nothing but a place holder.

All right, he was just going to stop there. Aron was starting to use his tongue in very interesting ways and he could not focus anymore.

"Hmm," he purred against his better judgment.

"Hmm, indeed," Aron chuckled into his ear. "So all I had to do was to leave for a few days so you could realize you miss me?"

“Wow, look who’s got an ego the size of a planet,” Carter leaned against Aron, shuddering as the guy’s hands went down his flanks, and not because he was ticklish, although he usually was.

“You like things that are big about me,” Aron sent another jolt of pleasure down his back with a new swipe of the tongue right into his ear.

“Yeah, right,” Carter snorted, trying to reign in his growing arousal.

Which was a rather hard thing to do since Aron’s hands descended right on his cock.

“Ready for another round?” Aron asked.

Carter wasn’t the only one, at least. He could feel the guy’s erection against the small of his back. How come he suddenly craved cock of all things? Well, not so suddenly, and not just any cock, but still.

He wanted to have that particular cock up his ass again, and he must have been fucking mental because he could feel his backside still throbbing from the previous session. All right, maybe he needed to back down a little here.

Aron gave his cock a friendly tug. Nope, he was good. Definitely good to go like right now.

“Let me wash you properly first,” Aron spoke.

What? He must have made a small disappointed sound, and Aron had the universal translator installed in his brain because the guy’s hands became a bit hasty while soaping his back and his ass.

“Bed?” he asked as soon as Aron was finished.

Great, now he could only communicate through grunts and one-word phrases. At least Aron wasn’t bothered by his diminished vocabulary. He stole a look at the guy’s face, and he understood why. He wasn’t the only one who wanted to take this to the bedroom.

They landed on the fluffy sheets, a tangle of limbs. Aron was kissing him again, and this time Carter was determined to show the guy he knew a few tricks, too. He

used his tongue to fight back, and soon enough, there was a battle of inch for inch between their mouths.

“Wow, baby, so assertive,” Aron chuckled.

“Shut up, you ass, I told you not to call me baby,” he protested and stuck out his tongue to lick Aron’s lips.

“You don’t fool me,” Aron responded in kind, sucking Carter’s tongue into his mouth with a loud, wet sound. “You love being called baby. You said you like how I’m spoiling you, calling you sweet nicknames ...”

“Ugh, but baby? Sounds so cheesy,” he complained and leaned in for another kiss.

“Nope, sorry, but you’re stuck with it. But I’ll make an exception today since you’re so horny and so adamant about asking things. I won’t call you baby. But tell me what else you want.”

Carter looked at the man’s mouth, annoyed that he was denied another kiss, as Aron was keeping him a bit away, for the sake of blabbering away.

“I want you to get busy with that mouth, and I want to get busy with mine,” he said promptly.

“Ah, why didn’t you say so?” Aron said joyously.

Talking about misunderstandings. Aron flipped him with ease and manipulated his body until Carter was practically facing the guy’s dick. Excellent, he commented in his head, with not a drop of humor, but, if he was to think about it ...

Hmm, that ... He actually wanted that. He grabbed Aron’s erection with both hands and stuffed his mouth with it in one go.

A quick slap on his butt almost made him take a bite out of that delicious cock.

“What the fuck was that for?” he bristled and turned just enough to stare over his shoulder at Aron.

The jerk seemed amused.

“Nothing. You just got me in the mood for spanking your lovely ass a little.”

“How dare you?” he frowned and now he was pretty much in the mood to fight.

But Aron chose to give him a meaningful look and then simply sink his teeth into one pert buttock. Carter jerked at the contact of teeth with his skin. Was he fucked up in the head, for real? Just anything Aron did made his cock twitch now?

He felt like howling as Aron let go of his buttock to push his tongue quick inside his ass. The way Aron knew how to rim him good was just everything. He licked his lips and turned back to the task at hand. The only thing he hoped for was that his ass was just as delicious as the cock he was planning to savor right away.

Wow, why on earth did sucking a dick had to feel so damn nice? He liked it that Aron’s cock was so big, it gave him a sense of satisfaction that he could fill his mouth with it. The sounds he was making, slurping and sucking, had to be pretty much obscene, and his mind was like a pendulum between the jolts of pleasure rooting in his ass, where Aron’s tongue was doing freakishly awesome things, and the bouts of ecstasy given by the precum he could taste from that engorged mushroom he was savoring on the other end.

“C’mon, I need to fuck you,” Aron whispered and slapped his ass again.

Again with that. But he could not deny it felt good, even if his buttock was burning a little. The least Aron could do was to hit the other butt cheek once in a while.

“I have two of them, you know?” he said out loud.

“Two of what?” Aron asked, confused.

“These,” Carter explained, planting his palms on his ass cheeks and making his point.

Aron laughed.

“I know. And they are both perfect.”

Better than Carter’s real ass? The question was on his tongue, but he could not say it. He had learned his lesson all right.

Aron didn’t allow him too much time to overthink things. Plastering him against the bed, the guy was crushing him a little. This kind of sensation, of being overpowered so easily should have scared him, but he felt no fear, because this was

Aron, and he had always been this awesome guy who could do no wrong, so there was really nothing to be scared of ...

Except maybe for a giant thing knocking at his ass door. He whimpered, despite himself.

“Hush, hush, I’m taking care of things right now,” Aron promised. “Don’t go anywhere,” he blew hot air over Carter’s ear.

He wasn’t going anywhere. It wasn’t like he had a choice anymore. That boat had sailed when he had just decided that he wanted to be fucked in the ass by his best friend, regardless of whatever his muddled brain was trying to tell him. He was going to burn in hell for it, that was certain, but he could deal with perpetual doom in exchange of having Aron, even only for a little bit.

Aron lay next to him, and for seconds, they stared into each other’s eyes. Carter could feel his buttocks being treated nicely to a lot of lube, and, this time, Aron was taking a bit of more time to do it, although Carter could swear he was a bit looser, so not that much in need of preparation.

“I missed you,” Aron said in a heartbeat and leaned in for a kiss, as his fingers slid deeper inside Carter’s ass.

“I missed you, too,” Carter mumbled, as Aron moved to climb on top of him.

Aron had no idea just how much.

His fingers clasped on wrinkles of sheets as Aron wormed his way inside him. It was like an invasion, powerful and overwhelming, and Carter just bucked his hips upward, more than willing to allow it.

Aron was pressing him down, and now kissing him on the back of his neck, sending small jolts of pleasure down to the furthest of his nerve endings.

“Can I do it harder?” Aron asked and Carter just mumbled a reply.

He gasped at the first thrust. But Aron clearly knew what he was doing. And Carter had to admit that each move was making him want nothing but to meet the guy back with a counterattack, as his hips seemed to move on their own accord. The sound of flesh slapping on flesh was making him think of porn, the good kind in which you could tell the actors on the screen actually enjoyed their act.

He wished he could see that, Aron in the act of fucking.

“Do we have a mirror?” he asked, in between moans.

“A mirror?” Aron asked, taken by surprise. “Why?”

“I want to see,” Carter replied.

“Hmm, look who’s a little kinky,” Aron chuckled, but he pushed himself back and took Carter with him.

They walked in front of a full-size mirror in the corner. Carter wondered how he didn’t see it before, but probably it had been because he was always such a scattered brain.

Aron took him in his arms, lifting him off the ground. Carter could have a good look in the mirror, as they were parallel to it.

“Hmm, are you sure?” he asked, as Aron grabbed him in his strong arms, lifting him off the ground. “I’ve only seen this in porn movies.”

“Hmm,” was the only reply from Aron who managed, with pinpoint accuracy, to find his opening and fill it quickly with cock.

“Nghh,” it was his turn to moan, as his entire body felt impaled on his best friend’s fantastic dick.

Aron was a master of sex, Carter thought, feeling a bit dizzy, and trembling with each move that was making him raise a little only to slide down on the other’s erection. It was pretty much like he was a toy, but he didn’t mind being treated like one at all. No, certainly not, he loved it, and he wanted nothing more right now than to be Aron’s personal cock sleeve.

Plus, he could watch everything in the mirror, marveling at how Aron’s cock was going in and out, fucking, yeah definitely that was the word, fucking his brains out, while sweat was flowing between them, making their bodies sleek.

He inhaled Aron’s manly scent. Was it possible to take things like that and store them away? He wanted to have a taste, too, so he used his legs as they were wrapped around Aron to push himself up enough so he could sink his teeth into a

sweaty shoulder. Aron grunted in response, but more in acquiescence rather than pain or displeasure.

Carter could feel his cock pressed between their bodies, the friction increasing, but not enough. The cock in his ass had to do, and hell if it wasn't doing that, because his teeth just clamped harder on Aron's shoulder and he just let go because he couldn't keep it in anymore, and there was no time to meditate what the fuck could mean that he only needed his ass pounded like that and he could come like a hose.

Aron let him down to the floor and pushed him gently away only to look between their bodies and laugh at how Carter's cum was just all over them.

"Damn, baby," Aron said.

"No baby," he protested, but his voice was feeble and it wasn't like he could make a point right now and offer Aron 45 reasons why that term of endearment was stale like three-day bread.

"Come on, on your fours," Aron commanded and started to push him down.

"Um?"

"I might have managed a record by making you come in that position, but I don't think I'm capable of another one. Come, come, ass up."

Aron was so much stronger than his real husband's body that it was almost funny. In a way, Carter could feel like he could sympathize with Alex and his hissy fits, but he was way too high after coming, to care for real.

Aron was pressing him down, and it was a good thing that his ass was so tender now, because there was almost no resistance when the guy sank his cock into Carter's backside.

Ah, damn, he barely managed to say in his own head. He was going to have burns on his knees after this. The carpet was plush enough, but still, Aron was a vigorous beast and he was doing nothing by half. The guy's large hands were keeping his hips in place while Aron was fucking him like he was competing for some prize.

And that was not even the worst part. He could feel an itch growing inside him with the other man's thrusts and he was so damn raw from coming just minutes earlier that he had no idea what to make of that sensation.

“Ah, fuck,” he expressed his frustration, and Aron must have misunderstood because he just sped up, making the sensation grow in intensity.

Was it really possible for him to come again so fast? It was frigging unlikely, and thank heavens for small mercies, because now Aron was coming hard into his ass, keeping him there, and filling him, while groaning in what Carter could only interpret as pure delight.

He slid on one side when Aron finally let him go. The guy’s hand was quick on his cock.

“Wow, you’re almost hard again,” Aron spoke, and Carter just waved.

He did not have it in him to protest as Aron dragged him from the floor and turned him with his back to the mirror.

“Did you want to see, baby?”

Carter mumbled something, but Aron made his head turn to look over his shoulder. It was pretty weird to stare at his ass, while Aron was kneading both cheeks, pulling them apart. All right, that looked like a well-fucked hole, and Aron had every reason in the universe to be proud of his load.

“No, no,” he finally decided to express his position, when Aron’s fingers began pushing against the tender flesh.

“Yes, yes,” Aron replied and dropped to his knees to take Carter in his mouth like he was dealing with a lollipop.

There was no way he could stand up for himself right now. Hell, he could barely stand up. Luckily, Aron was keeping him in place, one hand planted firmly around a hip bone, the other sinking fingers into Carter’s abused ass, while he was bobbing his head to and fro, and giving Carter another of his deluxe blowjobs.

“Fuck,” he said, and he was surprised at how he sounded like his voice was nothing but a hoarse whisper.

Ready or not, he was losing more than just his voice, and that had to be his sanity going down the drain because there was no other thing he could do but grab Aron’s by his short hair while he was coming again.

There were perks to having such a strong husband because he didn't have to walk to bed.

"Hey," Aron called from above.

He could not stand that look in Aron's eyes. Mainly, because it wasn't directed at him-him. Because Aron was looking at Alex with those clear and loving eyes, not at Carter, and that was just making him the biggest douchebag in the universe, as far as he was concerned.

"Hey," he called back, his voice unsure. "Aron, I ..."

"Hey, you don't have to say anything," Aron caressed his cheek.

But he wanted to. He needed to. Without overthinking, without weighing the pros and the cons.

"Aron, I'm actually ..."

His entire body jerked because of the sudden pain in his shoulder.

"Baby?" Aron's alarmed voice came through the haze of mind-numbing pain.

He had to hurry. He was clearly dying because there was no way that could feel so bad otherwise. The only thing he needed to do, the only one, was to tell Aron who he was. He opened his mouth, but words didn't come out. There was just a string of weird sounds, and above all, he could hear Aron getting up from the bed and reaching for the phone.

You cannot tell Aron, he heard a voice speaking right into his brain, and he could swear he knew that voice from somewhere, but through the excruciating pain in his shoulder, he could not say where from.

All right, weird things aside, like the fact that he was hearing voices, he had to take that statement slash order into consideration. He dropped back on the pillows, breathing hard.

"Okay, I'm not going to tell," he whispered.

"What did you say?" Aron's worried voice came through.

Carter straightened up just to grab the phone from Aron's hand. No point in paying a visit to the ER. Explaining the symptoms would have been tricky. Aron pulled him close.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Carter spoke, patting Aron on the back. "Just this shoulder acting up. Sorry I scared you."

"We should take you to the hospital," Aron insisted.

"No, there's no need to," Carter replied. "Now I know for a fact that all my medical tests turned out fine. I just ... I think I just strained myself a little during sex," he spoke quickly.

Aron exhaled in relief.

"I told you to take it a bit easier," Aron reproached, but it was clear as day that the guy had just been through quite a scare. "You're not used to this thing."

"Tell me about it," Carter said dryly.

Great, just fucking great. He could not tell Aron, and he was compelled to continue this charade. And that was not even the worst thing. The problem was he was just relieved and happy to keep it up like that. In the end, he was nothing but a fucking douchebag, too.

Aron began massaging his shoulders slowly.

"What can I do?" Aron whispered into his ear.

"Hmm, this seems like a good idea," Carter answered.

The pain in his shoulder was gone like it had never been there, but Aron's hands felt just too good on him. Plus, the small circular move undoing his tense muscles was also giving him more than just physical comfort.

Now what to make of that voice in his head? Was he really going crazy? Or the situation was actually even crazier than he thought, and the big mishap of him switching bodies with Alex was well known up above or down there, or whatever

that voice was coming from, and measures were not taken to switch them back? What was he to understand from this big ass snafu?

He made no other attempt to blurt the truth to Aron, and he just ended up cuddling with his best friend and falling asleep. The evening had been a quiet affair, spent in front of the TV, while Aron had caressed his hair slowly until he had been almost certain he was going to purr like a cat.

Aron had cooked and treated him like he was made of glass, but he had enjoyed it, like the douchebag he was. And, at night, he had slept in Aron's strong hands.

Now, it was morning, and everything just seemed surreal, from getting fucked by his best friend into the lawn in the backyard, then into the carpet, to hearing voices in his head.

Hmm, what if all was semantics? *You cannot tell Aron.* Maybe the restrictions applied only to verbalizing the situation. What if he sent Aron an e-mail? He got off the bed slowly, to avoid waking up Aron, and searched for the laptop. He opened the device and waited to log on to the e-mail server. Nothing easier. So far, so good. He hit 'compose' and started typing away happily.

What should he write in the subject box? He thought a little.

Hmm, yeah, that was perfect. He hit 'send' and turned off the laptop. Then he decided to go back to bed.

Where he found Aron awake and with a frown etched on his face while sitting on the edge of the bed with his phone in one hand.

All right, this was it. Suddenly, his heart was in his throat. How was Aron going to react? It was insane, he knew it, but he had to do the right thing, right?

"What is it?" he asked, his voice strained.

Aron's eyes remained fixed on the screen of his phone, his frown deepening.

"Somebody is trying to pull a morbid prank on me," Aron murmured.

A morbid prank? *No, no, no, Aron, you have to believe it!* His brain was screaming, but he didn't dare to speak out loud.

"What prank?" he asked, his feet now glued to the floor.

"Someone is using Carter's e-mail address to send me ads to penis enlargement pills."

Say what?

"But you don't need penis enlargement pills," he murmured.

Aron's eyes shot up at him.

"Good one, Alex, but let's not joke about this. Someone hacked Carter's e-mail. And you don't know that guy and his obsession for cybersecurity. Now, it may be just a harmless joke, and maybe Carter gave his password to one of his friends ..."

"No way," Carter protested.

That earned him another surprised look from his best friend. The only guy who knew his password in the whole universe was Aron.

"I'm glad to see you so invested in this," Aron said with a sigh.

"Can I see that?" Carter gestured for Aron's phone.

"Be my guest," Aron shrugged.

He cursed under his breath. Yeah, that was just the cookie cutter type of e-mail advertising ways to grow your penis to be one foot long overnight. Whoever was playing him had to have a pretty fucked up sense of humor. He gave Aron his phone back.

"Now that's just fucked up," he murmured.

"Yes, I know," Aron confirmed. "I should contact the police."

"No!" Carter almost shouted.

No point in involving law enforcement. It was easy-peasy to find where the e-mail had been sent from. And that would be way too difficult to explain when the police

were going to find out that the suspicious e-mail had come from Aron's laptop. Or it wasn't from there?

"Why not?" Aron asked, surprised by his husband's reaction.

"Because ... Well, we don't have anything. Just an assumed hacker sending stupid e-mails. The police will not listen to us; they will say we're just wasting their time. And, you know, that won't earn us points," he said with conviction.

"Points? What points?" Aron asked, obviously more and more confused with Carter's meandering sense of logic.

"Points we could use when we have a real complaint to go with to the police," he offered the first explanation that came to mind. "Reputation points."

Aron shook his head.

"That is not how the police work, Alex."

"How do you know? What if we go to them, you know, because someone stole our car, and they will just say, ha, ha, look at those guys who needed pills to get it up?"

Aron looked at him for a second, and then he began laughing.

"First of all, we have two cars. Second of all, the e-mail offered flabbergasting solutions for penis growth, not erectile dysfunction."

"And third of all, shut up," Carter shut Aron up, more than willing to change the topic now.

"Okay, we won't go to the police," Aron feigned surrender. "But this still bothers me. If I get more e-mails from this creep, I will have to contact the police and that is final."

Crap. So he couldn't send e-mails after all.

"I have a feeling that the creep won't bother us again," he said.

"So you're able to see the future now?" Aron asked, amused.

"No, but I have a hunch," he shrugged.

“Okay, Mr. Fortune Teller, can you say what will happen right now?” Aron suddenly pulled him close.

Oh, fuck, now he knew that look in Aron’s eyes. He knew what it meant, and his ass clenched in sympathy, despite his brain yelling ‘yes!’.

“I don’t think I can,” he mumbled.

“Hey, sweet fun can be had in many ways,” Aron joked and made the robe Carter had grabbed first thing out of bed, fall down to the floor. “I know that I practically burned through my weekly reward several times yesterday, so I won’t dare to push my luck,” he added.

Weekly reward? Ah, that. Well, Alex would have to forgive him, but Carter had no intention to keep that at just one time per week.

“We can make addendums to that rule,” he blurted out.

Aron was busy nuzzling his collarbone but stood up to attention right away.

“What do you mean?”

Aron was so serious it was almost funny. But Carter was in no mood to laugh.

“I mean I might want to have my ass tapped more often,” he said right away.

Here, take that, little voice, Carter thought with satisfaction. Wasn’t Carter committing some stupid mistake now that he was arranging Alex’s life differently? And wasn’t he a huge cheater, and wasn’t he making Aron a cheater, too? Such huge mistakes had to count for something.

“You look very satisfied with this decision,” Aron laughed.

Carter bit his lips and tried to turn his face away. Aron tipped his chin and looked into his eyes.

“I am a bit surprised with all these changes in you, but I can’t say I don’t like them.”

“So you’re willing to cheat on your husband with this new ... me?” he said with hesitation.

“I don’t exactly follow you, but yes. So, come now, I cannot properly cheat on you with this new you, if you just keep talking.”

The only thing he could do was groan in frustration as Aron had no trouble manhandling him and pushing him face first against the bed. He shivered as there was something liquid poured all over his ass crack. That was not funny. He was going to end up calling in sick.

Well, he didn’t mind that much, so he tried to buck his hips into Aron’s fingers.

“No, no, baby, play nice,” Aron warned. “You don’t want your sweet ass fucked right now. And I will lose my head if you continue like this.”

He was pretty sure the small whimpering sounds he was making should have counted as enough argument that he wanted his ass plowed.

“Be still,” Aron growled and kept his hips flush against the bed.

And then, Carter could feel Aron’s magnum size cock slide with ease between his buttocks.

“Are you kidding me? Is this a thing?” he groaned into the pillow.

“Yeah, it is,” Aron joked, but apparently, the guy was really enjoying himself like this, if Carter was to take after the short soft grunts coming from above him.

Great, he really was a fuck toy now. Damn, this was frustrating. From this position, it could have been just so damn easy for Aron’s cock to slide inside and give him satisfaction. But Aron just had to be a sport about it and just use Carter’s butt to get off like this. His own cock was rubbing against the sheets, but that only made matters worse, not better. Aron was having his fun on top of him, while he could not even stroke his cock.

Aron was clearly an expert at this type of fucking because only minutes later, Carter felt warm droplets falling on his back and pooling just above his buttocks. Damn, Aron was coming like a fucking bull.

And the asshole was even more than satisfied with that because he was now dipping his fingers in his own jizz, slowly painting Carter’s buttcheeks with it.

“Baby, if you could see yourself,” Aron laughed.

The guy was moving. He was just walking away after having his fun. Carter was going to have none of it. So he was quick to jump to his feet, tackle Aron who, luckily, didn't seem to mind to let himself overpowered like this, and straddle the guy's chest.

"How would you like me to use you, too, asshole?" he growled while slapping Aron's chest with his cock.

The look in Aron's eyes was a tad odd, but he didn't care about that right now. He grabbed Aron's pecs and tried to push his cock between them. Hmm, Aron had amazing pecs, but this wasn't working. And he had thought it would have been such a fitting quid pro quo. But Aron was no woman, so his pecs could not be used like this.

"Fuck this," he murmured and just began stroking his cock, wanting so much to come.

A large hand was quick on his ass, and he was made to stumble forward until he practically landed with his cock in Aron's mouth.

"Ah, damn, this ..." he barely managed, as his eyes did a flip in his head, and he was pretty sure something had to be broken.

Aron had said that his husband, aka Alex the douchebag, was giving amazing head. But either that guy was the absolute guru of oral sex and Carter could not even fathom what Alex could do with his mouth, or Aron was praising his husband too much. Because that position and award could only go to one person and that person had to be Aron.

His cock was easily engulfed in moist heat, and Aron was using his tongue to spoil Carter's cock from end to end, which made Carter really want to reconsider his life choices. But there was no time to dwell on that, specifically since his neurons were pretty much hijacked by that skillful tongue and it was pretty damn hard to follow any reasonable train of thought from his position.

Aron was truly the master of efficiency. The guy worked great when pressed for time, it seemed. After he had just gotten himself off earlier, now he was making Carter go from naught to 60 in record time.

Okay, he wanted to last a bit longer, especially since he felt he was on borrowed time and the powers that be were probably working right now on switching him

and Alex back, but there was no way he could do that. Aron was too damn good and he was just filling the guy's mouth with cum like there was no tomorrow.

He was weightless when Aron slowly put him on his back and pressed a tender kiss on his lips.

"Fuck me sideways," he mumbled, so spent that he couldn't even move.

"If that's what you want," Aron chuckled next to him. "But we need to get ready for work, baby, so come, let's take a shower and hit the road."

"Hmm, how about no?" he replied.

Aron had no qualms about taking him into his strong arms and carry him to the bathroom. If the guy was going to dress him up, too, things were just getting too far.

"I can walk," he struggled against the man's hold.

Ugh, it was not that nice to feel the ground, but Aron obliged, and he had to walk under the shower on his own feet.

"You wanted to tell me something," Aron cooed into his ear.

"I did?" he asked, shivering from pure pleasure as Aron guided the shower head on his back.

"Before your shoulder hurt. By the way, we should still take a look at that," Aron said.

"Nah, it was nothing important," Carter said quickly.

"You seemed so serious. Like you were on the point of giving me some bad news," the other man insisted.

"Ah, it was nothing, really," he replied.

Damn, now he had to come up with some stupid lie.

"Actually," he felt struck by a flash of genius, "I wanted to say sorry."

"Sorry? What about?" Aron seemed taken aback.

“Hmm, for making you leave, you know?” he said, his head down.

“Don’t sweat it, baby,” Aron made him turn to kiss him. “I’m done with being half-assed about us. It’s normal to feel threatened since I don’t show you enough how much I want you.”

“You don’t show me enough how much you want me?” Carter quirked an eyebrow.

“Yes. You take a step back, and I just push you to take two, instead of pulling you to me. It’s here you belong to, get it?” Aron emphasized his words by squeezing Carter into his arms.

Cursed be this man and his inhuman strength. Actually, it was all Alex’s fault for being a skinny pathetic asshole, because Carter had never felt such a big power disparity between his actual self and his best friend. But sure as hell, it felt nice to have someone so strong keeping him close. Alex was a damn lucky bastard.

“I get it,” his words came out muffled. “Don’t suffocate me.”

“Sure,” Aron laughed, and just squeezed him once more to make a point.

Well, at least there was one good thing coming out of all this. He was really saving Aron’s marriage because right now the guy was looking so happy and in love, without the anger and regret Carter could still remember from the first days.

Aron was happy. It was all that mattered.

Chapter Eighteen

So, whoever did the stupid body swap knew very well about it. And was doing nothing to correct the situation. Things were just getting stupider if that was a word.

“Boss?”

It took him two full seconds to realize that Mark was trying to draw his attention. He reluctantly let go of the pencil he had been munching on until being interrupted.

“Yes, Mark,” he said snappily. “Sorry, I’m just in a bad mood,” he added quickly.

His assistant threw him a short look, filled with pity. It lasted about a second, though.

“Yolanda says that she has been going easy on you since you have been through the accident and all, but now she is bent on working your ass off like she knows you need.”

He groaned and covered his face. No wonder Alex felt the need to act like a diva. Being into the fashion business was a frigging pain. There was always something new to do and he hated new things with a fiery passion.

“Tell her I don’t want to,” he said petulantly.

There was so much he could get away with while wearing Alex’s perfect body and face. Who could say no to that man doll?

“I’m afraid it is not up to you, boss,” Mark almost sounded compassionate.

“What’s the point of all these?” he gestured wildly, managing to ruffle his hair, rub his hands in despair and drop down face first on the desk within just a few seconds, much to Mark’s dismay.

“Boss, please, get a grip,” Mark chided him softly. “It’s nothing bad, I promise.”

“Do I have to travel? Tell me I don’t have to travel,” he begged.

Mark sighed. He didn’t like that sigh.

“It’s for the endorsement tour. For the organic line.”

“Fuck organic,” Carter shook his head in self-pity. “I swear I only want to eat plastic from now on.”

Mark made such a fearful grimace that he knew he had to correct that.

“I am just joking,” he added, glaring from beneath impossibly long eyelashes.

Why did Alex have to be so perfect? It wasn't fair for the rest of the world. But karma was known to take care of things. Maybe that's why Alex had to go through the torment of shooting ads, travel for endorsement deals, and have his ass waxed. There was, after all, balance in all things.

Except for one tiny thing. It wasn't Alex who was supposed to travel now and sleep in a foreign bed for who knew how many nights. He was more than displeased with that part. And he really needed to remain close to his body. He had to make Yolanda see reason. Alex was not that big of a fashion icon, what the hell? He was just a local ... Whatever he was. Well, he did have an expensive car, and his career was probably lucrative, but he was no Kate Moss. So there was not going to be a cold day in hell if he was just going to say no.

You don't want to be away from Aron, do you?

Shut the fuck up.

You know I'm you. You're talking to yourself. In your own mind.

Irrelevant.

“Boss, what are you thinking of, right now?” Mark asked, looking at him a bit funny.

“Stuff,” he shrugged.

His answer didn't seem to make his secretary happy.

“I can help,” Mark offered, and Carter could swear the guy looked almost hopeful while saying that.

“I doubt it,” he said with a sigh.

The look of sorrow on Mark's face was almost too hard to bear.

“Well, you can help me. Get me out of this. I don’t want to leave town.”

Great, he sounded like a spoiled child. But, wait, wasn’t he supposed to be a diva?

“Yolanda is not that easy to sway,” Mark commented.

“Then tell her that I plan on quitting and becoming an Instagram model if she tries to pressure me into this,” he said fiercely.

He knew squat shit about being an Instagram model, but it was worth a try.

“That is a great idea, boss! I mean the part about becoming big on Instagram, not the quitting part,” Mark spoke. “But I think you should be the one to sell that idea to Yolanda, not me.”

“All right,” he clapped his hands together.

He only needed to post some pictures with cute dogs and a few poorly taken selfies, right? It couldn’t be that hard if Kylie Jenner was doing it. He had heard that from one of his ex-girlfriends. And, if this Instagram gig was going to get him off the hook of traveling to promote that shitty organic line, he was all in.

“Fantastic idea!” Yolanda squealed in delight and almost jumped over her desk to embrace him.

Good thing she was short. She needed to consume her excitement while still sitting in her chair. And he could only congratulate himself for the Instagram idea. Yolanda was rubbing her hands and she was obviously taken with the proposal he had come up with. Although she hadn’t seemed too threatened that he wanted to give up on his career for Instagram fame. She obviously had a plan, but he wasn’t bothered. He had managed to reach his goal, and that was to avoid traveling and leaving behind a horny husband/best friend, and his own body.

He was still smiling in self-content when she spoke again.

“We’ll get you naked.”

“Say what?!” he asked, alarmed.

“It will be something tasteful, don’t worry,” Yolanda waved. “Nudity is not allowed, but we don’t really need you naked-naked anyway. You know. Enough to let them guess.”

“I have real trouble trying to follow you,” he frowned.

The lady was way too happy. Now that worried him. That definitely felt like he had just walked into a trap. Yolanda’s eyes were so moist like she was on the verge of crying with happiness.

“I never thought I would live that day,” she said with a small smile. “The day when I’ll have you posing in sexy, hot underwear.”

“Fuck me,” he murmured.

“Hmm, swimwear, too. All the big names,” Yolanda continued her dream of having her fashion icon pet show his ass all over the place. “You’ve never wanted to do that before.”

“Wait,” Carter tried to intervene, with the risk of popping Yolanda’s pink bubble. “I didn’t say that I want it now!”

“Well, honey, how do you expect to become Instafamous? You need to show the goods, darling. Seriously, I don’t understand what kept you until now. You have a gorgeous body, really Instaready.”

How many words starting with Insta- were there now in the English language due to that social platform?

“Wait, how do you know how I look naked?” he asked, more and more panicked.

“It’s not like those skinny jeans and tight t-shirts you’re wearing leave much to the imagination, sweetie,” Yolanda grinned. “I know you’ll be a star.”

Hmm, what could have kept Alex from becoming, in Yolanda’s words, Instafamous? He felt like there was something slipping through his fingers here, and he could not tell what. And the truth was Alex’s clothes were pretty damn tight. He would not have worn such a thing if threatened if he had been him.

“Don’t I have an Instagram account at all?”

Yolanda stared at him, and for one second or two, she seemed surprised by his question.

“Alex, you told me that Instagram is where celebrities go to die,” she eventually spoke.

“Really?” he began scratching his head.

He was no expert, but that statement sounded really weird.

“Don’t worry,” Yolanda waved. “You’ll be an Instastar like this,” she snapped her fingers. “C’mon, you’re the embodiment of Instacool. People will love you.”

“Will I have more followers than Kylie Jenner?” he asked, feeling terribly out of the loop.

“Alex, hun, you know I love you, but you’re talking about an Instaqueen here. But, don’t worry. We will do everything to make you the biggest you can be. We believe in you.”

“Wow, how encouraging,” he commented dryly.

Maybe if he was acting like an ass, she was going to go easy on him. But Yolanda was clearly having none of it.

“All you’ll have to do is let us take care of you. Really, you’re so beautiful and sexy, Alex, that you don’t have to do anything. We will make it happen.”

He groaned and covered his eyes. In retrospect, wouldn’t it have been easier to say ‘yes’ to that endorsement tour? He had a hunch Alex was going to kill him for this Insta-bullshit, the moment they were going to be reverted to their designated-at-birth bodies.

But no, he couldn’t. And not because of Aron, he tried to convince himself. There was the problem with his body still in a coma, and the fact that he could not be away too long. At least, that was he was thinking. Well, sacrifices had to be made, and if Alex was going to get pissed about all this, that was just too bad.

“You’re going to be so famous,” Yolanda continued to speak, most probably mistaking the cause of his distress.

“Wait, so I’m going to prance around in my birthday suit?” his head shot up, realization hitting him.

“Hun, I told you. You’re going to advertise some really cool underwear.”

“Great, just the same thing, if you’re asking me,” Carter said.

“Come now, why the long face?” Yolanda patted his hand. “You love the attention.”

“Right,” he sighed.

Well, that was that, then. He was going to show his butt, after all. Wait, what if Aron wasn’t okay with this?

“I need to ask my husband,” he raised one finger.

“Aron? Why?” Yolanda looked, a bit puzzled, at him.

“Maybe he doesn’t want me to show everyone, you know, the goods,” he explained and leaned back in his chair.

Was Aron the possessive type? He really hoped so. But he had no idea about that.

“Let’s call him,” Yolanda offered.

“What? Like right now? I’m sure he’s busy.”

He needed to be alone with Aron when he was going to talk about getting buck naked on camera.

“Well, try. Maybe he’s not that busy,” Yolanda insisted.

“Wait, I left my phone in my office.”

Of course, the lady didn’t like interruptions. He could have just let the phone on vibrations, but he had not thought too much about it.

“No problem, we’ll use mine,” Yolanda quickly began fiddling with her phone.

“Do you have Aron’s number?” he asked, a bit taken aback by the whole thing.

Ah, sure, Aron had mentioned before about Yolanda calling him.

“Of course. So I can always reach you,” Yolanda said promptly.

Hmm, again, he felt like he had just played into one of his boss’s snares.

“Oh, hi, Aron,” Yolanda began cheerfully.

“Give him to me,” Carter gestured, and tried to reach for the lady’s phone over the desk.

Yolanda seemed to be quite nimble, as she evaded his move right away.

“No, everything’s fine. But do you have a moment? Alex and I would like to ask you something,” she continued, while he circled the desk.

Great, she was good at running, too. Right now, he was pretty certain they looked like in one of those one-century old comedy movies, trying to chase one another around the table.

“We’re thinking about making Alex Instafamous,” Yolanda continued, as she sped up.

Hmm, he needed to be clever about this. He stopped and examined his enemy over the desk. Yolanda had such a satisfied smile that he was certain she had played him like a poker champion.

“He’ll have to pose in tasteful underwear. He’s just worried you might say no,” Yolanda continued.

That was it. He needed to speak to Aron. Yolanda almost dropped her phone as he jumped on the desk in one swift move and took only two steps to land on her side. She didn’t even put any resistance when he grabbed the phone from her hand.

“Aron, just say no,” he shouted into the phone.

“Hmm, hello to you, too,” Aron drawled lazily. “Why should I say no? I’m no jealous husband. And it’s not like you’ll be completely naked.”

“Why aren’t you on my side?” he complained.

Aron laughed.

“Because I know you’re gorgeous and I want the whole world to know it.”

“Can’t you be a little more possessive?” he huffed.

“Hmm, nah, I feel quite generous right now,” Aron joked. “Also, I’ll know for a fact that I’ll be the envy of the universe.”

“Give me that,” Yolanda finally found it in her to intervene.

Hah, now she was going to taste some of her own medicine. He was the one to start running around the desk, with Yolanda on his tail.

“What are you two doing there?” Aron asked, most probably intrigued by the ruckus on the other end.

“Yolanda is being a total kid,” he answered promptly.

“Am not,” the woman was trying hard to keep up with him. “You’re the kid. You must do this, Alex,” she stopped, exhausted now. “You must be Instafamous. It’s time. Don’t keep your fans waiting any longer. Any more of this ‘I don’t want to be on Insta’ crap, and they’ll start to forget about you. Do you want to be just a pretty face?”

“Ah, so I’m supposed to be a pretty butt, too!”

He cursed the moment he had come up with the Instagram idea. Everything he was doing these days was just going against him. He was amazing at beating himself up.

“You love the attention!” Yolanda said loudly, in frustration. “Stop feeling so insecure!”

Insecure? Alex? Alex the fashion star? Carter remained silent, staring at Yolanda like he could not believe it.

“Yes, Alex, Yolanda is right,” Aron intervened. Yolanda must have shouted so loud that even he had heard it. “You must let go of these insecurities. People will love you. They already do.”

Hmm. This was really weird.

“I’m not insecure,” he mumbled.

Yolanda looked as if she pitied him.

“Go ahead, and take this offer,” Aron encouraged him. “It will make you feel better. I know it will.”

“Okay,” he exhaled. “I’ll do it, at least, just to have you, people, off my back already. I suppose that I will have the entire universe on my back, in return, staring at my ass, but well ... Fuck me, right?”

Yolanda stared at him, frowned for a second, and then she started laughing. Apparently, Aron was in total accord with his boss, because he was laughing, too.

“I can barely wait to see your first Instagram posts,” Aron spoke. “I’ll be your number one fan.”

“Fine, fine,” Carter decided to surrender.

“Then it’s settled,” Yolanda moved quickly and snatched the phone from him. “Thanks a lot for all the help, Aron. You’re a sweetheart. Yes, of course, I will take care of your husband. Smooches!”

“So, what do I have to do now? And what about those guys with their organic line?” He felt a little guilty right now.

Yolanda waved.

“We have bigger fish to fry. And don’t worry. We’ll just arrange an interview with some amazing pictures, and publish it in the biggest fashion magazines, for the organic line,” she added. “They will be pleased with the exposure, and all I have to do is talk to the media planner. I have plenty of ropes to pull.”

“Well, if no one’s hurt, that’s fine by me. But wait? What the hell do I say in that interview?”

“Whatever you said when you went to New Entertainment is completely fine,” Yolanda hurried to give him peace of mind.

“I just said a bunch of bs,” he shrugged.

“It was perfect,” Yolanda said with conviction. “Continue to stick to that.”

He wasn't particularly happy as he walked out of Yolanda's office. Damn, couldn't the powers that be change him back to his own body already? But that ... that meant that he could no longer enjoy waking up next to Aron and ...

Brain, what are you doing? Stop!

Mark had done a great job arranging the shooting session and having him answer over the phone to all the questions. He had had no idea before walking in Alex's shoes that this was how journalism was done today. At least, he had expected to be summoned to one or two of those magazines, but they had been more than happy to be sent a bunch of pictures, and have the interview recorded in that manner.

Whatever, it was fine by him. And luckily, the workday was almost over and he hadn't fucked up too badly. He was even in the mood to pat himself on the back a little. Everyone seemed happy with his choices.

The knock on the door didn't even bother him.

"Come in," he cheerfully invited the visitor to let himself in.

His mood changed, however, when he saw who it was.

"Ah, you," he murmured.

Simon was carrying some sort of box and had a weird smile on his face.

"Well, I thought about bringing a gift," the guy spoke quickly. "Mark wasn't at his desk, so no one saw me."

"A gift?" he eyed the box warily.

The thing even had a bow. But what could someone like Alex possibly want? Simon was bubbling with excitement by the way he was shifting from one foot to another.

"All right, let me see it," he gestured for the guy to come closer.

Simon was giggling as he unwrapped the box. His jaw dropped when he saw what was inside.

“Really, man?”

“What? You don’t like it? It’s genuine leather,” Simon hurried to say in his defense.

“So? Do you want me to ... what? Spank you?” Carter took out the object and watched it closely.

Yeah, it was real leather. It felt kind of luxurious in his hand. He slapped his own palm, to get a better feel of it.

“Ouch,” he said and put the spanking paddle back in the box.

“But I thought you would like it,” Simon whined.

Hmm, no, I’m not going to look at you, puppy eyes, Carter thought with determination.

“Why won’t you even look at me? Did I do something wrong?” Simon insisted. “Are you this cruel?”

Carter sighed and looked at Simon. Oh, he was so going to regret this.

“No, I’m not this cruel,” he spoke and glared. “Come here, let me spank you.”

If the guy had had a tail, he would have wagged it.

“Wow,” he exclaimed, as Simon came over to him, pushed his chair a bit away and placed himself happily across Carter’s lap. “I thought more like a slap over the wrist or something.”

“No,” Simon said a bit too cheerfully, after how dejected he had looked just earlier.

Damn it, he was just such a pushover. Everyone was playing him around here.

“So, let me hear it,” he said dryly. “Do you want me to spank your ass?”

“Yes, Master,” Simon agreed quickly.

“All right,” he shrugged.

Smack! The sound was a bit muffled, as Simon was dressed in his usual designer suit.

“No, not like this,” Simon protested. “I want it on my naked ass.”

“No, no,” Carter spoke, but the guy stood up and quickly unhooked his belt, to drop his pants. “That’s enough, I don’t need to see your dick, just ... push your pants under your buttocks or something.”

Simon obeyed and sat across his lap again. The guy had a nice ass, if he was to think about it for a second. He had perfect unblemished skin. Well, that was going to change.

Smack! Ah, definitely better this time around. Simon grunted, and the place where the paddle had landed was a bit red. Hard to tell with the guy’s dark skin tone, but it offered a sense of satisfaction. Okay, once more.

This time, Simon’s grunt sounded a bit softer. Was the guy really enjoying this? Again. He had never done that before. He shifted in his chair and licked his lips. Smack, smack, smack! Simon was now digging his fingers into Carter’s thigh, his breath ragged, his grunts turning into desperate moans.

Carter froze with his hand in mid-air. Simon was practically rubbing against his leg now.

“C’mon, get off,” he asked.

Why was his voice raspy, too? Simon pushed himself up, without giving him lip, and carefully buttoned himself up. Carter could not avert his eyes. The guy was definitely hard.

“Alex,” Simon spoke breathily.

“Sorry, puppy eyes, this time you’ll have to take care of business at home,” Carter murmured.

“What did you call me?” Simon asked, his voice filled with excitement once more. “You’ve never called me endearing names before. Wait. Do you like dogs?”

“Yeah, I love dogs,” Carter answered. “Now out, out. I don’t want to see you in 3 ... 2 ... are you walking to the door already?”

“Yes, Master,” Simon bowed quickly and hurried to the door.

Carter opened a drawer and threw the paddle inside. And then he pushed his hands through his hair. Good thing Alex’s career was at stake, and he was in no position to jeopardize that by pulling his hair out. Plus, the pain was taking his attention away from the throbbing in his crotch.

He was functional enough when came another, playful knock on his door. Where was Mark, anyway?

“Come in,” he shouted, a bit annoyed now.

He wanted nothing else but to go home, eat something, and drop dead. The day had been eventful enough.

“How’s my Instaking doing?” Aron called cheerfully.

“Oh, shut up already,” he snorted. “I did that just so I won’t do the tour.”

“Tour? What tour?” Aron smiled and walked towards his desk.

Of course, the guy wanted to kiss him. Well, he was a dutiful husband, so he let himself smooched. At least, Aron was more decent than Simon, and settled just for a short peck on the lips.

“For that organic line,” he shrugged.

“But you love tours,” Aron leaned against the desk and watched him carefully.

“Eh, didn’t feel like it. I’d rather be close to home. And you,” he added without giving his words too much thought.

“Wow,” Aron chuckled. “So you love me or something?”

“I suppose. We got hitched or something,” he joked back.

“Excellent. Well, seeing how lovey-dovey you are these days, I came to take you out someplace nice tonight.”

“Ah, you finished your work early, then?”

“Yeah, do you still have work to do?”

“No, I think I’m set. All checked.”

Endorsement tour avoided. Checked.

Chasing down Yolanda around her desk. Checked.

Interview for the organic line. Checked.

Spanking the lover on the side. Checked.

Yes, everything was in order.

“Then, let’s go,” Aron offered his hand.

“Wait, I need my phone,” he started looking around.

Where the hell did he put that thing? It seemed to be nowhere on the desk. Aron moved away and he started pulling the drawers. His eyes landed on that offending object too late, and by how silent Aron fell next to him, he knew he fucked up.

“Um, what’s that?” Aron asked, as he tried to push the drawer back and pretend it didn’t happen.

“That is ...”

Fuck, what could he say? He could not just blatantly lie. Aron was not mentally challenged, and he wasn’t 12, either.

“Wait, let me see,” Aron pulled the drawer from his hand, and took the leather paddle.

He examined it carefully, while Carter held his breath.

“Care to explain?” Aron looked straight at him.

“I ... ahem ... bought it for us?” he said hesitantly.

“For us? Or for you?” Aron began smiling.

Oh, no. He was pretty certain that thing had to hurt.

“No, for you,” he said snappily and grabbed the paddle from Aron’s hand. “I want to spank your ass.”

“What for?” Aron asked, smiling.

“I thought you’d like it,” Carter said brightly. “You seem to, um, enjoy a little punishment.”

“What gave you that idea?” Aron played dumb. “I’d rather try this on you,” he added and quickly snatched the paddle back.

“Ha, ha, don’t even think about it,” Carter said dryly. “And you’re the one who likes being fucked in the mouth.”

“Oh, baby, you’re sure you want to go out still? Because if you keep running your mouth like that ...”

“Give it back,” he reached for the paddle, but Aron just held it higher. “It’s okay. I don’t need that to kick your ass.”

Aron was clearly surprised as he rammed into the guy, making him lose balance and end up on the carpeted floor. Carter got on top quickly, and grabbed Aron’s hands, pinning them to the floor. The man was still stubbornly holding the spanking paddle.

“Whatcha gonna do?” Aron teased.

It was clear as day that the guy had no intention to break free, as he could easily do it.

“I’m going to ... tickle you,” he said triumphantly, as he sank his fingers into Aron’s flanks.

“Fighting dirty?” Aron laughed and he grabbed Carter, turning the tables, and trapping his enemy under him.

“Aron, we’re at work, my work,” he said sternly, or as much as he could manage, as Aron was blowing hot air over his face.

He had no idea the proximity to his best friend could have that effect on him. It was like his mind was slowly going blank, and he could not tear his eyes away

from that handsome face. Aron captured his lips into a kiss, and now this was no casual smooch, like earlier. This was the sexy, I-want-to-fuck-your-brains-out, kind of kiss.

Who needed to breathe anyway? All he needed was Aron's tongue in his mouth, Aron's big hands reaching under his t-shirt to torture his nipples, and Aron's big strong body keeping him down like he was nothing.

"Ahem, boss?"

He had no idea if he wanted to kiss or kill Mark right now. Aron had at least the decorum to let him go and even helped him to his feet.

"Sorry, Mark," Aron said cheerfully. "I don't think we've met. I'm Aron, Alex's husband."

At least, Aron had the decency to sound a bit embarrassed. Mark shook Aron's hand with a happy expression on his face.

"I know, I wanted so much to meet you!"

Aron threw Carter a small look, as the assistant just continued to shake the man's hand.

"You're even more handsome than I imagined!" Mark continued.

Wow, there-there, tiger, this man's taken! Carter felt some weird sense of possession kicking in.

"You two are so amazing together!" Mark spoke again.

"Thanks," Carter smiled.

Why the fuck was he saying that? Aron looked happy together with Alex, not Carter. So they were not an item. Although apparently, he was doing a hell of a job to keep it up. It was okay, really. He was just taking care of Aron's marriage.

Well, if someone leaves you to take care of their plants, you water them and give them fertilizer, and all that, right? You keep them happy.

Yes, but you're not fucking them.

Screw you, brain.

“I want to celebrate Alex’s decision to become the new sensation on Instagram,” Aron chatted away happily with Mark.

“That’s great,” Mark agreed. “Did you decide what you want to do? Because I bought some tickets to the basketball game tonight. I wanted to go with a friend, but they’re busy ... I know it’s just the local team playing, but ...” Mark fiddled with his man purse to extract two tickets.

Carter was so quick to snatch them, that he almost bumped Aron aside in the process.

“Are you kidding me, right? It’s their first chance in forever to make it to the big league!” he said, excited.

He had read about the game online, but it had not crossed his mind one second to go until now. The opportunity was too good to pass.

“Mark, I would kiss you, man, but I’m your boss and I don’t want you to sue me for sexual harassment,” he added.

Mark grinned, and he seemed happy just because his boss was happy. What an awesome assistant!

“Aron,” he turned towards the other man in the room, “we’re going to see the frigging game!”

He froze in place. Aron looked at him, but there was no muscle in the guy’s face moving. It was like he had been struck by lightning. Oh, right, Aron had planned a night out and it wasn’t, most probably, including a basketball game.

Why was he such an idiot? Alex could not have been so much into watching the game, right? The guy was doing ballet, for fuck’s sake! Okay, now that had the effect of a bucket of frozen ice on his excitement, and he could not remember signing up for that kind of challenge.

He looked down in embarrassment, but also as a means to avoid Aron’s eyes.

“Sorry,” he said. “I should have asked what you wanted to do. Mark, thanks,” he turned toward the assistant to hand him back the tickets. “But I cannot accept these.”

“Hey, I didn’t say I don’t want to go,” Aron finally spoke and moved to place one hand on Carter’s shoulder.

And then, he picked up the tickets from Carter’s stretched hand, while smiling affably at Mark.

“Thanks a lot, Mark. You’re the man,” Aron spoke.

“Great! Have fun at the game!” Mark said cheerfully. “See you tomorrow, boss! I will make sure to pick the first swimwear you will need for the first shooting session for Instagram. Nothing too revealing right from the start, I know,” the assistant raised his hands in surrender. “Now I have to hurry home. Taz will surely tear down the walls if I’m not home on time.”

“Who’s Taz?” Carter murmured, too taken aback with everything to compute.

“My dog. He’s this awesome golden retriever. I canceled the dog sitter, so I have to go,” Mark spoke quickly.

A golden retriever. Just the breed he liked most. Suddenly he felt very jealous of Mark. His folks had never let him have a dog. They were away too much. So he had fantasized about it only. Now, if he thought about it, what was the name he had given his imaginary pet? Nah, his brain was playing tricks on him. It wasn’t possible that Alex’s assistant had a dog named just like the imaginary one from Carter’s childhood. Although he could now distinctly remember how many times he had played imaginary fetch with Taz, his very not real pet.

“Baby?” Aron called for him. “Are you upset? You don’t want us to go to the game, after all?”

The regret in the man’s voice was almost tangible.

“No, sorry, I was just thinking of stuff,” he replied. “I’d love to see the game with you.”

Ah, ah, it was coming to him. It was dishonorable like hell, but it was going to offer the proper explanation.

“I read about the game today and I know how much you love to play basketball, so I just thought how cool it would be if you could see it when Mark offered the tickets,” he said it in one breath.

Aron squeezed his shoulder and placed a kiss on his forehead.

“Ah, so you’re doing this for me? But it’s your celebration.”

“What better way to celebrate than this? If you’re happy, you’ll take care of making me happy, too,” Carter joked, remembering something about what one of his ex-girlfriends had once told him about how women could get men to do all kinds of stuff for them. Wait, weren’t those girls divulging too much of their arsenal? Well, it was true that they had also often said that they liked how comfortable they felt in his company.

“I like your way of thinking,” Aron hugged him. “And, really, baby, if you wanted me to fall for you even harder, you could not have thought of a better way.”

“Well, it was all because of Mark ...”

His assistant had vanished. He was probably in a hurry to see Taz, his golden retriever. Not that he could blame the guy for it.

“Your reaction when he took out the tickets was priceless,” Aron chuckled. “Alex,” he turned Carter to face him and for a couple of seconds, they stared into each other’s eyes. “Carter’s mom told me you visited them to apologize. I’m sorry I was hard on you. That was so nice of you. I so need to apologize. On my knees, how you want me. I should not be so quick to judge you ...”

“Stop,” Carter covered Aron’s mouth with one hand. “I need to make things right, you know?”

No, Aron couldn’t know. But Carter knew he had so many things to fix. And if he was going to get up from that hospital bed, ever, he was going to hug his mom and tell her how much he loved her.

“You’re doing one hell of a job so far,” Aron took his hand and kissed him quickly. “I love you, Alex. And I was in the wrong, too, talking about Carter the way I did. It was just so childish of me. Carter was ... is just my best friend. You are my husband. I really hope that, when he wakes up, you could be friends with him.”

“Yeah, right,” Carter snorted. “I mean, why not?” he hurried to add. “I’ll try.”

There was no way he was going to be friends with that cheater. Aron had no idea who his real husband was. But Carter was no better. He could not ever be friends with Alex, for the simple fact that Alex had Aron. And that was the only person Carter wanted in the whole wide world and couldn’t have.

Chapter Nineteen

They stumbled inside, laughing and joking, and somehow ended on the carpet in the living room. The game had been incredible, they had stuffed their faces with hot dogs and they had spent their evening in a dive, drinking and singing with other fans.

“Fuck, this was the most amazing night out in forever, Alex,” Aron said breathily, as somehow he managed to disentangle himself from Carter’s limbs, only to adjust his position and make his placeholder of a husband spread his legs so they could hook their crotches together.

“It fucking was,” Carter confirmed wrapping his arms around Aron and pulling him close. “Can you believe they won?”

“Yeah. I can’t believe I’m doing all this stuff with you, though,” Aron laughed and placed a sloppy wet kiss on Carter’s mouth. “I was getting used to you being bitchy, you know?”

Now look who had a loose tongue after a few drinks. Well, there had been more than a few drinks, and even a strong guy like Aron was bound to feel the effects of so much alcohol in his bloodstream.

“What are you talking about?”

Through the haze of alcohol, Aron seemed to start reconsidering his confessions.

“I’m still bitchy as hell!” Carter laughed and kissed his friend with a loud smack.

“Hmm, that reminds me,” Aron pushed himself to his feet. “Good thing I brought that home.”

Carter rolled on one side and found it ideal to just walk on his fours to reach the sofa. Standing up required way too much body strength.

“Well, nice of you to assume the position,” Aron joked.

“What?” he tried to turn. “Ouch!” he yelped.

Aron was standing there, leaning over him, the leather paddle in one hand, and he was laughing at his expense. Carter growled and stood up quickly. It wasn’t like he

was drunk-drunk. He could still snatch the thing from Aron's hand if he was quick enough.

"Aha!" he shouted victoriously and swung the paddle in the air. "Let's see who's getting a smacked bottom now!"

Aron was either too tipsy to react, or he was letting his skinny husband win just for the sake of it. Carter found great pleasure in pushing Aron down, rolling him and smacking his ass with the paddle.

Hmm, it had to be better on a naked butt. So, without too much preamble, he began struggling with his husband's jeans. Aron, the ass, was having a great time laughing his ass off.

"Undress and give me that ass to spank it," he growled, and Aron just started to laugh harder. "C'mon, I'll get all bitchy on you if you don't."

Aron almost made no effort to grab him, but he fought. There was no way he was going to be the one to get spanked tonight.

"C'mon, I'm dying to spank you," he complained.

If Alex was such a man doll, there were ways to get what he wanted without trying to overpower Aron, because that was definitely not it.

"Why didn't you say so, baby?" Aron chuckled.

The man stood up again, and this time made a show of unhooking his belt and pushing down his jeans and underwear. Carter gulped. He was no stranger now to Aron's intimate parts, yet he was still impressed. He licked his lips.

"You seem a little distracted," Aron spoke, and proceeded to remove his jeans and briefs completely, remaining in nothing but his t-shirt.

Carter was all for this bottomless fashion. Aron did a one-eighty, slowly, showing off his ass a little, and Carter found himself soon all over it. He sank his fingers into Aron's muscled ass cheeks and placed a kiss right above the crack. Aron laughed.

"Hey, I'm ticklish."

“You don’t say,” Carter murmured and searched for the spanking paddle with his eyes.

It was not the best position possible, but he did manage to raise the paddle and spank Aron’s ass once, hard.

“Hey!” Aron exclaimed. “Why didn’t you say you were starting?”

“And have no surprise advantage?” Carter laughed. “You gotta admit it; it’s a nice sound.”

The second time, though, Aron yelped and jumped, covering his ass with both hands.

“Hey, you have a mean swing, right there,” the man glared at him.

Carter got on his feet again and waved the paddle menacingly.

“Come on, present your ass,” he followed Aron.

The man was apparently not that big a fan of punishment, because he started running and laughing. Okay, so this was how they were going to play this. Carter sprinted after Aron, but the guy was way too fast for him. He had to stop to draw his breath.

“Some kind of Dom you are,” Aron stopped at a safe distance from him, hands on his hips.

Carter could not look anywhere else but the guy’s dick. Officially, he was obsessed with that thing. After all the hot dogs he had stuffed down his throat tonight, it was a miracle that he was still in the mood for having his mouth full again.

“Alex? Baby?” Aron cooed.

“What?” Carter snapped.

“You’ve been staring at my cock for the last two minutes. Did you forget about wanting to spank me? Do you want this instead?” Aron grabbed his cock and flaunted it.

Yeah, damn right he wanted that. He threw the paddle and walked over to Aron, grabbing the guy’s manhood with both hands.

“Fuck, baby,” Aron cursed softly, as Carter began stroking him, while fondling the balls, too. “When did you turn into sex on a stick?”

“I’ve always been like this,” Carter mumbled.

I am because of you.

Aron was ruining his concentration with all that talking. He slid to his knees and took the man in his mouth. Damn, he thought, as a small shiver coursed down his spine. Why did it feel so good to stuff his mouth with his best friend’s cock?

“Wow,” Aron whispered and he firmly grabbed Carter by the back of his neck. “You give so great head, baby.”

Carter could feel something swelling in his chest at the praise.

“And I really love your new technique,” Aron added.

Now he froze.

“Don’t stop, baby,” Aron’s hand was firm on his neck. “It’s pretty amazing, you know? I like it when you’re a bit rough. It lets me know you really want this. C’mon, eat up that dick like you mean it,” the man half-joked and pushed Carter’s head into his crotch again.

At least he knew how to control the situation and grabbed the guy’s cock at the base, using his hand to make a tunnel with his hand and rub the steely shaft in earnest.

“Oh, fuck, oh, fuck,” Aron murmured. “You’re killing me with this blowjob, have a little mercy.”

Well, he knew Aron didn’t really mean it this time, and it was just a compliment, so he increased the pressure, sucking in more. Ah, damn, he could feel his dick struggling against his pants, but there was no way he was going to let go. He wanted Aron’s cock deeper and deeper.

He could hear Aron’s raspy breath above him, as he worked the guy’s cock.

“I’m coming, baby,” Aron cried out, and kept his head there, as he unloaded wave after wave into Carter’s throat.

He was now holding onto the other for dear life because he almost could not breathe. But who cared about that anyway? It was so damn satisfying to have Aron come in his mouth like this that he could take it.

Aron let go moments later, and Carter allowed the guy's cock to slide out of his mouth, but not without giving it a few more licks that made the other shudder.

"Wow, baby, just wow," Aron caressed his face tenderly.

"Did you like it?" Carter asked smugly.

Aron was following the shape of his lips with rough fingers.

"I'm so glad I found you and married you," Aron whispered as he leaned in and kissed Carter.

Ouch, nice cold shower.

"Okay," he mumbled and got to his feet.

Aron pulled him tight and then forced his chin up, so he could look at him.

"What's wrong?" Aron questioned while searching his husband's face.

"Nothing," Carter shook his head.

"C'mon, don't lie," Aron insisted. "You're hot like this, and you make me dizzy with happiness, but the next minute you look like you just found out that you have only one week left to live."

Ah, damn. Well, that was somewhat accurate. To a certain degree. The doctors still seemed optimistic about what the hell was happening to his body.

Aron stiffened next to him.

"What aren't you telling me? Is this about your health? But the doctor said you're completely fine ..."

"I am fine," Carter interrupted. "I'm just ... I don't know," he shrugged.

What could he tell? He was not allowed to tell.

“Do you need to see a therapist?” Aron said cautiously. “We can arrange something. Baby, I want you to be happy.”

“I am,” he said sharply.

“Sorry to contradict you, but you seem the opposite of that,” Aron protested but started caressing Carter’s arms.

“I cannot stop thinking ...” he started. “Carter’s mom and dad are a wreck. The guy is there, in the hospital, dying. And I’m here, having fun, and ... I just feel guilty, okay?”

It was the closest shape of truth he could touch without breaking the rules.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Aron hugged him. “I want to understand what you’re going through.”

“Promise me something, Aron,” he said while holding his best friend with all his might.

“Just say the word,” Aron encouraged him.

“Promise me that no matter what happens, you will be happy,” he said in one breath.

“But I am happy,” Aron replied. “I have you, and you’re amazing.”

“No, just listen,” he hugged the other tightly. “If ... Carter dies, don’t be ... unhappy.”

Aron remained speechless.

“I know, it sounds bad, but ... I only want this,” he said.

“I ... I don’t want to lie to you, Alex,” Aron spoke, his voice filled with emotion. “I cannot promise you this. It’s the only thing I cannot give you. Ask me anything else. But not this.”

Oh, fuck. He could feel his entire body shaking.

“Ah, damn, I should have let you rest more. And forget all about Instagram and other stupid stuff. You will take the entire week off and that’s final. And let’s just

go together to see Carter. The doctors say he's stable and that his body is healing at a good rate, seeing what state he is in. Stop with these wide-eyed fears. Carter is not going to die."

He was pretty certain he wanted to cry like a stupid baby right now.

"He will get better and we will all be friends, okay?" Aron insisted.

That was not going to happen.

"Promise?" he asked, despite himself.

"Yes, that I can promise. You'll see. He's an amazing guy. We will have a super duper time together. Carter is the funniest guy I know. He's a good friend. He'll be a good friend to you, too. Seeing how much this accident changed you, I won't be surprised to see him changed, too."

"Maybe if he's that changed, you won't like him anymore," Carter mumbled.

"I'm talking about him seeing things clearer. About us. He will see how much we love each other and he will understand. I'm sure of it."

"Okay," he sighed. "Okay. I trust you."

"Better now?"

"Yes, sure," he said. "But don't lock me up at home. I'd rather be posing all naked, than staying all cooped up in here."

"As you wish, baby," Aron admitted. "What do you say? Do you want us to go together one day to check on him? I go almost every day, but you're busier than me, so you should pick the day that's most convenient for you."

"Are you really doing that? Are you going to see him every day?" he exclaimed.

"Well, of course, I told you. He's my friend, I'm not giving up on him."

"You know what, Aron? You're a great man," Carter whispered and pushed his head into Aron's shoulder.

"And you're amazing. Come now, there was enough excitement for one day. Let's get you to bed."

Half an hour later, he was cocooned in bed, with Aron's heavy arms around him.

"Make love to me?" he whispered, and Aron moved slowly to kiss him.

"Are you sure?" Aron's lips caressed his ear, sending small jolts of pleasure down his back.

"Yeah, I want you inside me," he said simply.

Aron was as tender as someone of his size could be, but Carter could still feel like he was getting crushed as the man covered him, head to toes, with his own body. But it was perfect like this. He felt grounded, safe, and he didn't have to worry anymore. At least for now.

The guy's lips were caressing his neck slowly, making him shiver.

"I'm so in love with you right now," Aron said softly. "You're safe here, with me. I won't let anything bad happen to you."

He knew that. He knew next to Aron he was safe. And he was whole, too, because when the man impaled himself slowly into Carter's body, there was nothing else he could think of but how complete he was.

It was easy to voice his happiness like this.

"Wow, baby, you're so vocal," Aron mumbled through the kisses. "I love hearing you cry out like this, do you have any idea how fucking hot you are?"

No, he didn't, and he didn't care to know what Aron had to say to his sexy husband. At the moment, he was nothing but a looter, scavenging emotions.

Aron had let him sleep in a little, after calling Yolanda and getting a reprieve of a couple of hours for him. And he was thankful. His hangover was not that bad, but Aron had not let him go to sleep until he had been sure his husband was completely satisfied. Which meant that he didn't feel like getting out of bed at all now.

Eventually, he knew he had to wake up. With a cup of coffee in one hand, he examined the living room with rueful eyes. He could tidy up the place a little. After all, Aron had made coffee and left plenty for him, too, which was a lifesaver.

He picked Aron's jeans from the floor, and, simply by force of habit, he checked the pants. His fingers wrapped around a card, as he checked the back pockets.

"A club?" he stared at the elegant card, on which, on the dark print, a few letters were embossed in gold.

Whatever, Aron had to go drink somewhere when he was out of town, right? The name of the club didn't ring any bells. He shrugged and put the card back. Hmm, there was still time until he needed to head out the door.

Oh, yes, he could use that time to check the strange e-mail Aron had gotten instead of his confession about who he really was.

He fired up the laptop and waited patiently for the device to boot. If he was lucky, Aron was still using the same password. All he needed was to track down the location from which the e-mail had been sent. That could give him an idea about the whereabouts of this invisible shthead who was playing with his life and also Alex's. Maybe the guy was a real magician or something. But he still had to use an IP address to send e-mails, right?

Hmm, Aron hadn't changed his password. Easy-peasy. Aron had never kept his password secret from him, and Carter had often accessed his e-mail, while they were still friends. Well, it was all for a good cause, and it was going to be the only one time when he was getting inside the guy's e-mail, without his knowledge.

He stared at the header of the e-mail, chewing his bottom lip. Nope, he checked, and it didn't look like the replacement had come from a different address. Damn, whoever that magician was, he was a whizz kid at hacking e-mails, because everything looked like nothing wrong was afoot.

Feeling dejected with his investigation, he decided to log off. His eyes traveled over the list of e-mails in Aron's inbox and stopped at one.

"Thanks for all the fun," he read slowly, chewing the words on the subject line.

All right, this was no longer benign. Was he really going to read Aron's electronic correspondence? The sender was someone named David ... Hmm, he thought. He

let the mouse hover over the e-mail. The fun? What fun? What could Aron possibly do to have fun with a guy named David?

Hey Aron,

I wasn't expecting you back so soon. But we really had a good time together, so I thought about sending you a few pictures as a memento.

Here's hoping things work out between you and your husband.

If not, well, you know where to find me.

Cheers,

David.

He stared at the screen in shock. Who the fuck was this David dude? What the fuck?! Aron was not a cheater. There had to be another explanation. No, nopey, no, no, no. But what kind of fun was this guy talking about? Maybe they just had some drinks.

The pictures didn't show anything compromising at first. Just shots of a club interior, the bar, Aron with a drink in his hand, smiling for the camera, while a guy who looked in his mid-40 was hooking one arm over his shoulder. The man seemed to have a similar height to Aron and was built strong, too. His blue eyes were staring at Carter from the picture, with a small secretive smile. It was like the guy knew something Carter didn't, and that was definitely annoying. Was this really the type Aron was going for when he wasn't fucking his twink of a husband? No, he shook his head. This guy was nothing but a friend. The way he was keeping his arm thrown over Aron's shoulder didn't look intimate beyond a friendly gesture.

That didn't mean that Carter couldn't admit that the guy was a looker. Showing his age, for sure, but with the kind of attitude and presence that would make others take note of him. How could Carter describe him? Ah, a man of the world. That was an accurate description.

Yeah, he was worrying about nothing. But when he clicked on the next picture, he knew he had to reconsider. The guys performing on some kind of stage were putting to absolute shame Simon's outfit when the guy had come to play slave. And Carter had thought that was risqué enough. This, however, was in a totally

different league. Plus, it looked like those guys were engaged in all kinds of sexual acts, save for penetration.

He shook his head. For a second there, he had lost himself while admiring the almost naked bodies. What was he now? Gay or something?

He could feel his teeth grinding when he looked at the last picture. It was a shot outside the club, and now Carter knew that name. He quickly ran a Google search and identified the location. So, maybe Aron went there for more than just drinks and pleasant conversation.

Well, he turned off the laptop. Aron had some explanations to give. He definitely wasn't a cheater, Carter said to himself. But damn, that fucking looked bad.

“Are you kidding me?” he grabbed one pair of underwear with two fingers and held it as if the thing could suddenly develop teeth and bite him. “Am I supposed to wear these for the photo shoot?”

Mark pointed one pencil towards the underwear with a thoughtful expression on his face.

“That is from the Blue Desire collection,” his assistant explained.

Carter took the offending thing and stretched it while looking through the enormous gap at Mark. The thing barely covered the front, leaving the back, ahem, exposed.

“This is not underwear. Whoever wears such a thing will just have a naked ass to worry about. Frankly now, what is the purpose of this thing? And I wasn't supposed to be this naked, right?”

“No, no, these are not for the shoot,” Mark waved quickly, now bent on putting his boss's mind at ease. “They're a gift. For you.”

“Is this a joke? Do they think themselves funny or something?” Carter exclaimed.

“Well, they thought you would like some items from their special collection. You know, for personal use,” Mark continued.

“For personal use? Why would I go out of the house wearing such a thing? It must be damn uncomfortable,” he continued his protests.

Mark gulped audibly, then coughed, and then drew one long breath.

“That’s not for wearing outside. It’s for, um, bedroom affairs?” Mark shifted from one foot to another.

Carter stopped and looked at his assistant.

“Do you need the bathroom, Mark? Just go, you don’t have to keep it in; it’s bad for your kidneys.”

“No, I don’t need the bathroom, boss,” Mark denied. “It’s just that, um, I don’t know how to say this ... Okay,” the young man braced himself. “They sent this sexy underwear so you can ... make your husband happy,” he added quickly.

Carter dropped the underwear back into the box. Hmm, did they have it in a bigger size? He knew exactly how Aron had to present his ass for punishment if he was going to found as little as the guy had tried to cheat. Well, if Aron was a cheater ... No, Aron was not a cheater. There was an explanation for David, that fancy club, and everything.

“Boss, can I go?” Mark said pleadingly. “This, this, and this, are for the photo shoot. The rest is for you. For personal use.”

“Oh, stop fretting already,” Carter chided him. “Okay, I’m not that dumb. I know what sexy lingerie is. Don’t you have a girlfriend, Mark?”

“Um, no,” Mark mumbled.

Of course, what was he thinking? They were in the fashion industry. Of course, Mark didn’t have a girlfriend.

“Don’t you have a boyfriend, then? I can share some of this lingerie, you know? It looks like they sent a ton,” he fiddled with the contents of the box, wondering how he had managed to live for 32 years and have no idea guys could wear sexy undies, too.

“No, I don’t have a boyfriend, either,” Mark replied.

“Ah, don’t worry, a nice guy like you, you’ll find someone,” Carter smiled at him. “Boy or girl, depending what you like. Do you like both?” it suddenly dawned on him.

Mark looked like he could swing both ways. And he was a nice guy.

“Actually, I’m asexual, boss,” Mark replied with an apologetic smile.

“Asexual?” Carter stared at his assistant for two full seconds. “Like you don’t like sex at all? Oh, sorry, I didn’t mean to pry. Whatever floats your boat,” he tried to make a quick exit out of the situation.

Shit, why was he tormenting his assistant over his sexuality now? The guy had probably suffered some trauma and it was not Carter’s place to play shrink. Could he be more of an idiot?

“I didn’t suffer any trauma,” Mark spoke.

Was everything he was thinking printed in capital letters on his forehead? What the hell?!

“But, don’t worry, boss, this is how I was made.”

Made? Mark was a bit strange if he were to think about it. But, wait, he was not going to judge.

“Okay, Mark, don’t mind me. Just pretend that we didn’t have this conversation.”

To make his words clear, he closed the top of the box and sat with his elbows on it. There, out of sight, out of mind. For now. The simple image of Aron wearing that kind of underwear was making him want to jump from one foot to another, like Mark earlier.

“Ah, don’t worry, boss. I am not that comfortable with such things, but I have to be, seeing my current line of work,” Mark smiled and clutched his folder case tightly. “Should I check with the seller to see if they have that in Aron’s size?”

Now Carter felt the need to glare.

“Nope. I don’t want my assistant to die of a heart attack due to spending too much time looking at sexy underwear. Now, shoo where you have to be, and take some

time off to de-stress. You look a little pale. Are you eating right? You know what I told you about eating only junk food.”

“Don’t worry, boss. And I’m the one who’s supposed to take care of you,” Mark replied, looking a bit affronted.

“Okay,” Carter raised his arms in surrender. “But please stop reading my mind already. It’s a bit annoying.”

“But that’s what good assistants do!” Mark protested. “Now I’m going, boss, but, if you need me ...”

“Just go,” Carter pointed the door. “And rest. And eat something green.”

“Okay, boss, on my way,” Mark waved and sauntered out of the room.

Wait, had the guy just admitted he was reading minds? But Mark was no longer in the room, so he could not ask him.

It had taken him a while to figure out how to drive to the club advertised by the card he had found in Aron’s jeans, but now he was on his way there. He was going to be late home, but he needed to find out the truth. If Aron was a cheater ... No, that couldn’t be.

His phone rang happily, getting on his nerves.

“Yeah?” he answered while kicking the car in high gear. This was going to take all day if he was going to drive like a grandma.

“I was hoping to see you home already,” Aron spoke and chuckled. “Maybe in some of that sexy swimwear you wore today? I saw your Instagram posts, baby. Now I’m not that sure if I’m a jealous husband or not. So hurry up home already. I’m literally dying to give my megastar husband the attention he needs if you know what I mean,” the man added, his words turned to drawled whispers.

He could ignore the goose bumps all over his arms, as Aron cooed into his ear. Phone sex was one thing. Phone sex and driving led to certain suicide.

“I have something I need to take care of,” he replied. “We’ll talk when I get home.”

He surely hadn’t wanted his words to sound so menacing, but that was how they turned out. Aron must have felt something was amiss, by the way silence stretched on the other end.

“You sound pissed,” Aron spoke eventually.

“I have my reasons,” Carter snapped.

How could Aron keep such a thing away from him? Wait, was he really thinking like a husband now?

Placeholder, Carter, you are nothing but a placeholder.

Oh, snap, he needed to control himself. But he was pissed. Aron better not be a cheater, or he was in for more than just a smacked bottom. And if David was just a friend ... how the hell he, Carter, had no idea of such a friend?

“Care to explain?” Aron became serious.

“I will, once I get my facts straight,” Carter replied. “I told you, we’ll talk at home.”

“You seem ready to rip me a new one,” Aron joked.

“You have no idea,” Carter replied.

“Ugh, now I’m starting to get worried,” Aron spoke.

“Then you know what you did,” Carter said in an accusing tone. “Now get off the phone. I’m in traffic, and I shouldn’t talk to you anyway.”

“Okay,” Aron admitted. “Don’t be late. And take care. You should not drive if you’re upset ...”

“I’m not made of glass, Aron,” Carter replied, a bit too harshly.

What the fuck? Was he judging Aron without first checking the facts? Why was he so pissed anyway? If Aron was a cheater, he was cheating on his husband, no one else. By all means, it wasn’t Carter’s business. But damn if he was letting this go.

He needed to find out who the fuck David was and what kind of fun Aron was having with the guy.

“Talk to you at home,” he added and turned off the phone.

He had no intention to answer again, and he really needed to pay attention to the road ahead.

The club was not yet open for business, it seemed, but Carter found himself inside, without anyone telling him he was not supposed to be there. The man tending the bar was focused on cleaning a tall glass to perfection and was staring at it with a critical eye. Well, since there was no one else to ask, he decided the barman had to do.

“Hey, man,” he called, and the guy looked over at him.

“We’re not open yet, but I think I can accommodate you, pretty,” the barman winked at him, and placed the glass on the counter. “What’s your pleasure?”

“No, I’m not here to drink, I’m driving,” Carter replied, annoyed and flattered in equal parts by the way the guy was staring at him. “But I’m here to see someone. A guy named David. I think he’s a regular.”

“Sweetheart, do you think people walk in here and offer their real names? And there are plenty of Davids hanging around here. Did he say you two would meet up here? He might have stood you up,” the barman drew a long sigh and stared at Carter in fake pity. “As I said, we can accommodate you with everything you need. And by that, I really mean everything,” the guy leaned over the counter and caressed Carter’s arm in passing.

“Well, it’s this guy,” Carter took out his phone and showed the barman the picture he had transferred from Aron’s e-mail.

The barman stood up straight like he was a spring based toy.

“That’s the boss,” he replied, a bit clipped. “Why didn’t you say you wanted to see the owner?”

“Well, I just know his name,” Carter said. “We didn’t speak that much.”

The man gave him an odd look like he could not believe someone was looking for his boss. Carter could feel getting a bit nervous under that gaze. It was clear that the barman was getting suspicious of him. A few seconds passed, and now he was wondering if he was going to be given the boot. A guy who ran a BDSM club probably had the means and the tools to punish anyone he didn't like.

"Ah," the guy's face suddenly lit up. "I know who you are. I thought you looked familiar. Aron's husband!" the guy exclaimed. "I'll let David know you're here. Don't go, please," the man urged him as he stepped out from behind the corner.

Well, he wasn't going anywhere. But come on, did everyone around here know Aron was cheating on him and they even found it funny or something?

He's not cheating on you, he's - presumably! - cheating on Alex.

Hello, I'm the placeholder, so I need to solve this shit.

If he were to think with the rational part of his brain, the truth was that he should have been happy with the bartender's reaction. People around here knew Aron was married, and they didn't seem to find it odd that he was here. So nothing was pointing out that Aron was a cheater. All good for now. And he was really curious about this David dude.

"Come, come," the bartender called for him. "David is waiting for you in his office."

The barman almost pushed him through a door, and Carter found himself in front of an impressive mahogany desk behind which sat the man he had wanted so much to meet. The guy looked like in that picture, except that he wasn't smiling, and he was checking his visitor with critical eyes. David had a commanding presence, Carter thought, as he tried to square his shoulders and not look very intimidated.

He was a bit startled when the barman closed the door behind him, leaving him alone with the man. Throwing furtive looks around, he wondered whether he was really expecting to see flogging whips, canes, and other punitive devices hanging from the ceiling. If anything, the place looked elegant and maybe a bit lavish, with heavy furniture, and plush carpets the color of old wine.

"Alex Ruskin," the host was first to speak.

“David,” he replied in kind. He had no idea if he had read the guy’s last name anywhere. Well, he was at a bit of a disadvantage here.

“Should I ask to what exactly do I owe the honor?” the man asked, a tad scathingly.

Hmm, this guy had no lost love for Alex; that was for sure.

“To nothing else than the fact that my husband is cheating on me. With you,” he pointed at a guy, hoping that he looked pretty much like the embodiment of indignation.

“Aron? Cheating?” David smiled thinly and his eyebrows shot up in amusement. “Do you really think that?”

The man began pouring himself a drink in a large glass. He made a small gesture as if he was inviting Carter to have one, too.

Carter chose to shake his head. This encounter was nothing like he had imagined.

“Please, have a seat. That if your righteous indignation allows you.”

Well, truth be told, he didn’t feel that much righteous indignation right now. And that came like a bit of a surprise. Nah, nah, nah, he wasn’t going to let himself fooled. He needed to act like a jealous husband here, and be a little irrational.

“I think I’ll stand,” he refused.

“Well, Alex, now that you came knocking down my door, come on, out with it,” David swirled the drink in his glass.

“Out with what?” Carter shook his head, surprised.

David chuckled.

“I must say, you’re nothing like I imagined, from what Aron told me.”

“And how did you imagine me?” Carter crossed his arms over his chest.

“Well, pretty much like a wild cat,” David stared at him, evaluating him with his piercing blue eyes. “You seem pretty tame. Three minutes in my office and you are yet to break anything.”

Break? Carter looked around. Well, that Chinese vase did look expensive. David followed his eyes and sighed.

“Not that I suggest you start doing that.”

“Hey, I’m civilized,” Carter raised his hands in surrender. “I’m not going to break anything.”

That vase was probably worth more than what he could make in three months. He, as Carter, not as Alex. Alex could probably afford to break expensive Chinese vases.

“Well, Aron did tell me of your suspicions,” David spoke. “So, the moment I heard you’re here to see me, I thought I would have to call security to keep you off of me,” he added with a small smile.

Wow. He could not imagine that strongly built man afraid of a skinny asshole like Alex.

“Really, man?” he snorted. “I’m no match for you.”

“Ah, well, hell hath no fury,” the man shrugged.

“I’m not a woman,” Carter said sharply.

“No, you’re not. You’re worse,” David said back, with the same unnerving, all-knowing smile.

“Okay, that vase suddenly looks like it’s not sitting too pretty over there,” Carter threatened.

David burst into laughter.

“Seriously, I don’t understand why Aron said you’re hard to deal with. I find you pretty manageable,” the man leaned into his lavish armchair and gave him a slow once-over that made Carter feel goose bumps everywhere.

There was something about this dude that was making him feel fidgety.

“Now, I insist, please sit down, and let’s have a little chat,” the man offered.

Well, David had a point. With a small shrug, he walked over the room and sat on one of the guest chairs. Hmm, velvet? That felt pretty nice under his fingers.

“This shit must have cost a fortune,” he murmured.

David chuckled again.

“Yes, definitely, you are completely different from what I gathered from Aron. Now, Alex, seeing that I can carry a decent conversation with you, tell me, what makes you think your husband is cheating? I won’t even say with me, I want to say at all.”

“Well, he disappeared for the entire weekend and he was with you,” Carter began explaining.

“Okay.”

“Okay? Is this everything you can say?”

“It is true. Aron was here this last weekend.”

“Ah, so you don’t deny it. Frankly, man, don’t you have anything better to do than steal other guys’ husbands?” he asked, now annoyed with the man’s admission.

“I didn’t steal anyone. Not that it would be impossible. But Aron is faithful to you.”

Aha! Just as he had thought. Aron was not a cheater.

“Are you just going to believe me?” David grinned. “You look so happy now like I just told you Santa Claus was real.”

Carter frowned. Okay, okay, he was going at this completely unprepared, and this guy was a fucking weasel. Although a weasel was not the type of animal to compare David to. He looked more like a ... bear?

“Come on, man, I’m just pulling your leg,” David joked. “You don’t look like a guy who thinks his husband is cheating on him. Frankly, I think you’re just curious. Should I introduce you to my club?”

“No way,” Carter put his hands up. “Stop derailing the conversation. What was Aron doing all weekend here if he wasn’t cheating?”

“Ah, so you don’t think Aron is a cheater,” the man looked at him to confirm.

“No, I don’t. I know Aron well,” Carter said without hesitation, earning another surprised look from his host. “But I still want to know why he comes here.”

This time, David didn’t laugh at him and didn’t dodge the question.

“Aron needs a friend,” David said simply.

“And you’re his friend?” Carter asked, now feeling a short pang of jealousy. A real one.

“Yes, I am. He told me I’m his best friend and the first person to trust ever since he fell out with that childhood friend of his, Carter. You know, the one who’s supposedly a homophobe.”

“Supposedly?” Carter snorted.

“I have my own theories regarding that fellow, but that is not why you’re here, right?” David asked.

Actually, he would have liked to hear those theories, but, since he was walking in Alex’s shoes, he had to put any personal considerations aside.

“All right, so you’re friends. That’s not reason enough for him to leave his home and spend days away from his husband,” Carter made his case.

“You’re putting Aron through a lot, Alex,” David said sharply. “He married you, he fucks only you. Stop being jealous of a shadow.”

“What shadow?” he asked, scandalized.

“I’m talking about Carter. Aron was honest with you, he told you about his crush, but that was all in the past. If he moved on, so should you. To think that he trusted you with this only so you can use it against him,” the man was now looking at him with judgmental eyes.

“I didn’t!” Carter protested.

Just how much did Aron share with this guy? It was like David was his personal shrink or something.

“Really?” David linked his fingers and stared at him.

“Well, he ... misunderstood,” he tried to offer an explanation.

David shook his head slowly.

“Your husband loves you, Alex. He’s doing his best. Stop doing things that are driving him away from you. Even a man like Aron has his limits. You’re lucky.”

“What do you mean by that?” Carter mumbled.

Funny how chastised he felt, and he wasn’t even the real Alex.

“You’re lucky that his friend Carter was dumb as a brick back in the day.”

He could feel a huge lump in his throat. What was this guy talking about?

“I don’t want to know,” he looked away.

He did, but he wasn’t here for that.

“But now I want to know something else. What kind of fun did you two have all weekend?” he returned to his initial righteous indignation state.

“Are you sure you’re ready to be introduced to the kind of fun I’m talking about?” David smiled.

“Try me,” Carter smirked.

Hell, he wasn’t here to back down. He was here to learn the truth, no matter how strange. Nothing could scare him. He was practically still tumbling down the rabbit’s hole.

“Are you familiar to BDSM?” David asked directly.

Carter shrugged.

“Heard about it. Wait; is Aron into this kind of stuff? He didn’t even let me spank his ass,” he blurted out.

Oops. Eh, Aron had confessed much more intimate things when talking to this guy. At this point, it felt as if he was visiting a marriage counselor.

“How did you two get there?” David laughed. “But that kind of question, you should ask your husband. I only invited him to watch.”

“Ah, damn, don’t tell me he got a lap dance from one of those guys all dressed in leather belts,” Carter expressed his concern.

“Does Aron know you’re reading his e-mails?” David threw him an odd look.

“Yeah, I mean, he has had the same password since ...”

Oh. Fucking. Shit.

“I’m surprised. He told me he didn’t want you snooping around, and that you two try to respect each other, as far as these things are concerned. He swore to you that he would trust you. And he expects the same thing back.”

“Ah, well, I convinced him,” Carter said quickly.

How much of a moron could he be?

“Wait, stop distracting me. How does Aron have fun here? Does he get spanked? Are you tying him up to a metal stand and don’t let him pee or something?”

David’s eyes were growing wide as the guy was looking at him, clearly astonished with whatever came out of Carter’s mouth.

“Are you attracted to this lifestyle, Alex? You’re grossly misinformed, but I do sense an enthusiasm in you that can only mean that you’re interested,” the man joked. “Let’s not torture you anymore. Aron comes here to watch and only to watch, as I told you. Now seriously, you can’t be mad at him. You don’t let him watch porn and you’re worse than a frigid housewife. The guy has needs. I can assure you that he didn’t do anything that could count as cheating.”

“Frigid housewife?” Carter protested. “I’ll have you know that ever since Aron came back on Sunday, we did it ... well, if it counts that I did him, too, that’s ... and oral ... and that thing between the butt cheeks ... that amounts to ...” he muttered to himself while counting.

He proudly showed David his stretched fingers. The man was staring at him in pure shock.

“Did you top Aron?” the man exclaimed.

“Duh,” Carter replied. “That thing’s like the tightest hole in ...”

Oh, damn. He was, again, a major idiot.

“It’s tight,” he added quickly. “Like fucking amazing. And Aron’s my husband. It’s like my right to fuck him. I fuck him legally,” he started to babble.

“No one’s contesting that,” David shook his head as if he felt suddenly trapped into a strange dream. “I’m glad for you. It means you’ve finally wakened up.”

“Yeah, thanks or something. Just get this. Aron’s mine,” Carter linked his fingers. “So sorry if I’m not going to let him come here and watch some naked dudes pretending to have sex. He can come for drinks and to see you, if he wants, of course,” he added. “Really, just watching? Was he jerking off or something?”

“No, what kind of establishment do you think I ran here?” David frowned. “People who want to engage in sexual acts have private rooms for that.”

“Okay. Wait, you weren’t interested in him or anything, I hope,” he said, now feeling anxious again.

“No,” David shook his head. “He’s not my type, even if he were single and not married to you. As a friend, and someone who is into this lifestyle, I would have loved to offer him a proper introduction, but so far, he said no.”

“Ah, so he’s not like submissive enough?” Carter ran his mouth once more.

“Oh, I think he can be plenty submissive,” David said. “But it would not be right for him. He may feel guilty and find this an outlet to blow some steam, but he would never be into this as a lifestyle, that I am sure.”

“A lifestyle? Like what? Wearing a collar underneath his shirt at work?” Carter asked.

David threw him another odd look.

“You’re making me itch to take you for a ride, Alex. You’re lucky Aron’s your husband. You would totally be my type,” the man now smiled at him, and Carter could feel his stomach doing a small flip. Not a full-fledged one, but a semi-flip.

David laughed and shook his head.

“Maybe Aron’s wildcat just needs a strong hand to tame him,” he said.

“Like hell,” Carter almost choked on his words.

“Well, I hope you’ll come around with Aron, and we can all have some fun. No, I won’t spank you or tie you to an X-cross. Not without your written consent at least,” the man laughed.

Carter gulped. David’s eyes were boring into him like they were trying to make him spill all his secrets. He could see why the guy was running a BDSM club.

“Stop looking at me like you’re looking to be trained and owned,” the man joked again. “I’m sure Aron won’t approve. Now, in all seriousness, I’m glad your sex life improved. It was quite a sore point for Aron, you know?”

“Hmm,” Carter mumbled.

He wanted nothing but to hurry back home and get owned. By Aron and no one else.

“Come on, shoo back home,” the man said with a small smile. “My sub will be here soon and if he sees you, he might become jealous. And, frankly, I’m really attached to that vase,” David joked.

Carter stood up and offered the man his hand. David shook it shortly, barely hiding his surprise.

“Thanks, man, for telling me about Aron.”

“No problem. Glad to have finally met you. And, you know, if you ever feel like you need a strong hand ...” the man joked.

“Shut up, man. I already have an owner,” Carter replied.

David winked at him.

“Then hurry back to him already.”

To say that he was happy when he walked out the door was an understatement.

Chapter Twenty

He almost felt tempted to walk through the door and yell ‘honey, I’m home’, but somehow he wanted to take Aron by surprise. No such luck, though, as the guy was expecting him, his arms crossed over his chest and a stony look on his face.

“So, what do you want to tell me?” Aron spoke first.

“What? No smooches?” Carter opened his arms wide and walked towards Aron.

Apparently, the guy was not in the mood for his shenanigans.

“Where have you been and why did you turn off your phone?” Aron questioned him. “What if something happened to you? Do you have any idea how that would have made me feel?”

“I went to see David,” Carter said bluntly.

Aron’s face fell. It was like the guy was waiting for a verdict that he knew it wasn’t going to be in his favor.

“Why didn’t you tell me about him?” Carter questioned.

Great, now you really think you’re the husband. Aren’t you going too far with this charade?

I’m doing it for a good cause.

And the road to hell is paved with good intentions.

Whatevs.

“Hey, I’m just asking,” he spoke softly and touched Aron’s arm.

The guy was looking at him, hesitating between panic and astonishment.

“Well, I talked to him, and just so you know, you don’t have to go there, at least not for that, you know to watch some guys doing whatever they are doing there. I mean, well, if you really can’t live without that,” Carter began his argumentation, “I cannot really keep you, but, if there is something you want us to try, be it that you like to be tied up, or, I don’t know, gagged, just tell me, and let’s just do it at home.”

Aron looked as if he needed to pick his jaw up from the floor.

“What? Do you think I cannot dominate you or something?” Carter frowned.

“I’m pretty certain you can do whatever you want with me because I thought you were going to say that you’re going to file for divorce now that you know about my friendship with David. Wait, how did you learn ...”

“I figured it out,” Carter said quickly. “And there was a card you dropped from your pockets. From David’s club. So I went there, and talked to him.”

“That seems like quite the intuition,” Aron mumbled.

Aron was not going to buy that. He needed to act quickly.

“Hey, guess what I brought home from work,” he said brightly.

“Wait, we need to talk about David,” Aron stopped him.

Ah, damn, it wasn’t going to be simple.

“The guy says you’re just friends,” he spoke.

“And do you believe him?” Aron asked, his voice a tad strained.

“Yeah. He seems like a cool dude.”

Aron was blinking and looking at him like he could not believe he was hearing that.

“Why didn’t you just ask me about him?” Aron questioned. “Or it is just me you don’t believe?”

Fuck, fuck, the situation was getting out of hand. What would Alex do? Clearly, if he managed to stay married to Aron for two years, while cheating and breaking expensive vases and who knew what else, the guy had to have some tricks up his sleeve.

“I could always get bitchy and break something,” he stared at Aron and made his best impersonation of an angry husband, crossing his arms over his chest and frowning. “Really, you left home without saying where you’re going. Forgive me if I didn’t think you would be willing to share this kind of information.”

“I’ve been gone before, and you didn’t really care to find out where I was,” Aron said defensively. “You cared only about throwing tantrums and never letting me say a word. And forgive ME,” Aron mimicked his words from earlier, “if I found that leaving for a few days to be away from you seemed the only way to save this train wreck of a marriage.”

Carter stood there, stunned.

“Are we breaking up?” he murmured.

“No,” Aron scowled. “I still love you. I’m not letting you go that easy. But some things are hard to swallow, okay?”

Carter could feel a joke coming right up, but even his troll brain had to agree now was not the time for that.

“Okay,” he sighed.

Saving marriages was tiresome. He wasn’t envying those marriage counselors at all.

“You always say you’re sorry, but you still don’t listen,” Aron said bitterly.

“Well, I’m listening now. If you want to talk,” he hurried to add.

Aron was staring at him, his eyes swimming in hurt.

“David is just a friend. Yes, I went to his club, and watched some guys performing on a stage, okay? I didn’t fuck anyone,” Aron shook his head. “Have I ever felt tempted? God knows I have. But I am a married man, and I’m not going to make a joke out of our marriage. You’re faithful to me, I’m faithful to you. This is how it works.”

Ouch. Big, big ouch.

“So what does David think?” Carter found himself talking.

“I thought you talked to him,” Aron frowned again.

“Well, he seems like a busy man. I just wanted to know who he was. Now I know, and now I’m asking you about him. As I’m supposed to,” he added quickly.

In retrospect, he could have just asked Aron directly, but no, he had been way too determined to find out who David was on his own. What did that make him? A jealous husband, like Alex was, of course. Completely in character.

Aron didn't look like he was buying that. But he continued to talk.

"David thinks I got the short end of the stick. He's frank like that. Are you sure you want to hear this?" he looked at Carter.

"Whatever he thinks, he doesn't think it anymore, I'm sure," Carter shrugged. "I told him how we fucked like rabbits."

Aron's eyes widened in surprise.

"You did? I mean, you're always so private about these things ..."

"Well, he was calling me a frigid housewife. I had to put him in his place," Carter explained.

"Wow," a ghost of a smile lit up Aron's face for a brief moment. "How did he react?"

"Surprised, and he also started talking about BDSM and stuff, like how I need to be trained or something. But forget about that," Carter waved. "I want to hear more from you."

"Okay," Aron breathed deeply. "He is a strong-willed man and he has his theories. I told him he's wrong and that he doesn't know you," he added in an apologetic tone.

"Stop mollycoddling me. Come on, shoot. What did he say about me?"

What did he say about us?

Shut up, brain, we're not asking that. This is about Aron's marriage.

Are we still lying to ourselves that we're some goody two shoes?

Shut up already.

"He thinks you don't love me," Aron spoke and stared at Carter, waiting for a reaction. "Well, not as much as I love you, at least. He says you're the kind of guy

who only wants to be loved, without giving anything back. But I don't think that. I think you're insecure and that I should love you more until you don't feel like that at all. It's just that ... It gets hard sometimes. So I just go talk to David, and while he doesn't approve of my attitude towards the whole thing, he listens, and that's something I need. God knows why he's doing this for me, though. I guess it's not his idea of fun to hear me complaining about how I cannot manage to be a good enough husband for you."

"He's a good friend," Carter supplied right away. "How did you two meet, by the way?"

"It was through a mutual friend, 7-8 years ago. He wanted to get his club off the ground. I like the idea and told him so. There was some money he still needed to open, so I lent him the amount. He paid me back, don't worry," Aron hurried to say. "David really has a nose for business. Now he still jokes about how I should have just remained an investor and asked him for my share year after year. But this was not why I helped him with money that time."

"Then why?"

"I could tell he was passionate about it. Well, it may look foolish of me to take some of the money my father gave me and just place it in the hands of a stranger, but I have no regrets. David put the money to good use and even gave it back to me with interest."

"Sounds like a hell of a story," Carter murmured. "How come I've never heard of it?"

How come we've never heard of it?

"Sorry to break it to you, Alex, but you're not exactly the listening type. I learned not to bore you to death with my past, or stories about my friends."

"Like Carter?"

"Yes, like him, too," Aron sighed. "But you wanted to know, so ..."

The man fell silent and just stared at him. What was he supposed to say now?

“Well, I’m glad you told me about David. And about what he said about ... us. It’s okay, I’m not upset, you can go see him or talk to him. As long as he doesn’t convince you that you should divorce.”

C’mon, if this David dude is right, Aron would be better off without Alex the douchebag.

Shut up, I’m not going to break up with Aron.

Again, you’re nothing but a placeholder.

“He wouldn’t do that. And I have no plans to divorce you, I told you. I married you and I didn’t do it on a whim,” Aron said with determination.

“How come you didn’t complain to your parents about ... your marriage trouble?” Carter asked.

Aron looked away embarrassed.

“I didn’t want to worry them,” the guy replied, his words a tad clipped.

“Wait, what aren’t you telling me?” Carter picked up the change in Aron’s attitude right away.

“C’mon, it’s not like my mom was subtle about it,” Aron mumbled. “She’s not your biggest fan, as you know. But that’s how mothers are, I think,” he added quickly.

“Really? Your mom doesn’t like me?” Carter asked, in shock.

He knew Aron’s parents well. Seeing how much time he had spent under their roof, they had often joked about him being their other son. It was hard to imagine Clementine Ruskin not liking anyone. Especially a pretty boy like Alex. That was a bit of a shock.

“Well, I guess so,” Aron murmured.

Would his own mom think the same thing about the person he was going to marry, that if he ever got to that point? He couldn’t tell. Clementine loved her son and she surely wanted to see him happy.

“Eh, she’s still a bit upset I bought you the Spyder,” Aron continued, shaking his head. “Dad didn’t say anything, but he likes to keep things to himself. And it’s not like I have regrets about doing that. I think you deserve nice things,” he murmured and looked at Carter with honest, loving eyes.

“Are you happy, Aron?” Carter asked directly, and to stop the mothball growing in his throat from getting bigger. “Being married?”

What the fuck? That douche hadn’t even bought the car with his own money? Damn. Now that was a piece of info that was hard to swallow. And what was Aron getting out of this marriage anyway?

Aron sighed.

“I am, of course I am. I married the guy I love. It’s impossible not to be happy. What more can I ask for?”

“I don’t know, more than just sex once a week,” Carter mumbled.

“Please don’t mock me,” Aron frowned.

“I’m not. It’s just that it really feels like you’re really getting the short end of the stick in this,” Carter remembered what Aron had said about David’s opinion on things.

“Are you making a case against yourself now? Really, Alex, I have no idea what angle you’re working now, but I feel like it won’t end up well for me. As always,” Aron said, running one hand through his short hair in exasperation, “I cannot tell where I stand with you. What do you want me to say? That I’m always happy? It would be a lie. Marriage is not just milk and honey.”

“I don’t remember seeing your folks fighting,” Carter blurted out.

If there was someone to take after for a successful marriage, those were Aron’s parents. Carter knew his childhood and teenage years had been so happy because he had practically lived under their roof.

“Well, you’ve seen them very little, but it’s true that they get along fine,” Aron admitted, unaware of his temporary’s husband real knowledge of his parents’ marriage. “But couples are different. What works for some, may not work for

others. And as long as I stick with you, as long as you're my husband, we will pull it through. That's what marriage is about."

"Okay," Carter mumbled. "It's okay."

It's not okay. Alex is still a cheater.

Yeah, but I'm here. I can fix this.

In your dreams.

He chose to ignore that thought. Aron looked so dejected, standing there, his eyes cast down, his face all a frown, that he knew that he needed to do something. So he closed the space between them and took Aron into his arms.

"I trust you," he said, pulling Aron as close as he could.

The guy seemed hesitant at first, probably still wondering how come half the breakable valuables around weren't flying out the window right now but he hugged back.

"You really are changed," Aron murmured into his hair. "I hope you stay this way. You would make my job a little easier, you know?" he chuckled. "Regardless of everything I sometimes say when I'm pissed, I want you and no one else, and if I have to work hard to deserve you, then so be it."

"Okay," Carter said softly. "Okay."

"Now, what did you want to show me?" Aron nuzzled his ear slowly.

"Ah, something," Carter laughed and pushed Aron away so he could pick up the box he had left by the door.

To his ears, his laughter sounded hollow.

And what do you want?

Nothing, just Aron to be happy.

Then you know what you have to do.

“Just look at this crazy stuff,” he turned away and presented Aron one piece of garment, pulling at the weird straps.

“Ah,” Aron chuckled, “don’t tell me you went out of your way to buy such a thing.”

“Didn’t have to. It’s kind of a gift,” he chirped away.

Was it really that easy to impersonate someone else? Maybe he could compete for an Oscar.

“The guys for whom I pose almost naked on Instagram thought about sending this naughty stuff. What do you think?” he asked.

“I think you should first have a shower while I put together dinner, and then you can put on a little fashion show just for me. What do you say?”

Carter grinned, feeling almost happy. Was this how delusional people came into being? He was pretty certain that the answer was ‘yes’. If after all this, he was going to become a bum on the street, singing serenades and dreaming about riding imaginary horses on the streets of the city, he was not going to be surprised. Not that he could be surprised in any way, seeing that he was just going to be insane and embrace his new reality.

“Baby?” Aron woke him up from his brooding. “Are you really okay?”

“Yes, sure thing,” he shook his head and headed for the bathroom.

This tumbling down the rabbit hole? It was just getting weirder.

“Hmm,” Aron murmured. “Now make a slow turn, bend, and ...”

“Hey, aren’t you objectifying me a little here?” Carter protested.

He had been the one with the idea of showing Aron the naughty lingerie, but, for some reason, he didn’t feel particularly at ease. Maybe he was letting other things get in the way.

Like your conscience.

Hey, I'm trying here.

It looks like something else from here.

Like what?

Like you don't want Alex to ever wake ...

Shut. The fuck. Up.

What was the solution for a dirty conscience? Forgetting, maybe. But there was no way for him to forget, as long as he practically wore Alex's body, and, at the same time, was falling ...

No.

That was not a door to walk through. Not now. Not ever.

"Damn, you're so sexy. I must be the luckiest man alive," Aron spoke, drawling the words. "Come here."

He stopped by the edge of the bed, looking at Aron. Was this how being happy was like? Too bad he was just practically staring through a window, or over the fence at his neighbors. He had never pegged himself as a voyeur before. And this was the most intimate thing he can defile by being ... just who he was. It was not his place to have Aron look at him like that. And, being the imposter he was, he even dared to enjoy it.

Aron was oblivious to the storm of thoughts clouding his mind. Maybe he was getting better at hiding. The man on the bed moved and a strong hand reached for him, caressing the inside of his elbow, while Aron searched for his eyes with his.

"Can I make love to you?" Aron asked simply.

He nodded and climbed the bed, pushing Aron on his back and making their lips touch. But this time, it didn't look like Aron was in the mood to be dominated by his skinny husband. The tables soon turned and he was the one on his back, with the other hovering over him.

"You're amazing," Aron cooed. "I wish I could stare at you like this forever."

"Take a picture, it will last longer," he replied, smiling.

“Not a bad idea,” Aron’s face lit up and the guy reached for his phone.

“Hey, what are you doing?” he eyed the other cautiously.

“I’m taking a picture of you, like this,” Aron replied.

He was trapped between the guy’s strong thighs. Seeing how much he could pose almost naked in front of strangers, it was pretty damn weird he was feeling so embarrassed right now. Maybe it was because he was really naked. Not naked-naked, as at least, in front, the naughty undies still covered his manhood, even if barely. But he could feel his soul laid bare, and that was making him feel like he could barely take having Aron look at him with those deep, full of meaning eyes.

“Oh, damn, baby, do you have any idea how you look?” Aron breathed out. “It’s like there’s something in your eyes right now ...”

“Are we fucking or making conversation now?” he blurted out.

“Someone’s a little impatient,” Aron smiled and began rubbing Carter’s cock through the flimsy pants. “Hmm, this material feels nice.”

“What are you still doing with that phone?” Carter chided his husband of circumstances.

“Well, I think I want more than a picture. A video is worth a thousand pictures.”

“Or it depends on how many frames per second you’re shooting,” Carter replied.

Aron looked at him over the phone now.

“Is this your idea of killing the mood? Cause it’s not working,” Aron joked. “Come on, feel this.”

If Aron wanted to derail him from calculating how many frames were going to be in a full minute, to have then a basis for calculating how many there were going to be for the whole video Aron wanted to record, well, he was doing a pretty good job.

Aron wore nothing but some tight boxers, and the contour of his superb cock was showing through the fabric. It was really pleasant to feel it like this.

“Are you going to shoot how we fuck?” he mumbled, as his fingers were curling, as much as it was possible, over the lengthening cock in Aron’s underwear.

Not that he disliked the idea. What he disliked was that it wasn’t him here. Damn, he wasn’t really here, was he? He raised his eyes to meet Aron’s, and the man gave him a reassuring smile.

“I want this memory of us,” Aron replied. “I’m just so happy now. Will you let me, baby?”

“Yeah, of course I let you,” Carter said and grabbed the man’s manhood tightly, making him hiss. “Now are you going to fuck with your underwear on?”

“No, how about you help me out of it?” Aron asked.

What did it feel so nice to undress Aron? For him, it seemed like he was unraveling a present on Christmas day. The guy’s cock bounced the moment it was freed. Struggling to get Aron completely out of his undies proved to be a much more complicated business, seeing that the guy preferred to laugh and try to get everything on his phone. Carter growled and pushed the guy on his back, to get rid of the underwear for good.

As he reached for his own, Aron stopped him.

“I want to fuck you in it,” the man explained.

“Well, what do you know?” Carter joked. “At least, these serve a purpose, after all.”

“What purpose?” Aron managed to get on top again.

“To make you hard,” Carter bit his lips and grabbed Aron’s erect cock with both hands.

“My husband is in my bed, with a naked ass, while some sexy underwear barely covers his cock. How do you expect me to be?”

“Hmm, maybe an outstanding member of the community, restrained and civilized,” Carter joked.

“I definitely have a member here,” Aron caught his cock by its base, almost making it slip from Carter’s fingers. “And I think it’s pretty outstanding, don’t you think?”

“Definitely,” Carter laughed.

Well, he wasn’t going to laugh for long. Aron began to maneuver him gently, but firmly, making him lay on his fours, preoccupied with taking a good look at his ass.

“Baby, do you have any idea how nice you look like this,” Aron said breathily. “It’s like you’re even more than naked.”

“Well, apparently, these are from some Blue Desire collection or something,” Carter laughed.

Not for long, as Aron was slapping his naked butt with a hard cock, showing his impatience.

“Come, turn, I want you from the front,” Aron turned.

It was easy to be Alex and have such a supple, easy to manipulate body. Soon he was on his back, with his legs parted and pushed up. Several seconds later, he shuddered as Aron’s fingers pressed slowly against his entrance, slick with lubricant, making sure to massage the area right above, making him feel his cock hardening without even being touched directly.

Aron soon replaced his fingers with the blunt head of his cock but continued to rub against the skin.

Fuck, this felt pleasant. Like really pleasant. He hummed to express his satisfaction. Normally, he wouldn’t have been against being taken fast, especially since he could feel how hard Aron was, but he was appreciating this kind of teasing. Aron started to sink inside his body, but only little by little, controlling his descent with his hand.

“Oh, fuck,” Carter moaned, as he began to feel the stretch.

“So nice of the guys to give you this sexy underwear. I hope they realize that whoever wears such a thing is sure to get fucked really good,” Aron joked, but his voice was strained.

“Shut up already, and get to work,” he mumbled.

Aron was moving slowly, despite his encouragements. And he had some other needs to tend to. Aron’s hand was quick to move his away and strong fingers pressed against Carter’s manhood, without releasing it from the sexy underwear.

“Your cock’s peeking out, how cute,” Aron teased, using his fingers to brush over the head of Carter’s cock that, indeed, had managed to break itself free over the waistband of the undies.

“Uh, that’s a bit too much,” he complained. “Or too little, I don’t know. At least fuck me good, would you?”

“Most obliged,” Aron joked. “Fuck, baby,” he moaned, as he pushed inside deeper.

Okay, so Aron was a bit of a sadist because he was only using the tip of his fingers to tease Carter’s cock, over the mushroom head, again and again. At least, the pressure in his ass was bearing fruit. He felt so damn fool, and it was damn pleasant.

“Hmm, love your big cock,” he murmured, biting his bottom lip and turning his head to hide it into the pillow.

“You should see yourself,” Aron spoke breathily. “You will, later,” he added with a smirk, as he continued to hold his phone.

“I have no idea how you can concentrate while using your phone,” he wondered out loud.

“Your ass is gripping my cock so tightly, it practically does all the work,” Aron smiled.

Wow, Aron was going in and out with increased speed now. Carter chose to rest his feet on the guy’s strong thighs for leverage. At the same time, his hands were searching wildly for the crumpled sheets, for something to hold on to.

“Fuck, I love your face when you show how much you like it,” Aron praised him. “Sorry if I’m going to pound your ass right now. Here, take this and continue. Now I really have to concentrate.”

He took the phone from Aron's hand. Oh, this is not a bad idea at all, not at all, not at all ...

Stop looping.

'Kay.

Aron looked amazing, the sweat making his skin glisten, his hooded eyes sexy, the way he licked his lips sending jolt after jolt of pleasure right into Carter's cortex. He lowered the phone, straightening up on one elbow, just so he could catch the act of fucking on digital memory.

He could not believe his pleasure could shoot much higher. Yet, it did, as he looked at how Aron's cock was sliding in and out of his ass like a well-lubed piston. They were like a marvelous machine right now, working together. He could no longer repress his moans.

"Fuck, baby, I want to see you come," Aron whispered.

This time, Aron gave up on teasing and pulled Carter's cock out to give it a good rub. It was fascinating to catch all this on camera, Carter thought, as he looked how Aron was pumping his cock good.

"Fuck," he threw his head back and dropped the phone, as he started coming.

"Yes, baby, yes, like this. I'm coming, too," Aron shouted back.

That moment, that perfect moment, when they stood still, like that, Aron wrenched deep inside him, his own body affected only by the shudders of the aftermath, that was simply everything.

Aron dropped on top of him with a small growl of satisfaction, locking lips with him. And they continued to kiss, pressed together, unaware of all the sweat and the cum between them, for minutes.

"So, you didn't catch the grand finale, did you?" Aron laughed when they finally found breathing was still necessary to live and broke their kiss.

"Sorry about that," Carter mumbled, smiling sheepishly.

"No sweat," Aron waved. "You just need more practice."

“Really?” Carter glared.

“Really,” Aron confirmed. “I plan an entire collection.”

“What for? It’s not like a family album, you can’t really show it to anyone,” Carter snickered.

“Yeah, but we can look at it,” Aron replied. “I think it would be hot.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

Yeah, it would be hot. But it would still not be him there, in those videos. How was he going to let go of this? When Alex was going to return as the rightful owner of this body, and this hunk of a husband? Because that was bound to happen. Because he could not be happy. Because he was a fraud, and he was not going to escape unpunished.

Chapter Twenty-One

Sleeping next to Aron was the best thing ever. Especially since the guy now had a signature way of waking him up, with slow kisses and caresses.

“Hey,” he smirked, as he stretched like a cat into the man’s arms.

“Hey,” Aron chuckled. “I hate not being able to cuddle some more, but I need to go to work early. They’re sending someone over from New Entertainment, to ask us about a new motivational book we publish. Apparently, these guys like to wake up with the chickens.”

“Why do you have to be there? Are you the one giving the interview?” Carter asked, and wrapped his arms around Aron’s strong shoulders.

“No, but I have to show support for the author, and they may ask me about some technical aspects. Or I might be as good as invisible. Trust me, I would like nothing more but wake up slowly with you.”

“I think I can live with you leaving early for work once. But don’t make it a habit,” Carter joked.

Hello, we’re not supposed to get used to this!

Hey, since when we’re talking like Deadpool again?

Admit it, it’s pretty cool.

Yeah, Deadpool is the awesomest.

Wait ... are you trying to change the subject?

Smart brain is smart, psh, what to say?

“Don’t worry, I won’t,” Aron placed a wet sloppy kiss on his ear, making him giggle. “And you go wreck them, tiger. I bet your Instagram has gazillions of followers by now.”

Carter rolled his eyes. That was the last thing on his list of concerns.

“Hey,” he caressed the ridge of Aron’s shoulders slowly. “When would you say we should go see Carter together?”

“As I said, baby, when it’s convenient for you. You’ll see, the guy’s on the mend. The doctors are very optimistic.”

“Eh, what do you they know?” he shrugged.

“Hmm, I’d say much more than us,” Aron replied. “They went to med school, and we didn’t.”

“Ha, seriously?” Carter smiled.

“Yeah, they have all those diplomas and stuff,” Aron joked further. “So, pick your day, and we’ll go.”

“I don’t know if today or tomorrow is the right day ... but I’ll check with Mark. I really want to see the bo ... the guy,” Carter correctly himself in time.

“The boy? Was this what you were trying to say?” Aron questioned, a bit puzzled. “He’s older than you.”

“Yeah, but he behaves like a child, right?”

Nice save, bro.

Aw, do you really mean it?

No, not really.

Douche.

“I suppose,” Aron sighed.

“Well, we’ll go together and kick him to wake up,” Carter said quickly.

“I’m pretty sure the nurses and the good doctors there would have something to say about such barbaric acts,” Aron shook his head and smiled. “Really, baby, I’m so happy you’re not upset with him anymore.”

“Eh, let bygones be bygones,” Carter said. “Weren’t you supposed to be out the door already?”

“Kicking me out of the bed?” Aron pretended to pout.

“I think you’re in danger of me not letting get out of it, but have it your way,” Carter sighed for dramatic effect.

“All right, here’s your last kiss, until we meet again,” Aron smooched him loudly on one cheek.

“Okay, okay, just go already,” Carter pushed him away.

That was the right thing to do. Push Aron away, even though it was pretty damn redundant at this point. How the hell was he going to live in his good ol’ shell? What? Was he getting used to Instagram fame already?

No, that wasn’t it. But he was not going to say it. Even his smartass brain knew to shut its trap on the topic. They were never going to go there.

“Hey, Alex,” Simon greeted him cheerfully, the moment he went through the door to his office.

“Did Mark let you in?” Carter asked, eyeing the guy suspiciously.

“No, I ... just waited for him to be a moment out, and I sneaked in,” Simon said with a small snicker.

Ah, this was getting weary. Fuck with the no interfering rule. Aron didn’t deserve to be cheated on. Not with Simon, not with anyone. And this was one thing he needed to take care of properly. Mark was right. He could not have his cake and eat it.

“Simon,” he said solemnly and placed one hand on the guy’s shoulder. “Look here, man. We’re over.”

Women used to break up with him, not the other way around. This was new. And frigging hard.

“What?” the guy stammered and recoiled as if he had been slapped.

Carter’s fingers squeezed to keep him in place.

“I thought I could play this game. I thought that it was enough to mistreat you and you would go away. But it’s not okay. It’s not okay at all. And it’s not fair.”

Simon was looking at him, chewing his bottom lip and frowning, like he was trying to make sense of the guy.

“I ... I could tell Aron,” Simon said hesitantly.

“If you do that, that’s on you, man. I’ll deal with my husband. I will figure out a way to get him back, because sure as hell that he’ll drop me after something like this. If this is what you want to do, I cannot stop you, and you know it.”

He was taking a huge gamble here. But he just couldn’t stand this anymore. Simon was too willing to take just everything his so-called lover threw at him. Aron was getting hurt, even if unconsciously. And Carter was too damn stupid to juggle two men at the same time. Plus, he only was in love with one.

Oops.

Gimme a break.

“But I hope you won’t,” he continued. “I hope that you care enough about what we had that you won’t decide to destroy it like this. I will tell Aron myself.”

Are we?

Yes. I don’t care about cosmic mistakes and whatnot.

It was maybe crazy and stupid, but it felt damn right. Yes, he knew, it was not his secret to tell, and he needed to find a way to come clean to Aron, for the sake of the guy’s marriage. Maybe when Alex was going to get back to his own body, he would just have to hack it, and finally admit that Aron was the best husband in the universe, and not supposed to be cheated on like a shmuck.

“You really mean it,” Simon said bitterly. “After all I did for you.”

“Boy, you don’t know what you’re talking about. What did you think you did? Have your romp smacked with a paddle? Wore some leather thingie under your shirt? Really, what kind of compromise or life-changing decision do you think you took?”

“This one,” Simon shook his hand and opened his shirt with hurried moves.

“Oh, dear,” Carter felt his jaw getting slack.

The sight of red, oozing skin was a shock. But even more was the message imprinted in black ink on Simon's smooth chest in round calligraphic letters.

"Alex's Property? Pardon my French, but are you nuts?" he whispered in a low voice. "When did you have this one made?"

"Over the weekend," Simon whispered back. "I was planning to have my nipples pierced, too, but I was too afraid of the pain!"

"Too afraid of the pain? How the hell did you live through this?" Carter pointed out at the guy's chest.

Simon shook his head and made such a face that Carter almost felt the need to hug the guy and comfort him. Well, maybe not hug him, because probably his chest hurt like fucking hell, but still.

"All right," he covered his face with both hands. "Simon, man, you really have to reconsider your life choices."

"What's to reconsider?" Simon asked, and he definitely looked like he was in pain. Physical pain, most probably. "I love you. What the hell do I have to do so you can understand it? And I was really hoping we would go to one of those cool BDSM clubs now, that we're into that lifestyle."

Carter drew one long breath. Then another. Then another. Simon was staring at him with pained puppy eyes.

Ah! The proverbial light bulb appeared.

"So, do you want to be owned and shit?" he asked Simon.

The guy's caramel eyes lit up.

"No, not by me," Carter raised both hands. "But, well, I know a guy."

"Wait, are you, like, lending me?" Simon asked. "Alex, I'm not sure if ..."

"Simon, my good dude," Carter caught the guy's head in his hands and looked him straight into his beautiful eyes. "I'm a shitty owner, okay? But this guy, he's like, top-notch master material. I'm sure he can introduce you to someone who could treat you right."

Or otherwise, he was in serious trouble with PETA or RSPCA, or whoever was in charge of animal protection around. He had no idea about stuff like that.

“I cannot believe you,” Simon pursed his lips and proceeded to button back up. “Okay, Alex, in your own words, if you want war, you got it.”

“In my own words? What the hell is that supposed to mean?” Carter wondered out loud.

“It’s what you said when you discovered your beloved husband was cheating on you.”

“He wasn’t cheating. I know all about his so-called cheating.”

“Like hell you do,” Simon shot back. “Think about all the things you have to lose. Not just Aron. Your image.”

“My image? Being a lying scumbag, a cheater, and a two-timer? Isn’t that my real image?”

Simon looked at him like he could not comprehend the question.

“Do what you want,” Carter added. “I thought you could be a decent guy.”

Simon stopped for a second, but then he set his eyes down and stormed out of the room, without another word.

Damn, now he had to get to Aron before that idiot. That definitely didn’t go down well. But, still, it felt right.

Why on Earth was Aron not picking up? In the end, he decided to call his office, but a dutiful secretary informed him that his husband was caught up in a meeting, and he could not be disturbed.

“Is it an emergency?” the secretary asked.

“No, not exactly,” he murmured.

“Unless it is an emergency, we cannot help you,” the woman said apologetically.

“No problem. Sorry to bother you,” he answered.

“I will let your husband know you called the moment he is out of the meeting.”

“Thanks a lot. Have a nice day.”

“Have a nice day, too, Mr. Ruskin.”

Okay, so he needed to postpone telling Aron about Alex’s cheating, for now. Was it really such a good idea to tell off Simon? Yes, it was. He was just keeping up with a lie, otherwise. And no one was getting anything out of it. Aron was a cheated husband, Simon was led by the nose, and he ... well, he just didn’t want any of it. If Alex was going to be pissed once back, that be it. He was not supposed to be a cheater in the first place.

He spent the rest of the day shooting ads, and in long meetings with Yolanda. His phone remained dead. Well, he wasn’t going to leave a message or send an e-mail. That was the kind of thing to at least prepare in advance, over a phone conversation. The rest had to happen face to face.

It was late in the evening that he finally managed to get home. To say he was not exactly looking forward to talking to his husband – *not your husband!* – was an understatement. What if Simon had gotten a hold of Aron before him?

Aron’s phone was still unresponsive. What if something bad happened? He walked through the door, anxiety like a knife in the pit of his stomach. No, that couldn’t be. Someone would have let him know, call from a hospital, from Aron’s work, without a doubt.

Still, he let out a big exhale, the moment he saw Aron sitting on the sofa, with the laptop on his knees, and a focused expression on his face.

“Hey,” he called out.

“Hey,” Aron said and raised his eyes from the screen.

“Didn’t your secretary tell you I called?”

“You called?” Aron asked, surprised. “No, she didn’t tell me anything. Who did you talk to?”

Aron gestured for him to come closer, and kissed him on the lips, as Carter leaned in. Yeah, that was something really nice to get used to. No, no, he needed to focus.

“I don’t know her name ... I don’t think she said it,” Carter scratched his head.

“We have some interns working with us this time of the year. Probably one of them answered the phone instead.”

“But, hey, how come you didn’t pick up? I think I called a thousand times,” Carter spoke, as he sat next to Aron on the sofa.

“Damn, can you believe it? I lost my phone. One minute, I had it, and the next, it was gone. I searched everywhere. I’m so sure it was on my desk when those reporters from New Entertainment came. For some reason, they needed to use my office as their home base. Between you and me, Alex, those guys are pretty damn annoying,” Aron explained. “I had people from nearby offices to help me search for my phone, but there was no trace of it. I have no idea how I could lose it like that.”

“Well, it’s just a phone,” Carter hooked his arm over Aron’s shoulders. “Did you buy another?”

“Yes, it’s not like I can stay without a phone. I was just busy getting in contact with a lot of people to let them know of my new number. But I really liked that phone. Plus, it had our little homemade amateur video on it. I really hope anyone who finds it hasn’t the means to hack into it.”

“Like who would do that? Plus, what’s to fret about? It’s consensual sex between two adults, married, on top of everything,” Carter shrugged, feeling philosophical about the entire situation. “At worst, they’ll just fap to us going at it.”

“Baby, you really know how to cheer up a guy,” Aron laughed. “It still upsets me. I should be more careful. But what did you want to tell me?” he asked.

Ah, damn. Carter unhooked his arm from Aron’s shoulders and began rubbing his palms against his jeans. How the hell was he supposed to start?

Hello. I am Alex Ruskin and I am a cheater.

Hello! This is not AA.

I'm not Alex Ruskin either.

Nor a cheater.

Technically, we spanked Simon once, let him rub his junk with our foot, and stuffed his mouth with our limpy boy.

Psh, that cannot even be called experimenting. We were just trying to ...

Yeah, trying. We're always trying.

It didn't matter. He had to start. He opened his mouth when his phone started ringing. Well, not that was bad timing. He looked at the phone screen with an annoyed expression.

"It's Mark. It doesn't matter, I'll see tomorrow what he wanted," he rejected the call. "Now, I was saying ..."

The phone began again, this time more hysterically if that was possible for an inanimate object.

"I think you should get it," Aron spoke. "We have all evening to talk. Whatever you want to say is not time-sensitive, right?"

Well, in a way, it was, but it was not like Simon had the means to get to Aron if Aron didn't have his phone. He doubted Simon had Aron's e-mail or other ways to contact the guy. He shrugged and answered.

"Hey, Mark, how's it going? What's with you calling out so late? What? What news? Website?"

Aron was looking at him, while he was trying to make sense of his secretary's babbling.

"Go to New Entertainment's website," he told Aron. "Mark is upset over some news or something."

"Okay," Aron nodded.

He returned to his conversation with Mark.

“Sex tape?” he asked, this time alarmed.

The look in Aron’s eyes was speaking volumes.

“Fuck me sideways,” he murmured.

Aron buried his face into his hands.

“Oh, fuck, baby, I’m so sorry,” he began.

All right, no need to panic. He slowly turned the laptop towards him, using just two fingers.

“Beauty X” Model Alex Ruskin Wows In Hot Sex Video Shot With Hunky Husband! We Didn’t See THAT On Instagram!”

“O. M. G.”

It was all he could muster at the moment.

“I’m going right there, right now, and I’m making those scumbags eat that phone!” Aron stood to his feet.

Carter caught his hand.

“Chill, man. Not that I don’t appreciate you standing up for your husband’s honor here, but I guess that, by now, the video has been leaked to all the major porn sites.”

“I cannot just stand here,” Aron protested. “Those guys stole my phone, they hacked it, and used a private video to ... ah, fuck, how can I be so stupid? I should have not let my phone on my desk!”

Carter was busy typing something while trying to appease Mark on the other end who was talking about what a failure he was for some reason.

“This has nothing to do with you, Mark. Those scumbags are to blame. Yeah, don’t worry about damage control too much. Tonight, my man and I will go there and ... make them eat Aron’s phone,” he added, for lack of anything better to say.

“We will?” Aron turned to look at him, more than a bit surprised.

“Yeah, just for the sake of watching them shit their pants,” Carter said with a small shrug. “Oh, as I suspected. We’re already trending on PornRub.”

“Really, Alex, how can you be so chill?” Aron asked.

The guy looked worried. Carter took his hand.

“It’s bad, I know. But what can we do?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I should not be so stupid in the future to shoot porn videos in the bedroom,” Aron shook his head and flopped down next to Carter on the sofa.

“Or hop into a time machine, get back to that moment, and not shoot it altogether,” Carter said. “Ah, damn, people are such assholes. Just look at these comments.”

julionerve – Jeesh, no money shot? What the fuck? Screw you, Alex! Can’t you even hold a phone?

alowyin – Aron is soooo husband material.

trentboss – @alowyin get your hands off my husbando, you bitch!!!

mekinglord – One second I’m diamonds, and then dark screen?! Alex, you fucking douche!!!

arania pleenese – Meh, this guy’s overrated. Aron’s hot AF, tho.

farinismere – Stop complaining, people! Just admit it already that we’re lucky to see this. Both guys are hot. I’d do them both. So happy fapping everyone!

xxcdcmemexx – fuck. Aron, you fucking lucker. I’d rail that twink ass so hard, too.

“And it goes like this ...” Carter scrolled down with a long sigh, “for 17 pages? For realz? Are these people jerking off when they go to porn sites, or they’re just here to write literature?”

“Ah, fuck, ah, fuck,” Aron continued to fidget next to him, probably not knowing what else to do.

“All right,” Carter said. “I think it’s time we go over there and give these guys a piece of our minds.”

“I’m totally for that,” Aron flexed his fists.

Carter covered Aron’s hands with one of his. They could not get physical with those idiots, no matter how much he could feel his hands itching, too. Hmm, bingo, he knew exactly what to do.

“Boss?” he heard Mark’s worried voice from the phone he had thrown on the coffee table.

“Mark, go drink some hot milk, grab some cookies, too, and chill. It’s an order, don’t give me lip. Take your dog for a night walk if you cannot sleep. See you in the morning.”

He was barely off the phone, that it started ringing again.

“Oh, fuck,” he murmured. He doubted he could send Yolanda to sleep with milk and cookies, too. But he needed to get that. “Yes?” he answered.

“Alex, stop your man from doing something stupid,” Yolanda began right away.

“So, you’ve seen it,” he breathed out.

“Yeah, like the rest of the universe with an Internet connection, most probably,” Yolanda replied with a sigh.

“Well, technically, only those interested in gay porn, and then supposedly interested in me, plus, if we count out those who are working, sleeping or doing anything else during this time ...”

“Alex,” Yolanda stopped him. “We need damage control.”

“You and Mark are like peas in a pod, seriously,” he replied. “What damage control? What is this? A DEFCON situation sort of thing? Should we let the president know my ass got caught naked on camera? Maybe he wants to address the nation!” he exclaimed, finding everyone’s reactions so far a bit too dramatic.

Well, it’s not YOUR naked ass on camera.

True that. Ah, well, DEFCON it is, then.

“We need to spin this in our favor,” Yolanda spoke, this time in her most professional voice.

“Okay, as you say, but first, let me know. Just how bad is a thing like this? For my career and such?”

“Well, there are many factors that come into play,” Yolanda said thoughtfully. “It’s not like you were with another man, but with your lawfully wedded husband. That’s good. You two weren’t engaged in something too extreme or kinky, so, again, that’s good. Also, you’ve never hidden that you’re out and proud, so no issues there, either. But,” she added.

“Ah, there’s a ‘but’, after all,” Carter sighed.

Not a but, a butt. Naked. On camera.

Seriously, not the right time for puns.

“Some of our clients might not be too thrilled. You know the kind,” Yolanda said with a small huff. “They’re all okay with everything, on the surface, but on the inside, they’re a bunch of stupid bigots, assholes, two-faced scumbags ...”

“Yolanda, Yolanda, okay, I get it,” Carter said. “Just tell me. What’s the fallout we can expect? And what do you think we should do?”

“Well, first of all, do you two lovebirds have other naughty bits you wouldn’t want to share with the world, yet it might happen?” the woman questioned.

Hmm, something like a lover on the side? Nah!

“No,” he answered after a short moment of hesitation.

“No for real, or no, not exactly no?” Yolanda continued.

Damn, shit was getting real, and he hadn’t even told Aron. He could not have had a worse timing telling Simon off. Now he really needed a crisis team to handle everything, and not only to save Alex’s model career.

“No,” he tried to sound like he was really convinced of his own words.

Next to him, Aron was squeezing his knee in assurance. He didn’t dare to look at the guy.

“Then we should send a statement tomorrow to all the media interested in such stuff, to express our sorrow regarding the incident, but also to emphasize that phone hacking is illegal ... wait, it wasn't you guys who leaked this, right?” Yolanda asked, alarmed.

“No. Fucking scumbags stole Aron's phone.”

“Oh, that's bad,” Yolanda murmured. “That's bad for them!” she added, more energetically this time. “Ah, we can so work this to our advantage. They will have to eat out of our hands for all eternity so that you don't sue.”

Now, Yolanda was laughing. A bit hysterically, even.

“Wait, shouldn't I sue them?” Carter asked. “They clearly committed a felony. They should pay for it.”

Says the one with a pristine snow white conscience.

Oh, please.

“Nope, don't sue them. Celebrities and tabloids live in symbiosis, and you should know that, Alex,” Yolanda said.

“Talking about the strangest of all bedfellows,” Carter commented wryly. “Forget about that. I'm suing these guys' asses.”

“Alex, c'mon. They'll just be a pain in the ass if you really do that,” Yolanda tried to convince him.

“Yolanda, you're my boss, and I respect your opinion. But, with all due respect,” he added with a sigh, “it's not your naked ass on camera.”

Yolanda remained silent for a few seconds.

“Okay, I understand,” she said. “I'm not only your boss. I'm your friend, too. And things that are private should remain that way. I guess I should prepare for a full-blown war with New Entertainment then,” she sighed in turn.

Hmm, he had to be better than this. He stole a look at Aron and his pain-stricken face. Alex was maybe a douchebag, but he didn't deserve to be the laughing stock of some assholes thriving on garbage like rats and shit eating flies.

“Don’t worry, Yolanda,” he said brightly. “I know exactly what to do.”

“Why isn’t this giving me peace of mind?” Yolanda chuckled. “Oh, Alex, I know you can be scary, but remember who you’re dealing with.”

“Well, I think they should know WHO they’re dealing with,” he replied with a small smile. “Ready, partner?” he turned toward Aron.

Aron nodded.

“Wait, what are you two planning?” Yolanda asked, a bit alarmed this time.

“No offense, boss, but it’s a secret,” Carter chuckled. “The less you know, the better.”

“As long as I don’t read another shocking title in the papers tomorrow ...” Yolanda trailed off.

“Trust me,” Carter stopped her. “New Entertainment scumbags are born a century too late to be a match for me.”

“Wow,” Yolanda laughed. “I’m counting on you, then.”

“Be sure of that. Now go to sleep.”

“So, what are we going to do?” Aron asked after he said good night to Yolanda.

“We’ll just pay a visit to the idiot who wrote this,” Carter began typing again. “Ah, here’s the scumbag’s Twitter ... A small party with friends ... Okay, let’s hijack the idiot a little,” he said, turning off the laptop and standing up. “Let’s go.”

Aron listened carefully as he explained the plan. It was so definitely going to work.

It wasn’t difficult to reach their destination.

“Are you really sure?” Aron whispered.

“Yeah, we’ll deal with this as we should. Gloves are off,” he whispered back.

Aron put his hands on Carter’s shoulders, squeezing them.

“I had no idea you were such a warrior,” Aron smiled, and Carter could barely see his face in the semi-dark.

“Better that than a worrier,” Carter punned right away.

“I like you when you’re this determined,” Aron came closer, forcing Carter to throw his head back so they could watch each other. “I think it’s hot,” he murmured and leaned in.

The backstreet was almost deserted at that hour. He only had to angle his head and kiss Aron. But no, he needed a clear head for the show they were planning.

“Let’s not offer some PDA for free,” he said as he stepped back. “I think they saw enough of us, as it is.”

Aron was a tad disappointed, but he nodded gravely. The door to the remote club where the scumbag reporter was partying with his douchebag friends opened brusquely. A guy came out, barely keeping on his feet, took two steps and vomited loudly on one side of the stairs.

Carter grimaced and walked over. Weren’t they lucky?

“Excuse me, are you Lionel Drew?” he asked, in his most innocent voice.

The guy turned and wobbled like a magnetic toy, returning to its original position after a short knock over the head. He squinted, pushing his hipster glasses up his nose.

“Wait, I know you,” the guy mumbled. “You’re Alex Ruskin! Wait, what are you ...”

“Aron, let’s take the suspect into custody,” Carter said smoothly.

The guy blanched when Aron emerged from the shadows. He turned to run, but Carter was quick to grab him and drag him toward Aron who caught him swiftly.

“I’ll scream,” the man threatened, but Aron pushed him inside the car, and climbed inside before the guy managed to say anything more.

Carter grimaced as he climbed behind the wheel. The guy reeked of cheap booze and fear. Good, that last bit was perfect. The fact that the idiot had just puked, not so much. He ignited the engine and drove off.

Adjusting the rearview mirror, he took a look at their temporary prisoner. Good thing they took Aron's car that wasn't two-seated. The Spyder could have been more intimidating to outside lookers, but Aron's station wagon was less conspicuous. Why was Aron driving that kind of car? Was he hoping for kids later, maybe? The image of his best friend holding a little girl and a little boy, one on each of his strong arms, and wearing the biggest smile ever, crossed his mind.

Well, he had to stop derailing with these thoughts. Now he needed to put on his scary face.

"So, Lionel, was it difficult to break into my husband's phone?"

"What are you talking about?" the guy squealed. "I just saw your video on some porn sites! Aren't you the ones who put it up?"

"Nice try," Carter showed his teeth, knowing that the guy was watching him, too. "Well, I don't have the same hacking skill, but I have something better. Aron, get the scumbag's phone."

"Hey!" the guy protested, as Aron searched his pockets and produced his smartphone.

"Well, let's stop a little here, and let's see what you might be hiding."

Aron threw him the phone, as soon as they stopped, by the side of the road.

"So?" Carter asked. "How do I unlock this?" he gestured toward the guy.

"I'm not telling," the guy set his chin high.

Carter sighed theatrically.

"We can do this the hard way or the easy way, you choose."

"I can sue you!" the guy threatened.

"Not if we sue you first," Carter replied. "Tell me, Aron, was this the idiot that was today in your office?"

“Yes, he is,” Aron confirmed.

“As you can see, my husband is a man of few words when it comes to private matters that piss him off,” Carter spoke. “There is footage, Lionel.”

He was bluffing, but it didn’t matter.

“We know who took the phone. And we know you profited from it. So, unlock your phone now, or you might lose something more precious.”

The guy looked at Aron who only had to frown a little to make him piss his pants. With trembling hands, he reached for the screen, as Carter held it for him.

“What you guys are doing is illegal,” the guy squealed. “You’ll pay!”

“Hmm, well, we need to make sure you won’t tell on us. And, if you do, we’ll make sure to come after you, again.”

He was speaking casually, but he could feel the guy trembling in the back.

“I will tell,” the guy continued. “Your fingerprints are all over my phone.”

Carter raised one hand, flexing and showing the latex glove. Good thing Aron had plenty of cleaning supplies around the house. Damn, he was thinking like a criminal. Well, he had watched plenty of crime shows. Now, all that knowledge was paying off.

“What are you guys going to do to me?” the man whined.

“Nothing, if you play nice. Now we’re going to make sure that you won’t bother us again. You and your shitty website. You could go to jail, man, and, frankly, it doesn’t look to me like you’re jail material.”

Apparently, the mention of the penalty that could incur as a result of hacking Aron’s phone made the man fall silent. Maybe not silent-silent, as he began to mumble something incoherently. Aron was dead silent, though, and for the first time in a long time, Carter wondered what his best friend might be thinking.

“Hey, look at that,” Carter commented, as he began to browse through the guy’s phone. “Did you know that the boss at New Entertainment has a huge, 10-bedroom

villa in Mauritius that doesn't appear in any legal papers? I suppose the competition would have a fit with this kind of information," he whistled.

"C'mon, man, you're killing me here," the reporter mumbled while keeping his head down.

"Ah, and you were planning later this week to do a small article on a certain politician who likes going to striptease shows a bit too often? Aren't you a cheeky brat?" Carter shook his head. "Are you that sure you can play the big boys' game?"

"I wasn't going to sign it," the man glared at Carter in the rearview mirror. "All the sensitive material goes by the editor in chief. He's signing those."

"Ah, it looks like I'm not that big a star," Carter feigned being affected by this new discovery. "Because you signed the little piece you did on me and Aron. And wasn't it a bit too reckless of you, seeing that you took the phone?"

"All right, I took it, but I wasn't the one to hack into it. I don't have the skills, and frankly, I don't look like a hacker, now do I?"

"I don't know, man," Carter deadpanned. "How does a hacker look like?"

"Whatever," the reporter scowled. "Just what the fuck do you want?"

"Watch that tone, or I'll have my hunky husband slap you upside the head."

The man kept his tongue and his breath along with it.

"What I want," Carter exhaled, "is a huge ass apology written in the biggest font you can possibly use on that shitty website, your printed publication, and on TV. Then I want your shitty company to never go after me or anyone close to me again. Also, some free ad space for Beauty X, because why not."

"No way," the man protested. "My boss will have my head."

"Well, then I think that the perspective of having the story of that beautiful villa all over the news tomorrow sounds swell to you. Whatever, man, I tried."

He made a move like he wanted to ignite the car engine again, but the man reached his shoulder and squeezed.

“No, I’ll do it. I’ll probably have to seek employment at some shitty fast food after this, but I’ll do it.”

“My heart is bleeding. Hmm, Lionel Drew,” Carter said slowly. “But that’s not your real name, right? Why don’t you use your papa’s name, hmm?”

The man became hesitant again.

“What do you mean by that?”

“How drunk are you usually when posting these tweets?” Carter shook the phone to make a point. “With my dad,” he recited, as he flicked through the guy’s social media and looked at a particular pic that had only two retweets and 20 likes. “Of course he had to be your dad. How else could you have turned into such a shmuck,” he said with a tinge of disgust. “So, seeing that your father practically runs the media company you’re writing for, I’d say that you might just get away with a slap over the wrist. Of course, your old man will be pissed, but, hey, that’s life. Who said it was easy to make it into showbiz,” he added with a grin.

“Okay, man, you won this round,” the man said, raising his hands in surrender.

“Not just this round, be sure of it,” Carter looked at the man in the mirror. “Be thankful that I’m a nice person.”

“A nice person?” the reported snorted. “You’re a mean son of a bitch and you ... What the fuck, man? Get your hands off me!”

Carter turned to witness Aron catching the man by the neck and pressing him into the door.

“Let the idiot go, Aron,” he intervened.

Aron’s eyes seemed darker than usual in the faint light inside the car. But he did let go, after two full seconds that made the reporter squirm and thrash.

“Now we are going to let you where we gave you the lift, and you’re going to keep up your part of the deal. If not, well, you know how things will go down. And they won’t go down well. Here’s your phone. Make sure to mail Aron’s back to him.”

“Okay,” the man murmured. “Just ... don’t mention this to anyone, okay?”

“Okay,” Carter said with a sigh.

“You’ve been awfully quiet,” Carter finally decided to break the silence, seeing that Aron was still keeping to himself after they left off the reporter in front of the club.

“Alex,” Aron breathed out. “I’m not sure how to say this to you.”

“Just say it,” Carter encouraged the other, as he took the last turn toward their home.

“I’m sorry I ever doubted you. I’m sorry I ever compared you to Carter. It wasn’t fair and I was the one to drive this wedge between us. I pushed you away with my behavior, even before we got married.”

Aron took a moment to exhale loudly. Carter stopped the engine, as soon as they were in the driveway, and it was his turn to remain silent. This was important, he could feel it.

It is frigging important.

Really, I don’t need the extra reminder.

“The moment we met, I wasn’t sure you would be the one. It wasn’t perfect, it wasn’t like in the movies. I felt that it was extraordinary, how we met when I felt so down, and you practically picked me up. But I thought it was going to be just a fling, something short like I had with others. And I knew that I had no intention to continue like that after hitting 30.”

“So you wanted to settle down. That’s a good thing.”

Thank you, Dr. Phil.

You’re welcome.

“I was afraid, in the beginning, that it was just my wishful thinking. That I was projecting on you. That I was projecting ... Carter on you. I know how you must feel hearing me tell you all these. But it’s like a huge burden on my chest and I need to let it go.”

“It’s okay. Go on,” Carter nodded, mostly to himself.

“I doubted you a few times during those first months. I thought that I might not be the only one ... I’m so sorry. And I thought that I should put you to a small test, ask you to marry me, to see what you would say.”

Oh, fuck! Was it some kind of joke? This whole thing?

Shut up, brain, I need to concentrate.

Yeah, ‘cause this is fucking huge!

“So, you like, didn’t mean it when you asked me to marry you?” Carter asked, trying to look every bit shocked as he was supposed to be.

His voice was doing a strange little squeal when he tried to pretend being outraged. It made Alex’s voice sound like a small piglet, for some reason. Completely unattractive.

Admit it, it’s a bit cute.

‘S not.

Aron shook his head.

“I felt I was falling for you hard. You were everything I wanted. I hoped you would say yes. But I was surprised as hell when you did say yes. I was so happy with you, like I could not believe how happy, and then, there were such moments when I felt like you were slipping through my fingers and you were suddenly somewhere, far away, away from me. But, I guess now, those were just signs of my own indecision and doubt. You were indeed tired sometimes; you were working so hard to make it into the fashion business, and seeing how your family ... But I won’t talk about that anymore. That reporter really had to use those words. I thought I was seeing red in front of my eyes.”

Carter’s ears felt like they were making small gyratory moves. What the hell was that supposed to mean?

“I’m sorry I’m unloading everything on you like this right now. And after such an eventful day. But I need to say it all.”

“Just let it all out, man,” Carter placed one hand on Aron’s knee and squeezed in sympathy.

“You know what’s the stupidest thing of all?” Aron chuckled. “That despite being so insanely happy, having found my better half, finally,” he joked, “I still had moments when I was unhappy. I know you’ll not like what I’m going to say, but after this, I’m going to shut my trap on this topic forever.”

Oh, God, oh, God, oh, God!

Could you please stop it?

“Just say it,” Carter smiled, looking at Aron, sure that the muscles in his cheeks were stretched and twisted beyond the point of no return.

“I thought of Carter. I thought how he was no longer the one in my heart. And I felt stupidly unhappy because of that. I tried to convince myself that he would always be like a brother to me, my best friend, through thick and thin, but nothing worked. So, in a way, I think I was the cheater. It was like my heart didn’t want to let go of him, despite knowing so well that he could never be with me, not the way I wanted him to.”

“So what did you do? You said that ...” Carter could feel the words turning into rubber on his lips.

“I didn’t lie. I fell in love with you and out of love with him. But it was like everything was in such a fragile balance. In a way, I think I was lucky that he came to the wedding and made a fool of himself.”

“Why? I don’t get it. Why?” Carter babbled, his eyes prickly for no reason at all.

“He tipped the balance. He made me angry with his stupid homophobic shit. And broke the thread, the trust between us. He broke my heart that day. I was so lucky to have you. Oh, no, Alex, are you crying?”

He felt his cheeks with his fingers. Yes, there was water coming out of his eyes. Such a strange thing.

Happy now?

Shut up. Just shut up.

Chapter Twenty-Two

“No, it’s just some allergy and stuff,” he quickly wiped his cheeks with his hands.

“I didn’t know you were allergic,” Aron said, still worried. “What triggered your allergy?”

“A shmuck,” Carter said brightly. “I mean, that shmuck from earlier. The reporter. Yeah, that’s it. I’m allergic to scumbags.”

Aron placed a hand on Carter’s shoulder and squeezed gently.

“You don’t have to act brave. I know how what I said must be affecting you right now.”

“I don’t act brave,” Carter protested.

And you have no idea why.

He’ll never have.

That’s right.

“I love you,” Aron said simply. “That’s all that’s important right now. I promise: no more doubts.”

Okay, if Aron was going to keep it like this, his allergy was going to act up again. So he needed to do something.

“Let’s just go inside. I’m beat, and I think we both need the rest. And just so you know, none of this was your fault. The reporter and everything. And ... I love you, too.”

His throat was dry like an afternoon in Sahara. But nothing mattered at this point. Aron was happy. So mission accomplished, right?

After getting out of the car, he had to walk with Aron holding him tightly, like the man was afraid that he was going to lose his husband if he was going to let go.

They were barely in, when his phone rang again. He almost dropped it when he saw the caller ID.

“Mother in law,” he barely managed and gulped loudly.

“My mom? Ah, damn, in all the ruckus I forgot to call my parents and give them my new number, too,” Aron said. “Come on, pick up, and then pass her to me.”

“Hey,” he answered, his voice as tiny as a speckle of dust.

How was Alex addressing his mother in law? Was he calling her by her name? Or was he calling her ‘mother’?

“Hello, Alex,” a voice he knew so well came through, a tad tired, and strained. “Aron is not picking up. And what is this story about a scandal? Are you two all right?”

“I think your mom wants to talk to you,” he handed Aron the phone, without replying to all the questions.

Yes, he knew that was rude of him. But he didn’t have it in him to talk to Aron’s mom right now. He hadn’t heard Clementine’s voice in years, and he could not take it. He just needed to sit down.

“Yes, mom. I ... my phone was stolen. I’m sorry about all this. No, it’s my fault and no one else’s. I know I didn’t hand over my phone, but ... Yeah, okay. Tomorrow night, then. I’ll send a message with my new number. I love you, too. Bye.”

“Oh, God,” Carter groaned, as soon as Aron finished his conversation with his mom. “Now your parents saw that, too?”

“No, they didn’t see it,” Aron shook his head. “And they wouldn’t, don’t worry. They just want to see us, tomorrow, at dinner.”

“Oh, fuck, why?” he buried his face into his hands. “Will we get lectured?”

He couldn’t image Aron’s parents giving them some big talk on how they shouldn’t be naked all over the news, but he was fairly mortified. If there was someone in the world he really didn’t want to let down, that someone had to be Clementine Ruskin, followed closely by her husband.

“No,” Aron smiled. “My parents are not big on lectures. They just think that we need support. Baby, I know you’re not crazy about family visits, but we see them too little these days. And, if they happen to say something, I’m ready to take full responsibility. You have no reason to worry. And it’s just dinner.”

“I ... I’d be happy to see your parents,” he mumbled. “And it’s not like you shot that video by yourself. Gosh, it’s just ... I just feel ashamed right now,” he added.

“Hey, what happened with being all chill about it?” Aron joked, clearly trying to lighten up the mood. “Thousands of people saw us.”

“Yeah. Strangers. Who gives a fuck about them?” Carter snorted. “But just thinking that your mom and dad ...”

“Don’t worry. My parents are not exactly the type to go browsing porn sites,” Aron sat next to Carter, and held him. “They just heard about it from an acquaintance. Apparently, the little news featuring us was all over TV, too, in prime time. Censored, but still.”

“Oh, fuck,” Carter made himself little in the sofa.

“Come on, my parents are the least likely to lecture us in the whole universe. They just want to know that we’re all right, and they want to see us.”

“Okay, if you say so. But I’m still ashamed as hell,” Carter spoke softly.

“Want to go to bed?” Aron hugged him. “I promise, no more playing director in the bedroom,” he added with a small chuckle.

“Ha, ha, really funny,” Carter said dryly. “But frankly, I’m beat. I think I’ll sleep like a log.”

“I second that,” Aron agreed. “And I want to thank you. For tonight and for everything. That was one hell of a revenge. But how come you knew that guy’s the boss’s son?”

“I scrolled through his Twitter really fast. I guess I was lucky to find that picture. My guess is that the guy changed his name to avoid people saying about him that daddy hired him. And I noticed the other dude’s name and realized who that was. No big deal, really.”

“I’d say it is. It looks like I’m sleeping in the same bed with a detective,” Aron joked. “But what if you couldn’t find anything compromising in the guy’s phone?”

“Are you kidding me? Everything you need to learn about a person, you only need their phone, and you’re set,” Carter snorted.

Now that he thought about it, Alex’s phone seemed kind of clean. Not that he snooped around. But there didn’t seem to be any compromising pics, although Simon had a ton, and all in all, the guy knew how to be discreet. It felt like Alex knew well how to keep things out of sight. Yes, he seemed ... practiced.

“Well, good thing someone’s the brains in this family,” Aron placed a quick kiss on Carter’s lips. “Which means I’m the muscle guy.”

“Of course you’re the muscle guy. Have you looked at yourself in the mirror? You’re like ...”

What did he want to say?

Adonis?

Hmm, too serious.

Gorgeous?

Hmm, too little.

“A sex god,” he said promptly.

Aron burst into laughter.

“I thought you wanted to sleep tonight,” the man cooed into his ear, making him shudder.

“Hmm, hmm, I think I should,” he replied.

I don’t.

Who’s asking you?

“Let me just make you happy, then,” Aron caressed him slowly. “You won’t have to do a thing, I promise.”

“Sounds ... really good,” he murmured.

Half an hour later, after having come into his best friend’s skilled mouth like there was no tomorrow, he fell asleep. And in his dream, he tumbled down a one-of-a-kind type of rabbit hole, with pictures of his old life being friends with Aron adorning the smooth walls, in downward spirals.

“Alex,” Yolanda jumped into his arms, the moment he sat foot in her office the next day. “I have no idea what you did, and I’m really dying to know, but I won’t ask. The editor in chief at New Entertainment called this morning and offered a tear jerking apology, while humbly offering some ad space, free of charge. Damn, how have I managed to rule this household without your help until now? And how can I repay you?”

Carter hugged the lady back.

“Don’t sweat it. Trust me, it was my pleasure,” he said with a small secretive smile.

Yolanda smiled in turn.

“I know! I should give you a little bit of time off. How about that?”

“That would be nice, only that, at this point, I have no idea what I would do with so much free time on my hands. However, I do want to ask if the day after tomorrow, you could let me off the hook earlier. There’s something I need to do with Aron.”

It was perfect for going to see his body. And he wasn’t willing to postpone things anymore. With all the excitement involved by being Alex, it was like he had almost forgotten about the most important things of all. And that was that he needed to find a way to return to his old self. To his own body, and his own life. No matter how he felt about it all. No matter how amazing it was to wake up in Aron’s loving arms.

“Sure thing, pumpkin,” Yolanda said and pinched both his cheeks. “There, you seemed a little pale.”

He nodded, a bit less absent minded. Yeah, Aron was right. He wasn't particularly thrilled with having his cheeks pinched, and spoken to in a loving voice. But not for the reasons Aron thought. No, not at all.

"Boss, I am really so sorry," Mark welcomed him.

"Man, would you quit it?" Carter smiled and ruffled Mark's hair in passing. "You worry way too much. And it wasn't your fault."

"It was," Mark insisted, while brushing down his disturbed hair with his fingers. "I wasn't paying attention. I ..."

"Alex, do you have a minute?" Simon peeked from behind the door, opening it without knocking.

Okay, this was going to be tough.

"Mark, prepare my schedule for today, and bring it over in ... let's say 15 minutes. Come, Simon," he gestured for the other to follow him into his office.

"But boss, I already have your schedule and ..." Mark protested, jumping from behind his desk.

"Mark, it's okay," Carter smiled at his assistant. "I know how to wipe my own ass," he added with a wink.

Mark sank back into his chair, and pouted. All right, he could deal with his assistant and his hissy fits later. Now, he needed to listen to what Simon had to say.

He waited until Simon closed the door behind them, but he remained standing.

"Hey, you don't have to look at me like I'm going to execute you," Simon mumbled and he looked to one side, seemingly nervous.

"Well, I'd rather take a blow standing up," Carter said. "I would ask what brings you here, but I suppose you want to tell me about how you intend to inform my husband about our affair."

"No," Simon said, keeping his eyes down.

“No?” Carter wondered out loud.

I think puppy eyes is on our side, now.

Not on our-our side, though.

Details.

“I ... saw the video,” Simon said with a small huff.

“Ah, the video. Well, we sent requests everywhere to be taken down, but well, this is the Internet. Nothing ever gets erased for good,” Carter said quickly.

“It wasn’t what I could have expected,” Simon crossed his arms over his chest, still refusing to look at Carter. “I thought you hated having sex with your husband. You always complained about him being too big, and always pressing you to come while being fucked ...”

“Pressing me to come?”

How the fuck?

I thought Aron was kind of a douche because he didn’t seem to care about that too much!

Yeah, like I said ... how the fuck?

“Yeah, you said that it took you half a year to get him to understand that you could live without coming during fucking, and another half to get him to come faster so that he could let you be.”

“That’s bullshit!” Carter exclaimed.

Damn, he needed to stop saying everything crossing his mind.

“Yeah,” Simon threw him a curt look. “It looks like you lied to me. And you didn’t have any hard time coming when you were with me, so ... Alex, you tell me what to think.”

“Really, I have no idea,” Carter mumbled, shaking his head.

This Alex dude didn't cease to amaze him. How much of a spoiled brat could he be to act like this? And why on earth was Aron taking everything from him?

"In that video, I saw you happy," Simon accused.

Actually, there were just two people fucking.

Shut up, can't you see this boy is trying to tell us something here?

"How ... why did you ... why did you lie to me?" Simon continued. "You gave me false hopes, you said you were going to divorce, you always whined about how Aron was so annoying always trying to make you happy by force ... Why? Can you please just tell me why?"

"I ... really wish I knew the answer to this one," Carter shook his head. "For all that's worth, I'm sorry, Simon. I mean, you're a cool dude. You're handsome. You're generous. Letting aside that you were with a married man ... but that's on me, I guess. I think you're a decent guy. So, you're not going to tell on me?"

Simon threw him a hurt look.

"No, but you should tell Aron everything. All this time, I thought you were unhappy with him, when actually ... you were just two-timing us, right? Why wasn't I enough? Why wasn't your husband enough? No, I won't tell on you. But I tell you this, and I tell you because somehow, I don't know why, I still think you should be happy. Tell Aron. You won't feel right until you tell him."

"How old are you again?" Carter looked at the guy. "Really, that sounded really profound right now."

Simon smiled, and managed somehow to look again like a silly puppy. Well, silly, but cute.

"I've read it online, on a relationship advice website."

"Of course you did," Carter said wryly. "Well, thank you for your concern with my wellbeing and happiness. But now, I should ask you. Are you still hoping that you're going to get something out of this?"

Simon looked away, and bit his lips.

“A bit, yes,” he admitted in a small voice. “But I won’t say it. I might jinx it.”

Moron, you just did.

Hey, have a little compassion here. Look at them puppy eyes.

Dogs will be the death of us.

Are you stupid? I have no idea how you managed to put that in a sentence.

Magic.

“So, if Aron decides to kick me out and divorce me, you’ll be here, waiting?” Carter tried to make clear whatever was happening in Simon’s silly brain right now.

Simon nodded happily. Yeah, the only thing the guy was missing was a tail to wag it.

“Damn,” Carter sighed. “You really should go chase someone else. With your looks, I bet 99% of single gay people in this city would want to be with you.”

“Yeah, like for one night,” Simon shrugged. “Or two,” he added, after a bit of deliberation, and a small frown. “You’re my longest relationship ever,” he declared, opening his arms and throwing them aside.

“Ah, fuck,” Carter mumbled. “Still, this doesn’t mean that you should just take everything that’s thrown at you. I kind of treated you like shit these last days.”

“Actually,” Simon looked down again and smiled, mostly to himself. “I kind of liked these last days. You introduced me to BDSM, you fed me from your own hand, you spanked me when I asked, you didn’t talk me down once ...”

“Talk you down? Like how?”

“Like how I should change my haircut, or change my favorite designer,” Simon grabbed the hems of his coat sleeves, and pulled, like he wanted to make a point. “You know. I mean, I know you’re more good looking than me, but I was born with this nose, and ...”

“What’s wrong with your nose? I’d say it’s a bit too perfect,” Carter said.

“That’s strange. I mean, it was the other time when you asked me if I went under the knife ... But I didn’t. You kept telling me it’s too long and pointy, and I see why. But I went to see a surgeon ... there, you made me said it, and despite me pleading with him, he told me that I shouldn’t ruin what Mother Nature gave me. What does he know, right?” Simon snorted, although it was clear that he was unconvinced by that.

“Well, he told you the truth. You have a perfect nose. Don’t go cut it or do something stupid. It’s perfect as it stands on your face. Hey, how come you work in marketing, and you’re not a model yourself?”

Simon was now looking at him like Carter was growing a second head.

“But you told me I’m no model material,” Simon spoke. “That I should stick to what I know.”

Carter could feel his head bursting. What was with this Alex, and his obsession to torture everyone around him? It was getting tedious, to say the least.

“Really, I have no idea what you see in me, if I used to talk to you like this,” Carter eventually managed to speak.

“Well, you have your days. Well, they don’t happen that often, but you do have your days. When it’s like you’re everything I want.”

You were everything I wanted.

Remember Aron’s words?

Yeah ... what the fuck is going on here?

“So I’m willing to wait for you,” Simon said brightly. “If you ever grow tired of Aron, I’m here for you.”

“Ah,” Carter sighed. “Please don’t do that. For your sake, please don’t. Can’t you see how much of a scumbag I can be?”

Simon shook his head slowly.

“No, you’re not. You’re not a scumbag. You just weren’t loved when you were a child.”

“Say what?” Carter exclaimed.

“Yeah, I mean ... your mom and everything,” Simon looked away, seemingly embarrassed. “But I won’t talk about that. I know it upsets you.”

“Okay,” Carter mumbled.

No matter how deep this rabbit hole he was passing through was running, the one Alex had seemed to dig all his life was even weirder.

That’s no way to compare things. You’re pitching apples versus oranges.

Pitching. Pitches. Peaches.

Where are you going?

Leave me alone.

But don’t you want to know about Alex?

No, not really. I’m not going to feel for the guy now.

Okay.

You’re agreeing for once?

Yeah, why not.

“I won’t keep you anymore. And I hope we can still be friends until, well, until you decide to leave Aron for me,” Simon spoke, interrupting his thoughts.

“You’re really bent on this,” Carter murmured.

Now that was worse than the prisoner’s dilemma. On one hand, if he went and told Aron about Simon, he was going to make Aron unhappy and ruin his marriage. On the other, if he didn’t, he was forcing Aron to continue living a lie, in the shape of a marriage to a famous model. What the fuck? He was still going at this in circles.

No, he needed to tell Aron. But he needed to choose his moment well. Maybe after the dinner with Aron’s mom and dad? No, better yet, after going to see his body. He needed to make all the ruckus around this die down before starting another shitstorm.

He was again lost in thought, so he didn't notice when Simon came close to him and hugged him.

"Hey," he said gently and patted the other on the back.

"I'm going to miss you," Simon sniffled. "But I'll wait. I'm sure you're the one for me."

Alex had to be a magician. Or simply, an expert in playing people. Because both Aron and Simon were smitten enough to think that Alex's whims were just the result of an unhappy childhood or something like that. Somehow he wasn't buying it. The guy seemed an emotional chameleon, capable to change to get the others fall for him.

And really? He had had Aron buy him an expensive car, like really frigging expensive. So Alex wasn't only after other people's feelings, he was after their money, too.

"What did you buy me last time as a gift?" he asked Simon suddenly.

The guy took one step away from him and smiled.

"The spanking paddle," he answered like a child happy to know all the answers to a school quiz.

"That was more like for you, but let's not talk about that right now," Carter said quickly, unnerved by how Simon's lovely caramel eyes were turning sultry and inviting. "Before that."

Simon seemed to take one moment to remember.

"Well," he began counting on his fingers, "it was that three day trip to Italy, on which you went alone, and before that was the diamond dust treatment for your skin at your favorite spa, and, ah, of course, your phone, that was a limited edition, just so you know, and before that ..."

"Stop," Carter raised his arms in surrender.

Just how much frigging money and things this guy needed? He was clearly making plenty of money, despite not being Kate Moss and all that, and he was still having

his husband and his lover buy him ludicrously expensive stuff. What the hell was he doing with all his money?

“Thank you,” he added, when Simon looked at him, confused. “Just for the record, since we’re no longer together, please don’t buy me stuff anymore.”

Simon’s face fell.

“But I enjoy giving you things. My family has enough money.”

“Then why are you working here? You could have fun spending your money to have fun, right?”

“My parents taught me that work is important. But they don’t forbid me to spend money on gifts for someone else.”

That made sense. It was clear that everyone around was well paid, but Simon did have an expensive car and was always dressed like he was ready to walk down the catwalk, despite only working for the marketing department. So Alex had a nose for choosing his victims well. Despite being different from one another, Aron and Simon had a few things in common, such as solid work ethics and generosity. And fat bank accounts.

The scumbag didn’t deserve Aron. What the fuck was he to do? All this time, he only wanted to see Aron happy, but was this really okay? Alex seemed to be on a quest to dig up all the money in the world, and not one second willing to stop. And he didn’t seem to love Aron too much. He didn’t love Simon either.

The guy simply loved money and nothing else.

“Simon, puppy eyes,” he murmured, “I’m saying this, and I hope you’ll understand. Go find an awesome guy to deserve you. I’m ...”

A piece of shit.

We don’t know all the facts.

Stop being the devil’s advocate.

“I will be your friend until you’re ready to accept me,” Simon spoke. “I won’t take no for an answer. I’ll show you that I can be the one for you. Even if every day you

will still go home to your husband. But I'll leave you now. Everyone is talking about you, how much you've worked lately. It looks like we'll all get a raise because the company is getting showered in contracts. And the guys with the underwear collection? Their sales seem to have taken off after your homemade clip. So, it looks like everything you touch turns to gold," Simon laughed. "So I won't keep the company's employee of the month from working his magic," he added. "See you around."

Carter stared at the door closing behind Simon. Not one moment without a surprise, or so it looked.

"Are you sure we shouldn't bring anything?" he glanced nervously at Aron, as they stood in front of the door to Aron's parents' home.

He only needed to look over the fence and see his childhood home. His parents were probably inside, but the house seemed silent. But there were more memories he had from this house, the one in which Aron and he had grown up, under the loving watch of Aron's mom and dad.

And now, that he was here again, he had the strangest of sensations that he had suddenly grown too much, and the house was smaller than what he could remember.

"Don't worry, mom clearly said that everything is taken care of, and just bring ourselves," Aron replied, and took him by the shoulders, squeezing in reassurance.

It was not reassurance he needed, but a cleaning agent for all the stuff Alex was capable of. Somehow, he doubted such a solution had been invented.

The door opened, and there stood Gary Ruskin, Aron's dad, with a warm smile that was lighting up his entire face. Aron was handsome like him, and anyone could notice the resemblance, although not Gary, and certainly not Clementine, were as tall. Apparently, Aron was taking after a grandfather, in terms of height.

Carter could not help notice the signs of time on Gary's face. His hair was completely white now, and the wrinkles he remembered were now deeper and set. But he was still the jolly man Carter knew.

“Clementine will be so happy to see you two,” Gary gestured for them to come inside and hugging them both. “I told her not to worry too much, but you know how mothers are. Always worrying,” he added, with a small, but fond eye roll. “Come, come, let’s have a seat at the table while my lovely wife is making herself pretty. She prepared some really delicious foods she intends to fatten us tonight with. Alex, please, this is your father in law asking. Just forget about your diet for tonight. Clementine really went head over backward to make the most exquisite foods. I promise, it’s nothing too fat.”

“Sure thing ... dad,” Carter said, after a short moment of hesitation.

Two pairs of dark eyes stared in shock at him.

Great.

It felt weird to just call him Gary, okay? He was always Mr. Ruskin to us.

Yeah, but I doubt Alex is calling his father in law ‘dad’.

Eh, we’ll live through it.

The older Mr. Ruskin seemed to be the first to recover himself from the shock. He smiled fondly and hugged Carter again.

“It’s good to see you, son,” the man said simply.

“I ... I think I’ll just go grab some water from the kitchen,” he replied.

He was in danger of doing something stupid again, and he needed a small break.

“I could bring you a glass,” Gary offered.

“No, that’s okay,” he shook his head.

“Do you still remember where the kitchen is? You so rarely visit. I’m sorry, it wasn’t a reproach,” Gary added quickly.

“Baby, are you okay?” Aron intervened.

“Yeah, don’t worry. I know where the kitchen is. I’ll be back in a jiffy,” he hurried the two other men to see about their business.

He could find his way in that house if he was blind. And he really needed that glass of water. That was no lie. His throat was dry and his eyes were prickly again.

Ah. But it was inevitable, and it was better like this than together at the table, with all eyes on him. He took in Clementine Ruskin, her wavy hair styled in an updo, probably for the occasion. She was turned with his back at him, fiddling with some kitchen utensils. She was wearing a flowery dress, and Carter could swear he could smell vanilla from where he stood, in the kitchen door.

“Hey, Mrs. R,” he spoke in a tiny voice.

“Carter?!”

The woman turned so fast on her heels that she managed to catch a porcelain bowl in the process, making it slide and crash on the floor.

Carter stood nonplused. Was he transforming? Could Clementine see him? Really see him?

“Ah, I’m so sorry, Alex,” the woman started speaking right away. “For a second, I thought ... Never mind.”

She made a gesture to begin gathering the shards from the floor. Carter shook off his trance. He wasn’t transforming. So he hurried to help Aron’s mom.

“Please let me,” he offered right away. “Your dress is too pretty to risk staining it.”

“Oh, thank you, Alex,” the woman smiled. “For the help, and for the compliment, of course.”

“My pleasure,” he said politely, while Clementine pointed out the trash can for him.

“Were you here for something?”

“Just a glass of water. I didn’t mean to startle you.”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Clementine waved. “I just visited Carter at the hospital two days ago, and I just ... Well, I suppose Aron told you how close we all used to be. I feel like he’s my son, too. And I was just thinking about him ... But don’t let me bore you with this. I’ll get that glass of water for you.”

He focused on the shards, placing them in the trash can and then grabbing the broom from a nearby closet for the smallest ones.

When he raised his eyes, Clementine was staring at him, the glass of water in her hands, which she held onto like a talisman. There was something odd in her eyes.

“I didn’t know you were so handy around the kitchen,” she said.

“Ah, I just thought not to leave anything sharp on the floor. So that someone doesn’t get hurt,” he explained.

“Okay,” she nodded, and her warm smile returned. “Now please, get out of my kitchen, and go take a seat with the rest of the boys. I will be right there.”

“I can help,” Carter offered.

Clementine’s smile widened.

“That is so very nice of you.”

The least he could do. So Clementine had gone to the hospital to see him? He was such a douchebag for not visiting them in two years. The same two years spent away from Aron. Like he had denounced his friendship with the entire Ruskin family. That wasn’t fair.

It had to be a wonder the way he could manage to answer all the polite questions Clementine and Gary were asking him about work, not once mentioning the scandal. Aron seemed happy, really feeling at home, joking with his parents and laughing.

And he felt like he was going back in time. How many times had he had dinner with the Ruskins? It had been more times than with his own mom and dad, with them always away on their exploring missions, away from home and, what truly mattered, away from him.

It felt like home, not only for Aron, but for him, too. He studied the wine glass in front of him, lost in thought.

“You made quite an impression on Carter’s parents,” Clementine was the one to address him again. “Such a fine young man, they said, and I can only agree. I am happy to be your mother in law. Proud, too,” she added. “I know Carter managed to make a bad impression at the wedding, but you should know, that is not who he is. We know him since he was seven years old. To this day, I cannot say I know what caused that outburst. And, after that, he has never returned our calls, nor picked up when we called him.”

“He was surely embarrassed, dear,” Gary spoke. “Carter has always had troubles expressing his emotions,” Aron’s dad said in an apologetic tone. “And he grew up here, with Aron, like they were brothers. I’m sure that somehow he thought at that moment that you were going to steal his longtime friend. In his name, I feel like I must apologize.”

“No need to,” Carter made himself little in his chair.

“Well, I will have a talk with him once he gets up from that hospital bed,” Clementine spoke again. “It’s enough how long he has ignored us. I won’t let him do that again. Time heals all wounds, and he must be less affected now than two years ago by the fact that Aron is married.”

To a guy.

To a douchebag.

They don’t know that.

They might suspect it.

Are you getting involved with the in-laws too, now?

“I would like to ask you, Alex,” Clementine placed a small warm hand on his, “to try being friends with Carter. He is usually such an easygoing person. All right, I admit that he might have his quirks, but he’s a true friend to Aron, so it would be nice for you to welcome him as a friend, as well.”

Carter looked at Aron, searching for help. His husband was seemingly preoccupied with examining the leftovers on his plate. Ah, so the entire family was ganging up on him.

It should make you happy. They love you.

Yes, they do. But Alex still hates us, remember? I cannot really offer the right answer here.

Always ruining a good thing? Stop talking about 'us' in this. I want to hug Mrs. R so much right now.

No can do and you know it.

“I’ll consider it,” he said slowly, afraid of the words coming out of his mouth.

Well, Alex was bound to be back to his own body at some point and he surely wasn’t going to be all lovey-dovey toward Carter. So there was no point in giving Aron’s parents false hopes. Better to just leave things in a limbo.

“Thank you, dear,” Clementine squeezed his hand, without showing one second whether she was disappointed by that vague reply or not.

Not the same thing he could say about Aron. His friend was looking at him from across the table, his eyes a bit sad. He looked away. Talking about a huge ass mess up.

To his relief, Aron’s parents dropped Carter as a topic of conversation for the duration of the dinner.

In the end, he had survived dinner at the Ruskins, and he almost felt the need to pat himself on the back. Except for that freakish moment when he had thought Aron’s mom had seen right through him, everything seemed in order. If anything, Aron’s parents seemed enchanted with him, although he had made an effort to speak very little. It was quite funny that he was so stressed that Clementine and Gary could guess he was not the real Alex.

But everything had an explanation. And that was that Aron’s parents knew him, Carter, inside out, and it was more like he was afraid of giving himself away than anything else.

“Well, that was fun,” he commented, as soon as they were in Aron’s car and on the way back home.

“I thought you were starting to warm a little toward Carter,” Aron said right away. “I was a bit surprised by the answer you gave mom.”

Ah, Aron had no intention of beating around the bush. Well, the man deserved an answer, even if it wasn’t going to be the correct or the honest one.

“Well, I’m totally ready to welcome Carter in our lives, as a friend,” he spoke. “But, as long as he’s asleep there, in the hospital, there’s no way of telling how he is going to react. I didn’t want your mom to be disappointed when he’ll wake up and start spewing all kinds of homophobic shit at us again.”

Aron stopped for a second, as the light turned red. Then he turned toward him.

“But you have no issues, otherwise?”

Carter shrugged.

“Why should I? Let bygones be bygones.”

The smile he earned from Aron was killing him a little inside.

“Don’t worry. I’ll make sure he’ll keep his big mouth shut until I convince him to behave like a normal human being. And thanks for thinking about my mom’s feelings. That’s really thoughtful of you.”

“That’s who I am,” Carter sighed.

How long do you think this is going to take until it blows right into our face?

Hmm, give or take, exactly two seconds after the body swap gets reversed.

That is absolutely correct. Alex will want our head.

We need our head, though.

Yeah, tough luck for him.

“So we’ll go to see him tomorrow?” he said nonchalantly.

“Yeah, sure. Should I come pick you up from work?”

“Yeah, that would be nice. I’ll take a taxi to work in the morning.”

“You could still take your car. It’s no problem if we drive separately to the hospital. I know how much you love your car,” Aron said with a smile, now focused on the road ahead.

Good thing he wasn’t looking, or he might have noticed the expression of disgust on Carter’s face. That guy and his greed. Damn, he needed to bring Aron up to speed about the entire cheating deal. But not tonight. Tomorrow was as good a day as any. He doubted he could go see his body again, if Aron was going to kick him out of the house and he needed to sleep in the bushes.

Or at a hotel.

C’mon, you’re ruining the dramatic effect.

Sigh.

Aron was prompt at his workplace at the hour they had agreed on, and Carter had to admit that his heart felt a bit small in his chest. He was going to see how Aron really saw him. Him, as Carter, not as a stand-in for a cheating husband.

“Since I leave early, I suppose you could leave now, too,” he spoke to Mark on his way out.

“Yes, thank you,” his assistant answered brightly. “Good luck, boss.”

“Hmm, okay,” he replied.

Good luck? What was that supposed to mean? What did he need luck for?

“Just for the record, boss, it’s been really nice working for you,” Mark added. “I wish you all the best.”

“Hey, it’s only mid-week. You’ll get to see more of me. No need to see me out like I leave on a three-month trip to see Machu Picchu,” he joked.

“Why Machu Picchu?” Mark inquired, his face all a smile.

“I don’t know. It seems like a faraway place. And eight thousand feet above sea level? It should take me quite a bit of time to get there,” Carter explained.

“It’s not eight thousand feet above sea level,” Mark remarked.

“No, it’s 7.970,” Carter laughed. “What’s a few feet here and there?”

“Enough to make a difference,” Mark said enigmatically.

Carter took a moment to stare at his secretary.

“You’re full of puzzles today, Mark. Well, I’d love to stay and chat about the importance of a few feet above sea level, but I must go. See you tomorrow,” he waved with a smile.

He could swear Mark had sighed as he closed the door behind him. Not a sigh like the guy was in pain, but a sigh like it was coming from someone feeling suddenly very compassionate and resigned about another person.

But why would Mark feel that way toward him? It made no sense.

“So, we’re here,” Aron stopped in front of the door to the hospital room. “Ready?” he turned with a smile toward Carter.

“I was born ready,” Carter smiled.

The room was as he remembered it. The same breathing machines keeping the guy on the bed alive. The same pristine white bed. Even the air seemed the same.

“Hey, buddy,” Aron spoke, taking him by surprise.

He took in with dread how Aron hurried to the bed, and took an inert hand into his. Well, at least, his body was no longer looking just as bad as before. Maybe the doctors were right, after all.

“Today I brought someone special with me. You already know him, but, well, I feel like you two should get reacquainted.”

Aron was talking to his body, and he was standing right behind the guy. If this didn’t count as an out of body experience, he had no idea what else could.

Is that allergy acting up again? And really, Aron is talking to us. Shouldn't we talk back?

Shut up. As usual, you're a complete moron.

“Alex, come here. I want you to talk to Carter, too, today,” Aron encouraged him.

“Nah, I think I'm fine over here,” he refused.

Aron didn't look like he was willing to take 'no' for an answer. So, with a fond smile, he grabbed Carter's hand and brought him closer.

“Here, you can touch his hand, too. Who knows? Maybe you'll have more luck than me to convince him to wake up,” Aron made a small attempt of a joke.

The hand was warm in his, like he could almost feel a pulse. It was faint, but it was there.

Of course it's there, we're not dead.

No, no, this seems ...

What the hell was happening?

“Alex!” he heard Aron's panicked voice through the drums giving a rock concert in his ears.

It was like he was falling, but without hitting the ground. Another rabbit hole? What kind of Wonderland was this, anyway? His eyes closed on his own accord, too dizzy with everything around him spinning fast.

Then suddenly he felt at peace inside. Could he attempt to open his eyes? Hmm, his eyelids seem to be controllable. That was good.

He opened his eyes and blinked. And stared at Aron who was gently shaking his husband, speaking in a hurried voice, like he was trying to make sense of why the guy was standing there like a statue.

And the guy was looking at him like Carter was some kind of sea monster, ready to sink all his sails. It took him a moment to hit him.

“Ah fuck!” he said out loud.

His voice was hoarse and sounded weird, like it was coming out of a well. Aron stopped shaking his husband and turned towards him in obvious shock.

“Carter, you’re awake?”

Is this a good moment to faint?

Exit. Stage left.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Waking up the second time, and this time in his own body, but in a similar hospital bed, proved to be an even more difficult an experience than the first time. One thing he noticed right away was that everything was hurting. Hey, it had been nice to be Alex, then, right? No pain that time.

C'mon, is that the only thing you can think of?

You know it's not, and don't you dare do the thinking for me.

I'm your brain, remember?

Then I'd rather be brain dead.

“Hey, hey, Mr. Malis, look who decided to join us,” a man in white spoke, almost startling him.

This was another doctor than the one from before, but just as affable, it seemed.

“Could you please tell me how you are feeling?” the man pulled a pen out of his chest pocket and began scribbling something down on a pad.

“Everything hurts like hell,” he mumbled.

The doctor laughed.

“That is a good sign. We are all very relieved to see that your body doesn't seem to have been affected irremediably by the accident. We will do some check-ups to see if everything is in working order, and then I think you'll be able to take some visits. A lot of people are waiting to see you.”

“No!” he almost shouted.

The doctor looked at him, a bit disconcerted.

“Your parents were hard to convince not to sleep in the hallway, you know? And your friend, Aron ...”

“Can't you just tell everyone I'm still in a coma?” he blurted out.

Now the doctor wasn't smiling anymore.

“Why would you possibly want that? I should call the counselor, then,” the man put the pad under his arm.

“No, no, no, I was just joking,” Carter hurried.

Spending hours in the company of an understanding woman who was just going to nod and smile at him while he recalled the dreams he had used to have when he was five, was not exactly an idea of how he wanted to spend his time, now that he was awake.

“Hmm, you seem to have quite a strange sense of humor, Mr. Malis,” the doctor said. “But I will give you until tomorrow since it’s late now, anyway, and I took care of sending everyone home so they could rest in their own beds. But tomorrow,” the doctor wagged the finger at him, “you will receive visits, young man. And, depending on how all the medical tests turn out, we might even let you return home before the week ends.”

Was this doctor in need of this particular bed? Why did he seem like he could not wait to send Carter out the door? No, no, he was just being paranoid there. Probably he had rained on the dude’s parade, since the doctor had seemed so happy to see him awake, aka alive and kicking.

So, he needed to get ready to face the music. What the fuck was he going to do? What the fuck was he going to say to Aron? Was he going to face Alex, the douchebag, too? How much did that guy know, anyway?

And it just fucking hurt everywhere.

“My baby,” his mother hurried to embrace him, the moment she put foot in the room.

All right, it wasn’t like he wanted to cry, but his mom’s familiar perfume, and how tightly she was squeezing him, were making him feel grateful. For a moment, he could forget about the stupid body swap, and the shitstorm that was going to start, the moment he had to face Aron and especially Alex.

His father was next to hug him, even though his mom had been hard to convince to let him go.

“You will come rest and recuperate at home,” his father spoke.

“But dad, I need to go back to my apartment. There are ... some plants in there,” he mumbled.

Were they? He could not remember. Maybe that cactus one of his ex-girlfriends had given him, saying that it might be the only thing that could survive in his house.

“I think Aron took care of watering them. He also paid the bills that came in your mail while you were ...”

“In a coma,” Carter said quickly.

He was pretty certain someone of his behavior had to be off. He had forgotten to ask how long he had been gone from the world of the conscious because, basically, he knew. He also didn't act surprised enough, as he had heard the nurses and the doctor mentioning at least once, while gossiping about him being quite a strange patient.

“But, wait, how did Aron get into my apartment?” he questioned.

“He used the old key you gave him. He said that he hoped you hadn't changed the locks.”

Oh, right. Aron had a key to his apartment, because he had been the one to give him one. Back when they were still best friends, joined at the hip, as their parents used to joke. Yeah, if there was one person in the entire world he could trust with his life, that had to be Aron. Whenever he went on vacations, Aron was the one to come check on things at the apartment, so of course, he still had that key.

“You will return to your normal life, don't worry,” his father spoke. “But allow us to have you close for a little while.”

“What? No trips scheduled lately to Antarctica?”

He knew he wasn't fair. But he was still upset with them a little. His mom's smile turned into a straight line. His father's eyes filled with guilt.

"Ah, forget it," he waved. "Just take me home and stuff me with food or something."

He was too old to be mad at his parents. It was too late anyway to change the past, and the truth was he loved them, with all their exploration trips and everything.

"Clementine has made so much of all your favorites. She sent a ton," his father said.

"I'm sorry I didn't ..." his mom began.

"Mom, don't worry," he said brightly. "I want to go home with you."

"Aron will come to see you a bit later. He is still at work."

"Can't you take me home now?" he said, hoping that there was a way to be checked out from the hospital without the need to see Aron.

"The doctor says that in a couple of days, we should be able to do that," his father said. "And why don't you want to see Aron? Are you still upset with him for marrying Alex?"

Dad, you have no idea.

Yeah, Aron fucked me.

C'mon, it's mom and dad! Are you a frigging idiot? And Aron fucked ... Alex, practically.

Ah, so you didn't feel a thing when he went down on ...

Seriously. Not now.

"Aron took care of everything, right?" he said morosely, looking down at the pristine sheet and trying to link his fingers.

"Yes, he's generous like that," his mother said. "We want to pay him back everything, but he insists so much that we should not. I don't know how we are going to proceed, without hurting his feelings."

“Don’t worry, I’ll pay him back,” Carter said.

“Son, it’s a little thing we want to do for you,” his father said.

They were burdened with so much guilt that Carter didn’t have it in him to look at them.

“Yeah, but you two will have to put up with me until I go back to my apartment, so I think that’s enough punishment,” he joked.

“Ah, don’t talk like that,” his mother embraced him again. “We would love to take care of you.”

“Seriously, mom, dad, as you can see, I’m in one piece.”

“But you’re hurting, and the doctor says that your shoulder will need some physical therapy to get back the way it was. Thank Heavens you’re well, otherwise.”

Yeah, apparently, he was well. Now the only problem that wasn’t well was that he was supposed to see Aron.

“Aron’s parents will also come to see you later.”

“Ah, so they come with Aron?”

Now that was a bit of a relief. He wasn’t going to have dirty thoughts about his best friend with adults in the room. Adults? What was he thinking? He was an adult, too. Apparently.

There was a short exchange between his parents that wasn’t missed on him.

“What?” he asked directly.

“Aron will just come earlier than his parents.”

Oh, of course, there was Alex to consider. Ah, fuck, was the fucker going to be in the same room with both Aron and he? That was going to be the most fucked up reunion of a threesome in the history of all reunions. And in the history of threesomes. Because, basically ...

Ah, his head was hurting.

“Will he come with his husband?” he asked in a meek voice.

Now his parents looked down, and his father even frowned a little.

“Well?” he pressed.

“Ah, actually,” his father started, but the man looked like he had trouble getting the words out.

“Alex caused quite a scene yesterday after you woke up,” his mom spoke, setting her chin high, in what looked like a gesture of defiance towards someone that wasn't there.

“A scene? Why?” he asked.

There was not so easy for anything to make his parents troubled. But now that was how they looked.

“He seemed such a fine young man when we saw him while you were still in a coma,” his mother said, the lines of her face modifying like she had just been forced to swallow an entire lemon. “Caring, understanding. But the things he said yesterday ... Carter, just know this, no matter what you hear. We do not believe a word.”

“Of course, it would help if you told us what happened,” his father intervened.

“I don't need him to say anything, I know my son,” his mother said in a tone that stood no opposition.

“Wait, what, I mean, why did Alex cause a scene? What did he say?” Carter tried to straighten up in his place.

“That boy,” his mother shook her head.

“He told Aron that you pushed him in front of that fire truck,” his father said, seeing that his wife was too upset to speak the words.

Wait, what?

C'mon, we don't like the guy, but still.

But what the actual fuck? I mean, let's see ...

We still don't remember?!

Did we ...

No, that cannot be. I refuse to believe that.

“So, what happened, son?” his father asked.

“I ... I don't remember,” Carter whispered.

How could he be so ... No, no, that couldn't be right.

“So, will the police come to take me away?” he asked, after a short moment of stunned silence. “I mean, once I manage to walk on two legs.”

“No, definitely not,” his mother said energetically. “There is nothing to sustain Alex's words, and so far he hasn't filed a complaint.”

“What does ... what does Aron say?” Carter gulped.

“He called us and told us about what his husband said. But, just like us, he doesn't believe it,” his mother said without hesitation. “He spent a lot of time apologizing for his husband, as, apparently, he believes that Alex will try to make a huge scandal out of this. Also, he thinks Alex is just exaggerating.”

“From a logical standpoint, what he says is not sustainable by facts,” his father spoke, clearly the more cool-headed in the family at the moment. “If you had been the one to push him, you would have escaped unscathed. And that is definitely not the case. From the two of you, you were the one who got hurt the most. It is a miracle you didn't suffer permanent damage, doctors say.”

“My son would never push someone in front of a car,” his mother said energetically.

“So ... Aron comes to see me without letting Alex know?” Carter barely made out the words.

It was so sweet of his parents not to believe an iota of what Alex had said. Even more impressive was that Aron didn't believe his husband.

“We do not know,” his father replied. “Aron can use his own head, don’t worry, son.”

“And Alex seemed hysterical, according to what I heard the nurses speaking,” his mother added. “So much so that he needed to be medicated. But they did send him home, and probably he made Aron’s life a small hell for the entire night.”

He should have felt better after hearing that Aron was on his side on this. But yet, he still felt miserable, and like there was a huge claw inside his chest trying to pull his heart out. Or maybe it was somewhat lower, and that strange claw was trying to get to some other organ, like the hawk who was feeding on Prometheus’s liver for all eternity.

How was he going to face Aron? Even if Aron didn’t believe Alex? The fact that he had been involved in that accident, along with Aron’s husband, was extremely weird. So something must have happened between them. But trying to push the guy in front of a fast moving car? No. He could not stand the guy, but no. Unless he had suffered through one moment of temporary madness and he had done what Alex was saying.

Yet, his father’s clear and analytical mind was right. How could have someone trying to push another person in front of a car ended being the one hurt? Now he was trying to run a 3D simulation in his mind, like the ones he had seen on TV.

Whatever Alex says, it’s shit and you know it.

Yeah, okay, but what the fuck did happen? Can’t you remember?

Nope. That part of the hard drive seems to be blank.

You’re a human brain, not a computer.

Okay, but I still have nothing where that memory should be.

He wasn’t sure he could face Aron, nonetheless. What was Aron going to say? He would have to admit to not remembering a thing, which practically left Alex the only one with the recollection of the event.

“Could I just skip seeing Aron today? I don’t think I can talk to him. He’ll want to know the truth,” he admitted in front of his parents.

“Carter,” his father said. “Avoiding your best friend is not the solution to whatever you are thinking right now. And you didn’t push that young man in front of a vehicle. It’s plainly absurd and impossible.”

“Okay,” he mumbled.

What had Mark told him that one time? That he should say ‘no’ once in a while?

“Actually,” he said, “I was the one in a coma until yesterday. I think that Aron won’t be that disappointed if I’m going to see him ... sometimes later.”

He had said almost all the words in a heartbeat. He kept his eyes down, expecting his parents to insist.

Eh, what do you know? No holes in the sky.

After a short moment of silence, his mother spoke.

“It’s all right, dear,” she patted his hand. “I am sure he will understand.”

“Are you ... going to tell him? For me?”

“Of course,” his mom nodded. “But make sure that you thank him properly. Actually,” she said, after a second, “we should be the ones thanking him. The only thing you need to do right now is to rest and get back on your feet.”

Good, his mother understood him. He murmured some thanks and let himself embraced again.

It felt nice to be back home. The house was still familiar, regardless of how much of his childhood he had spent more at Aron’s house than at his. He sat on the porch, inhaling the fresh smell of evening. Even in the faint street lights, he could still make the silhouette of the huge oak in the yard, overlooking the neighbors’ lawn.

“I still recall that day like it was yesterday,” his mother sat next to him, and handed him a cup of hot chocolate. “The day when you met Aron, the boy next door,” she said with a small laugh. “I thought I was going to have a heart attack seeing you

getting down from that tree, on Aron's back. He was, back then, much taller than you. And stronger. I'm definitely glad you're not a scrawny kid anymore."

She caressed his back.

"You never were one to complain, not even as a little kid, but I'm sure you were afraid that day. I didn't know if I should scold you or hug you, the moment Aron put you down. Or if I should sign off all the family wealth to the neighbors."

She laughed again.

Yes, he remembered that day well, too. For some obscure reason, he had decided that climbing the huge tree was an important stepping stone for his 7 year old self. That hadn't gone that well, and when he had looked down, from the vantage point he had conquered with much difficulty, he had suddenly thought that it was okay for some people to live in trees. He had been ready to join that new species.

He closed his eyes to relive the episode.

"How did you get up there?"

A voice was coming from below. He looked down, and stared at a boy who might or might not have been his age. Even from that height, the boy looked gigantic, at least in his eyes.

"I just put one hand and foot after another," he gave what might have been a pretty philosophical answer for that age, provided that a 7 year old Carter knew such words and their significance. He didn't.

"I'm coming, too," the new boy spoke and decidedly, began climbing.

"No, stay down!" Carter shouted.

Well, he was not going to admit that he was afraid. Not in front of another boy his age.

"Why?" the boy asked, stopping his climbing.

"It's my tree," Carter said with what he hoped to have sounded like a conversation stopper.

“There’s plenty of room,” the boy had said matter-of-factly.

Great, and now his realm as a tree person was invaded.

“What’s the password?” he asked, in a serious voice.

“The password?” the boy asked, but continued to climb.

“Yeah, no one’s allowed here without the password.”

He didn’t have a password. He had just come up with that idea.

“I don’t know it.”

“Then you’re not allowed,” Carter said, feeling victorious.

“Can I guess it?” the boy asked, now almost close to the branch on which Carter was sitting, or better said, clinging for dear life.

“Guess it,” he replied.

There was no way the boy was going to guess the password since the password didn’t exist.

“The password is ...” the boy seemed to contemplate for a while, “password.”

The password is password? Carter stared at the other boy. Well, yes, the password was password, because that was what it was, so ...

“Okay, you’re allowed,” he concluded, after a short internal struggle. His sense of justice won.

The boy pushed himself up with ease. He had to be at least one head taller, if not more, Carter examined him, while trying to pretend he was cool about being stranded up there. Well, now the both of them were stranded in the tree.

“Do you think tree people eat acorns?” he asked the other boy.

“I don’t think you can eat acorns,” was the prompt reply.

“I can try. You should, too. We’re tree people now.”

“We are? I’m Aron, what’s your name?”

The sudden change in topic took him a bit by surprise.

“Carter.”

“You just moved here.”

Yes, that was correct, but what did it have to do with eating acorns? As the self-entitled ruler of the new tree people realm he had in his care, he needed to secure a source of food.

“Yes. How do you know you can’t eat acorns? Did you try?” he asked.

“No. But oaks don’t make fruits,” Aron said.

“Acorns are fruits. They are the oak’s fruits. I read it in a book.”

Aron seemed impressed with his knowledge.

“Was it a funny book?”

Hmm, was it? He didn’t know the right answer to that one.

“I have books at home. With superheroes,” Aron made a large arc with his arms.

“Superheroes how? I mean, why aren’t they just ... heroes?” Carter wondered.

Aron stared at him, and pondered the question with all the seriousness he could muster at that age.

“Because all heroes have powers, but superheroes have superpowers,” Aron replied promptly.

He liked that answer. It made perfect sense.

“Does your book with acorns have superheroes?” Aron asked.

“No. Just other kinds of nuts,” he said.

“But was it cool?”

Hmm, these questions were hard.

“Yes,” he decided, not really knowing if his answer was the right one.

But he hoped it was going to impress Aron.

“Cool. Then I’ll come to your house, and you can show it to me.”

“I can’t,” Carter said promptly.

“Why?” Aron looked at him.

“Because I live here now, and here I don’t have a bookcase.”

Aron took a small look around as if he was checking for a bookcase.

“How long have you been living here?” Aron asked.

“It’s only been ...” Carter consulted the wrist watch his mom had given him on his seventh birthday. “44 minutes.”

“Can I live with you here?”

“Only if you can eat acorns.”

“Do you eat acorns?”

“I haven’t tried.”

“My mom makes a cake.”

“Why?” it was Carter’s turn to ask.

“It’s my birthday. I know! Come to my birthday!” Aron shouted enthusiastically.

“I can’t. I live here now,” Carter explained.

“And where do your parents live?” Aron asked.

“There,” Carter pointed at the house.

Aron took a long look in the direction Carter was pointing.

“And they let you live in the tree?”

“They don’t know yet.”

The babysitter had just left early, telling him to behave until his parents got home. She had seemed so much in a hurry to leave. But he had gotten bored, so he had climbed the tree.

“Will you tell them?” Aron asked him.

“When I see them,” Carter replied.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come to my house and eat cake? All my friends will come. I know you live here, now, but you can come visit, right?”

That was something Carter needed to process. Technically, people visited foreign countries all the time. Like his parents. Going to Aron’s house to have cake was like that.

But that didn’t change the fact that he had no idea how to get down.

Cake and visiting a foreign land, on one side.

Not knowing how to get down, on the other side.

“I can take you down,” Aron said.

“What? Why?”

Aron just shrugged.

“And I can take you back. Since you live here.”

Ah, that made sense.

The trip down on Aron’s back was horrific, as his mother’s shout, as his parents pulled their car in the driveway.

Carter shook his head. But he hadn’t had cake that day. His mother had grounded him, on basis that he had done something dangerous, no matter how much he had tried to explain to her about his ambitions of becoming a tree person.

Yet, that evening, his mom had made a pie for him and hugged him, which had made him a bit confused about what being grounded meant since it had never happened before that day.

“Aron has always been there for you, hasn’t he?” his mother spoke softly.

“Yeah, he has,” he spoke, his throat dry.

Not only when they had been 7 years old. Later, too, in high school.

“Why do you hang out with that Carter guy, Aron? He’s a weirdo,” a girl commented.

Carter stopped right around the corner, waiting for Aron’s answer, his blunt nails digging deep into his palms, his breath hanging by the next words that were going to come out of his best friend’s mouth.

“Carter is not weird,” Aron’s stern reply came right away. “He is very smart. And he sees things we don’t see. You know, like he has a deeper understanding, a different one, of everything.”

The girl made a small sound, to illustrate her disbelief.

“That guy says magic should exist because it would totally be easy to demonstrate. Don’t tell me you believe in magic, Aron,” the girl laughed.

“I believe in friendship,” Aron said back, in a curt voice.

By the way heavy steps were heard walking away, Aron must have left the girl standing there without another word.

Aron had been more than just his best friend if he was to think about it. He had basically taught Carter how to behave less like a weirdo, like that girl had said. And not by pressing Carter to be different, but by dragging Carter everywhere with him and teaching him by example. He could still be plenty of weird, aka himself, when he was with Aron alone. Otherwise, he knew exactly what to say and how to behave, although it had often felt like a learned lesson, not something coming from within.

“You should let Aron come see you,” his mother interrupted his train of thought. “You can’t be still upset. I know I shouldn’t bother you with this,” she hesitated for a second, “and we never talked, but why were you so upset Aron got married?”

I can’t tell you, mom. Really, I can’t.

You can't tell yourself.

Shut up, can't you see I'm busy?

Doing what?

Soul searching.

"I will see Aron," Carter exhaled. "And I should get back to my own apartment. I need to get back to work. If I lazy around your house too much, I might forget all the programming I've learned in my life," he told his mom. "Plus, you two should go on your expeditions and such."

His mom's hand was warm on his shoulder.

"All this time, we told ourselves that you would be okay," she said, with regret deeply set in her voice. "That you're smart, brilliant, and mature for your age. It is our fault," she sighed. "A kid should not find ways to cope with his parents always away from home."

"Mom, I'm not a kid anymore," he protested. "And you were right. I am okay."

"That you seem to be," his mother replied, squeezing his shoulder lightly. "But I cannot help but feel that we should have been an important part of your life, and we only filled that sparingly."

"Don't worry. I wasn't lonely."

"You had Aron," his mother said simply. "I remember how we tried to convince you to come with us on our expeditions, those that weren't in places with extreme conditions, and that you could learn for school remotely, but you just said 'no'. Just so you know, my boy, that is not something a mother takes lightly," she laughed. "Especially since you told me you could not leave Aron alone. Your father agreed that we should not force you and take you with us. We were lucky to have the Ruskin family as our neighbors. We still are," his mother looked over, at the neighboring house, as if she could see Aron's parents, standing in the lawn, like actors waiting to take their rightful place on a stage. "They are a bit upset you so far refused to see Aron. At least you had nothing against us having them over."

"Aron is ... just something else," Carter said softly.

“Carter, I’ve never asked you ... but could it be that you are in lo ...”

“Mom, stop worrying,” Carter stopped his mom from saying it out loud.

She smiled as if that was the only confirmation he needed.

“I will go back to my apartment, and I’ll contact Aron. I need to pay him back for the medical expenses, so don’t worry anymore.”

He kissed her gently on one cheek and got to his feet to walk inside. How the hell was he going to face Aron? But it was not like he could avoid the guy indefinitely.

It was quite strange to move around his small apartment, like a few weeks had been enough for him to forget it how it was like living there. The place felt too cramped, which had never bothered him before since he was against wasting space. And, while his home seemed too small for him, his own body seemed too large.

And clumsy. He was ready to blame it on the fact that he was still undergoing physical therapy for all the muscle cramps he was still suffering from, but that was not it. Being Alex Ruskin, if only for a little while, had left its mark on him.

But the devil always lay in the details, and not the big things were bothering him. Not the fact that he was no longer a twink with no hair on his body, who moved nimbly and definitely could suck himself, if he wanted to.

It was the sensation in his left ring finger. Or, better said, the lack of a certain sensation. While being Alex, he had found it natural to wear the guy’s wedding ring, and it was rather weird that he would miss having it on his finger. Too often his attention was drawn to the naked finger, like he was always expecting to see something there.

He needed to call Aron and sort out everything.

Everything?

Look who decided to rear his ugly head.

I’m always here, thinking.

Yeah, but not what I commend you to think.

Could we just stop beating around the bush? What are we going to tell Aron?

Nothing about the body swap, that's for sure.

We can't say anything about Alex the cheater, either.

It's for the best just to keep our mouth shut, and make polite conversation.

Like what?

We can talk about the weather.

With hesitant hands, he took his phone from the table. Aron was not among his contacts, which he had erased a day after Aron's wedding. But he knew the guy's phone number by heart. The old one and the new one Aron got after the New Entertainment incident. Since Aron had gotten his old phone from the scumbag reporter, Carter decided to go for that one.

"Hi," he mumbled.

His throat was dry, his palms were sweating, and the simple word he managed had sounded twisted, like spoken by someone who was drunk.

"Hey, buddy," Aron's voice came through, exhilarated and relieved. "How are you? Is that pain medication in full swing then? And how's your shoulder? The doctor told me ..."

He needed to stop Aron.

Fuck, I can't do this. It hurts just to hear him.

You have no choice. You don't want him to hate you, right?

How come there's no 'us' in this?

Frankly, I think you're doing this to yourself, and I don't want to be part of it.

"No, no, I mean, I still take some pills. Some are rectangular. I think. I mean. Aron, listen, I need to pay you back," he spoke, this time without drawling the words like someone on too much ibuprofen.

“Ah, don’t worry about that,” Aron said energetically. “When can I come see you?”

See me? Why?

“I need to see you,” Aron continued, this time his voice getting deeper and serious. “You can’t avoid me forever. I can’t stand it. I won’t allow it anymore. My mom and dad told me you’re okay, but I need to see you with my own eyes.”

“Why?” Carter asked the only thing he could think of.

A big question mark was stretching all over his brain, marking every nervous cell.

“Because I need to talk to you, and I can’t do it over the phone.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“Both. I don’t want people overhearing our conversation, for once, and I also want to see you. Say yes.”

He gripped the cell phone hard in his hand. Aron was the same as always. Whenever Carter got caught in a long string of questions, Aron was always there to suggest the correct answer.

“Yes,” he replied.

“That’s great! I can come at your place after work today. Is that okay with you? Have you started working?”

“Yeah, but I can take a break,” he admitted. “I work from home,” he needed to explain.

Redundant information? Stilted conversation?

We’re not handling this well.

Oh, fuck, we’re heading towards a huge ass disaster, aren’t we?

Yeah, but ...

Aron wants to see me. He will. End of story.

There was a short pause at the other end.

“I can barely wait to talk to you,” Aron said gently. “It’s been too long. Just ... know this, Carter. I’ll always be your friend.”

He didn’t even say goodbye, and just cut off the conversation. There was just this much he could handle.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Was he really ready for a visit? Aron wasn't a stranger, but that didn't mean he should receive him wearing pajamas. There was too much mess lying around, too. Mumbling to himself, he began tidying up the small living room, which now, after staying at Aron's house for a while, seemed unqualified for the 'living' part of the phrase.

It wasn't like he could not afford something more expensive. He just didn't want anything else. For him, the little shoe box, as his mom had called his apartment at one point, frustrated with his refusal of getting something more decent, or what she considered more decent, was more than enough.

Used to. Now, he could only think of how Aron was going to feel in that cramped space. Probably not too comfortable. Funny, he had never thought of this before, when Aron and he had been nothing but best friends. Aron had often visited and he hadn't told Carter once that he needed a bigger apartment. But then was then and now was now. And ever since their ... relationship had evolved into ...

Maybe he was just going to talk to Aron in the door. But what if Aron wanted to come in, after all?

Hmm, Aron was a guest, and a guest had to be treated properly. Decided that he was going to play the obliging host part, he marched into the kitchen and began exploring the contents of his fridge and the few cabinets he had in there.

A lonely beer watched him from the shelves of the refrigerator. His mom had brought plenty of food, but she had been stern about alcoholic beverages since he was still medicated. His father had said nothing, just nodding gravely. Aron's mom had also sent food for an entire army, but it was basically just the kind of food to feed a sick person, and not someone paying a social call.

With a shrug, he took out the beer bottle, and then he began scouting the cabinets for some chips. He could still vaguely recall buying some at a discount. Were they expired? No, no, no, he wasn't going to get his best friend in the hospital with food poisoning just because he was an idiot.

Finally, he managed to find one bag. He stared at the expiration date, trying hard to make sense of it. But it seems like half his brain, if not all of it, was busy with anything else but trying to read what was written on the label. Running away from his own thoughts had never been this hard.

Hard. Like Aron's big, beautiful ...

Stop thinking of Aron that way!

What way?

Don't play the innocent, you bastard!

Ah, like I want us to hump him the moment he's at the door?

Be serious, that would scandalize the neighbors. And seriously, aren't you supposed to be my most rational part of the body? Are you playing the other head's part now?

C'mon, you know I serve as a stand-in for any part of the body you feel like having a conversation with.

Yeah, he was a hot mess. All right, the chips weren't expired. They had to do, along with the lousy beer.

But what the hell was he going to do with the way he looked? He jumped into the shower, almost managing to sprain an ankle. How long was Aron going to take? Well, he did say after work, but ...

What time was it? Frantically, he rinsed his hair and sprayed water everywhere, hoping that he was going to come out clean and smelling like a normal person, not a homeless. Not that he usually had a problem with personal hygiene, but compared to Alex, he was practically the embodied image of a hobo. He didn't have a closet the size of an apartment and one thousand nice smelling bottles.

Ah, there was still time. Okay, now he needed some proper clothes. What was he going to wear? With brusque moves, he opened wide his closet, where his perfunctory plain attires lay neatly, arranged by his very dotting mother.

Ah, why hadn't he thought about getting some new clothes? Really, Aron was going to think that ...

He stopped in front of the closet and began laughing like a madman. Seriously, when had it mattered to Aron what he wore? Obviously, a few days spent as a local fashion icon and he was going crazy over having nothing to wear. He was definitely, undoubtedly, going slightly mad.

With a sigh, he put on a pair of slacks and a t-shirt. Really, he had no idea what he was expecting from seeing Aron.

Maybe for you to drop to your knees and take him into your ...

What the fuck, dude? Guy's married.

To a douche.

It doesn't matter, he doesn't know it.

All right, he thought. In Aron's reality, THE reality, they hadn't seen each other in two years. Well, Aron had seen him, lying there, in the hospital ...

Had Alex been there all that time? The thought was giving him the willies. He had been plenty of freaked out and he hadn't been stuck in a hospital bed, without being able to move, or speak, or anything.

No wonder Alex had behaved like a hysterical person the moment they had changed back. He could almost feel for the guy. Yeah, he really could sympathize. The guy must have been through hell.

He opened the door, trying to seem as nonchalant as possible.

"Hey," he called, forcing a smile.

His best friend was standing there, looking as handsome as Carter could still remember from just a few nights ago. But he wasn't looking at him with the same eyes. He was just smiling, and he did look happy, but that was totally different from how Aron had looked at him, when he had thought Carter was his husband.

Ah, damn, he had barely spoken a word and he could feel the world spinning. He wanted for time to just stop, so he could look and look at Aron for all eternity. But time had the bad habit of running, second after second, at the same tic-tac speed as always, from the beginning of ... itself.

Aron almost pushed him inside his own apartment, coming at him fast and grabbing him in his strong arms.

“I missed you, buddy,” Aron said, and Carter wondered if it was okay to hug back.

He didn’t have time to decide as Aron pushed him back to stare at him.

“Well, given what you’ve been through, I’d say you look really good!” Aron spoke, his eyes shining and his face all a smile.

“Would you like to come in?” Carter spoke, saying each word separately, like he was a robot in a 60s SF movie, and gesturing amply towards the living room.

That didn’t seem to bother Aron at all. Oh, well, Aron was used to all his quirks, and that was nothing.

“Yeah, of course,” Aron replied, the smile never leaving his face.

“I have beer and chips,” he hurried to add, this time without the weird speech impediment.

“That’s great!” Aron patted his back and Carter finally let him step inside.

He pointed the sofa, and both sat down. Aron didn’t seem interested in the beer and chips, though.

“How are you feeling?” Aron questioned him, his kind dark eyes searching his face with a mix of longing and bewilderment, and also with a tinge of hope.

Ah, damn, now he needed to make conversation.

I’m missing you. So much.

I want to kiss you.

I want you to leave your husband, and then come live with me, like forever, and we can get a dog, and then a house, that if you don’t like that one you have, because I

don't, because Alex tormented that interior decorator and sent the poor man into therapy, and seriously, maybe this is not a sofa, but that thing ain't either and ...

“Hey, buddy, you here?” Aron called gently. “What are you thinking of? I can tell you’re thinking of something.”

“I was ... thinking of ... how I feel,” Carter spoke slowly.

Like what answer could be the right one. Obviously, not whatever was crossing his mind at the moment.

“It was quite a strange thing, that accident,” Aron shook his head.

“Alex says I pushed him,” Carter said directly, making Aron wince and hunch his shoulders like he was trying to make himself little in the sofa.

The smile was gone from Aron’s face, too, and the corners of his lips pulled down. Carter could sense the man’s pain. It wasn’t just embarrassment. He could not begin to fathom what had happened between Alex and Aron, the moment they got back home, Alex in his own body this time around. Could Alex have told Aron about the body swap? If that guy had one ounce of self-preservation in his supermodel body, he must have kept his mouth shut.

“I was so afraid he was going to take that ludicrous story to the press that I told your parents,” Aron said apologetically. “I didn’t want them or you to find out about such a thing from the newspapers, or the Internet. He did calm down, eventually, and I wish I didn’t say a thing. It was not the time, nor the place to make them upset over something like this.”

“So you don’t believe him,” Carter said. “Your husband,” he added with difficulty, the word heavy and unpleasant in his mouth.

“No, how can I believe such an outrageous thing?” Aron huffed. “In his name, I must apologize. He’s been through a lot ... well, definitely not as much as you, but he tends to take everything too much at ...”

“He’s a screamer,” Carter shrugged.

Aron threw him an odd look. He also seemed a bit conflicted.

“Hey, listen, Carter,” Aron spoke, “could you please tell me what happened that day? For the love of all that is holy, I cannot believe what my husband tells me.”

Husband. Aron’s husband. Someone who wasn’t him. Husband wasn’t even a complicated word. It only had seven letters, and there was nothing weird about it.

Husband.

Huseband.

Hūsbōnda.

Hūsbōndi.

A householder.

Yeah, Alex was the best householder in the universe. Probably a housekeeper. In Zsa Zsa Gabor’s vision of what a housekeeper meant, not like a maid or something.

“You’re spacing out again, buddy,” Aron touched his shoulder.

He turned to look at his longtime friend. How come had he never looked at Aron like this before? How come had he never noticed how handsome the guy was? How come had he never realized he was ...

What? Attracted to Aron? But that was something that he had only recently discovered. So, maybe, just maybe, the accident had happened for a reason. It had opened his eyes. It made him feel ... and he was not exactly good at feeling.

“Hey,” Aron chuckled. “Stop looking at me like I’m one of your girlfriends. You almost make me blush,” he joked. “By the way, any new conquests?”

“Like how? From the hospital bed?” Carter questioned, without a trace of irony.

“So, no hot nurses ready to give you a sponge bath?” Aron grinned.

It was obvious Aron was trying to make him feel at ease. That was how things had always been between them, Aron always doing something so that Carter could express what he wanted to say, without too many detours and delays.

“That thing is so overrated,” Carter stated. “It’s not as pleasant as people make it out to be. And I think that nurse who did give me a sponge bath was just in overdrive for some reason. I can take showers by myself. I just did. Took a shower.”

You’re babbling.

It’s not like I can help it. He’s so close, I only have to lean in and kiss him.

Don’t do it.

Ah, finally, you’re agreeing with me on this.

“Good for you,” Aron said with a smile. “But, about the accident, could you please tell me what happened? Just so you know, I don’t believe what Alex says. Except maybe for the part when you two were quarrelling.”

“Quarrelling?” Carter asked. “I don’t remember that part, either.”

“Either? Wait, do you remember anything from the accident?”

Carter shook his head dejectedly.

“Nothing. It’s like that part of the brain is blank.”

“That is so weird,” Aron murmured. “That was exactly Alex said the first time he woke up after the accident. That he could not remember a thing. Maybe it will come to you later. Just like for him.”

“But didn’t you say you don’t believe him?” Carter asked, his heart small as a pin.

“I don’t believe the horrible things he says. But I think he remembers the accident, only that he twists everything in hope of some gain.”

“That’s a fine husband you have right there,” Carter commented dryly.

What don’t you bite your tongue before you say another word?

Shut up. I can’t help it.

You won’t. That’s a different thing. Hating on Alex won’t get you points with Aron.

Ugh, I get it.

Aron sighed.

“Look, I’m not here to make a case for him. But he’s a bit insecure.”

“Insecure? He’s a supermodel. The world is at his feet,” Carter poured some more ice on his words.

He has you as his loving husband. He’s the richest man in the universe right now.

Aron hesitated and threw him a side glance.

“Anyway, I was hoping you could tell me. But, it doesn’t matter. What matters is that you’re fine.”

Aron placed a hand on Carter’s knee and squeezed.

He’s touching me.

It doesn’t mean anything.

Should I kiss him?

Are you stupid?

“What makes Alex think I could do such a thing?” he asked, his eyes fixed on Aron’s hand, still resting on his knee.

“Ah, well, first of all, he doesn’t know you,” Aron pulled his hand away. “Basically, the only time he met you was at the wedding and ...”

“And I called him an overrated slut going around, making people gay,” Carter said promptly.

Wait, what are you doing?

What does it look like I’m doing? I’m setting things straight.

Oh, sure. Straight.

Aron frowned for a second.

“Well, that was then. Now is now,” the guest began speaking. “And I’m hoping you and he can be friends now.”

“Friends? Really?” Carter frowned, too. “I cannot be friends with that guy!”

Aron seemed taken aback.

“All right, I won’t say you should be friends with him right now since both of you need to get back on your feet, but I was hoping ...”

“Aron, keep your hopes for other things,” Carter said shortly and looked away.

“Okay, you two started on the wrong foot. You said some mean things, he said some mean things ...” Aron tried to pacify him.

“Mean things? He tries to convince you that I pushed him in front of a fucking car! That kind of thing could throw me in jail!” Carter exploded, and got to his feet.

All right, this was out of character from him. But it mattered. Aron didn’t believe Alex. But still, why was Aron not sending the douchebag away with a foot in his pert behind?

Because Alex is his husband. And you’re not.

“I told you, I don’t believe him,” Aron’s voice began to strain, too. “And you made the most appalling wedding speech in the history of weddings. So it’s no surprise that he has no love for you. But I want all of us to be friends,” Aron seemed to find it hard to keep his wits about him.

“There is no way we will all be friends,” Carter shot back.

Aron drew one deep breath.

“Okay, I cannot force such things on either of you if you two are so bent on behaving like 8-year olds.”

“Why 8-year olds? Why not any other age?” Carter questioned. “9-year olds are not particularly rational beings, as for 10-year olds ...”

Aron frowned.

“Stop running away from this conversation, Carter. Are you forgetting how well I know you?”

“Okay,” he mumbled, feeling a little chastised.

“It’s okay if you cannot be friends with Alex. But I’m here, because I want the two of us to be friends again.”

From Aron’s tense stance, Carter could tell the man was hanging by the next words he was going to hear.

“We cannot be friends,” he said without looking at the other.

“What?!” Aron exclaimed, like he could not believe his ears. “C’mon, Carter, why? I mean, it’s been two years, and ...”

“And you’re still married to that douchebag,” Carter said stubbornly.

“Is this still about the fact that I’m married to a guy?”

Not just any guy. That guy.

Or anyone else who’s not me.

You’re not going to say that, are you?

You know I’m not.

Aron might have known Carter well, but there was no chance in hell or high heavens to guess what was going on in his old friend’s mind now.

“So you have a problem with me being gay, still,” Aron said, with pursed lips. “I cannot believe you!”

“Why? Should everyone wave the rainbow flag just because you found some twink to fuck?”

That’s not fair and you know it.

Shut up.

“I don’t understand you. It’s like you don’t want to see me happy,” Aron reproached.

I want to see you happy. There’s nothing I want more.

“Couldn’t you marry some girl and settle down, have kids, and white picket fences, and everything?” Carter continued, his fingers digging deep into his palms.

That’s a mighty shiny shovel you have there for digging yourself in.

Shut up. I can’t. I just can’t. I can’t be just friends with him.

“Seriously, all my life, I thought I knew you,” Aron shook his head. “And not for one second, I believed that you would be against me being gay.”

“Well, then how come you didn’t say anything before getting married?” Carter mumbled.

“Because I was afraid that ...” Aron’s words died away.

“Yeah?” Carter pressed.

“Never mind,” Aron stood up. “I should get going.”

“To your gay husband?” Carter said through his teeth.

“Hey, watch it,” Aron growled. “You’re lucky you’re just back from the hospital.”

“Or else?” Carter asked, his back still turned. “What would your gay ass do?”

“Or my gay ass would kick your straight ass until you’re ready to listen,” Aron snapped. “Whatever. I was expecting much more from you.”

Aron marched toward the door.

Carter could feel his feet moving on their own, his hands rising to try to stop Aron from leaving.

“Wait, Aron ...”

For a second, Aron turned. But words didn't come out, and Carter just stared at his best friend, hoping that, for the umpteenth time since they had known each other, Aron would tell him the right answer.

And Aron walked through that door, and he did nothing.

Nothing at all.

Except for leaning against the door, and pressing his head against the wood, and staying there for long minutes, trying hard not to feel a thing.

He'll never know.

Never.

Funny how slowly he was getting used to his old life. Going through the motions, that was what he was doing. He had had no courage to call Aron again. It was okay for Aron to be upset. He knew he would be.

But that didn't mean that he was thinking less of Aron. If anything, his brain seemed so preoccupied with reliving everything that had happened during those weird days when he had been Alex, that it was a wonder he was getting anything done at all.

He was speaking to his parents, regularly. Aron's parents were coming by, from time to time, too. Clementine had told him, without reproaching him, that Aron just needed a bit of time and he was going to come back and try to convince Carter to be friends again.

"I know my son. Hopefully, it won't take him two whole years this time," she had added with a small smile.

"Are you really bothered by Aron being gay?" Aron's father had been more direct, and less forgiving.

He had shaken his head. Probably Clementine and Gary Ruskin were changing looks between them, wondering what was going on. But he could not say it, not to them, not to any other living soul.

I'm not gay, but ... I somehow want Aron to choose me over that two-timing bastard.

That sounds childish. And you have no proof.

“You two only need time,” Clementine had hugged him. “And when that happens, I won’t forgive you for not coming to visit at least once every two weeks. It’s not much I’m asking, right?”

“How often does Alex come by?” he had asked without thinking.

Other people would have thought him rude and never given him an answer. But Aron’s parents knew him well, maybe not as well as Aron, but still.

“Not as often as we would like,” Gary had replied, in his wife’s stead.

Now he was just standing in a coffee shop, busy breaking open packs of sugar and pouring the contents into the cup he wasn’t going to drink. He was there only because he needed to get out of the house once in a while.

The worst thing to endure was, funny enough, the silence. There were no people calling, no busy workplace, no Yolanda to chase around the desk, no Mark to keep his busy schedule in check and have lunch with, no barre classes to run away from, no interviews on TV, and no ...

No Aron to come home to. He had used to love the silence of his home and being on his own. The buzz produced by human activity around him was usually an annoyance, something to keep his thoughts from tumbling together like the Niagara Falls.

“Eww, that is so disgusting!”

It took him a few moments to realize that the off-putting comment was directed at him. The voice seemed a bit familiar, too. He raised his eyes and almost jumped and ran away. Right there, in flesh and blood, with a hand squeezing the back of the chair across from Carter, stood no one else but Alex Ruskin.

Carter could tell the guy was trembling, and barely reigning in whatever he was feeling at the moment. It was so strange to look at Alex. As if he was looking in a

mirror, since that had been a face he had seen when looking at his own reflection for days on end.

But, even so, he could see the striking differences. Alex was keeping his head high, but he was strung, like a cat ready to pounce. There was an imperceptible sway in his hips, as if he was ready at any moment to start walking down a catwalk.

And he was holding the gaudiest thing a guy could use and still call a man purse, a large rectangle with dazzling lines, like it was some sort of camouflage. Carter could not take his eyes off that thing.

“Now tell me, Carter,” Alex spat his name like it was poison, “did you have fun screwing my husband?”

“Sorry not sorry, you cheater,” Carter replied, the words coming out of his mouth, like a round of bullets from an automatic weapon.

Alex’s perfect lips made a perfect O.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“Are we playing mime?” Carter was the first to speak again, seeing that the other was busy expressing his outrage just by standing there, petrified, with an expression of absolute horrified surprise on his perfect face.

Alex scrunched his nose and pulled the chair brusquely, taking a seat without being invited to. Carter felt the need to say something and point out the rudeness, but he could bet that little mishap was going to pale in comparison to what Alex was going to say and do.

“So, Carter,” Alex began again.

“I thought we have already been over the introductions,” Carter interrupted the other.

“I cannot believe it! You are just so damn obnoxious! Seriously, I don’t understand what Aron sees in you ...” Alex trailed off, but, by the way Carter grinned at him, showing teeth, it looked as if he understood without words what must have transpired between the two old friends. His cat-like eyes narrowed, and he continued. “Anyway, what the hell,” he spoke the words, enunciating them carefully, like he was at a diction contest, not in a private conversation. “Aron expects me to top, Simon tries to drag me to some ... leather bars, I have an Instagram account, I’m posing for stupid lingerie, and, did I forget something? Oh, sure! I have a sex tape?!”

“Technically, not a tape,” Carter raised one finger.

Alex rolled his eyes.

“Really? And I heard it was stupid Aron’s fault.”

Carter could feel his jaw hurting, as he clenched his teeth.

“Don’t call Aron stupid,” he said.

Alex leaned back and looked at Carter through his perfectly curled eyelashes. How could Aron fall for this guy? Carter could not comprehend.

“I’ll be damned ... So, you needed this body,” Alex gestured toward himself like he was the most prized exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art, “to get him to sleep with you? Was that the deal?”

“The deal? What deal?” Carter asked, feeling that something was amiss.

Alex leaned over the table again, and spoke to Carter in a hush-hush voice.

“You know, with those guys ...” Alex said slowly, his eyes darting around, as if he was expecting to be jumped by the secret service at any moment. “By the way, I’m not allowed to talk about that. Yet, somehow, I know it’s all your fault. Creep,” he added, after straightening up again.

“So ... you were, like, inside my body this whole time?” Carter carefully attempted the question that was plaguing his mind.

“Not ... exactly,” Alex preferred to remain vague. “Just so you know. It was no fun trip, like the one you had. Really, do you have any idea how much you screwed up my life? All kinds of nobodies try to hug me now because apparently I’m allowing it,” he began rotating his hand, like he was trying to get rid of flies in the most inefficient manner possible. “Also, you canceled my barre class? Are you nuts? And what did you eat all this time? My face is so greasy,” Alex complained, touching his face for a fraction of a second and only with the tips of his fingers.

“Your face is perfect, stop complaining,” Carter sighed. “But now that you’re here, why on earth do you keep lying about the accident? You know well I didn’t push you.”

For a second, Alex appeared to look guilty, but that was pushed away as a speckle of dust on a piece of designer clothing.

“So, what’s your version then?” Alex smiled sweetly. “Aron says you don’t remember,” he added quickly.

“He told you that?” Carter said bitterly.

“Yes, that, and the fact that you refuse to be friends with him again. See, he does tell me everything. He’s MY husband,” Alex said triumphantly, pointing towards his chest in a manner that clearly underlined his words.

“You’re cheating on him,” Carter pointed out, pretending the crack in his heart could be fixed with Flex Seal.

Alex shrugged.

“Marriage is so boring,” he explained.

“Then why the hell did you get married?” Carter asked.

“Hello, he asked me,” Alex taunted while flaunting the hand with the wedding ring.

“Yeah, but why did you say ‘yes’?” Carter continued.

Alex seemed to ponder for a little while.

“I was bored,” he said in a tone that could just as well belong to a petulant child.

Carter could feel his head hurting.

“You were bored, and decided to get married. And now you’re bored because you’re married,” he tried to understand Alex’s line of reasoning.

Alex yawned and rolled his eyes again, while patting his open mouth with one hand.

“I cannot believe you,” Carter shook his head with bitterness. “Then why don’t you leave Aron now? Since you’re so bored?”

Alex stopped and this time, his face transformed, his lovely features turning icy and a tad ugly, if that was possible. A man of many faces, a thought crossed Carter’s mind.

“And let you have him? No way.”

“Why?” Carter asked simply.

“So you don’t deny it?” Alex’s voice was now void of the affectation from before.

Carter was fascinated, for lack of a better word. Alex was the perfect actor. Now he no longer looked like a miffed preteen, but like someone who was bent on

destruction in his path. It was like the temperature in the room had just dropped. Also, there was something cold and calculated in his hypnotizing eyes.

“Deny what?” Carter asked.

“That you want Aron,” Alex said.

“No, I don’t deny it.”

“Does Aron know?”

“No.”

“So what do you want exactly? Why should I leave Aron?” Alex’s eyes filled with unmasked hatred. “Why should I give you something that’s mine?”

“Someone. We’re talking about a human being here,” Carter said through his teeth.

“Yes. About my husband. Was that homophobic rant at my wedding nothing but an act then?” Alex questioned further.

Carter shrugged. He could not help but notice how Alex had nonchalantly claimed the wedding as only his. As if Aron hadn’t been the other party involved. As if Aron didn’t matter. His heart clenched painfully. But he could not break down right now. He could not let this man see him like that.

“I don’t know.”

“It’s funny, though,” Alex started, as if he was just starting to realize something. “How quickly you went from a piece of homophobic shit to screwing your best friend. Hmm, so you had no remorse while doing it? What did you like best? For him to fuck you, or the other way around?”

There was an ugly glint in Alex’s eyes as the guy spoke. Carter decided that he was not going to let himself riled up any further.

“You don’t want Aron. I don’t ask you to leave him so I can have him. I’m asking you to leave him, so he can be free. And happy,” he said.

Alex began laughing and clapped his hands together.

“Ah, this is so precious,” he returned to his act from before, in a fraction of a second. “That is just so noble of you, isn’t it? For your information, since you don’t seem to get it, Aron is loaded. Yes, I did my research before I said ‘yes’. He buys me stuff, stuff that you can’t even imagine, with that big head of yours that Aron seems to admire so much I have no idea for what reason.”

Big? Like big how? Do we have a big head?

Oh, you’re awake, what a nice surprise.

He’s insulting us.

Hush, let him speak.

“I distinctly remember Aron telling me about other body parts he likes in me,” Carter crossed his arms over his chest.

Well, he hadn’t been in the body of a diva and learned no lessons. Two could play that game.

“Really?” Alex grimaced, but Carter could tell he had just managed to strike a nerve with the guy. “I don’t remember that. He must have lied.”

“He had no reason to. Now, seriously, how many things do you need? Aron bought you a frigging luxury car, you’re squeezing Simon for all he has ... and you wanted to suck off that guy in Accounting for what?”

Alex turned his head to stare at Carter so fast that bone cracking could almost be heard.

“Bernie. What did you do about him?” Alex asked slowly.

“I told him to fuck off,” Carter said, just as slowly.

“Oh, fuck,” Alex murmured. “Now I’ll have to ... Really, couldn’t you be more polite? I could really lose some serious money!”

“Like how should I have been more polite? By getting on my knees and sucking the guy’s dick?” Carter asked.

Alex waved.

“No, you thick-headed bull. Really, you’re dumb as a brick. And I wasn’t going to give that guy a blowjob, what the hell? I’m much more expensive than that.”

“I bet,” Carter said wryly. “But he was pretty certain you were going to blow him dry.”

“I would have just given him a handjob,” Alex shrugged. “But, now, thanks to you,” he reproached Carter, “I will have to do better than this.”

Carter could feel getting sick to the stomach.

“Are you at least using protection?”

Alex glared.

“You’re not my mother. Yes, of course I use protection, don’t be stupid.”

Carter exhaled.

“Good.”

“Anyways,” Alex said brusquely, “the only reason I put my foot in this dump to talk to you is to tell you this. Stay away from Aron. I mean it.”

“Stay away from Aron? You can’t forbid him to see me,” Carter said.

“Luckily, I didn’t have to do that. You did a mighty good job at pushing him away. By the way, bravo,” Alex clapped two times.

“He will know you’re cheating on him,” Carter spoke.

“Are you threatening me? By the way, I am extremely careful, and you have no proof. He won’t believe a word you say ... so, how exactly do you plan to let him know that? If it’s one thing you seem to have done right this time while being me is that you managed to convince Aron that I’m madly in love with him. Poor thing,” Alex shook his head, “I think he was almost this close to believe me when I told him you pushed me in front of that car.”

“Fire truck,” Carter corrected the guy. “And Aron didn’t believe you. I know it.”

That seemed to give Alex a small pause.

“Regardless,” he replied. “Now he’s eating out of my hand, and the only annoying thing is that I will have to steer him gently towards how things were before. Well, that’s concerning Aron. Because you definitely made other things impossible for me. What’s with Simon and all his obsession with BDSM all of a sudden? What did you do to him? Thank heavens you didn’t screw him, too,” Alex linked his hands together and looked at the ceiling, as if the said heavens were about to descend from the sky and told him he was right to be so upset about the whole deal.

“That kid is in love with you. Don’t you at least want to treat him fairly?” Carter spoke.

“Why should I? Men are easy,” Alex shrugged. “Messy in their emotions and annoying.”

“You’re a man, too,” Carter pointed out.

“Yes, but a much clever one than your whole lot,” Alex gestured around as if he was speaking about the entire male population of the planet, save for him.

“What is that supposed to mean? Why are you tormenting Aron and Simon? And ... oh, fuck, is there someone else ...”

“Don’t be silly,” Alex spoke. “My mother used to say that a husband and a lover are enough. Anything more than that becomes a complication. Well, except for occasional side gigs, of course.”

Alex’s mother. Just one of the mysteries Carter could not get a hold of.

“Did your mother teach you how to play men, then?” Carter asked.

“Yes, of course, and how to keep them unhappy, because,” Alex smiled, seemingly completely satisfied with himself, “if they are happy, then there’s nothing else they need. And if they don’t need anything, they don’t feel like they have to give you anything. So, I’m not giving Aron sex, but I stay married to him, and I’m getting my fix from Simon, while I’m not giving him what he wants either,” the man explained, obviously satisfied with his strategy.

Carter shook his head in disbelief.

“That’s a toxic way of thinking,” he spoke.

“No way!” Alex exclaimed, in that fake exaggerated way of his that seem to be one of the roles the guy enjoyed playing. “You’re a shrink, too, now? Not that I won’t need one after this stupid body exchange or whatever this was. And I’m sure it’s going to cost me a fortune.”

“So, you’re not allowed to tell me about what the hell happened, but you’re going to tell a shrink?” Carter asked in disbelief.

“As much as I would love to torture you with this, no, I won’t tell my shrink, either. But I’ll come up with something. Aron has to pay for all this time he spent fucking you.”

“And being happy,” Carter added, with a tinge of regret.

“Yes, that, too,” Alex sighed. “I cannot believe you did it. I mean, you were a homophobe, and while I was stranded ... well, I thought that nothing could ... would happen. And to return to a husband who now expects to have sex almost every night ...” he shook his head.

“I won’t leave Aron alone,” Carter interrupted.

“Say what?” Alex straightened up, taking a more aggressive stance now.

“I won’t let you ruin his life,” Carter added. “He is my best friend.”

“He won’t screw you, now that you’re ... you,” Alex pointed at Carter’s body with what could only be read as disgust in his eyes.

“I don’t need him to screw me,” Carter said shortly.

We don’t?

No, we don’t. We need to save Aron from this guy.

“He is and will always be my best friend,” he added.

Alex’s face turned to ice again.

“So you’re willing to go to war against me?”

“Not particularly. But I’ll do what’s right by my best friend, and if this is what it takes, so be it,” Carter said simply.

Alex stood up brusquely and clutched his man purse while looking down at Carter.

“Then I think it’s on. You won’t have Aron, I promise,” Alex said and turned on his heels.

“You know what, Alex?” Carter felt compelled to say something back. “That dirt in your soul won’t cover with concealer.”

Alex huffed and walked away. Yet, for a second, something happened in the green eyes, and Carter wondered if it was pain he saw.

What the hell are we going to do now?

I have no idea. But I need to do something. I cannot leave Aron to be used like this.

Ah, damn, something hurts.

Don’t think about it, just don’t.

So, it was down to apologizing to Aron and trying to get back together as friends. This was hard enough, as it was, Carter thought. But how was he going to go about the fact that he needed to let Aron know Alex was cheating?

He could not just say it directly. Aron was going to think that he was just a major homophobe again. Hire a private investigator? Go to the press? Alex had said that he was very cautious, and Carter believed him. That was not an easy thing to do.

But, he needed to take the first step, and just talk to Aron again. It was no longer only about him now and what he was feeling.

The phone rang and rang. It was nine o’clock in the evening, so Aron could not be sleeping. Okay, the guy wasn’t picking up. Maybe he was in the shower.

Maybe he’s fucking his husband.

Shut up, don’t go there.

Why not? You know it's true.

Aron is my best friend. This has nothing to do with anything.

Except if it makes him happy ...

Sometimes I think you're working against me.

He waited for 20 minutes, looking at the seconds going one by one. How long could a shower take? This time, Aron picked up after several seconds. His voice was raspy, and sounded like he had been running.

“Carter?” Aron asked, like he could not believe it.

“Yeah, I’m ...”

There was a small giddy laugh in the background, and Carter could feel his hand moving on its own accord to cut the conversation. He ground his teeth and after a second, he spoke.

“I’m calling to ... say that I’m sorry, and to ask if you would like to hang out. Sometime. Not right now.”

Why was he suddenly so challenged when he needed to speak to Aron?

“I ... yes, baby, it’s ... Carter,” he heard Aron speaking, a bit away from the phone.

Ah, great, now Alex was going to forbid Aron from seeing him. All right, he was prepared to beg.

“I’ll call you, is that okay?” Aron spoke quickly into the phone, this time. “Now, let’s just say that it’s not the ... ahem, right moment.”

“Okay,” Carter said slowly.

“Okay, bye, and good to hear you, buddy,” Aron added, before cutting off the conversation.

Damn, how was he going to go about this? There was no way in hell he could let Aron in the clutches of that douchebag. The guy had no regrets about cheating, no

remorse, and he was clearly bent on continuing like before. And Aron had no idea and ...

Just now he had sounded happy. So happy that Carter could swear his heart was hurting bad, so, so bad.

What he needed to do was to keep himself busy until Aron was going to call, or until he was going to call Aron again. A good idea was to investigate the circumstances of the accident. He had no idea what had happened, but Alex seemed to know and was just bent on spewing lies. At least he needed to correct that. He didn't want Aron to believe that he could do such a horrible thing.

Stop it with that. Aron didn't believe a thing.

Yes, but Alex can screw with his head, and that's not right. I can stand him not loving me back ... but I won't stand him hating me.

Fair enough.

He began by searching online for all the information he could find on the accident. Unfortunately, everything pointed out to just what he already knew. Or better said, what he didn't know. But there was the matter of the witness, and his hopes were hanging on that. Maybe that pony tail girl was going to emerge with news on how the accident had occurred. Yet, his hopes were slim. So far, the police's appeal had remained unanswered.

Suddenly, there was ruckus at the door, and he stood up. Was that ... barking? The doorbell chimed, taking him even more by surprise. Who could be at the door at that hour? And with a dog in tow? If the person was a serial killer of some kind, it would have been highly unlikely to have a dog with him, right?

He shrugged and went for the door. The person standing there must have been the last he was expecting. But he felt a surge of something pleasant the moment he saw his late evening visitor.

“Hi Mark,” he said.

“Hi boss,” Mark replied cheerfully. “May I come in?”

Boss? Wait, Carter's brain finally caught up with him.

“What did you just call me? And how on earth do I know you? I mean how do you know me? I mean how ...?”

Mark raised one hand to placate Carter’s mumbled questions. He needed the other to hold still a beautiful golden retriever that continued to express his happiness of being there in short barks. Well, at least Carter thought the doggy was happy, because his thick tail was wagging to a rhythm only he could hear.

“I will explain everything, I promise,” Mark spoke. “Could we come in? Taz is just so happy to see you I don’t think I can hold him much longer.”

“Happy to see me?” Carter spoke, feeling like a parakeet. “I’ve never seen this dog before in my life!”

Mark laughed.

“He is your dog, after all. But let’s get inside, okay?”

Carter made way for his guests to step into the small apartment.

“I’m batshit crazy, right?” he asked, after carefully closing the door behind them. “Please, sit down,” he gestured towards the sofa.

Mark was happy to take a seat, stretching his legs with a satisfied groan. He spoke something into the dog’s ear and then released the leash. That allowed the dog to make a small leap and hurry into Carter’s arms.

There was no other thing he could do but deal with the furry creature that seemed bent on reaching his face to lick him. Well, touching the thick fur was pleasant. But he needed to solve a little problem right now, like how insane he was at the moment.

The golden retriever seemed satisfied with being scratched behind the ears and sat next to Carter.

“Can I get you anything, Mark? Is your name Mark? Are you really an assistant?”

Mark patted the place next to him.

“I know you must have a lot of questions. I will try to answer them all without breaking the rules.”

Carter could swear his head was starting to hurt. But he sat down, and the dog placed his head right away in his lap.

“Yes, my name is Mark, well, at least, the name I use when I get down here for field work,” the guest explained. “Yes, in a way, you could say that I am your assistant. You did give me quite a fright with the accident, though. Until then, I think you were my most no-nonsense charge. But I suppose that was to be expected,” Mark added the last words, like they were directed at himself rather than his host.

“Ah, so you’re like my ... guardian angel?” Carter barely managed to get out the words.

It was clear. He was insane. He was going to go to sleep, and the first thing in the morning he was going to get himself checked in a nice facility with padded walls where nice people in white were going to try to understand what the hell was wrong with his brain.

“There is nothing wrong with your brain,” Mark spoke.

“Can you, like, read my mind?” Carter whispered. “Are you really my guardian angel?”

“That is quite a pompous name, don’t you think?” Mark smiled. “We are created to watch over ... you. But let’s not waste precious time with definitions and whatnot. I’m here for something else, now that you are back into your own body.”

“To tell me how the accident happened?” Carter asked, feeling hopeful.

The dog made a small whiny sound and looked at him.

“You’re a nice doggy,” he patted the animal’s warm head.

“Not exactly,” Mark said. “I will tell you about the accident if that is what you wish ...”

“Yeah, I would like to hear about that freakish accident,” Carter said. “Alex says I pushed him ... Oh, no, please don’t tell me I pushed him!”

Mark smiled.

“It is uncanny how little you seem to know yourself sometimes, Carter Malis. But please let me finish. I am here to offer you an alternative. The one you choose will decide how your life will be from this point forward.”

“That sounds serious,” Carter mumbled.

“It is,” Mark said. “So please listen carefully, so you make the choice you think it’s right for you.”

“Aren’t you going to point me out to the right one?”

“No,” Mark shook his head. “It is not my place to do that. You have free will, Carter, there’s no invisible hand that pushes people to do right or wrong.”

“Aha,” Carter said, for lack of a better word. “So, what are the alternatives? And really shouldn’t I bring you anything? A glass of juice, at least? I feel like this is important and I don’t ...”

“Don’t worry about a thing,” Mark waved. “Now, pay attention. I could tell you how the accident happened and you will get all the memories from that particular event back. But each choice comes with a price. If you pick this one, you will forget everything that happened during the body swap. Actually, you will wipe clean all that happened.”

“Can I do that?!” Carter exclaimed. “Wait, so I will forget everything? About Aron? About ...”

How we made love and ...

“Ah, sorry,” he added quickly, remembering that Mark had no troubles reading his mind.

“No problem,” Mark said brightly. “The answer is yes, you will forget about everything that happened between you and Aron.”

“Ah, damn,” Carter mumbled. “What’s the other choice?”

“It’s simple, just the other way around. You get to keep all the memories about the body swap, but I cannot tell you about the accident, or give you back the memories from that event.”

Carter stared blankly in front of him.

“No memories of how I kissed Aron?” he mumbled. “Not one thing about how he used to crush on me when we were 14 and all that?”

“No,” Mark shook his head. “I’m sorry. These are the rules.”

“Then the choice is easy,” Carter spoke. “I won’t forget about Aron. Screw the accident,” he shrugged.

Mark smiled.

“Okay then,” the guest spoke.

“Wait, was that it?” Carter asked, surprised. “Aren’t you going to give me to choose between a blue pill and a red pill? Do I stay in Wonderland? Just like that?”

“Do I look like Morpheus to you?” Mark joked. “No pills. You cannot believe how many jokes we say about that movie ...”

“Do you watch Matrix in heaven?” Carter asked, more and more confused.

Mark waved.

“We know everything. It’s a bit too much, really, and most things are redundant, but well, sometimes, something happens and it’s no longer a boring day at the office,” Mark said. “But I do need to make sure that you understand your choice. Not knowing what happened during the accident will have consequences. You already know what Alex is saying. He could poison Aron’s mind, you know?”

Mark looked at him as if he was expecting Carter to reconsider his decision. But Carter just shook his head.

“That’s a risk I’m willing to take. Aron won’t believe Alex. And I could not have pushed him. I just know it, even though I don’t remember a thing.”

“Are you sure? Aron loves Alex. Love can make people blind,” Mark insisted. “What if Aron begins to see you with different eyes? What are you going to do?”

Carter could feel his heart getting heavy with each of Mark’s words.

“Aron won’t do that.”

“He did think you were a homophobe and didn’t speak to you for two years.”

“I didn’t speak to him for two years either,” Carter replied. “And I was wrong. And Aron ... He was always there for me, for so many years. Even if he never talks to me again, ever, even if he believes Alex, I don’t care. I won’t forget the fact that I lo ...”

He swallowed the words. Mark sighed, but didn’t protest against his charge’s cowardice.

“Then your choice is made?”

“Yes,” Carter said loud and clear.

“Then my job here is done,” Mark said with satisfaction. “I should get going. If I can say so, I’m glad for you, Carter, and I hope that you won’t need me again, until when you’re very old and grey and we’ll meet again.”

“Wait,” Carter spoke, expecting his visitor to disappear into thin air. “I just have so many questions.”

“Well, you can ask me anything, but I won’t promise that I can answer them. Go ahead.”

Carter pointed toward the dog.

“You say he is my dog. How?”

“You invented Taz. He was your imaginary dog while you were a kid,” Mark began. “And since you were the type of kid never asking for too much, it was a common decision we reached that Taz should exist. I took him from the shelter the moment I got here, on earth, and could not wait to hand him to you.”

“Oh,” Carter replied. “So if I were to choose to remember the accident, then Taz ...”

“I’m afraid he was going to need another home,” Mark confirmed.

Taz barked to confirm the guest’s words.

“And that day, at the office, when you didn’t want to hug me, like everyone else ... What was that all about?”

“Ah, we are not allowed to touch humans too much. There is a risk to reveal our true nature. When I came into your office the first time, and shook hands with you, you saw something, right? I could read it on your face, although you didn’t think much about it,” Mark replied promptly.

“Your eyes ...” Carter murmured. “They were like all kinds of colors.”

Mark nodded thoughtfully.

“Anything else?”

“Yeah, I’m sorry, I still need to know ... What about that ... scandal? Why were you saying you were sorry? About the video that leaked ...”

He was talking to an angel or a heaven assistant, whatever the guy was, and he was talking sex tapes. Great. Way to go making an impression on his guardian angel.

“It is your right to know,” Mark stopped his train of thought. “It was my fault for not paying attention. The next day I was still focused on you to notice what was happening with Aron’s phone. Ah, and there goes a point on my record,” Mark shook his head with mirth.

“Ah, damn, I’m so sorry,” Carter whispered. “And thanks for telling me you weren’t watching me and Aron ... Oh, but why did you come here?” he changed the topic, feeling his cheeks ablaze. “I mean, if you’re not supposed to intervene ...”

“I had to watch over you, so that you don’t end up in trouble by trying to tell someone about who you really were. Also, to offer my guidance, should you have asked for it.”

“Ah, that’s why it seemed as if you were waiting for me to ask for help!” Carter exclaimed. “Oh, wait, that e-mail to Aron ... That was you? Penis enlargement pills?” he said without thinking.

Mark laughed.

“It was a pretty good joke, wasn’t it?” the guest said.

Carter nodded.

“Yeah, I guess it was. Aron didn’t think so, though.”

“Of course, he has a more stern personality. You should see the guy in charge of him,” Mark laughed.

“Does Aron have a guardian angel, too?” Carter asked, feeling like he was on the cusp of finding something amazing, but he was busy asking about trifle things.

“Everyone does, although this is not the correct term,” Mark spoke.

“But how come there are still so many bad things happening in the world?” Carter finally found his brain and the courage to ask a really important question, for once.

Mark’s face clouded.

“The world is not a perfect place, and we are not perfect either. We do have flaws, and sometimes we’re overworked and ... But don’t let me bother you with this,” Mark said quickly. “In the end, people make their own lives, and sometimes, their choices influence the others. That is why accidents still happen, and other bad things, as you say. We do not control everything. There is, sometimes, too little we can do, but, in your case, I needed to step up and ask to be sent down here, and watch over you for a little while.”

Carter felt like he only had more questions now. But he knew he could not insist on this.

“But the body swap? Why did it happen?”

Mark smiled fondly.

“That was something quite unexpected. And it was, you know, caused by your most ardent wish.”

“My most ardent wish?” Carter mumbled.

“Don’t ask me what it was. You know it much better than I do. And now, if you don’t have any other questions, I should hurry back. I have a ton of paperwork to file in.”

“Wait, is Alex given a choice like mine? I mean, he seems to remember the accident and ...”

Mark smiled again.

“That is between he and his, as you say, guardian angel. That is when that guy will return from his pleasure trip. And just to give you a hint, since I like you,” Mark laughed, “Alex doesn’t know what happened during the accident, either.”

“He doesn’t? Then why is he spewing all those lies?” Carter asked.

Mark shook his head slowly.

“It is up to Alex whether he learns something from this experience or not.”

“Wow,” Carter expressed what he felt inside. “That’s ... I mean ... I guess I should say ‘thank you’. You saved my life, right?”

Mark’s face filled with warmth.

“Carter Malis, I hope you will have a great life,” the visitor said. “Now I really need to get going.”

“Are you going to fly out the window? Or just disappear?” Carter questioned, curiosity gnawing at him.

“I’m afraid I just need to catch a certain train. Passing from this world to the other is nothing as glamorous as some people make it to be.”

“Okay,” Carter mumbled and stood up to see his guest to the door.

“Just for the record,” Mark said, “I did want to hug you that day.”

He felt warmth, all engulfing, as his ex-assistant/not exactly guardian angel embraced him. All right, he thought. It was all going to be all right.

Chapter Twenty-Six

It was a great thing he had Taz now, as he had a reason to go out of the house, and also to go jogging. Getting back to playing sports with buddies was not yet on his list of priorities, as he was still trying to get his life in order, and adjust to the post-Aron era, as he had come to call his life now.

Taz was a great jogging partner. Adjustments to the shoebox, as he called his home now, had to be made, and the cabinets now held dog foods from various brands which Carter wanted to try to see what Taz liked best. Apparently, his puppy was not pretentious at all, and, if there was anything he needed to worry about, as the human in charge, was the risk of making Taz overweight.

So running every day in the park had to do. He had gone back to his freelancing gigs, and everything was looking up. There was one thing to take care of, and that was to give Aron the money back, for the hospital bills and everything else.

Only that Aron hadn't called yet, and Carter had to respect his best friend's choice and not be the one to call again. It had been three days, but who was counting?

"Do you know how to count, Taz?" he asked his dog.

Taz just barked as a reply. That could mean anything. He was busy petting his dog on the head, so he didn't notice someone coming from the opposite direction. For one second, he balanced on both feet but somehow managed to remain standing. The other guy wasn't so lucky, and he was now struggling to get up, while rubbing his behind.

Carter hurried to offer the guy a hand and felt his jaw beginning to drop when he saw who it was.

"Simon," he said without thinking.

Wearing a sporty getup that left little to the imagination, and complemented the guy's slim figure, Simon was right there, in flesh and blood.

"Do I know you?" Simon smiled and took Carter's hand to bring himself up.

"Oh, no, I don't think so," Carter said quickly. "I just mistook you for someone else."

“Someone else named Simon?” the guy asked, still holding Carter’s hand.

“Yes.”

Okay, okay, he had to make a habit of thinking before talking.

“That is so uncanny!” Simon exclaimed and his mouth stretched into a large smile. “My name is also Simon,” he explained.

“Ah, that is, indeed, uncanny,” Carter shook his head and tried to pry his hand away from Simon’s now.

“What’s your name?” the guy let go, albeit a tad reluctant.

“Ahem, it’s Carter,” he said after a short moment of hesitation.

“Nice meeting you, Carter,” Simon smiled again. “Do you run here often?”

“No, I just took up the habit lately. And the dog,” he gestured towards Taz.

The dog had assumed a good pet position, and his tongue was hanging out.

“Well, see you around, then, Carter,” Simon winked at him, giving him a short once over and began jogging away.

He winked. Why did he wink?

Do you think he likes us?

Why? What makes you say that?

The wink.

No, that was just totally random.

Well, that’s what you get for bumping into people.

Why do you mean by that?

I mean complications. You’re an expert in that.

Ugh, shut up. It was just a small ... incident.

Yeah, and he winked.

Just stop it already.

Carter shook his head, and began running, as well, but he didn't take two steps that his phone started ringing. He was so fast to answer it that he almost dropped it.

"Hey, Aron, hi," he said breathlessly.

"Hey, buddy, how are you?"

"Just trying to get back in shape, running and stuff," he replied.

And bumping into your husband's lover.

"That's great to hear. Hey, what do you say about hanging out tonight? For drinks?"

"Great!" he exclaimed.

Oh, damn, he must have sounded desperate.

"Ah, wait, there's something," he added, looking at Taz.

How was he going to get a dog-sitter until tonight? It was unlikely that he could book someone so fast. Also, the idea of leaving Taz alone ... He still cared for his ugly curtains and he had never left Taz alone before. Three days were too short a time to decide whether his dog was all right with being on his own.

"Yes?" Aron encouraged him to speak from the other end.

"Can we go somewhere where they accept dogs?" he asked.

"Yeah, sure, I suppose. But why?" Aron questioned. "Do you have a dog? But when ..."

"Yeah, I have a dog," Carter said brightly. "His name is Taz."

"Ah, just like the dog you wanted to have when we were kids, right? Funny thing," Aron said.

"What is?" Carter asked.

“Alex’s former assistant has a dog named Taz. I just happened to hear about the guy’s pet one day, when I was at Alex’s workplace to take him out.”

Okay, he could do this, he could do this.

Try hard not to remember what happened later that night ... Aron is married.

To the wrong person.

Delusional much?

“Former assistant?” his words came out unnaturally bold.

“Yes. The guy just dropped off, just like that. It was quite strange as he seemed to get along with Alex like a charm. Which was a bit of a surprise since ... Well, you decide the place and let me know,” Aron seemed to have just noticed he had a bit of a loose tongue, too.

Well, they had used to tell each other everything, and that kind of habit did die hard.

Except for a little detail, like the fact that he liked men. How could he keep that away from us?

“Yeah, sure, and I also want to sort out the money thing, too,” Carter spoke.

“Don’t worry about it,” Aron cut him short. “The least I could do for you. After all these years as friends.”

C’mon, c’mon, don’t get emotional, man, don’t ...

“Thanks a lot, man,” Carter mumbled. “For everything.”

Aron could not know what that meant. Was he ever to know? Carter had to admit, all stupid hopes aside, that even without Alex, Aron could do much better than him, a homophobic ex-friend who ...

“No sweat, buddy. I’m so glad you called. I was going to call you anyway, after letting you cool down a little, but it was nice coming from you.”

“You were? But why?”

“I told you. I will always be your friend.”

Nothing was supposed to make him happier. What would Aron think if he blurted out, out of the blue, that he wanted something else? Something more?

“I ... want us to be friends again, too,” he spoke, trying hard to ignore the knot in his throat.

“Missed you, buddy,” Aron said, his voice serious. “I won’t let you this time around. Two years ... That’s enough time, don’t you think?”

“Yeah,” Carter spoke softly. “It is.”

Like a hole in his life, in the fabric of time, and somewhere deep inside his soul, all in one. And, by contrast, the several days spent with Aron, as his husband, had been the total opposite. Only that Aron could never know, and was still in love with that douchebag, and after all the effort of keeping the two together, it seemed as if he was insane to try considering breaking them up now.

But he needed to. Somehow. Without making Aron think he was still a homophobic piece of shit and just trying to slander Alex’s reputation.

“Carter? Still there?” Aron called for him playfully.

“Yes, I’ll send a message with the place,” he spoke.

“Good. And let me know again sometime where you go when you go away like this. You used to tell me all the time.”

Aron remembered. The imaginary tales he had told as a kid, even into their late teens, with only Aron as his audience. Of places that never were, populated by creatures that could have never existed.

Aron was right. He was the only one who understood him completely. But now, he needed to keep hidden from his best friend the only thing Aron could not know. Because, simply put, he was coming too late to this party. Aron’s teenage crush had faded away, the man’s affection maturing in what he was feeling now for his husband, not a trace of that childish sentiment left. And to some extent, he understood why Aron was putting up with Alex. Aron had had the image of the perfect marriage in front of him all his life, in his parents. He could not just let go of Alex unless he really found out about the cheating.

And Carter could not just tell him, without proof. And even with proof, he was afraid that Aron was just going to think wrong of him and not believe a word. After something like that, the guy was just going to trust his husband blindly.

“I’m getting used to your silence again. I assume this is a good sign,” Aron joked, waking him up from his reverie.

“Ah, sorry, just ... Let’s just meet, I can barely wait to really catch up this time,” Carter came back to his senses.

Just seeing Aron was going to be good. And he had to think of a way to prove Alex’s cheating, and free Aron from that poisonous marriage. It wasn’t going to be easy. Especially with Alex all aware of what Carter knew.

He could not just believe his eyes. Preferring to get busy with the glass, he tried to focus on some joke Aron was saying. Why on earth was Alex there, too?

Apparently, Aron was really bent on making all three of them friends, and it was painful to fake being friendly towards that snake. Especially since Alex was nonchalantly exposing a totally different personality right now.

Anyone who didn’t know the guy could swear he was the kindest, most considerate husband in the universe at the moment. Laughing at his husband’s jokes, leaning against Aron and touching him lightly, in a very domestic and affectionate manner, maybe a little too often, Alex seemed indeed able to play the marriage bliss part like it was his biggest role.

“Another round, guys?” Aron gestured toward the table and got to his feet. “I’ll go get the drinks from the bar, getting the waiter’s attention seems a bit too much right now.”

“Just water for me, honey,” Alex called sweetly.

Carter could see himself lunging over the table and strangling the asshole. So that was how he was ensnaring Aron! Fuck. This was going to be hard. He could not strangle Alex and then say his hands slipped or something.

“What are you doing here?” he hissed, the moment Aron was out of earshot.

Alex's sweet facade vanished in thin air. His green eyes narrowed.

"What do you think? That I'll let you waltz into Aron's life and steal him away from me? No way."

"And do you think I'll let you ruin his life? You don't love him!" Carter pointed out.

"Maybe, but as I told you, he's mine," Alex shrugged. "So if I have to keep him happy for a while until he forgets all about you, so be it."

"Forget about me? Hello. I'm his best friend," Carter replied.

"Not you, as how you are now, silly," Alex grimaced. "All the things you did with him while I was away, I need to undo them carefully. And that means that I need to show him the real version of his husband that could make him happy. Hence my presence here. As a loving husband, I need to support my man in his efforts to get back with his old friend. But really? What's with all the dogs outside on the patio?"

"It's a pet-friendly bar," Carter exclaimed.

"And? You're Aron's pet now?" Alex snorted.

"No," Carter scowled. "My dog is outside."

"You have a dog?" Alex wondered out loud, like the simple fact that Carter owned a pet was somehow ludicrous.

"Yeah. I couldn't leave him alone," Carter explained.

"Whatever, enough about your pet," Alex waved. "Now tell me, what's all that stuff about some David guy? Aron is over the moon that I made some big impression on this David."

"Not telling," Carter said with satisfaction.

Alex mumbled something under his breath.

"Fine. I'm willing to negotiate. What would it take for you to tell me about David?"

“Stop cheating,” Carter said simply.

Alex seemed to ponder the possibility for about half a second.

“No, too much.”

“Too much?” Carter exclaimed. “Stop being a cheater, for fuck’s sake! Aron doesn’t deserve this from you!”

“Have you been with other guys? Besides Aron?” Alex ignored completely Carter’s reply and continued on a different thread.

“What kind of question is that? Of course not!” Carter ground his teeth so hard his jaw was starting to hurt.

“Then you should start. What do you find so amazing in Aron, anyway? Okay, so he’s good looking. Big deal. A lot of guys are.”

“In the fashion magazine life you’re living,” Carter pointed out.

Alex scrunched his nose.

“He doesn’t have that great a personality. Kind of boring,” he continued. “Too serious. We never go to enough parties.”

“Well, that’s an up point for me,” Carter replied.

“Of course. You’re as boring as he is. No wonder you two make such a good pair.”

A good pair? What the hell was Alex talking about? He was about to ask when Aron placed their drinks on the table. Ah, damn, he could not really talk to Aron, if that scumbag Alex was going to tag along all the time.

He spent the rest of the evening in a daze, and felt guilty for it, too. It was clear as day that Aron was trying really hard to make this work. But it was the strangest love triangle in the universe that could exist and Aron was the only one not aware of it. And that made it really hard for him to focus.

All the more reason to be happy when Aron began coming by his place, but alone. At least, Alex was busy enough with his fashion career to let Aron off the hook once in a while.

“So, we have plenty to catch up, right?” Aron placed one hand casually on Carter’s knee.

“Yeah, two years,” Carter mumbled.

It was so hard to focus when Aron was touching him, even though it was not one ounce sexual. Just the heat of the guy’s hand through the fabric was making him feel a small tremble in all his body.

And the way Aron smiled. He could just stare at his best friend like that all day, even without talking to each other. But Aron had no idea about what was going through his mind. He couldn’t have.

“I hope you didn’t mind about me bringing Alex along when we met at the bar.”

“No problem,” Carter lied through his teeth. “How come he’s not with you now?”

“Alex gets bored easily, and since we weren’t going to a bar, he decided not to tag along this time. Also, I think Taz gave him quite a scare. Alex is not used to dogs, and has this irrational fear of them.”

“Hmm,” Carter barely managed.

“I really do want to know what you have been up to, all this time,” Aron squeezed his knee.

Carter’s leg shook, taking both him and Aron by surprise. It was apparently a knee-jerk reaction. Or he needed to have a serious talk with his leg.

“I understand that you still have muscle cramps from time to time,” Aron spoke. “The doctor told me. Sorry, I don’t mean to pry, but how are you feeling?”

“No sweat,” Carter waved. “Yeah, I still have some annoying muscle cramps, especially in this shoulder,” he rotated the culprit with a small grimace.

“Here, let me help,” Aron grabbed him by the shoulders and turned Carter with his back to him. “Do you recall how I always put you back on your feet after a game?”

“How could I not?” Carter groaned in pure delight, as Aron’s expert fingers began working the knots in his shoulder blades, while inadvertently blowing hot air over Carter’s neck.

Except that those times Carter hadn’t felt aroused. Short and swiftly, he grabbed a pillow and placed it over his groin, hoping Aron wasn’t going to notice. All right, so he was a bit insane. Aron could just breathe in his direction and he was ready to ...

“Is it hurting that much?” Aron asked, his voice a tad worried.

Apparently, he was making some weird sounds. From his dog bed, Taz was watching him intently, too.

“C’mon, guys, I’m not a cripple,” he joked, freeing himself from Aron’s skilled hands.

“Guys?” Aron asked. “Ah, look who’s awake,” he called for Taz who happily jumped from his place and hurried toward Aron.

Could someone be jealous of a dog? Aron was talking to Taz now, caressing his fur. Nah, he couldn’t be. Taz was a sweetheart. Of course Aron liked him, too.

“I haven’t done anything interesting these two years,” he found himself talking.

Aron was used to him picking up conversations five questions back, so he didn’t comment on the abrupt statement.

“I guess your life has been much more interesting,” Carter tried to smile.

Like you got married to an asshole and got silvers in your hair to go along with that, he thought to himself.

“Well, I guess,” Aron shrugged. “I did get married, but I guess we both know you’re not a fan of that particular event,” he chuckled.

“For what is worth, I’m sorry, Aron,” he said.

We are? We were practically right. Alex is a hoe.

C’mon, stop with the denial. Alex didn’t make Aron gay.

We did.

Again with the delusions, you really are something. That was just ...

Why don't you ask him?

Are you nuts?

“Hey, it’s all in the past,” Aron smiled at him. “But if you’re sorry, that really means a lot to me. Anyway, my life hasn’t been that exciting, either. Being married is ...”

Aron was hesitating. His smile was faltering a bit, too.

Aron needs a friend.

David’s words from that time were coming back to him now.

“Hey, you can tell me anything,” he invited his friend to speak. “Not that I know anything about being married.”

Hmm.

“Or being gay.”

Really?

“I guess,” Aron shook his head and smiled again.

“Is Alex still going at it that I pushed him? He seemed civil the last time we met.”

And a borderline sociopath.

Aron’s face clouded.

“Alex has ... some issues with trust. He grew up in a very toxic environment.”

In which he thrived like a carnivorous plant.

Unaware of the imaginary conversation in his best friend’s mind, Aron continued.

“He sometimes lies to himself, that he is a victim. Of circumstances, of other people ...”

“Did you know that about him when you asked him to marry you?”

And that he’s a complete basket case?

Aron exhaled.

“No, I cannot say that I did. But he is really a wonderful person,” he spoke, but to Carter, the words rang hollow, as if Aron was trying to convince himself that Alex was, indeed, just misunderstood. “Except for these obsessions and some ... let’s say, erratic episodes, he is ... perfect. Everything I want.”

He’s just a bastard, great at reading people so that he can manipulate them.

“But what’s wrong with him? I mean, is he seeking treatment?” Carter tried to choose his words carefully.

“He is considering now, after the accident. But somehow I feel like he just tries to draw attention on himself with this. I think he believes it’s fashionable to see a therapist. Oh, damn, you must be thinking I’m a horrible husband, standing here, and gossiping about my husband with my best friend.”

“Not at all,” Carter said as naturally as he could.

“I cannot admit such a thing in front of my parents for the world. For once because I know they were against my marriage to Alex, and I feel ashamed now for some harsh things I told them back then.”

“You can talk to your parents. I’m sure they love you just the same,” Carter spoke.

Even if you are married to a douchebag.

“Yeah, I’m sure they do, but that doesn’t make me less of a prick. I took responsibility with that vow, you know? I cannot just ditch Alex now because he has problems, and it’s not all milk and honey. I need to understand him.”

“Does he understand you?”

You’re on fire!

Thank you! See, I'm totally fine!

“I hope he does,” Aron chuckled with mirth. “You know I can be difficult, too.”

“Difficult? Like how?” Carter asked.

Aron waved.

“Relationships can be difficult. Marriage can be difficult. And maybe my parents were right that I rushed into it, but this doesn't mean that I'm not going to do my best to make it work.”

“Alex is beautiful,” Carter pointed out.

Aron smiled and shook his head.

“That's hardly the point. I know you might not believe me, but it wasn't because of his physical appearance that I liked him, the first time we met.”

“Then what was?” Carter asked.

We've heard about it before.

Hush, Aron didn't tell us-us that.

“He was laughing, and it was like a sudden breath of fresh air, because, back then, I felt ... Well, we did end up engaged in ... But I suppose your straight ass doesn't want to hear about that,” Aron joked.

My straight ass wants your dick inside it, like fucking deep.

Seriously?

What? It's the truth!

“Actually,” Carter raised one finger.

Aron caught his hand and stared him in the eyes.

“Hey, you don't want to hear. Trust me. I know when you're trying to cope with things you don't get. But, hell, if it's any consolation, I don't get straight people either,” Aron laughed. “Just joking. And really, no girlfriends? For two years?”

Carter shook his head.

“How come you didn’t tell me you were gay?” he asked the question squirming in his brain.

“Ah, you’re not going to let this one pass, are you?” Aron spoke. “Well, if I’m going to tell you, you’ll have to promise that you’re not going to kick me out the door.”

Ohdamnohdamnohfuckohfuck he’s going to say it!

“I promise,” he said solemnly.

“Okay, but, just for the sake of my physical integrity, I’m going to sit over there,” Aron stood up and grabbed a chair.

Carter was waiting as if he was in front of the execution squad.

“Well, for a while, when we were in high school, I had a crush on you,” Aron said quickly. “And later. There, I said it. I couldn’t tell you I was gay because I was afraid of your reaction, and seeing what happened at the wedding ...”

“Ah,” Carter barely managed.

Now the worst part was to figure out how to close his mouth.

C’mon, it’s no shock!

It’s a shock that he admitted it to me!

“It’s good that that’s the only thing you can say,” Aron said. “But are you sure you don’t want to kick my ass?”

“No,” Carter spoke, this time swallowing hard. “But really, don’t you think it was quite a big step from me to Alex?”

Aron stared at him, puzzled.

“In what way?”

“You know. This,” Carter felt his face, and then for some reason he placed his hands on his chest, squeezing.

Aron threw him an odd look. For a moment, Carter could swear the guy was undressing him with his eyes. But the moment was gone as quickly as it had come.

“Well, let’s just say that I tried many different dudes in between,” Aron joked.

“Really? How many?” Carter questioned.

“Aren’t you a little too curious for a straight guy?” Aron chuckled.

“I’m your best friend. I should know,” he replied.

What a cheap trick! Do you kiss your mother with that mouth?

“Okay, they weren’t that many. I was just boasting,” Aron spoke with a small smile still hanging on his lips. “But, seriously, don’t tell me you’re so straight that you think no gay guy should look at you with interest.”

“No, actually, I’m wondering what you could see ...”

“In you? C’mon, dude, is this how you make so many chicks fall at your feet? False modesty? I must admit that I was surprised with the string of girlfriends you got after high school. Definitely, I haven’t dated as many guys as the number of girls you got with.”

“No, seriously, what do ... did you see in me?” Carter asked again, hiding his relief upon hearing that Aron hadn’t had that many sex partners.

“Okay, I’m playing this game with Alex, I suppose I can play it with you, too,” Aron chuckled. “You wouldn’t believe how insecure he can be sometimes. I need to make a list of things I like in him so I can enumerate them without fail each time he’s in a funk. But by the number of chicks digging you, and dragging you to their lairs,” he joked, “I wasn’t expecting you to be insecure, too.”

“I’m not insecure, psh,” Carter snorted. “Just what could a hot gay guy like you see in me?”

That mouth of yours ...

Ours, dear, ours.

Aron stared at him in shock for about one moment and then he burst into laughter.

“All right, I’ll take that as a compliment,” he said. “Well, seeing that you really want to shock me today, I’d say it’s my turn to do the same. Your ass is way too yummy for a straight dude.”

Carter opened his mouth, closed it, then opened it again, then closed it again. A few times, until Aron began to speak again.

“Do I have to rush for the door this time? And frankly, I thought you would be more shocked with me telling you about my teenage crush.”

“Yummy how?” Carter asked.

Aron’s eyes grew wide.

“Like, ahem, you know, round and ... perfect?” Aron said, but his voice dropped low about an octave or so.

“You’re fucking a fashion star,” Carter mumbled. “Isn’t his ass perfect?”

“Ah, yes, of course,” Aron shook his head like he was trying to wake up from a dream. “But it won’t be fair to compare the two of you. It would be like comparing apples to oranges. You two are different, different body types ... Ah, damn it, Carter, I feel like I want to strangle you a bit. You know, in a friendly way.”

“Why?” Carter asked, confused with his friend’s reasoning. “Am I the apples? Or the oranges? Which one you like best?”

This time, Aron just burst into laughter.

“I cannot believe that all this time I was afraid of telling you about my crush on you. As usual, you’re just making a joke out of it. And, frankly, I should have expected that from you. Because this is what you do. You always make me laugh and feel at ease. But to answer your question, I cannot compare the two of you, not only because it would be unfair to Alex, but also because I only tried his ass,” Aron joked, shaking his head.

Would you like to try mine, too?

Hoe.

Shut up.

“But really, I’m glad you’re taking this so easy. How come you were so upset when I got married? Was it because I didn’t warn you? I guess it must be. You’re not a big fan of changes. I should have pulled my head out of my ass and think of how radical that must have sounded to you. Your best friend, not only getting married but also telling you he’s gay. Was that the reason?” Aron asked, this time without a trace of humor.

Carter felt the need to make himself little into the sofa.

“Yes, I guess. It was a shock,” he added, to make his fake confession more believable. “I could not believe you were gay.”

“But you seem to have no trouble with it now,” Aron encouraged him with a small smile.

“I had two years to get adjusted to the idea,” Carter joked. “Seriously, I’m cool now.”

“Great!” Aron exclaimed. “Then when do you think you could come around to play some ball?”

“To your home? Wouldn’t Alex mind?” Carter wondered out loud.

“He needs to get used to seeing you around. The only reason he’s afraid of you is that he doesn’t know you and created a strange idea of you in his head. The moment he’ll see you’re no danger ...”

“Me? Danger?” Carter tried to laugh.

Admit it; you won’t mind kicking that guy’s ass.

Yes, but we need to be civilized.

“Well, as I told you, he tends to be a bit insecure and even jealous. But, well, it’s not like I’m still crushing on you, and you’re straight, anyway. So I’d say you’re a safe bet.”

No, Aron, don’t bet on that. You’d lose.

Oh, fuck, why does he have to look so ...

Yummy?

Now you learned a new word!

But seriously, he is yummy, just look at him. If I look closely, I think I can see his abs through that t-shirt.

“Do I have a stain?” Aron looked down on his shirt.

“No, no,” Carter said brightly. “I was just thinking. So, seriously, is my ass good enough for a gay guy?”

Aron now seemed to sense that something was amiss. So he did what he always did, as far as Carter knew him. He became serious.

“I’m just pulling your leg a little here,” Aron smiled fondly. “The truth is that I always thought you were great and all since you were my friend. So I guess that in a way it was natural for me to crush on you for the first time in my life. It would not have been fair toward you, though. To tell you that I like you. This is how friendships go to waste.”

“You thought I was going to ... hate you?”

Aron nodded.

“Just so you know, jokes aside, I liked you because of how great you were ... And you are. Nothing to do with your physical appearance.”

“Not at all?” Carter mumbled.

“Okay, not exactly not at all,” Aron admitted. “Just that it wasn’t that important. It just ... you know, made the picture complete. But, I have to apologize, too. For shunning you. For getting upset. I knew you and I should have expected you not taking it well.”

“You were expecting me to behave like a shitty homophobe?” Carter asked.

Aron exhaled.

“Well, not exactly. I was surprised since I knew you to be open-minded. But I should have expected you to be pissed. I was out of my box, right?” Aron chuckled.

“Out of your what?” Carter asked.

“C’mon, you know what I mean. Your complex system of categorization, the one that helps you keep track of everything, even when you’re not paying attention. I don’t think I’ve encountered anyone else to try to rationalize everything. So I must have taken you so badly by surprise that ... You flipped a lid,” Aron sighed.

“I suppose,” Carter murmured. “But am I really that bad?”

“C’mon, buddy, I know you’re not likely to get emotional. Ah, do you remember that school play in fourth grade? The Wizard of Oz? You wanted to play the Tin Man, and also made a demand to the teacher to change the play. You said that the guy should be happy that he doesn’t have a heart. You gave Mrs. O’Brien a run for her money. Now if I look back, I think you were having a pretty philosophical conversation for that age. Mrs. O’Brien was so pissed that she could not convince you that you were wrong. In the end, you had to play the scarecrow. And that finally shut you up, because you had to think about what to do with a second brain.”

“Do you remember all these?” Carter stared at his friend in pure astonishment. “From 4th grade?”

Aron shrugged.

“Like plenty of other things about you. I think I always liked you, Carter, because you were different from the rest.”

“What do you know?” Carter mumbled. “And I struggled all my life to be like the rest.”

“Frankly, buddy, I don’t think you’re doing that good a job,” Aron laughed. “But that’s why you will always be my best friend. No one could ever take your place.”

“Not even Alex?” Carter spoke.

Aron shook his head.

“Alex is my husband. That’s a different thing.”

“Aren’t spouses supposed to be best friends, too?” Carter asked. “I read it somewhere.”

Aron’s eyes became slightly unfocused.

“I don’t know.”

“Aren’t you friends with Alex?”

“I am, but not by far as I used to be with you. And that is why I hope we can be friends again.”

“Sure,” Carter shrugged like it was a trifle thing.

It wasn’t. He wanted so much more. But he had to settle for this.

“And don’t worry. You’re a handsome fellow,” Aron smiled. “Let’s go on a night out. Alex and I could be your perfect wingmen.”

“Huh? What for?”

“You know. So you can meet girls. Don’t you know that having gay friends gives you points now with girls?” Aron laughed. “C’mon, Carter, you should not keep the single ladies in this city waiting. You know you’re quite a catch. And, if you find the one, and want to settle down, I promise I won’t keep an anti-straight speech at your wedding.”

Aron was willing to laugh it off. To leave it all behind like it had been nothing but a small misunderstanding, nothing more.

“I don’t think I’m the marrying kind,” Carter spoke.

“Ah, you’re just saying. I can barely wait for you to get hitched with a nice girl. Promise me I’ll be the godfather of your first child,” Aron continued, with the same big smile on his face.

“Then I should fill in the same role?” Carter mumbled. “I mean, should I be the godfather of your child, too?”

Aron’s face clouded for a second.

“We can negotiate something,” he chose to joke.

“So, you and Alex are considering the possibility? To expand the family?” Carter needed at it, intrigued by Aron’s reaction.

“Haven’t really talked about it ... Just a sore point with Alex. He jokes saying that it is a great thing he’s gay because that means that he doesn’t have to have children. I told you. He didn’t have a great childhood. But I’ll try to bring him around.”

I’d raise kids with you.

Could you stop it? Man, how thirsty can you be? You guys haven’t even kissed and you’re dreaming of a little girl with black hair and black eyes like Aron’s, and also a boy who will learn how to play basketball before he can walk properly ...

Look who’s the thirsty one now!

My bad, my bad.

“Anyway, it looks like we started getting too serious here,” Aron spoke. “Come for a game and a cold beer on Saturday. I’ll give you the address. You’ve never been, so ...” Aron fiddled with his phone to send the details right away.

I know that house in and out.

Yeah, so? Alex is in charge there. You’ll only be a guest.

Yeah, I know.

“So, it’s a done deal?” Aron smiled at him and got to his feet.

Carter followed.

“Yeah, why not?”

“Great,” Aron nodded and pulled Carter into a hug.

Let’s hug back!

Wouldn’t it be weird?

He closed his arms around Aron and hugged back.

“See you on Saturday,” Aron said with a smile and went out the door.

And Carter stood there for a while until Taz began asking for food, because it was crazy to even think he wanted a family with Aron when he had never thought about having a family of his own at all, until that very moment.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

There was still time until Saturday, and Carter had homework to do. He could hire a private detective to follow Alex around, but, somehow, he felt that would not be a good idea. Alex was a star, not a housewife looking for love outside conjugal bliss. He was a star, and getting other people involved sounded like a recipe for disaster. No, he needed to be the detective and gather evidence against the guy, evidence of the guy's cheating. How he was going to show Aron that evidence was a different matter.

Where should he start? After a short moment of hesitation, he decided to begin by investigating Alex's past a little. Everyone behaved like they had to walk on eggshells when word of the guy's family, especially his mother, came up, that it made him believe that something was not right.

Wait, what was Alex's last name? He had to torture his brain a little to remember. Something with M? Miller? Was that it? He tried that one, but apparently, the name was too common. It was all down to browsing through Alex's older interviews and archives of crappy tabloids.

Apparently, the guy's mother had been the perfect socialite in her young years. A long string of scandalous affairs made up the woman's life, in small sequences of gossip, some of them Carter suspected not completely true. While she had managed to wring dry at least three husbands, she was now apparently retired, or as some people said, she was most probably institutionalized somewhere, away from the maddening crowd.

Okay, so Alex's mother liked to be the center of attention and changed men like socks, or stockings, or whatever. It was clear Alex took after her, he mused, as he watched old photos of the lady showing her in designer clothes, attending all sorts of social functions. Mr. Miller, Alex's father, had been husband number two, and the owner of an impressive wealth, like all the other men in the woman's life. Although the man had apparently made quite a case to take Alex away from her, she had won in court after a very ugly battle.

Yes, Aron was right. Alex had not had a happy childhood. But still, that didn't justify the way Alex was. Carter could feel something was amiss. There was something he was yet to find. Going back in time seemed a tad difficult. Yeah, nothing was lost on the Internet, but the old gossip was buried in heaps of current and ongoing garbage.

He was about to leave it on another day when a title caught his eye. Ah, now he understood the commentary about Alex's mother that seemed to be such a pressure point. It looked like the lady had been close to being convicted for involvement with a high profile prostitution ring. Well, that was bad, he pondered. Where was Alex when all this was happening with his mom? Apparently, he was no longer a kid, at least. The woman had begun to realize that no longer being young and beautiful made a dent in her wealth, so she might have decided to make money using other venues.

From that point, the string of gossip stretched. Some kept saying that Alex might have been involved with his mother in the affair, others said he was a victim, while Alex's lawyers were just trying to convince everyone that Alex had had nothing to do with anything.

"That might explain some things, Taz, right?" he scratched his pet behind his ears.

Had Alex been prostituting himself? For his mom? That was enough to give him the chills. Yet there was something morbid in how Alex desired stuff. Like it was never enough. Maybe the guy really needed to see a therapist. Who knew what he might have witnessed, even without being exploited directly.

All right, he was not going to feel for the man now, right? He had Aron to save. Alex's life was Alex's life. Nothing he could do about that.

Ah, and now he felt miserable. Maybe being married to Aron was the best thing in the douchebag's life.

"Great, so now I feel conflicted," he said out loud.

Next to him, Taz whined cutely.

"What should I do, Taz? Should I tell Aron he's married to a cheater? That's not fair to him, you know? But what if Alex has a chance of becoming a better guy since Aron cares about him? Do I have the right to interfere with that? Aron loves him. Ah, damn it, what a complicated thing."

He needed to sleep on it. Before going any further. There was no wonder everyone pitied Alex. Yet, Carter did not have it in him to overlook the guy's cheating on the grounds that he had had a miserable childhood. That didn't give him the right to ruin other people's lives. Especially Aron's. He needed to find a way to solve this.

“Hey, we should stop meeting like this,” Carter heard someone talking, while he was busy tying one shoelace that had come undone. It was the first day he was trying to let Taz alone at home after he had taken the dog out a bit earlier for his morning walk.

He looked up to see Simon less than one foot away. The guy wore tight fitting clothes like last time, and it was clear that he was well aware of how good he looked. Not that Carter’s was staring. Or comparing. Aron looked better. Yeah, he also had a bigger, nicer bulge in front, he mused, as he eyed Simon’s manhood through his biking shorts. How could Alex choose this dude over Aron? Well, Simon was good-looking, in a twink sort of way, but Aron ... Aron was a real man.

He swallowed hard. Way to start the day at seven o’clock in the morning, thinking about Aron’s ...

“Hey, earth to Carter,” Simon waved in front of him.

“Ah, sorry, just lost a bit in thought,” Carter shook his head.

“May I know what you were thinking about?” Simon smiled.

“Just stuff,” Carter waved while giving Simon a once over, and deciding again that Aron’s body was way yummier and that Alex was blind not to see it.

“Hmm, could that stuff involve me?” Simon asked directly.

“You? No!” Carter protested. “No, certainly not!”

Simon’s eyes grew wide for a second and then he burst into laughter.

“Let me take a wild guess here. Recently out of the closet?” the guy asked.

Carter looked at him and blinked a few times.

“What closet?” he mumbled.

You know what closet.

Damn. Is it written all over me that I like dick now?

Just Aron's dick.

Don't be a dick.

“Okay, sorry, my bad,” Simon raised both hands in surrender. “I just got the feeling that you're staring at me and I thought you might be ...”

“Gay?”

“Yeah,” Simon confirmed. “I usually read these signs right, but ...”

“Don't sweat it,” Carter interrupted quickly.

“Okay, so we're cool?” Simon asked. “And sorry again, my gaydar must be malfunctioning.”

Err, not exactly malfunctioning ...

Are we gay now?

Not the moment for a philosophical discussion about what we are and aren't.

“Told you, no sweat,” Carter insisted.

Wait, there was something to gain from befriending Simon. He had no idea how, but maybe it was the providence that had brought Simon to him. The guy was Alex's secret lover.

Are we going to take advantage of Simon aka puppy eyes now?

We'll figure out a way. We need that evidence, damn it.

Brushing aside any thought about committing a not so moral act by trying to use Simon, he smiled at the guy.

“Do you have time for a cup of coffee? That is if you're no longer in the mood for running,” he offered.

Simon threw him a sideways glance, but then he nodded.

“That would be nice.”

Minutes later, they were seated at a table in a cozy coffee place, where people in sporty getup, like them, mingled with early risers dressed up in dark suits, getting ready for a new day at the office.

“So, Simon, what do you do for a living?” Carter asked.

Wow, you’re playing this like a pro.

Well, it’s Aron’s happiness at stake here. And so far, we’re doing nothing to hurt this guy.

“Ah, I’m working for the Marketing department, at Beauty X.”

“Beauty X? What’s that?”

“A boutique fashion house. It’s not big, but I like it. We do have some important clients and the money is good.”

“Cool,” Carter nodded.

“What about you? And how come you don’t have your dog with you?” it was Simon’s turn to ask.

“I’m my own boss. Freelancing. Programming. Taz is at home.”

You could try to use longer sentences.

It was common for him. He tried to focus on what he needed to learn from this guy, and that left no room for anything else. All right, he needed to handle this carefully.

“And? Any special lady in your life? I don’t see a ring,” Simon proved better at fishing information for the moment.

“Ah, no,” Carter shook his head. “What about you?” he found the perfect opportunity to get close to what he wanted to know.

Simon made a small grimace.

“I ... Well, it’s a bit complicated,” he exhaled.

“Complicated how?” Carter asked.

Simon shook his head.

“The guy I’m seeing ... He’s married,” the guy spoke.

Bingo!

“Ah, by the way, I’m gay,” Simon added with a small apologetic smile.

“I figured that out,” Carter said promptly. “From the gaydar comment and ... earlier,” he gestured vaguely. “But why are you seeing a married guy? A good-looking man like you, you must be getting a lot of attention. Not that I’m interested or anything,” he added quickly.

“I don’t usually talk about this. But since you’re a stranger, I feel like I can confide in you a little.”

“Sure thing, I won’t tell a soul.”

Really? How low can you go?

Shut up. Haven’t you read Machiavelli? The end justifies the means.

Tell that to your immortal soul while it ends up deep frying in Satan’s wok.

We forgot to ask Mark about hell and all that.

“He’s really beautiful,” Simon said dreamily. “And it’s like he knows what I want and ...” he trailed off.

“So he loves you and you love him? Is this how things are?” Carter asked.

“Yeah, I guess,” Simon spoke, although Carter’s questions seemed to sow doubt in his heart, by the way his eyes clouded.

“Then why is he still married? Wait, is he married to a woman or a man? Could it be that he’s still ... in the closet?”

Way to go, playing this like a pro.

“No, he’s out, that’s no issue,” Simon waved. “But I think ... that he might still love his husband. It’s strange because lately ... well, he’s been through many changes, and I don’t know what to think anymore.”

“Changes? Like what?” Carter leaned across the table.

“Well, first he’s involved in some weird accident, and next he’s coming to work ...” Simon trailed off, swallowing his words.

“Do you two work together?”

“Ah, I shouldn’t talk anymore. You’d figure out who he is, and that shouldn’t happen. I might not be the brightest tool in the shed, which means that I should not yap my mouth like this.”

Ah, damn it, he’s shutting down on us! Do something!

“Hey, it’s okay. I’m not interested in learning who this guy is. And if opening up to me, a stranger,” Carter pointed toward himself, “makes you feel a little better, please do.”

Simon smiled, and Carter felt his heart growing a little smaller. He had the distinct sensation that he was doing the wrong thing. But he couldn’t just stop now.

“Well, the thing is he seemed changed. Telling me we should be through, that he’s in love with his husband and all that. But, unlike before his accident, he starts treating me ... how should I say this? Like ...”

Simon seemed to be lost for words. He was obviously trying to work things out in his brain, and it was worse than the worst math problem for him.

“Like he didn’t like you anymore?” Carter tried to supply the missing info that was eluding Simon at the moment.

“No, actually, in a strange way, he made me feel like ... I somehow mattered?” Simon wondered out loud, the last words spoken mostly to himself than to Carter.

“What? Weren’t you important to him before?” Carter asked.

Simon’s beautiful face was now all scrunched up in a frown.

“Yes, I mean ... oh damn. He’s usually like this. Sweet. Pleasant. But demanding,” Simon added after a short second of hesitation. “And, I don’t know, a bit cruel? It’s not like he’s insulting you, but after he leaves your side, you feel like ... you’re not enough?”

There were way too many question marks in Simon's little speech about Alex.

Sweet my ass. Poisonous would be the right word.

"And, after the accident?" Carter tried to help Simon get over his little conundrum about the man he seemed to love.

"Oh, after," Simon's eyes lit up. "He's abrasive and all about not wanting to deal with me anymore."

"So it got worse," Carter nodded, hoping he seemed sympathetic enough.

"Actually, no," Simon smiled. "He's getting me into some crazy ... BDSM stuff," the guy's voice dropped to a whisper. "And it's frigging exciting."

It was Simon's turn to lean over the table, to share his dirty secrets with his new found friend.

"I mean, he still keeps me at arm's length, and that's making me, you know, hot, like super-hot. And he even gives me a cute nickname, and says that I should be modeling because my nose is perfect."

Carter could feel his tongue gluing to his teeth. Talking about the misunderstanding of a century.

"But wait; do you have sex with him all this time?"

You know the answer to that.

Hush, I just cannot make sense of this guy.

"No, but it's like that doesn't matter that much," Simon spoke quickly. "You see, before the accident, he was clearly giving me the impression that I wasn't good enough for him. You know, not beautiful enough."

Carter frowned.

"Then this guy must be a supermodel if he thinks like this."

Simon pursed his lips.

“Ah, well. Anyways, that was then. And now he seems to be back to his old self. And ...”

“Do you have sex with him?”

Straight to the point.

We need to find out, right?

“Yeah,” Simon sighed. “Everything’s back the way it was. But I still feel like I lost something. I miss something from his crazy, so-called amnesic period. Because as he stood there, in his office, and told me he only cared about his husband, and his husband only, I only fell for him harder. And now, that he’s saying again that he would rather be with me than his husband, I don’t know ...”

It appears that we just successfully applied the Socratic Method on poor Simon. He might just realize he’s not that much in love with Alex anymore.

Yes, it appears so.

“I must sound really messed up,” Simon smiled apologetically.

“No, not at all,” Carter murmured.

“Well, but enough about me,” Simon straightened up in his chair. “I confided in you, yet I know nothing about you.”

Carter shrugged.

“Ah, well, that’s because I’m completely dull.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Simon laughed. “You certainly caught my eye when we bumped into each other.”

“Really? I thought you were the one who caught an elbow to the stomach or something,” Carter replied promptly.

Simon laughed louder.

“You’re funny. Are you sure you’re not gay? Not even a little? Sorry, I’m just joking. I seriously thought you were checking me out earlier.”

“I’m just weird like that,” Carter explained.

“I’d rather say interesting,” Simon smiled with his eyes, too.

“Well, I must say thank you for a pleasant conversation, as I need to head back home now,” Carter spoke, as he reached for his wallet to pay for the coffee. “I have to check on my curtains.”

“Your curtains?” Simon asked, a bit confused. “And, please, let this one be my treat. I feel better now than if I saw a therapist.”

“Ah, thanks, you’re cool,” Carter said.

We’re spying on him, and also enjoy coffee on his tab? Clearly, Hell and never-ending fire await. How do you feel about damnation for all eternity?

“And I say my curtains because Taz might feel disgusted with them after watching them for,” he checked his phone, “the last hour or so. I have to see if he took it upon himself to redecorate.”

Simon burst into laughter.

“You’re both handsome and fun. The ladies in this city must be pretty lucky,” Simon said.

Carter smiled, forcing the corners of his mouth to go up, up, up. But apparently, he was doing fine at playing games. Poor Simon wasn’t suspecting a thing.

So, finally, he was entering the dragon’s lair. He hadn’t progressed much on finding how to prove Alex’s cheating, and he hoped he could have an extra word or two with the asshole when Aron wasn’t around. Which seemed like a slim chance, but it was worth considering, anyway.

To his surprise, the one who opened the door was not Aron, but his supermodel slash douchebag husband. Who threw Carter the sweetest smile in the universe as he held the door open wide.

And that wasn’t the weirdest thing. The guy wasn’t talking. He was just staring at Carter as if the guest had just gotten off from a carriage pulled by flying stallions.

“Um, hi?” he managed.

“Hi, Carter,” Alex leaned against the door like he was trying to make love to it.

“Is, um, Aron home? We talked over the phone,” Carter spoke.

He could not just blurt out all that he wanted to say to the guy. Aron could be near and overhear their conversation.

“Yeah, he is,” Alex continued to smile, but this time he bit his bottom lip seductively.

What the f is going on here?

Beats me. Is he on drugs or something?

Frankly, he looks like ...

Like he wants the D.

A, B, C, D, E, F, G ...

“Can you let him know I’m here?” Carter shook his head, in terrible need of getting a hold of himself.

This was not the moment to contemplate why Alex was trying to rub against the door like a cat in heat.

“Sure thing, come on in,” the host finally moved and allowed enough room for the guest to enter the house.

Carter felt a bit of a painful squeeze as he looked around.

Yeap, that’s the sofa where Aron blew your mind ... literally. For the first time.

I like it how you don’t include yourself in this particular memory.

Come on, the only thinking you were doing was with your dick.

“Aron, honey, your friend’s here,” Alex called in a languorous voice that was making Carter’s hair stand on end, for some unexplainable reason.

“Hey, buddy,” Aron came into the living room and opened his arms wide.

Was it really okay to embrace his best friend in front of the guy’s husband? He made an effort to make the hug as manly and friendly-only as much as he could, but he could still feel Aron’s body heat and ...

“Ready to play?” Aron patted him on the back and then grabbed him by one shoulder to steer him toward the backyard.

“Can I come and watch?” Alex chanted, in his annoying, languorous voice, again.

“Sure thing, baby,” Aron replied. “But maybe you should grab your phone. Basketball usually makes you bored.”

“Oh, I’m pretty sure I won’t be bored,” Alex cooed. “After all, I’ll just be watching my husband and his bestie playing. Not some strangers.”

“Okay,” Aron shrugged.

“Is it okay with you, Carter?” Alex asked him.

“Yeah, sure,” Carter replied quickly.

What the hell was going on with the guy? What part was he playing now? The loving husband? Did he want to trick Carter into thinking that he was Aron’s faithful little spouse, so that no word of the cheating was going to start flying around?

That had to be it. There was no other possible explanation.

“Aren’t you guys hot?” Alex asked, only a few minutes into Aron’s and Carter’s game.

Apparently, the guy had chosen to use the opportunity to catch some tan and he was wearing nothing but some skimpy bikini. That had earned him an instant whistle of appreciation from Aron, and pretty much consternation from Carter.

He knew that body well. He wasn’t going to be impressed by some hairless twink. But he was going to be impressed by ...

“Yeah, a little,” Aron replied to his husband’s question and pulled out his t-shirt.

Carter stared at Aron’s perfect pecs. Okay, now how was he supposed to continue playing now? He threw Alex a small murderous look. So that was how the guy wanted to play this game.

He’s good, you gotta admit it. He wants you to lose it in front of Aron and make a fool of yourself.

“You too, Carter,” Alex smiled at him.

“I’m not that hot,” Carter replied.

“Ah, okay,” Alex shrugged, putting on sunglasses and angling his body on his lounge chair like he was at a photo shoot.

Fuck, this was hard. Everywhere he looked, he could only see Aron’s naked ... parts.

C’mon, get a grip of yourself. You’ve seen his naked chest before. It’s not like he’s buck naked.

Yeah, but I can only think of how I want to touch him ... everywhere. Just look at that perfect muscled back, those pecs, those washboard abs ...

Stop it. Concentrate.

“Don’t mind me while I do some gardening,” Alex rose from his chair and picked up the water hose.

Ah, great, Aron scored again, as Carter looked over to see what the hell Alex was doing. The douchebag was certainly working some angle, and he could not deal with so many distractions around.

Like Aron grabbing him and laughing, while basically rubbing his sweaty body against him.

“Rusty, aren’t you?” the guy laughed.

“I’m just going easy on you, that’s all,” Carter scoffed and pushed Aron away playfully.

He almost yelled in shock, as he felt cold water hitting him in the back. Behind him, Alex was laughing. When he turned, he hoped the look in his eyes was conveying all that he wanted to say to that asshole.

“See? Now you have to take off your t-shirt,” Alex said matter-of-factly, and dropped the water hose, seemingly satisfied with the results of his so-called hard work.

“Baby, stop teasing Carter,” Aron reproached his husband, but it was clear that the guy was finding the situation funny. “Don’t worry about him,” he turned towards Carter. “He likes to tease straight people sometimes.”

“Maybe I’ll tease some of all that straightness out of him,” Alex commented from his tanning chair.

Oh, damn. This guy. He was going to make the situation really bad, wasn’t he? He was practically trying to expose Carter to Aron, and all the attraction the guest felt toward his best friend.

You’re damn good, Alex, you’re damn good.

But now he had no choice, but to take off his t-shirt. At least, his shorts had escaped unscathed. He hoped Alex wasn’t going to demand his husband and Carter to play completely naked.

“Okay, happy now?” he threw the wet t-shirt toward Alex who caught it deftly.

Alex stretched Carter’s t-shirt over the back of his lounge chair and returned to his tanning business. Carter could feel like he could not take his eyes off the guy. What the hell was he planning next?

It took him about two seconds to notice that there was a bit too much silence. Alex was staring at him with hooded eyes, and he was staring back, feeling like his enemy was ready to pounce at any moment.

All right, he still needed to focus on the game. He turned toward Aron and noticed how the guy’s eyes were taking him in.

What the fuck? Please tell me my nipples aren’t getting hard. And other things. He’s looking at me! Fuck, he’s looking at me like ...

Think sad thoughts. Dead puppies!

No, what the hell! I might start crying.

“Ahem, let’s play some ball,” he finally managed to find his voice.

Aron shook his head and smiled, a bit too strained.

For the next half an hour, Carter crushed his best friend and the most annoying thing that each time he scored, Alex cheered like the fucking bee queen of all cheerleaders in the world.

“It’s not fair,” Aron complained, but in an amused voice. “You had my handsome husband to cheer for you. It is quite clear that is why you won.”

“Sure thing,” Carter snorted. “I told you I was going easy on you.”

“So you did,” Aron confirmed. “Now let’s get into the house for some cold drinks.”

“I’m not staying long,” Carter said. “I have to go back to Taz, I could book the dog sitter only this long.”

“But you can at least have a cold drink,” Aron insisted.

“Non-alcoholic,” Carter said.

“Of course,” Alex chirped happily and hopped in front of them. “I have this perfect fruity recipe you will love. Guaranteed.”

Does it have arsenic on the list of ingredients?

I bet.

Aron went to grab another t-shirt, leaving Carter in the kitchen alone with the beast.

“So do you still need to find out about David?” Carter asked, hoping his irony was getting through Alex’s act.

Alex chose that very moment to start the blender, so Carter’s words lost in the noise.

“What were you saying?” Alex spoke, as he danced around the kitchen, grabbed a tall glass and poured the contents of the blender carafe in it. Then he pushed it toward Carter.

“About David,” Carter said shortly.

“David?” Alex seemed a little confused. “I’d rather talk about you,” the guy smiled at him, as he leaned against the counter.

“Stop it already,” Carter mumbled.

“With what?” Alex inquired, visibly surprised.

“With this act. Are you trying to expose me as gay in front of your husband? Is this what you’re trying to do? It’s not going to work. Because I’m straight.”

Oh, really?

Alex sighed, a bit dramatically. Then he walked over to Carter and looked him straight in the eyes.

“You weird straight boy,” he whispered with something akin to affection in his voice.

Aron interrupted their weird conversation by walking into the kitchen.

“You really can’t stay?” Aron asked him, sounding hopeful. “Here’s a t-shirt for you. We don’t want you to go back home half naked, because of my husband’s gardening enthusiasm,” he joked.

“Thanks, man,” Carter grabbed the t-shirt and put it on quickly.

He felt naked under the asshole’s scrutinizing eyes. The way Aron was looking at him, too, wasn’t helping either. It was like he had just walked into a totally different dimension.

“You know what, honey?” Alex spoke to his husband. “I’ll go put something on, and then I’ll see Carter to the car since he cannot stay. And you can go grab a shower. I’m sure he’ll come to visit again.”

In case the poison didn’t work the first time?

“Sure thing, baby,” Aron stole Alex a quick kiss.

Okay, so it was a bit awkward with Alex gone. There were so many things he wanted to tell Aron, but not one he could really say.

“Eh, I’m glad you came by. And sorry about Alex. He tends to be a little overbearing sometimes. I hope you didn’t mind his teasing that much.”

“No, not at all,” Carter mumbled.

“But I enjoyed playing with you. Even though you crushed me,” Aron smiled.

“I was just lucky, I guess,” Carter shrugged.

Okay, so the atmosphere was continuing to be a bit awkward. Why was Aron so silent? Why wasn’t he talking about anything?

He risked a look at Aron. The man seemed serious and his dark eyes were hooded, filled with something. He licked his lips and swallowed. To his dismay, Aron did the same thing at the exact same moment.

What is this? What’s going on?

Really, you don’t know? You’re hot for your best friend.

But why is he looking at me like this?

Alex walked into the kitchen, as Carter and Aron were still staring at each other without a word.

“Ready,” the guy called cheerfully and grabbed Carter by the arm. “C’mon, I bet your puppy is waiting for you.”

Ah, so the douchebag wanted him out the door in record time now. That wasn’t a surprise. What was he worried about? That he would find his husband and the guest humping like rabbits on the kitchen floor?

That sounds like a nice scenario.

I told you before. It might be good to dream, but being delusional is just a sign of mental problems.

He mumbled to Aron a lame goodbye and allowed Alex to drag him away.

It was really strange how the guy was leaning onto him, as they crossed the small distance between the door and Carter's car. Why wasn't the guy letting go already?

He struggled to get his car keys out. Extracting himself from Alex's hold, he faced the guy.

"Well, goodbye," he said, although he could have said something more cutting than that.

But, for Aron's sake, he wanted to be civil.

He froze as Alex's hands rose to cup his cheeks and then slowly descended on his neck.

Watch out. He's trying to strangle us.

Let him try.

He steeled himself for the bout of hysteria that was probably going to overcome Alex any minute now. But nothing could prepare him for what happened next.

Alex closed the distance between them even more and standing on his toes, he planted a soft kiss on Carter's mouth.

"Thank you," the guy added cheerfully, getting back on his feet, squaring his shoulders and walking back to the house with a spring in his step.

Alex only stopped for a second before getting into the house, to wave at Carter and smile sweetly.

We should be very scared of this guy.

Yes. Very, very scared.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

“This is, Taz, what is called a stake out,” Carter spoke to his dog, as he sipped from his iced coffee through the straw. “You see,” he explained to his pet, “Alex is bound to make a mistake, sooner or later, and we will be able to expose the douchebag to Aron. We’re making a great team!”

Now, as he stood behind the wheel of his car, talking to his dog, he didn’t feel that convinced that he was making any progress, though. He wasn’t exactly the most skillful detective in the universe, and seeing that he was just a beginner, he probably sucked balls. And so far, he had managed to stalk Alex only to beauty salons and fancy restaurants, where probably the guy was just stuffing his face with diet foods. Not once he had managed all week to catch a glimpse of Alex together with Simon.

He had talked to Aron a few times over the phone, and some of the awkwardness of their last get-together still lingered, for some reason he could not fathom. It was like both of them had something to say, but didn’t have the guts to start speaking already.

He knew what his problem was. He needed to tell Aron his husband was cheating without sounding like a lunatic slash homophobe decided to destroy his best friend’s marriage. Aron had been generous enough to forgive him for his outburst at the wedding, but that didn’t mean he was going to believe him, without any proof.

Still busy with sorting his own thoughts, he almost missed Alex exiting the shop he had entered almost one hour ago.

“Sorry, buddy, I need to go on foot for this one,” Carter told Taz, who seemingly agreed, by the way he looked at his owner, wagging his tail. “Don’t worry, I come back if he goes too far.”

Alex was surely quick on his feet. Carter needed to speed up. Ah, damn, where did he go? Carter felt frustration growing and walked round the corner.

Only to almost bump chests with the guy he was following.

“Are you stalking me, darling?” Alex teased.

“Um, what? Stalking you? What have you been drinking?” Carter spoke quickly. “I was just happening to be here, because I needed to ...”

Great way to box yourself in, Carter. You don't even know the name of the street you're on.

He looked around, hoping for providence to show him a sign. Ah, great, there was some kind of parlor across the street.

“I needed to go there,” he pointed at the business across from them, although he could not make its name from where he was standing.

Alex looked in the direction Carter was pointing, and his eyes turned back to the other right away.

“Really? You need to have your nails done?” Alex cooed, smiling widely.

Carter squinted and tried to read the handwritten name of the business. What the hell was it saying? Was that even English?

“Come on, straight boy, just admit it already,” Alex got closer, well up in his personal space. “You,” he poked Carter’s chest with one finger, “like me.”

“Like you?!”

Wow, he's even more delusional than you!

You think?

“You certainly struggle a lot to get my attention,” Alex said with a small seductive smile. “Even now, following me around ...”

“I told you, I just happen to be here,” Carter said, but his voice sounded as convincing as a male enhancement ad.

“Ah, then you happen to be where I happen to be quite a lot. Yesterday, two days ago, three days ago ...”

“All right,” Carter raised his hands in surrender, trying to ignore Alex’s overpowering cologne. Really, too much of a good thing, even if it was some designer fragrance, was too much. “How could you tell?”

“Darling, I’ve been chased by paparazzi since I was ten. I know when I’m being followed.”

“Oh, shit,” Carter mumbled.

Now that was a bummer.

“So, Carter, how about being a little honest here? And frankly, I thought you were pissed your best friend was gay, when, all this time, you were hot for me?” Alex shook his head slowly. “So the little speech at the wedding was because of me? Ah, how touching! Yet you were rude. You could have just said you liked me, and we could have arranged something,” the guy continued. “Or you were like one of those guys who prefer to admire me from afar?”

“Wow, wow, wow,” Carter managed to cut through the guy’s speech. “I don’t like you. At all.”

“Ah. You sure?” Alex batted his eyelashes and burst into laughter. “Too bad. I was thinking about repaying you.”

“Repaying me? What for? I thought you were ready to strangle me or poison my drink!” Carter exclaimed.

Alex seemed taken aback.

“Why on Earth would I do that?” he asked.

Funny thing, the guy sounded sincere. But with someone like Alex, one could never know.

“You know,” Carter said with a small huff. “Because of the ...”

He wasn’t going to talk about Aron and how they had sex. So he steered the conversation to something that was probably more important to Alex than the fact that his husband had experienced pleasure in the arms of another dude.

“Because of your Instagram account!” he said quickly.

Alex looked at him, his eyes going a bit unfocused, like the guy was trying to compute, but wasn’t managing to get to the end result.

“What about my Instagram account? Are you following me on Insta?” the guy asked, visibly pleased with this conclusion.

“No, I’m not following you on Insta,” Carter replied, now annoyed with the guy’s deflections. “Why would I do that?”

“To stare at pictures of me wearing nothing but underwear?” Alex asked, this time smiling and back to his flirty mode.

“Oh,” Carter said slowly.

Something was amiss all right. Like the guy had suddenly no recollection of the body swap.

“You don’t remember anything about the ...”

Ah, that was definitely it. He was not allowed to say the words out loud. That meant ... that meant ...

“So you chose to remember the accident instead?” he exclaimed.

Alex frowned, and now he was watching Carter a bit warily.

“All right. I have no idea how Aron puts up with you. You’re really, and I mean really strange,” Alex said, taking a small step back. “And what do you mean I chose? Wait, you don’t remember the accident?”

“No, I don’t,” Carter said. “Ah, but you do, so how about you tell me all about it?”

Alex seemed to ponder for a bit.

“I thought it was a ruse. That you’re just pretending you don’t remember about what happened. That you don’t want Aron to ... you know,” Alex said, pursing his lips.

“No, I don’t know,” Carter glared. “But I didn’t push you,” he added quickly.

Alex took another step back, and now he was looking at Carter with a mix of pity and disdain in his beautiful green eyes.

“You don’t have a lot of money, do you?”

Carter snorted.

“What’s that have to do with anything?”

Alex sighed, and then he smiled, but this time it was clear that the smile was directed at himself.

“Then it’s all for the best,” he grinned. “Stop stalking me, you creep,” he added cheerfully, but without the edge needed for that to be an insult.

“Wait, tell me about the accident,” Carter tried to prevent Alex from walking away.

“Nope. Not telling,” Alex said with satisfaction. “Ah, if you only had money,” he said with a bit of regret, as he touched Carter’s chest in passing. “You’re passably cute. But sorry, I have standards,” he shrugged.

“Come on, you have to tell me,” Carter began walking side by side with Alex.

“No, I don’t,” Alex said. “As far as everyone knows, I don’t remember squat either. Oh, I love me some attention,” the guy added. “It’s just so good to be back in the saddle. So no detours for me, darling, sorry about that.”

“You keep saying sorry, but you’re clearly not sorry,” Carter said through his teeth.

“Of course I’m not,” Alex shrugged. “Life’s too short to spend it being sorry. And really, stop walking next to me. Someone might snap a picture and seriously, the 90s called, they need their clothes back. Or do you still have them since that time? Passed on to you by your papa, or something?”

“My clothes are new ... enough,” Carter said slowly, unsure of how a t-shirt and jeans could be considered as belonging to a different century.

“Whatever, now shoo where you have to be, and somewhere that I’m not. I’m not in the mood for charity cases, and you’re way too difficult to deal with.”

“I really have no idea what the hell you are talking about,” Carter insisted. “And you say I’m the creepy one.”

“Seriously, Carter, stop following me. I don’t want to become unfashionable by association. And if you don’t, I’m telling Aron you’re bothering me,” Alex said, now looking a bit annoyed and distressed.

Okay, the guy knew how to play his hand. Carter had to give it to him. So he needed to stay put for now.

“All right, don’t get your panties in a twist,” he mumbled.

Alex sped up and looked over his shoulder one more time at Carter before waving for a cab, like he was still trying to make sense of something. The look the guy gave him was giving him the shivers a bit. Now what the hell had happened during that accident?

And he had no means to stalk Alex without being seen. The guy had many talents, apparently, and that is why he was probably not so easy to get caught with his lover’s dick in his ass. Carter needed to rethink his strategy.

What was Alex playing at? Carter stared confused at the TV screen for a while, even after turning off the device. The last interview the guy gave had been quite a shock, and not only for the audience, but also for Carter who could not give a damn about celebrities’ latest gossip. He had caught that by complete accident, as he was browsing through the channels for lack of something better to do.

“We decided to separate for a little while,” Alex said, somewhat with self-pity, while the host was staring at him a bit surprised.

“Just a few weeks ago, you stood here, on this very spot,” the host insisted, “and told me how much in love you are with your husband. What could go wrong so badly in such a short time?”

Carter remembered the host well, from the show he had attended that time. He also remembered what he had said. And how true the words had sounded.

“People change,” Alex replied, shaking his head apologetically. “Sometimes, you know, even too much love can be a bad thing. You can feel, you know, suffocated.”

“Was Aron suffocating you?” the host didn’t let go.

An untrained eye could have sworn Alex was a victim in all this. It was like the guy was one moment away from bursting into very emotional tears.

And now Carter had no idea what to do. Was Aron alone? Was he upset? Pissed? Angry? Desperate? Sad? He needed to find out. Where was the damn phone?

The ringtone signaled that the phone was right there, on the coffee table. Carter grabbed it, decided to finish fast the conversation with whoever was at the other end so he could call Aron.

“Can I come around?” Aron’s voice came through, a bit muffled by what seemed to be the sound of a busy street.

“Sure thing,” Carter agreed, taking a quick look around, to see if the house was clean enough.

Taz was already fed and asleep, and supposedly, there was nothing that could interrupt them.

No other words were needed. He knew Aron in distress. The guy wasn’t exactly a man of many words. And now he needed Carter, his best friend.

But what the hell was he going to say? How was he going to stave off all that hurt, hurt that he was going to read in Aron’s deep dark eyes, the moment the guy was going to walk through that door?

He had no idea how, but it was sure as hell that he wanted to do everything he could and couldn’t so that he would give his best friend what he needed in such dire times.

“So, I suppose you saw it,” Aron spoke gloomily, while fiddling with the glass Carter had filled to the brim with the strongest booze he could find around the house.

“Yeah,” Carter swallowed hard. “What ... what happened? You two seemed ... happy.”

It was hard to speak. It hurt to speak. But now was not the moment to focus on his own feelings. Aron was hurting much more.

“Ah, for so long,” Aron sighed, “I’ve just felt like living with Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Apparently, the bad guy is winning. For now. And only a few weeks back, we seemed to be well on the mend.”

“What did you two fight about?” Carter continued, carefully.

“What didn’t we fight about?” Aron said, his voice edging on sorrow. “Can you believe that we haven’t even had proper sex for weeks now? Ever since you woke up from that coma ... Ah, I thought I’d never be able to say I’m sick of oral, but ... Sorry, I’m not supposed to get into so much detail with my straight best friend.”

Carter could feel his heart clenching painfully in his chest and he touched Aron’s hand slowly.

“I’m ... trying, you know?” his friend spoke again. “To be a good husband. But I guess that, somehow, I’m still doing something wrong. Alex has, sometimes, the most extravagant requests and I try ...”

“Like expensive cars?” Carter could not help it.

Aron shrugged.

“If only. He’s ... very challenging, emotionally speaking. He needs to be loved, but he doesn’t want to be hugged. He wants to be called cute nicknames, but he doesn’t want to walk hand in hand in the park. He ...” Aron stopped with a small huff. “And I’m just ... trying to make sense of everything. And I know that, somehow, it’s still my fault.”

Carter could not stand this. Not seeing his best friend beating himself up over some fashion addict with a penchant for torturing every living soul in his path.

“It’s not your fault,” he said with determination, his hands curling into fists, pressed against his thighs.

“Thanks, buddy,” Aron took a sip of the strong drink and grimaced, but in a way that told Carter he was actually enjoying the burn in his throat. “I appreciate it. But

that still doesn't change anything. And I know that it must be my fault. Most of the time, he seems ... just the guy I fell in love with, but then ..."

"Stop it," Carter said, his voice abrasive and on the point of breaking.

"I've always been perfect to you, haven't I?" Aron chuckled. "You used to tell me that. I did feel flattered. Who doesn't want to hear that? But being the perfect friend does not equal being the perfect husband. And I have a lot of work to do for that."

"No," Carter said, more sharply this time. "It's not you."

It's Alex. Aka the douchebag.

You can't tell him that. He'll only shut down on you.

"You are perfect," he added.

Aron exhaled and smiled fondly.

"Eh, I suppose I can let you tell me that a few more times. I definitely need the encouragement. And I need to find a way to get Alex back and ..."

No, no, no, no, no! Do something! Now!

What the hell should I do?

Do it! Stop dallying! He's going to say next that he needs to beg that asshole to take him back! Don't allow that! Shut him up!

"Ah, um, ah," he barely managed.

"Are you okay, buddy?" Aron asked, taken aback by his friend's distress. "So sorry. I shouldn't burden you with my problems, I should just head back and ..."

Carter knew what he had to do, with so much clarity that for a split of a second, he wondered how come he hadn't thought about it. He moved fast, closing the distance between them, grabbing Aron by the shoulders and ...

Kissing him.

Aron's mouth tasted of home. Of strong booze, too, but most than anything, of home. He angled his head, brushing his lips against the other's, sticking out his tongue and licking the beautiful full lips gently.

And that was only meant to make him thirstier, because it was the only right thing right now that he could do, so he pressed more, wanting Aron to open his mouth and kiss him back.

But Aron pulled away. Not brusquely, not in shock, but gently and firmly.

"You're trying to comfort me, right?" he said slowly, putting one hand on Carter's shoulder.

"I'm trying to kiss you," Carter shook his head and leaned in for another kiss.

"Wait," Aron mumbled, the squeeze on Carter's shoulder increasing.

"No," Carter said stubbornly and pressed his lips against Aron's once again.

I'm so done waiting.

Aron's mouth was hesitant and opened slowly, allowing the kiss, yet still not an active participant. Carter moved to straddle Aron's lap, trying hard not to break the connection. He must have looked silly, struggling to put one leg over Aron's thighs.

But it was Aron who helped him get into position, so to speak, and soon, two strong hands were on his back, and one very determined tongue, this time around, was in his mouth.

Ah, damn, he loved Aron's kisses. But if you could still recall, when he had worn Alex's fashion model body, Aron had been more restrained, maybe trying to be a bit gentler, probably so that he didn't spook his husband with his unhinged desire.

There was nothing of that restraint left, it seemed, and this time around, Aron's want was honest to the core.

Carter loved it. Aron was strong, and Carter could feel that strength by the way the man made aggressive love to his mouth, reaching inside deep, making sure Carter was opening his mouth wide to take him in.

He had to admit that he had never thought about why kissing was sometimes called ‘sucking faces’. Now he knew. Because it was like the two of them were having oral sex, with no dick involved, and it was fucking heaven.

Aron was the first to stop, drawing just a fraction of an inch back, and trying to look into Carter’s eyes.

“Oh god,” he murmured. “What’s this? I mean, it’s not like I’m complaining ...”

“Hush,” Carter put his hand over Aron’s mouth gently. “It’s ... it’s ... um, just me experimenting.”

Experimenting to be with you.

Aron’s eyes grew wide. Slowly, he put one hand over Carter’s wrist and pulled it down, to release his mouth.

“Experimenting? How?”

“Exploring ... my sexuality,” Carter said slowly, measuring every word, like he was quoting some magazine.

Are you trying to kill the mood here? Just tell him.

No, no, no, I can’t. He won’t believe me, he ...

“Should I be glad to be of help here?” Aron chuckled, as his hands moved lower and grabbed hard Carter’s ass. “Fuck,” he whispered.

“Yeah, be glad,” Carter whispered and pulled Aron in for another kiss.

But the guy moved his head enough to avoid him.

“Wait, wait, I mean, Carter, this is ...”

“Just sex,” Carter interrupted. “It’s just sex, nothing else. You need it. I need ...”

You.

“... it.”

“I’ve never cheated on my husband until now,” Aron spoke, his voice low and strained. “And maybe I’ve been tempted, yes. But no one has managed to tempt me like this before. Do you have any idea ...” the man’s voice choked.

“I do,” Carter said. “I frigging do.”

Now wasn’t the time for words. Yet Aron had this weird idea that they should talk.

“Carter, I ... You do realize that I might just take everything you offer right now. I am selfish enough to do it.”

“So do it,” Carter whispered, his lips hovering close to Aron’s.

“But what is it? What are you offering?” Aron insisted, his hands totally disjointed from his hesitant voice, groping Carter’s ass like they were trying to rip the jeans and get inside.

“Everything you want,” Carter cut him off and this time, ground his crotch hard against Aron’s taut body.

“Are you sure?” Aron’s voice became a tad urgent and heavy. “I ... This moment, right now, I ...”

“Fuck me,” Carter voiced what Aron didn’t have the strength to say. “Fuck me like there’s no one else.”

That seemed to trigger something inside Aron, because the guy flipped Carter quickly, pushing him into the sofa. Now they weren’t just sucking faces, their bodies were trying to weld together.

And Carter could feel himself tumbling down, but he knew he wasn’t going to fall. Because Aron’s strong hands were holding him, and, if that was the case, then he was safe.

“Wait,” it was Carter’s turn to stop.

Aron obeyed right away, but his body was tense.

“Taz,” Carter explained.

“He’s a dog,” Aron smiled.

“Yeah, but he’s still a kid. He’s not supposed to ...”

See his parents having sex.

Aron moved away, and Carter hurried to take a very sleepy Taz along with his dog bed to move him to the bedroom.

“You’re in luck, buddy. You can use the big bed, if you want,” he whispered into the dog’s fluffy ear.

Taz couldn’t care less, apparently, just yawning and trying to lick Carter’s face. Carter dodged that just in time.

He placed the dog bed and its fluffy inhabitant by the bed and closed the door carefully behind him. Then he risked a look at Aron. The man was watching him with a strange smile on his face.

“Sorry, I had to. This is going to be so X-rated,” he explained.

Aron wasn’t talking, he was just continuing to stare and stare.

“Oh, fuck, I ruined the mood, didn’t I?” Carter mumbled, and leaned against the wall.

There was something amazing in how Aron moved as he stood up and walked over to Carter. Like a hunter approaching his unaware prey. Only that Carter was aware. Oh, he was very much aware. Of how his knees were turning into jelly. Of how his pants were too damn tight. Of how his heart was beating wildly in his chest.

And, more than anything, of Aron, of how the man used one hand to place it gently over Carter’s crotch, filling with the hardness found there.

“Is this for me?” Aron asked slowly, while pressing his forehead against Carter’s.

“Yes,” Carter whispered.

Everything. Everything you want.

Aron’s fingers were nimble, not struggling at all with the fly, knowing their way around as if they were at home. Carter exhaled, willing to accept absolutely everything because he needed Aron’s hand on him, touching and exploring him.

Aron gave Carter's cock a small friendly tug, and then his hand sneaked lower, cupping the balls now hanging over the jeans.

"Now, tell me, Carter, how exactly do you want to explore this sexuality of yours?" Aron asked, now his nose rubbing gently against Carter's, his lips searching for the other's.

Cannot compute! Cannot compute! What does this mean?

"Let me put it simple, 'cause I can hear your gears turning on empty," Aron chuckled. "Do you want to get fucked? Or do you want to fuck me?"

"Um, ah, oh, um, both," Carter said, stumbling on his own words.

"Wow, you're doing nothing by half," Aron laughed. "So, condoms? Lube?"

"No," Carter said quickly.

"No?" Aron asked, surprised.

"No condoms, I didn't fuck in years and just got out of the hospital with a perfect record," he said quickly. "I'm sure you don't have a problem, either."

Like in really, really knowing for sure.

Aron gulped.

"Ah, fuck, Carter, you want me to go bareback with you?" he whispered. "That's pretty damn hot. But lube, that's needed, friend."

Friend?

Okay, we are ... Friends.

"Let me search for something," Carter moved away reluctantly.

He hurried to the bathroom, managing to knock over the shampoo bottle and a few other things that, at the moment, had no name, because his mind was going in circles. Lube, lube, lube.

Grabbing some lotion bottle that had to do the trick, he hurried just as fast back to the room.

“Is this good enough?” he pointed at the bottle.

Aron was quick to get to him, taking the bottle from his hand.

“It will have to do,” the man said, without a trace of hesitation.

But Aron just threw the bottle on the sofa and cupped Carter’s cheeks gently.

“Fuck, you have no idea what you’re doing to me,” he murmured and kissed Carter so deeply and thoroughly that Carter could swear the room was spinning. “I want to see you naked.”

Was there a record for undressing? Carter was sure he didn’t care about no Guinness prizes, but he was willing to be number one. It was a good thing that Aron was helping him, pulling him out of his t-shirt and jeans, with expert moves.

“You, you too,” Carter mumbled, pressing his hands over Aron’s perfect pecs, so easy to touch through the tight fitting t-shirt the guy was wearing.

He could not wait to touch Aron everywhere. With a short laugh, Aron pushed him to sit on a sofa, while he pulled his t-shirt over his head, making his beautiful muscles ripple in the process, and then continued with his slacks, so that he could remain completely naked, just like Carter.

Carter could swear his mind was completely blank. His neurons were learning that there was nothing else on the face of the earth except for one amazing man who was revealing his naked body in all its glory, in front of his eyes.

“Wow,” he whispered and gulped loudly, earning a small chuckle from Aron.

“I have no idea what prompted this, but ...” Aron spoke.

“But you have no right to speak,” Carter said simply and slid on the floor, to his knees, planting his hands firmly on Aron’s hips, leveling on the guy’s cock which he kissed gently first, only to hungrily capture it into his mouth one moment later.

Aron made a small surprised sound.

“I thought I was supposed to show you the ropes in this little adventure of yours,” the man said softly. “But I guess that’s still you wanting to comfort me, so I’ll take it.”

This has nothing to do with comforting. Comforting is offering someone a cup of hot chocolate.

Shut up, I'm concentrating here.

His brain could take a break once in a while, and it felt amazing to lose all rational thought, when all he could feel was the taste of his best friend's cock on his tongue. He still needed to use one hand to steer the hard cock toward his mouth, because it clearly wanted nothing but to go up, up, up.

The struggle was nice, despite the resistance. Helping himself with the hand, he began pumping Aron's cock in and out of his mouth. He had yet to uncover the secrets of proper deepthroating, but he was hoping that his enthusiasm was going to compensate for his lack of skill.

By the way Aron's cock was throbbing in his mouth, and the small, almost pained, moans Aron was making, he could tell he was on the right path.

"I don't want to come in your mouth," Aron whispered.

Carter drew back and looked up at his friend, a bit dizzy. If he was going to stare too much, he was bound to lose his mind. Aron was beautiful like a Greek statue, perfect muscles everywhere, now covered by a thin film of sweat. He only needed to press his nose against the man's groin and inhale the musky smell. He was probably going to go crazy for real, but who cared?

"You offered, so I want to fuck you," Aron explained, and his voice was tender, caressing Carter everywhere, raising goose bumps all over.

"Sure," Carter mumbled, and he let himself helped to his feet by Aron.

There was a storm of emotions in the dark eyes as they searched for his.

"Please tell me this is not a mistake," Aron spoke.

"It's not," Carter shook his head. "It's not."

It's probably the only right thing I've done in forever.

Aron pushed him gently, and soon they were aligned head to toes, on the sofa which Carter briefly wondered if it was going to escape the onslaught in one piece.

He wanted Aron to fuck him so hard that that lousy furniture was going to be only good enough for firewood.

“Let me get you ready first,” Aron kissed him deeply, reluctantly letting go, as if he was afraid Carter was just going to take everything back and kick him out the door.

Ah, damn, how much he had missed this. Aron’s fingers were gentle, but determined, as they began to probe him in all the right places, slick with lotion. There was a small shiver, growing inside him, and he could feel his ass clamping down on Aron’s fingers, despite the man’s cooed encouragements to relax.

“You’re so tight, you’re going to squeeze me so hard,” Aron murmured.

Carter was pretty certain he was far from ready for penetration, but he could swear he was going to come if Aron was to continue like that.

“Fuck me,” he demanded, closing his eyes.

“Hey, I should get you a little bit more adjusted,” Aron chided him with affection.

“No, I’m gonna come and I wanna come on your dick, not like this,” Carter whispered hurriedly.

“You sure are hot as hell for a guy just experimenting,” Aron joked. “Are you sure you don’t have already the conclusion for this experiment of yours?”

Even in the heat of the moment, Aron was trying to find an explanation. Carter knew he had to do something.

“I just thought about it. I tried before ... with a dildo.”

Now that’s not exactly a cute name for Aron’s cock, because that’s the only thing that’s been in there, and you know it.

It’s a lie anyway, stop bothering me.

“Wow,” Aron smiled. “Should I ... then?”

“Yeah, hurry,” Carter squirmed and Aron placed himself at the right angle.

Oh, fuck. His mind froze for a second. Well, his actual ass was an actual virgin. If only he had given in to that girlfriend and her strap-on. But he had only had sex with Aron in Alex's body, so this body, the original, was completely unaware of the mechanics of anal sex.

"Ah, you're damn big," he murmured.

"I know," Aron said in a dejected voice.

"Don't stop. It should work, right?"

Okay, so he needed to focus on the idea that he wasn't been skewered on a ten foot pole and it was just Aron's cock.

Just. Right. Funny. Not.

"Okay, let me take you really slow here," Aron murmured. "Could you help me, holding your legs up?"

Carter was no ballet practitioner, like Alex, but he could pull his legs up. And he used his hands to pull his ass open, too, to give Aron easy access. Aron rubbed the head of his impressive member against his opening, murmuring something again on the lines of 'fucking tight', and trying to be as gentle as possible.

All right, so the first inches were a bit insanely difficult, but he could feel himself opening up. His erection had half died, but he wasn't upset over it. Aron pulled away, to add more of the so called lube they were using, and this time, he managed to get more inside Carter's ass.

"Ah, damn," he whispered.

"Still hurts like hell, right?" Aron said softly.

"Nah, it's actually ... Just give me a little more," he encouraged his friend.

Aron obeyed and slowly, he began moving his hips, getting Carter to open more and more. The discomfort was slowly giving way to a different sensation. Almost pleasant.

"It's working," he murmured, and used one hand to pull Aron in for a kiss.

It was only this much the guy could take it, apparently, because, this time, he slid inside, making Carter's breath hitch.

"Ah, sorry," Aron murmured against Carter's lips. "Got a bit carried away. You're so damn hot."

"Don't bother, just go at it," Carter encouraged.

It was a certain type of satisfaction, to feel Aron fully seated inside him, and it was inside his body, not one he borrowed by accident. It definitely felt different, deeper in a way, and he wanted it all.

"Fuck me, Aron," he whispered and Aron moved again, this time with purpose and Carter exhaled, along with a curse.

And this time, the real thing began. The one where they moved together like they were made for each other, as Carter lowered his legs just so he could trap Aron inside him and hold him close, while their mouths were busy devouring one another.

"Fuck, this is amazing," Aron murmured in one of the short breaks they had to take to breathe. "Carter, I ..."

"Shut up and fuck me harder," Carter shut him up again, and moved his hips enough to make his intentions know.

Aron was big, and it still felt like there was something much bigger there, but the way the guy knew how to angle his thrusts was making everything save for pleasure die away.

"Oh, fuck, oh, yes," Carter mumbled incoherently.

They were a mess of limbs and tongues and touches, and soon, Carter felt he could not control anything anymore. Aron moved away just a bit, to stand back on his calves, and pulled Carter's body to him, over and over again.

There were no more words needed. Carter covered his cock with one hand, and just two strokes were enough.

“Fucking hot,” he heard Aron speaking through like through a haze and his erratic moans of climax.

Aron began moving faster, more frantic, his breath rhythmic, like a chant.

“Fuck, Carter, I ...”

Carter pulled Aron close and sealed their lips together. He could feel Aron’s cock pulsing inside him, and the guy letting go, over and over again.

They stood there, their sweat and Carter’s cum mixing between them.

“Oh god,” Aron mumbled, as he finally let his cock slide out of Carter’s well used hole. “That was incredible.”

“Yeah,” Carter spoke, too, his voice ragged and too loud in his own ears. “But I might call rain check on me fucking you. I’m not sure I can feel half of my body.”

Aron laughed wholeheartedly.

“Rain check? Do you intend to do this again? With me?”

The words were spoken casually, but Aron’s eyes were intense, trained on him. Carter closed his eyes. He needed a moment, no, two, no, three, to think this through.

“It’s strange,” Aron started, with a small sigh, as he straightened himself up into a sitting position.

“What?” Carter mumbled.

They were both naked, and they had just had sex, but there was no awkwardness between them. Even the moments of silence stretched like a warm blanket.

“I feel not one ounce of guilt over what we just did,” Aron said simply, his eyes a bit unfocused, and searching for something that must have been floating right in front of his eyes. “And I don’t find it in me to feel guilty over not feeling guilty, either.”

Carter pushed himself up to sit by his friend, and winced at the discomfort he could feel at his backside. Yeah, he was going to feel it; that was for sure. It had been a lie that he couldn't feel half his body.

"This, us, what is it?" Aron questioned, and this time, he turned to look at Carter, with something akin to hope in his dark eyes.

What? What's the right answer?

His mind was frantic, trying to decide on something that wasn't going to sound shocking, desperate, or downright outrageous.

"We're, um, fuck buddies?" Carter replied, answering with another question.

Aron frowned for a split of a second, but then the lines of his face, the worried wrinkles softened.

"We are?"

Carter nodded vehemently.

"Yeah, we are."

"All right, buddy," Aron smiled and began caressing one of Carter's knees with his rough hand. "Then what should I do now?"

What was with Aron and so many questions? Carter wasn't good at that. He always worried about not having the right answer at hand.

"What do you want to do?" he mumbled.

Aron seemed a bit taken aback, but he answered right away.

"I should get going, I guess," he exhaled.

Carter put one hand on Aron's arm to stop him, as if the guy was ready to just up and leave, in nothing but his birthday suit.

"Take a shower first, at least," he spoke.

"That'll do," Aron agreed. "But just give me a moment to really catch my breath," he joked.

Carter nodded.

“You wanted to talk?” he asked in a meek voice.

Aron was not feeling guilty, but he kind of felt. His best friend had come to talk about his failing marriage, and he had just hurried to offer sex. There was something wrong with his head, clearly.

“About Alex,” he added, when Aron remained silent.

“Now you’re ruining the mood,” Aron joked.

But his shoulders slumped.

“What can I tell you? I should just go ahead and admit that I made a mistake, but ...”

“What mistake?” Carter’s heart grew small.

Aron took one deep breath, like he was getting ready to jump into freezing water.

“I made a mistake marrying Alex. There, I said it. For so long I tried to convince myself I love him more than anything, and yet, I cannot deny that suddenly, this separation seems ... just the right thing. In years. Like I see everything clear. Like I’m waking up from a dream, or, I don’t know, a nightmare. Like I can finally breathe.”

Carter’s heart was getting back to normal. And it was filling with fondness, because if there was one thing that Aron rarely did was to admit making a mistake. Not about little things, not about every day stuff, but sometimes, he was getting so invested into something, too impetuous and stubborn, that no one could convince him otherwise.

“I’m only saying this for your ears only. I could not live to admit it in front of my parents,” Aron added.

“It’s cool. I’m not going to tell on you,” Carter spoke.

“Of course you won’t,” Aron chuckled. “You’re my best friend, right?”

Carter knew well the answer to that question.

“Yeah, of course I am,” he replied.

“My mom told me,” Aron said, “Aron, it’s not your job to repair a broken man. But I got upset with her, told her that she could not see what I see in him, and I guess ... she was right, after all.”

“And the more they told you ‘no’, the more you went at it, I bet,” Carter snickered.

“Yeah, you know me,” Aron laughed, but this time, in self-deprecation.

“Hey, do you remember that kitten? The one we buried in the backyard, at your folks?” Carter began speaking. “You were so determined that we were going to heal her.”

“Yeah, and we tried our hand at healing all right,” Aron snorted. “My mom was trying to tell me that the kitten couldn’t survive, because she was too little, and she needed her cat mom, but I wouldn’t listen, and ...”

“And we ran away at my place with her,” Carter said, to complete his friend’s unfinished sentences. “Trying to feed her milk, keeping her warm.”

“But she did die,” Aron said mournfully.

“And we both went crying to your mom,” Carter sighed. “And your dad grabbed a shovel and went to make a small hole in the ground, right under that maple tree.”

“And you sent her away with the strangest and the most beautiful eulogy I have ever heard in my life,” Aron began laughing, the sound laced with a smidge of bitterness, but still heartfelt. “Even mom and dad were wiping tears from their eyes.”

Carter began laughing, too.

“Why the hell are we laughing? It is a sad memory,” Aron was the first to stop, covering his eyes and wiping them discreetly.

Carter could feel his eyes were wet, too. They were just going slightly mad, that was for sure. Maybe that was why it was called mind blowing sex. They had just had it, so now they weren’t in their right minds anymore.

“I’ll go take that shower,” Aron stood up.

There was so much more they needed to tell each other. But Carter could feel his heart growing small again.

“I guess I should now introduce you to the lifestyle, right?” Aron spoke, his hand on the door handle.

Carter looked at his best friend, trying to figure out what Aron wanted to say.

“Seeing that you’ve been introduced to the delights of gay sex,” Aron added with a small smile. “And that you consider that it wasn’t just a one-time thing ... We’re fuck buddies now, right?”

There was something in the way Aron looked at him, while speaking the words. Like he could barely wait to hear what Carter was going to say.

“Yeah, sure,” he replied.

Aron’s face fell a little, but the man shook his head.

“I’ll give you a call,” Aron winked at him, his face relaxed once more.

Carter stood in front of the door, for a few minutes, still not making sense of everything. There was something he was missing there. How come Aron wasn’t surprised with that kind of proposition?

Fuck buddies? Really? Couldn’t you have just said what you really wanted to?

I panicked, okay? What if he’s not ready? He’s not even divorced for crying out loud! Plus, until yesterday, I was a homophobe! Wouldn’t that be an incredible leap of faith?

Tell yourself that again. You seemed to have no hesitation jumping on his dick.

Yeah, but this ... This is important.

The most important things of all. He couldn’t just play it wrong.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

He was still pondering over how the hell he had managed to get Aron to have sex with him so quickly when his phone started ringing. This time, he didn't hurry to get it. Yeah, he was going to be a little sore, that was for sure.

But he could barely stop a small surprised gasp when he saw the caller.

"Hi," Aron's warm voice came through from the other side.

"Hey, did you forget your keys?" Carter mumbled and looked around. "I guess you'll have to come back and find them, because I don't see them ..."

Aron's low chuckle made the words die on his lips. Why was everything Aron did so ... Like it was making him ... Like ...

"I just wanted to ask you how you're feeling," Aron said.

"We barely said goodbye 5 minutes ago," Carter replied, confused.

"Ah, well, if you really want me to say it," Aron exhaled. "How's your ass?"

"Ah, my ass," Carter almost exclaimed. "Well, I guess I'll have to use some pillows or something, later, not like right now, but all in all, I suppose that ..."

I want seconds!

Are you insane?

What, you know that's true.

"I'm glad to hear you're fine, then," Aron said in what appeared to be good humor.

Something of that attitude didn't sit well with Carter, though. There was something suspicious about it. He just couldn't tell why, seeing that he usually knew everything Aron was thinking. Well, except for the fact that the man liked guys, but well, that was in the past, and ...

"I've been thinking," Aron continued, breaking the silence. "I want to take you out on Saturday night. Somewhere nice. Where you can stretch your wings a little."

"You've been thinking? When did you have time for that?" Carter questioned.

“From the moment I left you until now,” came the prompt reply.

“Ah, okay,” Carter agreed to the explanation. “But what wings?”

Aren't you glad he wants to hang out? What's with 21 questions?

Shut up, I can tell something's off.

Of course something's off. He's going through a break up.

His brain was good at offering him solutions when he had none. Which sounded really weird even to him, seeing that his brain was his, anyway.

“Well, I suppose the chick should try to see how's the world outside the coop,” Aron chuckled.

“Chick? Coop?” Carter mumbled.

Other words that start with C? Come on, he's trying to get you to hang out, and you're being a slowpoke.

“Ah, everything needs to be clear with you, right?” Aron laughed. “Okay, since you're not one for subtleties, and I seem to suck at it, too, here's what I have in mind. Let's hang out at a gay club on Saturday night. I suppose that you would like to see how the other side of the universe is living. Since you've been so curious lately,” the man added with that low, sexy chuckle of his that was making Carter's hair rise on end, like he was tickled by a thousand feathers.

“A gay club? Hmm, okay, I guess,” Carter chose to leave other questions for the next time he was going to see Aron. “Wait, I can't.”

“Why?” Aron asked, and this time he sounded more serious.

“I cannot leave Taz alone for so many hours. And I don't know what dog sitters will be willing to work late while I go shake it ... on the dance floor or something. I mean, I will try to arrange something, but I don't want to ruin your night and ...”

“It's cool. Let's leave Taz with my folks,” Aron said promptly.

“Your folks? But he's a dog, and maybe your mom and dad won't like him ...” Carter trailed off.

No, Aron's parents were going to love Taz. He was certain of it. But to impose like this?

"Stop finding excuses. Mom and dad will love Taz. And they won't be bothered by having him over. Come on, I know you must be a very doting dog father, but you should let Taz see other people. Golden retrievers like it best when there's a full house."

Carter could feel a small short circuit right through his usually overactive brain.

"How do you know that?" he almost whispered, his voice stumbling on his own words, like a poorly maintained mechanism.

"I've read about it," Aron said promptly. "Are you sure you're okay? Please tell me I'm not scaring you off right now."

And now his best friend sounded a bit worried.

"No, no, it's nothing," he hurried to say.

"Good, for a second there I feared I broke you. You know, maybe I fucked your brains out or something," Aron snickered, like a schoolboy bent on doing something naughty during study hours.

"Look who thinks he's funny," Carter commented dryly. "Just you wait until I grab hold of your ass and I give you the D. We'll see who'd be laughing then!" he promised.

"Ah, really? I'll hold you to that," Aron said cheerfully. "I'll call you with the details."

Carter could swear he had just been tricked into something somehow. But even if it was really irking him to admit to something he was not completely in control, it still felt fine. Yes, definitely. It felt fine as fuck.

What was there to do while waiting for Aron to call? The man was probably having a thousand other things on his mind, and he wasn't going to think of nothing else but calling Carter.

He looked at the clock, an old piece of garbage he had gotten from a yard sale a few years back. It was supposed to look like a nautical anchor and other maritime symbols, but the thing was so rusty that one could not really tell what it was anymore. Truth be told, the thing had never looked better than this, and, at the time of the purchase, Carter had thought that the thing was going to look quaint and interesting. It was just an old piece of junk, though.

So, in the meantime, since there was nothing he would rather do, he decided to try looking into Alex's social media for a bit. He didn't care about following the guy on Instagram, but maybe clues of the guy's indiscretions could be found there somehow.

After half an hour of reading saccharine compliments and dumb questions from people who seemed to be just as shallow as the subject of their misplaced affections, Carter was bored out of his mind. Maybe he should look into Simon's social media, for a change? It was clear that the two clandestine lovers were not that stupid to let anything transpire, at least not from Alex's part of things.

Simon did have the usual social media accounts, but nothing seemed to stand out on his feed, either.

Except, and now Carter looked closely, there was one strange post from Simon.

So happy. Not long until I'll be with the guy I love. #personal #relationshipgoals

Oh, so Alex was ready to take the next step and file for divorce? Carter pondered while looking at Simon's post. Maybe it was all for the better. It looked like Aron was taking the separation well, and if Alex was going to call it quits ...

Maybe, just maybe, Aron didn't have to know that the douchebag was and had been cheating on him. By all means, it felt like a solution to the problem, but Carter found it that it didn't sit well with him. He felt that Aron was still entitled to know.

So he can wipe the last ounce of affection he might still have for the asshole from his heart.

I wouldn't put it like this.

Face it, Carter, you're an egoist when it comes to Aron's feelings. You want the man for yourself.

Says who?

He ignored the little righteous voice in his head. Funny how people called their conscience a little voice. It wasn't really a voice. It was just a weird game of tennis which people played on both ends.

He continued to browse through Simon's feed with disinterest. Apparently, the guy was using his social media presence to promote the business. Yolanda had to be pretty proud of him. Well, at least the guy had found the means to mix business with pleasure. And he did advertise heavily the company's presence at various hip venues.

Including some gay clubs, he noticed at some point. Ah, so it was to one of these places that Aron wanted to take him. Maybe it wasn't such a bad idea to look into it beforehand. Just so that he would not end up looking like a poor deer caught in the headlights.

Eh, the places Simon liked to frequent looked just like any other nightclubs, with the sole difference that the audience was preponderantly male. There were still female patrons in attendance, so all in all, those clubs were just different in the sense that they were offering various styles of entertainment, from live performances to thematic parties.

Entertainment? Wait, what if Aron had something totally different in mind? Like the type of place run by that guy, David?

Suddenly, the places showing on Simon's feed looked like kindergarten. Carter gulped. Damn, what if Aron wanted to have fun with some rough play? Okay, okay, he needed to think.

First of all, how was he going to react? Was he going to take a hike the first moment he saw Aron pulling out a flogger or whatever? Ah, damn, he wasn't sure he could live through it.

His eyes wandered to the various pics posted by Simon. Man, but were all the guys going to these places good looking or something?

Shit. There was a problem much bigger than the slight possibility that he was going to be introduced to a more alternative lifestyle than what he could face at the moment. He was going to face ...

Competition.

All right, it was a good thing that Aron hadn't called just yet. He hurried to the bathroom and took a look in the mirror.

"The 90s called, they want their clothes back," Carter mimicked Alex's words in the mirror.

Okay, so there went the list of problems. He needed a haircut. But what if Aron wasn't going to like the change? Carter had worn his hair a bit long like this since forever, well, since the teachers had no longer cared to tell him that he should get a haircut.

So, no haircut. Aron had fucked him like this, maybe it wasn't that big an issue. But maybe he needed other clothes? What the hell did he know about fashion?

Well, you were kind of a fashion icon for about a week or more.

True, true, but what did I learn? Nothing.

Well, Aron liked Alex's body, right? And while he could not become a twink, or have magnetic green eyes that were making stern dudes like Aron buy a Porsche just like that, he could borrow some of that guy's fashion sense, right?

Okay, but what could work for someone like him? He wandered off to his sparse wardrobe, and Taz woke up from his dog bed and came to accompany him. Both of them looked at the few clothes Carter had with disapproval and annoyance.

"I'm not going to conquer Aron like this, right, Taz?"

Taz looked up and made a small whiny sound. Great, even his dog thought he needed help. Eh, that meant that he had to go out shopping.

"I would like something that I could wear on a ..."

Date?

Night out?

Just some place for hanging out?

The saleswoman looked at him with understanding, nodding slightly.

“The first time you’re taking her out?” she obliged, with a small knowing smile.

“Her? Ah, no, it’s a guy and ...” Carter trailed off.

The woman’s face changed its expression from slightly interested to very much interested.

“Oh, we have the perfect helper then!” she exclaimed, clapping her hands. “Armand!” she then yelled, half turning.

Carter was enough uncomfortable as he was. He could not understand what he was doing in a posh store, like this one. Maybe he should just wear his usual clothes.

His internal debate was interrupted by the saleswoman talking again.

“Armand, dear, the gentleman here is in need of a bit of assistance,” she spoke to the guy emerging from some back room.

Carter threw a small look in the guy’s direction and he was rewarded immediately with a bright smile. Ah, damn, now he felt even more uncomfortable. He was not yet one to read all the signs right, but the guy’s smile had seemed flirtatious.

Armand also had perfect hair, brushed to the last strand like it was supposed to follow some kind of pattern, and everything about him spelled confidence. Like fashion confidence, but it didn’t matter. He was also dressed smartly in what looked to be a pretty comfortable, yet elegant, casual suit.

“Of course,” the guy said affably. “How can I help you, sir?”

“Ah, hmm, I need clothes,” Carter blurted out.

If the guy was amused, he didn’t show it. His smile remained courteous.

“What’s the occasion?” the man asked.

“I’m going out. With a friend,” Carter continued to speak in short sentences.

“A friend-friend, or a special friend?” the guy asked, and this time his smile widened.

How special was Aron to him? Extremely special? Very special? What was the right answer?

“Let me make it a bit easier,” Armand offered, and began guiding him towards the racks of clothes. “Do you want your homie to notice you?” he leaned in, and almost whispered.

Wow, so being gay was like being in a secret society? What was with the whispering? Carter wondered. But he felt the need to whisper, too. And it did make things easier.

“Yes,” he replied in a small voice. “We’ll go to a gay club, and it’s my first time, and, really, I have no idea what to expect.”

Armand nodded thoughtfully.

“All right, then we’ll just need to go for something that will make you feel comfortable.”

“I thought I should buy something different,” Carter said, evidently surprised.

“That is a common misconception,” Armand explained. “If you don’t feel at ease, you will have a bad time, dear. And your friend will notice, trust me. We just need to upgrade you a little. I see that you’re a jeans type of guy, so let’s try something.”

With expert moves, the guy pulled one pair of jeans from a rack and handed it to Carter.

“Try these on, and let’s go from there,” Armand smiled.

Okay, so far, it wasn’t that hard. He could wear jeans. These were a much darker blue than what he usually wore, but it was fine. He dressed up and took a look in the mirror. Hmm, they were just jeans, but they were definitely hugging his backside a little better. They were a bit low on his hips, but, as he could notice while admiring himself in the mirror, that was the secret to making his ass pop out

more. He could almost understand what Aron saw in his behind, and what that girlfriend with the strap-on meant by him having a fuckable ass. The jeans also, kind of, made his legs appear longer, somehow, and the straight cut looked elegant, too.

He pushed aside the curtain and braced for the verdict, as Armand gave him a professional once-over.

“Yes, I guess they are perfect, although I would like to see you in other things, too, now,” Armand pondered.

“I don’t have too much time on my hands right now,” Carter mumbled. “You see, I left my dog alone at home, and he’s really a good kid, and he doesn’t make a mess ...”

What the hell was wrong with him? Why was he so chatty? This fashion assistant could not care less about Carter’s dog.

Yet, Armand smiled.

“What breed is your kid?” Armand asked brightly.

“Golden retriever,” Carter answered promptly.

“Ah, a family dog,” Armand nodded. “Mine’s a pitbull,” he added with a small satisfied smile.

Wow, talking about dangerous! Carter looked at Armand in awe, and probably a little frightened.

“Ah, don’t worry,” Armand waved. “They’re the most misunderstood breed. Brute is an angel, really.”

Brute? Wow, that dog certainly had to be an angel.

“Then let’s not hold you more than it’s needed, dear,” Armand smiled warmly. “Here is something to complete the ensemble,” he handed Carter what looked like a pretty much plain white shirt.

Again, as he studied himself in the mirror minutes later, he had to take that back. The shirt was a slim fit, somehow making his anatomy show off, but without being one inch distasteful. He presented himself to Armand, once more.

“Yes, definitely, it becomes you,” Armand nodded. “Now, just a few adjustments to show you how to wear this for, you know,” he added with a smile, “the optimal effect. May I touch you a bit?”

“Sure,” Carter shrugged.

Armand opened the first two buttons from the top and adjusted the collar, and then he proceeded to roll the sleeves up, arranging them in what looked like something very fashionable, although Carter could not exactly explain how.

“There, showing your lovely forearms a little, hmm, I like me a man with veiny arms,” Armand sighed, a bit too dramatically to be serious. “Are you working out, darling?”

“Just playing sports and stuff,” Carter said. “And Taz needs a lot of exercise, so I run a lot, too.”

“You have nice shoulders, too,” Armand said, a bit dreamily, as he dusted Carter’s shirt of some invisible lint. “Your special friend is lucky.”

If he had been a schoolgirl, Carter would have blushed to the tip of his ears. But he wasn’t. No, he was a grown up or something. Yet, that didn’t mean that he knew everything.

“Could you please show me how you roll up the sleeves?” he asked Armand.

“Of course,” Armand beamed at him, and carefully, proceeded to explain Carter how he could replicate that little trick that was supposedly going to make him more attractive to his date.

You’re just hanging out, who the heck said it’s a date?

Shut up. It will be just the two of us. What the hell is it if it’s not a date?

Sweet dreams, my delusional prince.

Fuck you very much.

He had no idea how to be thankful enough for all the help he had received from the shop personnel, so he just chose to buy new shoes, and a belt, to complete his outfit. And Armand also made him promise that he would come back again if his date was a success.

See? Armand thinks it's a date, too.

Only because you made him believe that.

Saturday night, when Aron was at the door, ringing his bell, Carter stilled believed he was as far from being ready as he could be. At least, the new clothes were not making him feel uncomfortable. And Taz seemed to be excited to go out again, his tail wagging so much that Carter thought there was no more need for a fan or even AC in their small apartment.

“You’re going to stay tonight with the grandparents,” Carter told his pet, patting the dog’s head. “Be nice and they will want to have you over again.”

And maybe I'll get lucky again.

Lucky? What exactly do you think will happen?

You have no idea.

Actually, I do, since I'm your brain. Have you thought about pivoting your career toward new horizons? Like adult entertainment?

Well, it was now or never. He wiped one sweaty palm against his new jeans and opened the door with what he hoped looked like a natural gesture.

“Hey,” Aron said, and, for a couple of seconds, they looked at each other, like they could not allow themselves to breathe.

Aron was as stunning as ever, dressed up casually, in a black tank top that showed off his perfect muscled arms while offering perfect coverage otherwise, and also made Carter’s mouth water in an instant. The black jeans the guy was wearing also seemed tighter than usual. Maybe they could just skip the going out thing? Go straight to the main course or something?

“Wow, you look great,” Aron said with a small smile.

“Ah, thanks,” Carter mumbled, his eyes still going low, low, low, to Aron’s ...

Okay, he needed to get a hold of himself. If not for any other reasons that the jeans he was also wearing were tight as hell. Comfortable, yet tight.

“Ready then?” Aron asked. “I hope you don’t mind we’re taking a cab to move around because I don’t want to keep from drinking tonight, in all honesty.”

“Sure,” Carter shrugged. “Well, I could be the designated driver,” he offered.

“No way,” Aron shook his head. “You’re drinking with me, buddy.”

See? Buddy! Who calls their date ‘buddy’?

I don’t know. Maybe gay guys do, what do I know?

For the time they were in the back of a cab, with Taz between them, everything seemed fine. They made small conversation, talking about common stuff, without a glitch or awkwardness. But Carter could swear Aron was a bit too nice, if that was a possible thing to say.

Clementine and Gary were ecstatic to see them, and not one moment they mentioned about Aron being separated from his husband. They seemed busy making Taz’s acquaintance, just as much as Taz was happy to meet them.

“Don’t worry about a thing, Carter,” Aron’s mom kissed both his cheeks. “Taz will feel great here. How come we never got a dog?” she turned toward her husband.

“Maybe we were too busy looking after the boys,” Gary smiled and gestured toward Aron and Carter.

Carter felt moved. Only after he had grown old enough, he had started to realize what Aron’s parents had done for him for so many years. He was about to say something, when Aron pulled him by the shoulder.

“Let’s go. Now that the baby is safe in the crib, and you don’t have to worry about a thing, it’s time for us to party a little,” Aron told him.

“Have fun!” Clementine said and Gary watched them as they walked back to the cab, and waved at them.

Ah, damn, he could get so used to this. This was, after all, his childhood home. Even if the one across the fence was, like many times before, silent and dark. He could not say that he loved Aron’s parents more than his own, but it was safe to say that he loved them just the same.

At least, this time, his parents had promised to keep him posted about where they were, embarked on another expedition. And so far, they had e-mailed regularly, which was more than what they usually did, so he was grateful.

Okay, so there was no need to panic, despite the quite high number of good looking dudes inside the club. Well, he was congratulating himself now for the decision to get new clothes, because everyone around, while dressed up casually, looked like wearing good quality clothes, and not exactly what Carter wore on a regular basis.

Aron’s hand on his shoulder was reassuring.

“I’m glad you haven’t run away just yet,” Aron spoke into his ear, caressing the skin with his lips.

Carter almost felt the need to tap with both feet. But it would have looked awkward. Aron’s touch, breath, anything, was doing funny things to him.

“Let’s sit at the bar,” Aron guided him.

They ordered drinks, and Carter paid very little attention to what Aron asked the barman. But he sipped from his glass, barely registering taste or whether the thing had alcohol in it, or not. Probably yes, if he were to take after Aron’s words from before. He was pretty sure he felt intoxicated already. If Aron was going to get closer, he would just fold down to the floor, like a curtain after a bad performance.

Yet, the man seemed keen on chatting up the barman, a guy who seemed to know Aron, at least as an acquaintance. To steady his nervous hands, he placed them carefully around his glass.

“Hi,” he heard someone talking from his right.

He half turned to see a young man in his late 20s, wearing pretty much the same getup as Aron, although being not as gifted in the muscle department. The neon lights made the strange colors in his short spiky hair more vibrant. Yet, Carter could not deny that the guy was attractive.

“Hi,” he offered back, with a perfunctory smile and nod.

The guy seemed pleased enough with his reply and mounted the free chair to Carter’s right.

“It’s quite crowded tonight,” the young man commented, looking around and then setting his eyes on Carter again.

Ah, all was well. Why the hell had he thought that a gay club experience would be different from any other one? This guy was nice and even striking conversation with Carter who probably looked like a fish out of the water.

“Yeah, definitely,” he replied, offering a more genuine smile this time.

“Would you mind going somewhere that is less crowded then?” the guy flashed a smile at him, while looking him straight in the eyes.

“Hmm, we just got here, though,” Carter mumbled.

“We?” the guy quirked an eyebrow, and leaned toward the bar, eyeing Aron on the other side. “Ah, I see,” he nodded in sympathy. “Have fun,” he patted Carter’s arm and stood up.

Hmm, what had just happened? Carter could not really say. The guy had looked friendly. Was there something wrong about having company?

Ah, wait, we know this. He was making a pass on you.

Smooth.

What did you expect? Some pickup line? Nice shoes, wanna fuck?

I told you, I have no idea what to expect.

“It’s okay if you want to chat up guys,” Aron spoke, again right into his ear, making his hair stand on end from something that he could only describe as too pleasurable. “I don’t want to hold you back.”

Funny, while Aron was saying that, he had sneaked one arm around Carter’s waist, like he wanted to make sure Carter wasn’t going to get up and start chasing guys that very moment.

See? It’s not a date. He expects you to flirt with other guys.

But I won’t! I’m here for him!

Then why don’t you make that a little clearer?

“Hmm, I don’t know,” he said, looking at his glass, and trying to ignore Aron’s fingers moving imperceptibly right above his belt.

Like the guy was caressing him, through the shirt.

“What, you didn’t like the looks on that guy?” Aron moved a bit closer now.

I like the looks on you.

“He was ‘kay, I guess,” Carter shrugged.

“Oh, look who has some really high standards,” Aron chuckled in his ear.

“High standards? Did you find that guy ... sexy?” Carter struggled to get out the right words.

“Not as sexy as you,” Aron cooed.

All right, so his palms were sweaty, his knees were made of butter, and he had some trouble breathing.

“Let’s get you some sea legs,” Aron stood up and pulled Carter up with him.

“What’s that?” Carter followed, but not without noticing a few guys throwing them looks that seemed like a mix of admiration and envy.

Of course, he was dragged to the dance floor by a guy who looked like Adonis, and while Carter could not say that he had had the time to examine the entire male

population, make a hierarchy and then decide where Aron stood, in terms of attractiveness, he was pretty certain Aron was with the most desirable man in the building. He just knew it.

“Ah, no, I can’t dance,” he began to gesticulate, as Aron pulled him onto the dance floor, where numerous couples were already engaged in sensual dances of all kinds of degrees of sexiness.

Well, he was unfair to realize only that very moment that he couldn’t dance, but he risked disappointing Aron, so that couldn’t happen.

“You’ll just have to trust me,” Aron smiled at him, and pulled him close.

And Carter, no wonder there, stepped him right on the foot. Aron’s smile faded for one second, only to grow larger right away.

“No worries, you just need a little guidance,” Aron said with confidence.

Ah, great. Only he didn’t feel the same confidence. Aron grabbed his waist and made him turn so he could face the crowd, and stay flush against Aron’s strong body. Hands were on his hips, steady, and Aron’s voice caressed his ear again.

“I will teach you how it’s done.”

“Hmm, okay,” he agreed, and prayed inwardly that Aron was not going to need foot treatment after Carter was going to step on his toes an infinite number of times that night.

But the truth was, he noticed right away, that it was easy. Aron glued their bodies together, guiding Carter’s every move, while holding one arm round his waist.

Wow, he was dancing! Now that was something! Also, it felt nice to have Aron hold him like that. The song ended, in the cheers of the audience, and Carter made a move to step away from his best friend’s embrace.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Aron cooed. “I have so much more to teach you.”

Teach me oral sex.

You didn’t just think of that!

Why not?

Because!

This time, the tune was slow, and Aron turned him so they could face each other. Since Aron was holding his back, Carter found that there was no other way for him to stay without being awkward but to place his hands on Aron's broad shoulders.

Aron was looking him right in the eyes, and while the play of lights in the club made it a bit difficult to read everything in Aron's dark eyes, Carter knew, that very moment, that the man's entire attention was trained on him.

"So," he gulped. "What would you like to do next? And I didn't ask you, because I didn't know ... Well, okay, if you want to pick up some guy or ..."

The cascade of words flowing from his mouth was cut short by Aron's firm lips. Ah, so nice! Even his brain was shutting down, now relaxed and floating somewhere in the vast expanses of the universe.

Aron didn't need to fight him to make him open up. Carter had no hesitations when it came to that. Not anymore, not that he had ever had, come to think of it. Aron had his kryptonite. He only needed to kiss Carter, and nothing else mattered.

The man pulled him tightly and buried one hand in Carter's hair, making a fist. Oh, fuck, the sudden jolt was making his knees tremble. Aron knew so well how to kiss it was unfair. Desperately, he opened his mouth wider, allowing Aron to reach deeper. Carter knew as much as to not let go and be a slowpoke this time around. He stuck his tongue into Aron's mouth, too, and they were pretty much devouring each other at this point.

The only thing they needed was to breathe. So they had to stop, but they continued to move slowly, to their own rhythm, while tasting each other with small licks and bites. Around them, another fast paced song was making the audience move spastically on the dance floor.

"Oops, sorry, guys," someone apologized, when he bumped into them by accident.

"No problem," Aron said promptly and now dragged Carter down from the dance floor.

“Should we get drinks again?” Carter asked, unsure of what his best friend’s determined gait could mean at this point.

“No, let’s get going,” Aron said, and his voice sounded a bit strained.

The music in the club was loud enough to make them yell at each other, but Carter knew when his friend was preoccupied, and that was now. But why the change in attitude? Until now, Aron had seemed pretty relaxed.

It took what seemed like seconds to be out in the street, again. He was about to ask Aron what was wrong, when the guy just pulled him close into another kiss. This time, Carter wanted that humans didn’t need air to function. Because sure as hell he didn’t want to let go.

“I cannot believe it!” an angry voice interrupted them.

Both Carter and Aron stared confused at someone who was gesturing with a smartphone, probably taking pictures of them.

“Simon?” Aron asked, intrigued.

Carter could feel his head starting to hurt. Now what were the chances?

“I have it right here!” the guy continued, without looking at Carter at all. “The proof that you’re cheating on Alex!”

“We’re separated,” Aron shrugged, seemingly not impressed at all with Simon’s threats.

“Not divorced yet!” Simon insisted. “Wait till I show him this. This is grounds for divorce, you know?”

Simon’s eyes finally traveled to Carter and grew wide.

“What the hell?” he exclaimed, but then he tried to regain his angry composure.

“Not gay, my ass!”

“Wait, do you two know each other?” Aron intervened.

“We run together, sometimes. We met at the park,” Carter said quickly.

“Okay,” Simon exhaled, clearly now a little thrown off balance by Carter’s presence. “I don’t blame you. He’s cute,” he addressed Aron. “But you should just let Alex go if you don’t want him,” he wagged his phone at them again. “Don’t think I won’t show him this.”

“Aron and Alex are in an open relationship,” Carter found himself talking. “They’re trying to see how it would be to see other people. So your so called proof means nothing,” he gestured toward Simon’s phone.

“You’re pulling my leg,” Simon lowered his phone, now a bit unsure of his actions.

Carter let go of Aron and pushed Simon three feet back. Then he grabbed the guy and whispered in his ear.

“How else would I know that you have a tattoo on your chest saying ‘Alex’s Property’?”

For the love of all that was holy, he hoped Aron was out of earshot. He could not check.

Simon almost staggered.

“No way!” the guy whispered.

“Yes way,” Carter said quickly. “But Alex doesn’t want people to know, so if you go to him with this, he might not take it well, okay?”

“Okay,” Simon mumbled, visibly shaken. “So you and Aron, huh?”

“Yeah,” Carter nodded.

“Okay, sorry to bother you, then,” Simon began walking away, still starting in awe at him and then at Aron. “Enjoy your night.”

“What was that all about?” Aron asked, amused. “What did you tell him?”

“Just that ...” Carter fumbled with his brain for a credible lie. “That I won’t run with him in the mornings if he’s a douchebag.”

“Ah, pretty convincing,” Aron laughed. “I’m pretty certain that you told him something along the lines of better not tell unless he wants to piss his pants from too much tickling, but ...”

“Hey, I’m not the kind of guy!” Carter exclaimed.

“C’mon, did you forget? There was this guy in sixth grade who couldn’t stop teasing me over my height, and was an asshole about it, too, calling me names. You tickled him until he pissed his pants.”

“But I apologized!” Carter said, now completely mortified. “And I got one week suspension.”

“Regardless, that just goes to prove that you’re all for cruel and unusual punishments,” Aron laughed. “Well, I should say that I feel honored that you took my side. But it wasn’t needed. Simon could go to Alex with those pictures for all I care.”

“But he could divorce you,” Carter mumbled. “Make it hell for you.”

“That’s fine,” Aron shrugged. “The sooner, the better. Plus, I’m not going to cower in front of my soon to be ex-husband’s so called secret lover.”

Carter grabbed his jaw and put it back.

“You knew?” he asked. “I mean, this guy and your husband?”

“What? That Alex has an affair with this guy? He could barely wait for me to be out the door that he started going everywhere with Simon.”

“But, for how long ...” Carter murmured.

Aron shrugged.

“It doesn’t really matter. I like to think that at least they weren’t together while Alex and I were still playing house. We seemed to get along just fine for a little while, and then Alex just flipped a lid again. Just as I felt like I was in love with him deeper than ever before. I just couldn’t stand it to go back to the war of attrition Alex seems to be a specialist in. Well, this time I’m done. And I’m not

going to stand between him and his happiness with Simon, if that is what he wants.”

Carter let out a sigh. Ah, great. So Aron had his suspicions all along. Only that he had struggled to believe in his husband nonetheless. And he knew Aron well. The guy was as determined to walk away as he was invested in something. He embraced Aron tightly, hoping that he could transmit all that he was feeling with that hug.

“Don’t worry,” Aron hugged him back. “I’m okay.”

“But weren’t you afraid,” Carter mumbled, “with him sleeping around? Maybe getting something ... bad from him?”

His fears from before came rushing back to him. Aron had been in danger all along? Even if Alex had claimed that he was always using protection.

“Alex is one fuse short of being misophobic. He doesn’t let people touch him too much, let alone other things. Simon must have made the cut. And it was one of the reasons why I asked our medical provider for regular checkups for the both of us and have the results transmitted to me, in duplicate. On one occasion, he even acted like a total hypochondriac. Just after he got out of the hospital. Trust me, putting up with his disgust of germs and dirt could alone drive someone insane.”

Carter could feel some sort of perverse glee imagining how Alex must have reacted with people wanting to hug him all of a sudden. Yeah, he hadn’t exactly left a happy legacy there. Ah, great, now he was feeling guilty again.

“Well, thank you for the night out, Aron,” he spoke. “I should get Taz from your mom and dad. I bet he’s sleeping right now, but ...”

“The night’s still young,” Aron interrupted him and took his hand gently. “And, as you say, Taz is already asleep. Let the puppy have his rest. Plus, my parents won’t be up at this hour either. We would only just disturb them.”

“Should we go back inside the club, then?” Carter pointed toward the building they had just gotten out from.

Aron shook his head slowly, and then leaned in and kissed Carter.

“Do you remember what you promised me?” he whispered, brushing slowly his lips against Carter’s.

“Ah, um, ah, what?” Carter mumbled, all rational thought down the drain.

“You wanted to give me the D, if I recall properly,” Aron chuckled. “Come on, I have an awesome hotel room. I even have a Jacuzzi.”

Ah, who could resist to that kind of temptation? Carter stood there, dumbstruck, while Aron made the call for a cab.

“Are you serious about this?” he asked, as soon as Aron finished the conversation with the operator.

“About getting the D from you?” Aron laughed. “I’ve never been more serious about anything else in my life.”

Ah, damn. Carter could feel his knees getting wobbly again. Great. Now he had performance anxiety.

Chapter Thirty

Could Aron tell he was nervous? His friend closed his hand over Carter's, and all he could do was to think of the warmth he was feeling. It was not exactly like they were holding hands, and there was some room between them on the back seat, while the taxi driver seemed more preoccupied with watching the road ahead rather than spying on them.

You're getting a little paranoid, aren't you?

You saw what happened with Simon earlier! What if someone finds out?

Aron doesn't seem to care. Why do you?

I care. I care that he doesn't get hurt.

Another funny thing was how silent they were after their happy banter from before. Each one was staring over the window on his side, and there seemed to be no words they cared to share. Carter could not exactly remember that kind of situation. Although Aron had said something before about Carter's way of falling silent. Was that one of those moments? When he just lost himself in his own head, while Aron didn't mind? Maybe the only difference was that he was well aware of it now, unlike those times.

Aron paid the fare, exchanging a few polite words with the driver, and then proceeded to extract Carter from the taxi. Extract certainly being the exact word seeing that he wasn't sure how well he could keep himself on his feet.

Apparently quite well, he noticed as he stood next to Aron, after the taxi took off, leaving them in front of a posh boutique hotel.

"You booked a room for tonight?" Carter asked.

Ah, that meant that Aron hoped to get lucky. Well, he ended up taking Carter with him, eventually, so probably he wasn't that lucky. Seeing Carter's terrible performance anxiety at the moment.

"No, for a longer stay. I have ties with the owner, so I got a pretty nice deal," Aron explained.

“Why would you stay at a hotel?” Carter questioned. “Why aren’t you staying with your parents? Or get a new place to live?”

“I’m just hoping to deal with this separation problem quickly. Plus, I haven’t exactly had the time to search for a new place,” Aron said matter-of-factly.

“That doesn’t exactly answer my first question,” Carter pointed out.

“Ah, well, there’s no way for me to deflect you, right?” Aron chuckled. “My parents don’t need the stress. They insisted that I should come to stay with them, but frankly, I think I need some time alone, to reflect a little on ... you know, stuff,” the man added, his voice trailing off a bit.

“Ah, then I’m interrupting your reflections?” Carter hurried. “By coming over?”

“You definitely are,” Aron laughed. “Actually, I’m counting on it,” he added, and pulled Carter close to him, as they entered the elevator.

The dignified man in livery tending the elevator didn’t seem bothered by the public display of ... whatever Aron was doing to him.

“Good evening, Mr. Ruskin. Did you have a good night?” the man inquired politely.

“Excellent, Randolph,” Aron replied cheerfully. “And it’s only getting better.”

Carter was sure that grin had been directed to him since the hotel employee was already with his back at them, fiddling with the buttons of the machinery. And that was making his heart grow small, small, small.

“That is great to hear, Mr. Ruskin. If there’s anything you would like us to bring to the room, please just let the room service know. There seems to be a quiet night.”

Carter was gently pushed out of the elevator, as Aron remained a few steps behind to tell the hotel employee something that didn’t quite reach his ears.

Most probably, because even the sound of a fanfare could not overwhelm the beating of his heart.

“We’re here,” Aron gestured toward a door which he opened quickly with his card, allowing Carter to go in.

And make a little fool of himself, as he gasped in surprise.

“Is this like a penthouse suite or something?” he said out loud. “Man, it’s like you’re in the lap of luxury.”

Aron closed the door behind them carefully and remained silent for a moment. Carter turned, and watched his best friend since forever, leaning against the door, his thumbs hung in his pockets as if he was waiting for something.

“Impressed?” Aron asked, something challenging, yet warm flickering in his eyes.

“Yeah, like how could I not be? I’ve never been anywhere this nice.”

“So? What would you like to do?”

Drop to my knees and worship your cock.

Hush, does the pervert in you never sleep?

Never.

“I don’t know,” he shrugged. “I’m afraid if I sit on that white sofa, I might just get it dirty just by breathing in its direction.”

Aron’s low chuckle tickled his ears.

“Please feel at home,” the host urged, but Carter didn’t feel more at ease.

As he was busy taking in his surroundings, Aron sneaked from behind and embraced him.

“You seem a little tense,” Aron whispered into his ear. “I think I have just the remedy for that. Let’s hit that jacuzzi,” he added, sliding both his hands into Carter’s, linking their fingers together.

“Um, okay,” Carter said softly.

It was easy just to follow Aron around. But when Aron let go of his hand, to climb the few stairs to the area where Carter supposed served as the bedroom, he just stood there, looking.

With practiced ease, Aron pulled off his tank top, allowing Carter to admire his broad shoulders and muscled back. When Aron began unbuckling his belt, Carter gulped so loudly that the man turned.

“Are you going into the Jacuzzi all dressed up like this?” Aron laughed. “Not that I don’t appreciate how nice you look. I wasn’t expecting that.”

“What were you expecting?” Carter mumbled.

“Just you,” Aron said simply. “I was just expecting you.”

The man’s dark gaze trained on him was so intense that Carter could swear he was just going to melt to the floor or burn like a candle. His usually overactive brain was silent, probably mesmerized with Aron, too, with how beautiful and perfect the man was.

“It’s okay, I will give you a hand,” Aron smiled a little too smugly for Carter to feel safe.

What are you afraid of, exactly?

Ah, look who decided to join the party.

The question still stands.

I’m afraid ... I’m afraid that I’m going to fall and never come back up from this.

Aron interrupted his conversation to his own brain by walking over and putting his fingers on Carter’s first shirt button, proceeding carefully, with a small frown that Carter was certain he found sexy for some reason.

But the frown was slowly melting, turning into a smile, with each button giving in. When Aron slowly pushed the shirt down his shoulders, Carter knew he needed to do something, to stop or hurry this torturous pace at which things were happening.

“Aron,” he called, and his voice was broken, strange, even to his own ears.

But his best friend since forever didn’t seem in the mood for conversation. If anything, he seemed in the mood for something else. And that something else included making Carter crazy. He leaned in very, very little, and soon their lips

were touching and their tongues tasted each other, and Aron knew exactly how to make their bodies touch, too.

It was fine like this. It wasn't exactly calming down the fluttering butterflies in his stomach, but he wasn't required to do a thing, so everything was absolutely fine. Aron managed to undress him completely, pulling him out of his jeans he had no idea how, and soon enough he was more naked than his friend, and that had to mean something, although he didn't dare to process what.

"Is there something wrong?" Aron murmured against his lips.

"Performance anxiety," he whispered, very, very slowly.

"Hmm?" the man wondered, preoccupied to caress Carter's cheeks with his thumbs as his hands cupped firmly the jawline.

"Like, you know," Carter murmured. "How I'll ... perform."

"Ah," Aron seemed to understand what was going on in the other's scattered brain. "But I have just the remedy for that. Leave everything to me."

"Okay, cool," Carter replied.

Aron let him go only to shed off the rest of his clothes quickly and pulled Carter by the hand, making him follow.

He barely registered the luxury surrounding him, as Aron made him join him into the hot bath. The gentle sound of the jets working was a bit soothing for his nerves, but Aron's hands on him, and the guy's lips were making him dizzy with a kind of excitement that now, at least, he knew something about.

Aron pulled him closer, kissing him slowly, as if not to scare him.

"Let's take the edge off a little," Aron whispered and pushed him until he sat on the edge of the hot tub.

He watched as the man knelt in the water, between his legs and grabbed his erection fast. Wow, his dick was really up for it, performance anxiety or not, Carter thought.

And cursed, as Aron's engulfed the hard cock into his mouth. All right, now wasn't the time to make a total fool of himself by crying out loud all the pleasure coursing up his spine, to his brain, and back to his cock again.

Aron was great at deepthroating, unlike him. Even if Carter was larger than the guy's husband, Aron seemed to have no trouble swallowing that thing down and somehow caress it with his tongue, over and over again with each move.

Talking about performance anxiety, it was clear Aron had none. He was doing a fine job, no, a great job, and he had no qualms with making Carter shiver. The fact that Carter still had his legs dangling in the hot water didn't seem to matter. He was hot and cold at the same time.

"How is it?" Aron let go of his cock, just wrapping one hand around Carter's balls, and stared up.

He could not speak. But he reached for Aron and pulled him up to kiss him. That had to do for an answer. Aron did kiss back, but it was clear as day that he wanted to return to the task at hand.

"No, no, no," Carter protested, holding Aron near.

"Don't you want to come?" Aron murmured, his intense gaze dropping to Carter's mouth.

"But it just seems so one-sided," Carter replied, his voice weak.

"Don't worry, you'll be able to make it up to me later," Aron promised.

Aron was going down on him again, and this time was kissing his way there, creating an ebb and flow of desire that was only getting higher each time lips connected to flesh.

"You do it so well," Carter mumbled, not knowing what else to say while he caressed Aron's head gently.

Because he had done it so many times before? With others? Carter knew he could not afford the luxury of getting jealous over such things. Aron was his, probably for these fleeting moments only, and all he could do was to enjoy himself while it lasted.

He groaned in pure pleasure as Aron took him deep once again. Taking the edge off? Carter wasn't sure if this was going to solve the problem. He was fighting hard not to let go, not to make a fool of himself by coming too soon, but it was damn hard to focus on that, as Aron's mouth and throat were acting like the perfect cock sleeve, moist and hot, and squeezing in all the right places, at just the right moments.

It was good that the man was wearing his hair short because otherwise, he might have ended up with a much unpleasant hair pulling experience. Carter came, long and hard, and kept Aron's head buried into his crotch for what seemed like a small eternity.

Aron caught him, and pulled him into a tight embrace, generous enough to share the creamy load in his mouth. Carter wasn't minding it at all. All tasted better from Aron's mouth. Maybe even vanilla ice cream. Although this was more like whip cream if he were to think about it.

Just that he wasn't doing much thinking right now. There was no point in it, anyway. Aron withdrew, very slowly and very gently, and soon they were staring into each other's eyes, with a mix of wonder and excitement, maybe with a tinge of wistfulness. At least, that was what he was reading in Aron's deep dark eyes. Maybe he was just imagining things, but he could not exactly recall this kind of look, from the time when he had been Aron's placeholder of a husband, and from before that, either.

It was something completely new.

"Better?" Aron asked, his smiled returning.

"Oh, yeah," Carter smiled in turn.

"Let's just chill a little," Aron offered.

"Don't you ..." Carter gestured, unsure, toward the other's manhood that now, as Aron was standing, was stiff and demanding.

"You took me by surprise that first time," Aron explained, and pulled him down, so they could both sit and enjoy the relaxing jets. "Now I really have to assume the role of the instructor in this."

“Instructor, huh?” Carter wondered, and Aron covered his mouth with a short kiss, again.

“Of course, what kind of friend I would be not to offer you the full course?” Aron joked.

Friend. See?

Shut up. Does he kiss all his friends like this?

“Do you kiss all your friends like this?” he asked, considering that an interesting bit of information like that had to be explored.

Aron’s low chuckle made him tremble in an instant.

“No, just you.”

“So I’m your special friend?” Carter asked, remembering the conversation he had had at the clothing store.

“You’re special all right,” Aron laughed. “After being best friends for 25 years, I’d say you’re pretty special.”

“23,” Carter said promptly. “We had a 2-year hiatus. Plus, if we think of all that time you were away after college when I only saw you on special occasions ...”

“I should not have left,” Aron interrupted him.

Say what? What is this supposed to mean?

I have no idea.

Ask.

I ...

The cheerful sound of a bell interrupted his thoughts.

“That must be room service,” Aron jumped out of the hot tub and grabbed a robe to cover himself.

Can you be slower than this? Opportunity lost.

No way, we'll get to ask him.

Aron came back a couple of minutes later and invited Carter to get out of the tub. Apparently, there was a fluffy robe readily available for him, too. He was about to move back into the main room when Aron planted a towel on his head and began rubbing it vigorously.

“Hey,” he protested from under the towel.

“I don’t want you to catch a cold,” Aron explained. “Your hair got wet a little.”

“I can do it,” Carter said.

“Sure, but am I going to let you?” Aron joked.

So he had to endure this or something. When Aron pulled down the towel, Carter looked up. There it was again. That look. What did it mean?

“Let’s take things to the bedroom,” Aron whispered. “I remember a certain promise you need to honor.”

Oh, that. Hmm, that performance anxiety was rearing its ugly head again. Aron must have had so many skilled lovers before. Although he had said something about other guys not being that many. But what did Carter know about gay sex, anyway? Except for the practice during the time when he had been in Alex’s body.

Now he wished he had more experience under the belt, pun totally intended. As Aron’s husband, he should have topped the guy more often. That would have made things a whole lot easier now.

At least Aron seemed to have things totally under control, as he was once again pulling Carter after him, making both of them land on the bed, ready for some horizontal play.

It was easy to deal with everything if Aron was in charge. The man had placed one muscular leg between Carter’s, and he was now making them kiss again.

“So, now, I have to fuck you?” Carter mumbled, not daring to open his eyes, as Aron’s lips finally allowed him to speak.

“Yeah,” Aron confirmed and laughed.

Of course he could laugh. He wasn't the one worried in all this.

What if he came too fast? Carter began to fret internally. What if Aron was going to hate it? What if ...

"Here's a drop of liquid courage," Aron moved away and turned back with a champagne flute.

Carter straightened up and took the glass. Well, at least his hands were steady. He waited for Aron to grab his own, but when the man turned again, he was holding a strawberry. Slowly, while all the time watching Carter, Aron dipped the strawberry into the flute and brought the fruit to Carter's lips.

"You're kidding me, right? Like in the movies or something? Is this the honeymoon package?" Carter began running his mouth.

"Hush, just open wide," Aron chided him.

Hmm, that did taste interesting. Aron kissed him quick, and then made a gesture for him to have a sip.

"You're not drinking," Carter pointed out.

"Maybe later," Aron said, his eyes smiling. "Now I want you just to relax a bit. And don't worry, I won't have you drink an entire bottle. I still expect you to ... perform."

Perform. Right. Okay.

But Aron didn't allow him more than a couple of sips. He just took the glass away and started again to kiss Carter. This time, he began pushing the robe away, and soon they were entangled in a hot embrace.

Carter knew he only had to open his legs wider, and Aron could just sit comfortably on top and ... Well, their erections were touching. Nice. And he did feel a bit more relaxed.

"How do you want me?" Aron asked, still caressing Carter's chest slowly.

"Um?"

He was slow, slow, slow, tonight.

“On my fours?” Aron accompanied his new question with a new kiss.

“Oh, no,” Carter replied alarmed. “Your ass is too sexy. I’ll come before I’ll even be in.”

“Wow, have you stared at my ass a lot, then?” Aron pinched one nipple, making Carter grunt.

“Enough to know I don’t stand a chance,” Carter said in turn.

“Okay, then, the missionary position?” Aron continued his inquiry.

“Those missionaries really thought they weren’t kinky by doing it from the front?” Carter wondered out loud. “I mean, all the animals do it from behind, I mean, most of them, and humans are still animals, so, by all means, we’re the perverted ones because ...”

“Shut up and fuck me,” Aron pressed his lips against his mouth again.

Okay. He could do it. He had imagined it so many times, how it would be, now that he was himself again. So he needed to just roll Aron over and be on top, right?

“I think I know how to do it, just so that you don’t have to worry taking after the perverted ways of the missionaries,” Aron spoke, half laughing.

Wow, Carter thought, as Aron straddle him fast, and sat upright while resting that delicious cleft of his ass right on top of Carter’s hard cock.

“Leave it all to me,” Aron said gently while moving only so that he could reach for the nightstand.

Carter closed his eyes. He knew, by the way Aron moved on top of him, that the guy was taking care of lubing himself now, and he also knew that he wasn’t going to do a good job at controlling himself if he was going to watch. Maybe another time. Another time definitely. He wanted to see that.

Aron moved only so that he could grab Carter’s erection – great, it was, after all, a good thing that his cock had a mind of his own, and was still standing proud – and pour plenty of lube on it, too.

But the guy's hands were too skillful, moving up and down like that. He wanted him to stop. Or go faster. No, he still needed to perform.

"Oh, fuck," he half-whispered, half-groaned, as Aron adjusted himself so he could descend on Carter's cock.

"Open your eyes," Aron demanded.

Carter obeyed, and Aron took one of his hands to guide it at the back.

"You're damn big," Aron smiled, and his smug grin was faltering a little, the corners of his lips twitching.

"Sorry," Carter mumbled.

"Okay, so rule number one in gay sex," Aron chuckled. "Don't apologize for having a big dick."

"Really?" Carter glared. "Maybe not all guys like that."

"Most do," Aron replied. "Well, or maybe just ... I like the way your cock feels inside me," he added and leaned in for another kiss.

It was a good thing that he was so distracted by the playful tongue in his mouth because he didn't exactly notice when Aron began to move. Ah, it was so good, but he didn't want to let go of Aron's mouth, either.

And he wanted to touch, to feel everywhere. Which was easy, because, from this position, he could grab Aron's sexy ass with both hands, and help the guy move. Not that the guy needed any help. He surely knew how to do that, making Carter's dick want to do a little happy dance, only that the fucker was clearly too busy being grabbed and squeezed and rubbed by a damn fine channel of tight muscles to give a damn about anything else in the universe right now.

"Oh, fuck, right there," Aron encouraged him.

What? Was he doing something good? But wasn't Aron in charge? Oh, it seemed that he was actually guiding the guy's moves by using his hands. He was groping Aron's buttocks, kneading them, and suddenly, Aron pushed himself up and began stroking his dick fast.

“You’re so ...” Carter gulped, feeling too much, too soon.

Sexy? Beautiful? Handsome? Amazing?

Hot droplets began pelting his chest and abdomen as Aron exploded, arching his back and clamping down hard on Carter’s cock. Ah, at least he could no longer worry about coming too fast.

Because that was exactly what he was doing right that moment, filling Aron’s ass, or at least, hoping that was what he was doing because it was too hot and too tight, and his cock couldn’t take it anymore.

Aron moved and crashed by his side, breathing hard.

“Fuck,” the man said and covered his face with one arm.

“Um, did I ... suck big time?” Carter asked, his breath ragged, just the same.

“You’re kidding me, right?” Aron let down his arm and turned his head to watch him in the eyes. “Tell me, have you really not done it before? With other guys?”

“You practically did all the work,” Carter tried to reason with his friend. “And only you. You’re the only one.”

Technically, not a lie.

Correct.

Glad we’re on the same page.

“I should be the one asking how it was, but ... I think I have an ass full of cum that tells me how it all went down on your part, too,” Aron joked. “Now I should ask for a repeat performance because I think I was the one who didn’t manage to hold it in enough.”

“No, you did well,” Carter protested. “I mean it was good. Awesome. I want to. A repeat performance.”

You know there are more neurons in here than just one. How about you use them to put together longer strings of words?

Shut up. I’m nervous!

He liked it. Just face it already.

“You were great,” Aron chuckled. “And I am definitely glad that you haven’t run away just yet.”

Carter pushed himself up on one elbow and turned toward Aron.

“I’m not running away.”

Never will.

“So glad to hear it,” Aron whispered, sneaking one arm to grab Carter and pull him into a kiss again. “But forgive me, while some of my blood, along with other things, return to my head, I need to ask. Why now?”

“Why now?” Carter mimicked.

“Yes. I mean, I should say, again and again, I’m not complaining. But you could have satisfied your curiosity, so to speak, with anyone. So maybe the question I’m trying to ask here is why me?”

Carter frowned. Oh, fuck. How the hell was he getting out of this?

“I’ve always tried new things with you,” he said cautiously. “I don’t trust anyone else.”

“Hmm,” Aron seemed to analyze his answer for a few seconds. “So do you like me?”

“Yeah, of course I like you. I’ve always liked you,” Carter said quickly.

“I know. But I don’t mean like a friend but like a ...”

“Fuck buddy?” Carter supplied right away.

Aron seemed disappointed. Just for a fleeting moment, because his face warmed up again with a smile.

“Okay, a fuck buddy,” the man admitted.

“Yeah, you’re the best,” Carter replied in all honesty. “You kiss like a devil, you know? Or like an angel. Sorry, I’m getting things all mixed up. Which one would mean better?”

“I’ll take it,” Aron said quickly. “I’ll take the compliment. What else do you like about me?”

Everything.

Too simple. Try being, you know, a bit less like how you usually are.

What do you mean like I usually am?

Blunt and uninteresting.

Well, his brain had a point. But there was just so much he wanted to say, and the words were now trying to push all through his mouth at the same time. This wasn’t going to work. So, with a sigh, he put one hand on Aron’s shoulder and he began contouring the beautiful shape.

“This,” he said, his voice strained.

His fingers went lower, taking in the biceps, caressing the inside of the elbow, then brushing against a firm pec.

“And this,” his voice went deeper.

It was nice to feel Aron’s washboard abs next. His fingers searched and found purchase in the black hair above Aron’s sex, now semi-dormant.

“And this,” his voice quieter now.

When his hand wrapped firmly around Aron’s cock, now lengthening under his touch, the man pulled him close again.

“You like my body?” Aron asked, and his voice was just as strained, and deep, and quiet.

“No, I mean not only. You,” Carter said. “Inside and outside. Wow, that sounded stupid!”

Wow, you just said that out loud!

“No,” Aron contradicted him in a solemn tone. “Not stupid at all.”

“Do you want to fuck me?” Carter asked, too nervous to admit what that silent intimacy meant.

“I thought tonight it would be only about you on top. You know, getting adjusted to sitting in the saddle.”

“I’d rather be the one mounted,” Carter admitted.

Damn, he was just saying stupid thing after stupid thing. Soon enough, Aron was just going to start laughing at his stupidity. But no, Aron had never laughed at him. Not in a way that would make him feel bad.

He wasn’t laughing now either. His intense gaze was once more on Carter, and that was not the only thing on him. The man straddled him, making him sink into the plush bedding.

“You sure?” Aron cooed, pushing himself between Carter’s legs. “I might subject you to the perversity of the missionary position again.”

“Ha, ha, funny,” Carter said dryly. “How about, you know, from behind?”

“I don’t know,” Aron pretended to ponder. “What if I find your ass too sexy and I come in five seconds?”

Carter made a long face.

“Just joking. I told you; you were great. Actually, no, you were perfect. So, come on, present your sexy rump so I can mount you.”

Aron was always playing into his jokes, had ever been since they were kids. Yeah, they were always laughing together. Maybe that was some secret-secret of their friendship.

“All right,” he tried to sound cool, but his heart was starting to beat fast again.

Aron coaxed him into position, and, for what seemed like minutes, he caressed Carter’s back and ass, making sure to pour plenty of lube down the crack and massaging the muscles outside and inside the hole.

“Do you like, you know, smooth guys?” Carter found himself talking.

Aron's hands stopped.

"You're asking because of Alex?"

"Well, I bet he has no hair on that twink body," Carter replied.

"Don't worry," Aron said lightly. "He has nothing on you."

"Ah, good. Waxing sucks. I mean, it must suck," Carter said quickly.

"Have you considered it then? For my sake?" Aron sounded amused.

"Well, a little. Maybe."

Aron laughed, and Carter snickered, too. Something that was brought right to a halt by a blunt thing at his backside. He sucked in a breath.

"Relax, it's not the first time, after all," Aron said softly. "And I'll go as slow as I can."

Ugh, wow, damn, Carter's mind was going in circles again. The man was endowed, what could he say? And, as much as he wanted to claim that it was going to be easier than the previous time, it didn't look like his behind was agreeing that much with him.

But Aron knew how to worm his way in, slowly, without losing his concentration, while making sure to distract Carter by playing with his nipples and peppering small kisses on his neck.

"Wow, you're in?" Carter wondered when he felt Aron's wiry pubic hair tickling his behind.

"Sure am," Aron said cheerfully. "Ready?"

"When you are," Carter shot back.

He mumbled and buried his head into the pillow. Aron began moving, slowly at first, allowing him more time for adjusting.

"Your ass is really sexy," Aron praised him and caressed his buttocks, higher and higher, until his hands were wrapped around Carter's sides, holding him in place.

Not that he was going to run anywhere. He moved his hips to meet Aron's slow thrusts, growing impatient.

"You can take me hard," Carter said over his shoulder.

"You're basically almost still an ass virgin," Aron replied.

"Am not," Carter protested. "Fuck me."

"You don't have to ask me twice," Aron said back and this time, he moved amply, going straight for Carter's bud of pleasure and hitting it with the force of a hammer.

"Oh, fuck, yes," Carter moaned. "Do it again."

Aron remained silent and instead of wasting time talking, he began pounding Carter's ass hard. He could tell the man was no longer holding back. The waves of pleasure were growing, a tide that never ended, making all his nerve endings combust in ecstasy.

"I love the way you fuck me," he said, breath by breath, word by word, and Aron's moves became more frantic.

He could feel one of Aron's hand sneaking underneath and grabbing his cock. He moved between the steel hand giving him the best handjob of his life and the steel cock penetrating his hole, helping as much as he could.

"Coming, coming, coming," he mumbled like a mantra.

Aron's breath became deeper and harsher as the man drove him to his orgasm. Through the haze of his release, he noticed how Aron continued fucking him, using his body to reach his own climax and realized how complete that made him feel.

When Aron drew away, he could feel something pouring out of his ass. The man really came a lot, and it was the strangest satisfaction to feel that. He reached back and played a little with the jizz inside his hole. Yeah, it was definitely nice.

"Stop doing that. I cannot get hard again so fast," Aron joked and slapped one of the buttocks still nicely presenting.

"Hey," Carter protested feebly, "you're into spanking, too?"

Aron reached him and turned his head to kiss him.

“Come on, cry baby. That couldn’t have hurt.”

“Not really, no,” Carter agreed.

He just wanted to fall asleep now. Aron pulled him into his arms.

“I should get up, right?” Carter murmured. “Let you get some sleep this night. And I’ll drop by your folks to get Taz in the morning.”

“Hush, you’re too sleepy. You stay here tonight.”

“Okay.”

It wasn’t like he had it in him to protest. And the bed was so, so nice.

Ah, he felt like an extra in a zombie movie when he woke up. His body hurt, but not bad-bad, but good-good and his head was still all fuzzy, but eventually, he realized where he was.

“Rise and shine,” Aron grinned at him. “Come on, go hit the shower and then join me for breakfast.”

Carter took a look at the tray with all kinds of tasty foods on it, and his stomach growled. All right. Shower. Food. Kiss Aron.

Tell him you love him.

Shut up. It’s too early. And what if he replies something like: Ah, that’s nice?

He probably took a bit too long with the shower, because Aron came to knock on the door.

“Coming!” he yelled.

Aron opened the door anyway.

“Nice hearing you say that again,” the man grinned. “Here, let me take care of you.”

Aron was an expert at many things, including toweling Carter's body and draping it in a robe again.

"Don't be worried about Taz," Aron spoke, minutes later, when they were enjoying their breakfast. "I bet he had a great time with mom and dad."

"I'm not worried," Carter sipped from his orange juice.

I am worried this was a one-time thing.

So do something.

What?

Well, think.

Half an hour later, when they were riding in Aron's car toward the guy's folks' place, he still had zero ideas.

Aron's parents sent them on their way with a lot of food for Carter's fridge, and a very happy Taz that seemed to have enjoyed his little adventure away from home.

Time was such a funny thing. Carter was certain some mythical animal must have swallowed the next 20 minutes needed to navigate the city to his place. Aron helped him upstairs to his apartment, seeing how much food he had to haul.

"Well," Aron said with a small smile, as soon as everything was in the fridge and Taz was happily claiming back his bed and toys. "I should get going."

"How about you stay?" Carter said, feeling desperation creeping in.

Aron looked at him, his car keys in one hand, unsure probably of what Carter wanted to say with that plea. Of course, it had been nothing but a one night stand, and now they were back to being buddies. Only that about the same words escaped his mouth once more.

"Please stay," he said again.

"Here?" Aron asked, eventually, looking around a bit disoriented.

“Yeah. I know. It’s a shoe box. But my bed is a queen. I think. And there’s plenty of food. And you don’t have to pay for that fancy hotel. The people are nice, I know, but they had you enough.”

And I didn’t have you enough.

He waited, his whole body tense. What was he thinking? That was no place for a guest, especially Aron. The guy was used to posh hotels and houses with a backyard and a basketball hoop and ...

“Okay. When should I move in?” Aron asked promptly.

“Ah, what? You’re saying yes?” Carter asked in unhidden surprise.

“Sure thing that’s what I’m saying,” Aron said with conviction.

“Then how about now?” Carter said, feeling his heart filling slowly to the point of bursting.

“I have to bring my stuff,” Aron explained.

“Of course!” Carter almost shouted. “Well, it’s going to be cramped, and I guess you’ll search for a place, but until then, you should not just stay there, alone ...”

“Definitely. You have a pretty strong case,” Aron smiled. “Just give me an hour or so.”

“I might be out, walking Taz a little. You still have the keys, right?”

“Of course I do,” Aron smiled again.

“Good. Great,” Carter nodded energetically.

He was so busy dealing with his inward excitement that he failed to notice Aron moving close and pulling him into a hug.

“So happy to be your roomie,” Aron whispered into his ear.

Buddies. Fuck buddies. Roomies. Was that a good progression or what?

Chapter Thirty-One

Was Aron already back? He wondered, as he climbed the stairs two by two, with Taz happily prancing after him. He definitely hoped so, but stopped in front of the door to catch his breath. Aron was going to ask him why he had rushed up the stairs. He had no alternative reply for that.

“It looks like for a while you’ll have two daddies,” Carter scratched Taz’s ears, just to buy some time.

Taz barked in reply and Carter had to shush him since he didn’t want the neighbors scandalized on Sunday afternoon by a loud dog.

The door opened suddenly.

“You guys back already? Great! That means you’ll help unpacking!” Aron said brightly.

Carter stood up straight. Aron in the door was a sight to behold. Not because he was different from how he usually was, but simply because he was. Aron waiting in the door. For him. To come home. It seemed like something from a dream he must have had a long time ago, one that he could not clearly remember, but was still lingering at the edge of his memories. He could identify the feeling, though, as something pleasant and warm settling right in the center of his chest.

“Do you have a lot of luggage?” Carter questioned, this time a bit worried that they weren’t going to find enough room for Aron’s stuff.

“Just the necessary things. But I don’t want to step on your toes and take over your domain,” Aron laughed. “So I need you to tell me where to put everything.”

“Don’t worry,” Carter waved. “My home is yours.”

I’m all yours.

I dare you to say that out loud.

No way. Too soon.

Aron made way for him to enter and Taz was happy with the attention he received right away.

“Who’s a good boy?” Aron began playing with Taz.

I’m definitely a good boy. Play with me, too.

Could you give it a rest? You should behave at least like a half-decent person. Otherwise, he will run away.

Point taken.

Aron eventually followed him to the bedroom, and Carter opened wide his closet. Now it was a good thing that he didn’t have many clothes. He hoped there was plenty of room for Aron’s.

“You can put all your clothes here,” he said.

He turned to find Aron watching him from the other side of the bed. It was a bit odd, but the first thing he thought was how familiar the entire scene seemed. Like this was normal. Just another day in their lives. Completely how it was supposed to be.

“And I have spares. I mean, like toothbrushes and stuff,” he added quickly.

“Thank you,” Aron replied, but his voice was low and a bit strange for some reason.

If someone could have asked him later, he would have said, in all honesty, that he had no idea what the hell happened, but he practically jumped on the bed, rushing straight into Aron’s arms. Or was it Aron who made the first move?

The only thing that mattered was that they were kissing, stumbling on the bed, making a mess of Aron’s clothes that had been just earlier neatly arranged on the coverlet. It took them a minute, or maybe two, to come to their senses.

“What are we doing?” Aron wondered, pressing his forehead against Carter’s, his hands firm on the other’s biceps.

“I think we’re ruining your clothes,” Carter replied promptly.

Aron chuckled.

“Good point. And a good thing I left the suits on the sofa. I won’t need to do ironing all day long.”

“You know how to do that?” Carter mumbled.

He only had clothes that could not wrinkle. Much. For everything else, he used local services. But Aron ironing? Somehow, that was possible. The man had always been so self-sufficient. Or at least he had been before meeting Alex and deciding he suddenly needed a husband.

Ouch. Back to reality.

“Do you, um, think about, you know, getting back with your husband?” he asked, his voice meek.

Aron squeezed his arms briefly and let go.

“No,” came the prompt reply. “For a little while, he behaved like he was my husband, for real. And then he just took everything back. I felt cheated.”

“Because he was cheating?” Carter let the words flow from his mouth. “With that guy Simon?”

“I don’t mean that. As I told you, I hold a bit of hope that he respected our marriage while we were still together. But I felt cheated out of my happiness. We could be happy together. For a little while, he showed me everything we could have. And then he even had the nerve to tell me that he could not see why I was upset with him when he got back to being ... Well, himself, I guess. Yeah, now that I think about it, him being so ... my husband,” Aron chuckled, “was somehow out of character. And of course he said that I was suffocating him. No one controls what I feel,” Aron said, looking down, a frown darkening his face. “I was honest with him. And all he did was take, and use that as he saw fit.”

“Wow, so you just ... walked away? Was it a spur of the moment thing?”

Aron sighed.

“He actually told me to go away.”

“He kicked you out?”

“It’s a way of saying. No, it wasn’t a spur of the moment thing. As I see things now, much clearer, I think I just went against myself like an idiot trying to love

someone who didn't want to be loved. I should feel ... regret. But no, I don't feel that. Because if everything was a game for him, he doesn't deserve my love."

"I'm sorry, man," Carter put a hand on Aron's shoulder and squeezed in sympathy.

"It's okay," Aron placed his own over Carter's. "I really have no regrets. Except maybe for the lost time. But I'm decided to make up for it."

"You are?" Carter asked.

"Yeah," Aron whispered and leaned in to place another kiss on Carter's lips.

"So will the fuck buddy arrangement continue?" Carter asked when Aron drew away.

"Of course," Aron smiled. "I would not have it any other way. Plus, we'll share the bed. So, you know, things might ... no, will happen," the man laughed.

Ah, great.

Yeah, I was scared there for like a moment or so.

"And let's settle you in," Carter offered. "I can't do the ironing, but at least I'll make sure to keep things in order. A little. Not much. I'm afraid."

Okay, so he was babbling again. It was slowly dawning on him what Aron had just told him. Things would happen. On the bed. They were on the bed. Oh, did that mean ...?

"Don't worry. In exchange for your generous offer of letting me stay with you, I'll take care of everything. I'll keep the house clean, and I'll cook. And I'll pay the bills," Aron added.

"Wow, no," Carter put both his hands up. "You'll be away from home for more than half the day each work day. I think I can manage with keeping things tidy. As for cooking, do you know any microwave recipes? I don't think I tried. Shit, I don't think I have anything but plastic plates. And ..."

"Don't worry, it's not like you're hosting royalty," Aron smiled. "You should just feel as at home as before. I am the one intruding."

"No, no, no, you're not. Taz and I should at least hold the fort while you're away."

“Are you back to work? On your freelancing gigs?” Aron asked.

“I sure am. It’s not like I’m a cripple. And all I need is a laptop and Internet connection.”

“Great. It’s good to hear that you’re back in the saddle.”

Saddle? Do you remember that other context?

Oh, yeah ...

“Hmm, what’s with that mysterious smile?” Aron asked.

“Ah, well, nothing. Just my mind, going ...” he gestured for his head.

“Let’s put all these things away, and then chill,” Aron offered. “For tonight, I’ll take you and Taz out. There are plenty of nice places where dogs are welcome.”

“Great. Taz loves mingling with other kids his age,” Carter agreed.

“And, of course, when we need a bit of quality time, just the two of us, we will just leave him with my parents,” Aron added.

Wow, they were really making arrangements like they were married with kids or something. Only that they weren’t married, and they didn’t have any kids, and this was just a temporary situation and nothing more. He needed to get a hold of himself.

“Are you having second thoughts?” Aron asked, and this time, the man looked a bit dejected. “About me being here, with you?”

“No, no, it’s just that ... don’t mind me, it happens that I space out a lot, ever since the accident and all that,” Carter jumped quickly at an explanation.

“You looked a bit sad, just earlier,” Aron pointed out.

Could you just please tell him?

And risk having him walk right out that door, saying that he’s in no mood for complications right now? No way. I want to have him. Just a little more.

“A bit tired, I guess,” he murmured.

Aron pulled him close and slowly began caressing his back.

“I still remember how you used to tell me everything,” the man said, his voice tight. “We will get back to that.”

I could tell you everything, but I can't tell you that. Not right now. I need you too much.

“We will,” he replied with conviction. “Now, really, we should start putting your things in all their rightful places if we don't want this to take us the whole Sunday.”

That evening, after their night out, spent pleurably, without complications, and uncomfortable questions, Carter was as happy as he could be with their arrangement. Yeah, for a while, he could practice being happy.

“Ah, damn, I only have one blanket,” he noticed as they prepared for bedtime.

“It's okay, we can share,” Aron shrugged as he began shedding all his clothes.

Carter licked his lips as he watched his friend putting on a small striptease show, just for him. When Aron turned, showing off his gorgeous body, and what looked pretty much like a semi-erection, he knew he wasn't going to get too much sleep.

“You're sleeping naked?” he asked, as soon as he realized they were both too silent.

“Well, I think you should, too. Fuck buddies arrangements?” Aron asked.

That was supposed to be a joke, but Aron's voice came out low and strung.

“Okay,” Carter nodded. “I, like, totally agree. What other rules should we put in there?”

He was talking to Aron, but he could only stare at the guy's cock. Clearly, he was just getting a little bit obsessed.

“Let's just make them as we go,” Aron moved to the bed, and Carter followed.

He was a bit overly conscious as he undressed like he could feel Aron's eyes everywhere. Seconds later, they were both lying in bed, and Carter could feel the tension growing a bit.

"Should we just go to sleep?" he proposed.

Aron moved to turn off the light on the bed stand. Carter had to admit that he was a little disappointed, but he could not really say it.

He didn't have time to meditate over what could mean that Aron wanted to go to sleep early because the next thing Aron did was to invade Carter's side of the bed, and basically plaster him against it.

"How does this sound like a second rule? Let's always play before sleeping," Aron spoke, and Carter was a bit thankful for the dark because otherwise, he would have had a tough time hiding what he was feeling right now.

"So who's on top?" he asked, hoping that talking about technicalities was going to stop him from blurting out some not so little truths.

"We'll take it slow," Aron proposed. "I want us to enjoy ourselves, nothing else."

Enjoy it, yes, he could definitely do that. It could not be that difficult. It had to be easy, by all means.

Yet, he moaned as soon as Aron covered his lips, and the guy's hands came upon his wrists, dragging them up and keeping them in place.

"Am I too rough?" Aron asked gently. "I'm sorry. It was hard to keep my hands to myself all day long."

"You shouldn't ... be sorry. And don't keep your hands to yourself," Carter replied quickly.

"Are you sure? Because I might want to assault you in the most inappropriate situations, like when we're watching a game or you're drinking coffee or ... I don't want to scare you off."

"You're not scaring me off. I promise," Carter said.

“Okay. Because I’m feeling a little like I’m in a dream and I’m going to wake up soon,” Aron said simply.

“No, it’s no dream at all.”

And if it is, we’re both having it.

“Good then,” Aron chuckled. “Then can I jump you anytime I feel like it?”

Carter could tell the guy was joking, only that their cocks were touching and they were both a little bit hard right now, and that was no joking matter.

“Well, maybe not anytime. Some situations can be dangerous. Like what if we’re in traffic? Also, maybe we could get arrested for indecent exposure if we do it in public, and then your parents will have to bail us out, and also Taz is going to get confused when we don’t get back home and ...”

“Okay,” Aron murmured against his lips and shut him up with a kiss.

He didn’t mind that. Oh, he didn’t mind that at all, especially since Aron knew how to slide one hand underneath and lift him up, so they could meet thrust by thrust. It was just so, so good, to be kept in place by a strong hand wrapped around his wrists, and have another on his ass, squeezing, and a damn fine cock on his, while Aron called the shots and was doing a great job while at it.

Had anyone said to Carter before that he would find sword fighting a pretty fascinating sport, he would have called that person on having way too much imagination, but the truth was that he liked it. He liked it so much, that he could not get enough of it. Especially since Aron was also busy fucking his mouth with his own, and the guy knew how to make that kind of rubbing really pleasant.

“Oh, fuck,” he murmured, as soon as they stopped kissing so they could breathe a little. “I want to suck your cock,” he said in one go, hoping that Aron didn’t have other plans.

“Let’s go 69,” Aron whispered. “I want to suck yours, too.”

Aron decided on his own to manipulate Carter easily on top of him, and in the right position, making them face each other’s cock with ease. Carter knew that he was merely just enthusiastic and way too sloppy, as he pushed as much as he could into

his mouth, only to release and take a deep breath a moment later, like a diver just before a dive.

Aron, on the other hand, seemed to have no problems with swallowing Carter's cock deep and controlling it with a light squeeze at the base. Ah, well, he could try to take after whatever Aron was doing. Because it definitely felt pretty frigging amazing.

The only problem was that Aron was an expert deepthroater while he, Carter, could barely be called a novice. So he decided to aim for artistic points, rather than technique. Grabbing Aron's cock with both hands, he began licking it like a lollipop. And he was probably doing something good because it was clear that Aron was enjoying it if the muffled sounds the guy was making were any indication.

He put his mouth over the engorged mushroom, continuing to lick it and suck it. It was probably going to take a while to manage to get the whole thing inside his mouth, but he could do half of it, so he could work on that.

The problematic aspect was that Aron was doing an amazing job swallowing him to the hilt, and that made it pretty frigging difficult to concentrate. Hell, it was impossible to concentrate.

He noticed, somewhat horrified, that he was moving his hips, and practically hammering Aron's throat. He needed to stop that. Really, he needed to do it. But Aron moved both hands to cup Carter's buttocks and he began hammering his own throat using the other's body to satisfy this very strange thrill of his.

"Oh, fuck," he cried this time feeling his climax coming, without any chance to postpone it.

It was a real pity that he had to let go of Aron's delicious cock, to focus on the pleasure invading him and making his toes curl, but there was no way helping it. There was no way out for him, and it wasn't like he had any regrets. He pushed and pushed, and Aron helped him, by keeping his hips down, and clamping down hard with his mouth, that Carter was certain he was going to faint one second later.

He was probably making very strange sounds as Aron was gently pushing him away to rest on the bed. The guy was laughing.

“So full of yourself,” Carter mumbled. “Fuck, your cocksucking techniques are out of this world, A.”

“A? You haven’t called me that in a million years,” Aron chuckled.

“Ah, really? Because A is ...”

“... the first letter of the alphabet, so the most important,” Aron continued. “Yes, I know. I wanted to think it was only because you wanted to call me in a way that was only yours.”

“But A was way too simple,” Carter continued.

“I know,” Aron moved to one side. “You also called me A-champ. That was progress.”

“Still not good,” Carter shook his head and laughed. He was too damn high to give a damn. “Until that idiot from the class next door started calling you A-chimp and ruined it.”

“How about you be a champ now and get to work,” Aron joked and took one of Carter’s hands to put it on his own cock.

“Sure,” Carter agreed enthusiastically.

Aron made a small naughty sound when Carter pushed as much as he could in his mouth.

“Oh, wow, you really took that champ comment to heart,” Aron joked, but the words died on his lips when Carter began pumping his cock again.

He was a man with a mission, after all. Making Aron come was like the ultimate goal. And he really hoped for that reward.

Which swiftly came, Aron most probably surprised with Carter’s total lack of technique to try to prolong his pleasure. When Aron’s cum hit his taste buds, Carter hurried to swallow, while continuing to lick the guy’s cock.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” Aron chanted, and pushed Carter’s head down.

Again, they were both breathing hard. But of course, the best part was that they were both done, this time around.

“Well, not sure if I did it like a champ ...” Carter began, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

“You did it,” Aron confirmed. “Frankly, I cannot understand how all these years ... I had no idea you would enjoy this. I should have proposed such an arrangement earlier.”

“That would have certainly taken off some pressure,” Carter joked. “If it’s any consolation, I think you’re the best.”

“You too,” Aron admitted.

“Really? But you’ve been with guys and ... I mean, gay guys ...”

“And you are ...” Aron said on a playful tone.

“Hmm, not gay?” Carter wondered out loud. “Actually, I did do a lot of gay things with you, and that means that I am a little gay, too, right? And since I’m enjoying it so much, I’m probably a lot more gay and ...”

Aron burst into laughter.

“Everything has to have a clear explanation with you. But I think that’s you. You’ve always been like this. And you sure made us get almost scot-free from a lot of trouble when we were kids. Like when we broke that neighbor’s window from across the street. What was the man’s name?”

“Allen something,” Carter supplied. “It rhymed with Allen wrench, but I cannot recall the family name right now.”

“After you explained in detail how the ball moved at a certain velocity, following a certain arch, and motivated that the outcome of a broken window, given the DP rating of the said window that could not be that high, was inevitable, he let us off the hook.”

“We did have to replace the window, though,” Carter pointed out.

“Yeah, my dad wasn’t that impressed with your complex explanation. He told us that we either replace the window or we’re both grounded.”

“And he was right. He raised us well. Your mom, too,” Carter added.

“Yeah, they did,” Aron sighed, in contentment. “I’m glad I grew up with you.”

“Same here,” Carter raised one hand.

There was comfortable silence stretching between them now.

“Are you asleep?” he murmured, just in case Aron did fall asleep.

“No, not yet.”

“Would it be weird, you know, if I touched you?”

Aron’s voice was soft when the man replied.

“Not at all. Touch me.”

Carter stretched one hand and placed it on Aron’s chest. He sighed in contentment, as Aron’s rhythmic breathing began lifting his hand up and down. In the morning, he could not recall how fast he had fallen asleep, too.

Aron was already in the shower when he finally opened his eyes. Ah, damn, he had slept like a log, and probably Taz was already wondering why the hell they weren’t at the park. The kid needed a schedule. Mumbling something in the way of scolding himself, Carter got out of the bed. He was just putting on his tracksuit pants when he heard something ringing.

Hmm, that wasn’t his ringtone. Oh, it had to be Aron’s phone. Well, whoever it was, they had to call later again, he thought and pushed his hands through his hair, just to comb it a little. There was time for grooming later when Aron was going to be out of the shower.

The door to the bathroom opened, and Aron stuck his head through it.

“Could you please see who’s calling?” Aron asked. “And ‘morning,” he added with a smile.

Carter grabbed his friend’s phone from the nightstand.

“It’s some David dude,” he said.

That David. Aron's best friend right now, probably. Of course, Aron needed a friend to talk to. And Carter wasn't, probably, ...

"Please answer for me and tell him I'll call just a little later. My hands are all wet and I was waiting for his call," Aron said over the incessant ringing.

"Sure," Carter shrugged.

Aron withdrew back to the shower.

"Hi," he answered, and found his voice sounding just a little bit too high pitched.

What the hell? Was he losing his voice now?

"Hi, I would like to talk to Aron," the man on the other end seemed a bit hesitant.

"Yeah, sure, he'll call you later. He's in the shower now," Carter spoke quickly.

"Ah, you must be Carter," David said now, in a cheerful tone. "Is Aron sleeping over? Who's struggling on the sofa? You or him?"

For some reason, Carter took that as an affront.

"We're both sleeping on the bed," he said, and this time his voice came out snappy.

Oh, great. Now he couldn't even control his own voice.

"On the bed?" David laughed at the other end. "Together? Way to go, Aron Ruskin!" the man added with satisfaction.

"Hey, you're still talking to me. I'm Carter. Aron can't hear you. He's in the shower."

Great. Back to four-word phrases.

This guy's like intimidating or something.

"You sound just like Aron described you," the man laughed again. "So are you two boys having fun?"

"Yeah. Saturday night we went dancing and stuff," Carter mumbled.

“Hmm, dancing, sleeping together ... Should I worry about Aron’s reputation?” David laughed again.

“He’s separated from his husband,” Carter protested. “It’s not like he’s doing something wrong.”

“Of course not. I’d say that he’s finally doing the right thing,” David replied. “But I’m just a little bit curious, Carter. Did you fight a lot?” the man’s voice was now a seductive whisper.

“Fight? Why should we fight?” Carter wondered out loud, pretending the guy’s voice was not doing something funny to his ear.

“Not the two of you. You. When Aron finally got the guts to jump your sexy bones,” David explained.

“I,” Carter pointed toward his chest as if David could see him, “jumped his sexy bones.”

“Wow,” David said matter-of-factly, but the amusement was clear in his voice. “You’re even more a surprise than I imagined, Carter Malis.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Carter inquired.

“I’ll tell you when you grow a little bit older,” David chuckled. “Okay, I’ll wait for Aron’s call.”

“Wait,” Carter said. “What’s Aron to you? What are you to Aron?”

“What? Are you jealous, too?” David asked. “I thought only his prissy husband was obsessed with this.”

“Nope, not jealous. Just curious. Aron tells me everything and he hasn’t mentioned you before.”

Wow, you said that without stuttering. Be careful. And you are jealous.

I’m like friend-jealous, not lover-jealous.

“Well, you skipped a few years of Aron’s life. I’m sure he’ll tell you everything about me,” David said now in a serious voice.

“Okay,” Carter said. “Nice meeting you. I mean, not meeting you, because I’ve never seen you ...”

And here is how you get a nose like Pinocchio’s.

“You’ll see me, I’m sure,” David laughed again. “And you’re just like Aron described.”

“Wait, did Aron tell you I have sexy bones?” Carter asked, realizing what the man had said earlier.

Now David was roaring with laughter.

“No,” he eventually got over his fit of laughter. “But he showed me pictures of you. So the sexy bones part is all on me, pretty boy. I bet Aron sees you even more than just sexy.”

“Did he, hmm,” Carter swallowed nervously, “tell you that?”

“Oh, it looks like we’re in high school,” David sighed, but it was clear the situation was continuing to amuse him. “You’re sleeping with the guy, Carter. I’d say you should have enough courage to ask him things like these.”

“Okay, thanks for the advice,” Carter replied.

“And thank you for making me start the day with a smile on my face,” the man commented slyly. “I can barely wait to meet you. I’ll tell Aron to bring you over to my club.”

“No way!” Carter said and instantly wanted to slap himself.

“Hmm, what?” David asked, clearly confused.

“I mean, later. Because Aron just has so many things on his mind. And he’s busy, and ...”

“I’m sure you two will find the time to drop by. You guys should take some rest once in a while.”

“Is that advice?” Carter asked.

“Sure. Don’t pull a muscle,” David laughed.

“I won’t,” Carter replied.

He was still staring at the phone screen long seconds after finishing the conversation. Absorbed in thought, he didn’t notice Aron getting out of the bathroom. He almost jumped when the man pulled him into a hug and kissed him on the cheek.

“The shower is all yours,” Aron nuzzled his ear a little while showing no signs that he wanted to let go.

“I should check on Taz. I bet he’s already up and about and probably scratching the door to get outside.”

“I can walk him a little around the block if it’s an emergency,” Aron offered.

“Hmm, okay,” Carter said, trying to ignore Aron’s nice smell, fresh out of the shower.

Or how naked the man was, he finally realized. Ah, damn, if he moved the back of his hand a little, probably he was going to touch ...

“C’mon, don’t hesitate so much,” Aron laughed and let go of him, much to his regret. “Taz is well behaved, and I suppose I can walk a dog.”

Carter watched longingly while Aron began covering his amazing body with clothes.

“Don’t you need to go to work?”

“I have time,” Aron waved. “I wanted to get up a little early so that I don’t monopolize the shower while you need it.”

“Don’t worry, I have enough time for that,” Carter said.

“Of course, I wouldn’t have minded taking a shower with you,” Aron added, and this time, the look he gave Carter was loaded with meaning.

“Ha,” Carter shook his head. “Good luck fitting two people in there.”

“Oh, it would be crowded, without a doubt,” Aron’s voice was slick and sensuous.

Sensuous? What the hell was he thinking first thing in the morning? With a wince, he adjusted his tracksuit pants, squeezing his cock to behave.

“I do have to go to work,” Aron sounded stern now. “So stop doing that.”

“Doing what?” Carter grimaced.

Fuck. Caught in the act.

“Playing with your junk. Because next thing, I’ll want to do that.”

“Play with your junk, too?” Carter asked.

“Yeah, funny. No, with yours,” Aron replied with a smile.

Oh. Damn. Okay.

“I’m off to the shower,” he said quickly.

Seriously, now he really needed to play with his junk.

Half an hour later, when Aron handed him Taz’s leash and he was heading to the neighborhood park, he was wondering why the hell everything seemed so familiar. Aron going to work, he taking the dog for a jog, and both of them behaving like it was the most natural thing in the world. Was this meant to be? Carter shook his head. That was stuff from fairytales and such. It was just that they were so familiar with each other. This was just a next step. A higher step. All right, one that was more exciting, admittedly. And it was new, he could not deny it. But everything fit just so well.

“Don’t get adjusted to it. This is just temporary,” he mumbled to himself.

Aron was going to find a place to stay, once he was going to have a little time to start searching, and Carter was just going to go back to being alone, like before. And maybe they were going to continue to be friends because that was how things were, but Carter wasn’t going to be the same and ... he was going to be lonely.

The thought made him stop in the middle of the alley, feeling stunned, and incapable to move. Taz’s coarse tongue on his fingers brought him back.

“I’m not alone, right? I have you,” he said with a smile. “Now let’s get moving a little, we don’t want to end up being couch potatoes.”

“Hey, man,” someone called from behind, and Carter turned to see Simon jogging toward him.

He nodded at the guy. He had no idea what to say. Simon looked pretty content and was smiling widely.

“Do you mind if we jog together?” Simon asked.

“No problem,” Carter shrugged.

They were just jogging leisurely, so Simon began talking.

“I’m so happy right now. And you must be, too. Aron’s a great guy.”

“A rather funny thing to say about your lover’s husband,” Carter said.

“No, I have nothing against Aron, never have, really. It’s just that I’m in love, so, I guess, I’ve envied Aron for a long time. But, between you and me, have the two of you been together long? Alex used to say Aron was cheating on him. Or maybe it was just a ruse, and they were already in that kind of open relationship and stuff?” Simon asked.

The guy had a lot of questions. Carter could not blame him. Alex was probably capable of making anyone he touched question everything.

“Aron and I just happened recently,” he shook his head. “And it’s just ... a thing,” he added slowly.

They stopped by a bench and Simon began stretching his legs.

“A thing?”

“Yeah. I mean, we’re not that serious.”

I wish we were serious.

Simon threw him an odd glance.

“You’re that Carter,” the guy said matter-of-factly. “You’re Aron’s childhood friend. The one who ruined the wedding.”

Now, aren't we exaggerating a little? Nothing got ruined. I didn't even have cake.

“Ah, well, that’s some old history. And just for the record, Aron didn’t cheat on Alex.”

“How do you know?” Simon began swinging his arms.

“I know Aron,” he said simply.

Simon nodded thoughtfully.

“Well, I’m glad he’s with you. You two look great together.”

“You’re just saying,” Carter grinned for no reason at all. “You’re just happy you’re with that guy.”

Simon grinned back.

“Nah, that’s not it. Okay, it is, a little,” he admitted. “But you and Aron,” Simon whistled, “man, that’s like, wow. I saw you two kissing in front of that club, and before I realized who Aron was, I was thinking, wow, what a pair of sexy guys.”

“Really? I mean, Aron clearly is, but I’m totally new to the gay, you know, everything.”

Simon winked at him.

“If you need extra guidance, I’m here,” Simon offered cheerfully. “But by the way Aron was kissing you, I doubt he’d let anyone teach you but him. And, I’m totally honest when I say that you look perfect together. It’s like you two are made for one another.”

“Thanks,” Carter replied. “I should get back,” he added hastily. “Taz is getting hungry. See you around.”

“Sure thing,” Simon smiled. “And congrats for landing Aron. Really great guy,” the young man gave him the thumbs up as Carter walked away.

Obviously, the guy was so happy that he was looking at the world through rose colored glasses. Not that Aron wasn't great, but it seemed so strange that Simon was saying it. Before, Simon seemed not at all endearing toward Aron. So that was quite a big change.

At the same time, he needed to get away from Simon because the smile he felt growing, stretching his face was probably going to scare anyone happening to throw a look in his direction.

So is this how happy feels like?

So it would seem, friend, so it would seem.

Chapter Thirty-Two

“Microwave recipes,” Carter mumbled as he began browsing cooking websites.

Maybe he could make lasagna! But wait, Aron was making a much better lasagna, anyway. The best. So maybe something else would be a better idea. Like a surprise.

Hmm, maybe something healthy? Okay, he started reading, with Taz cuddled next to him on the sofa. Flaxseeds? What the fuck were those? Were they even edible? Somehow that recipe didn’t sound too tasty. Moving on, moving on.

So many types of cheese, Carter shook his head. It wasn’t like he hadn’t heard about cheddar and mozzarella and whatnot before, only that he hadn’t cared about what they were exactly. What kind of cheese was used for a cheeseburger anyway?

“I’m not getting anywhere like this, am I?” he asked Taz, and the dog whined, asking to be petted.

Carter quickly obliged, scratching his pet behind the ears. By the way Taz blinked, yawned and stretched, that was just the spot.

“Well, we need to start somewhere,” he decided and placed the laptop on the coffee table, and went for the fridge to check what he had in there.

Ah, well, there was still plenty of food from Aron’s mom. He should just opt for warming up something instead of trying to cook something on his own. Yet, it felt like he wasn’t doing enough.

“Taz, do you think I could seduce Aron with food?”

The dog barked one time and shook his head.

“Yeah, I thought so,” Carter said with a sigh. “With his mom’s cooking, he won’t risk food poisoning, which would be pretty much whatever I could cook. So, let’s settle for the tried and tested. Plus, Aron’s mom really knows how to cook, unlike me.”

Hmm, but what was he supposed to do, now that he had finished working, and there were still a couple of hours until Aron got home? He looked around the small

apartment. There were no dishes to do ... ah, damn, he had no dishes. Proper dishes. Only plastic everything.

“Let’s go shopping,” he told Taz, and the dog didn’t need another invitation, jumping from the sofa and going straight for the door.

Two hours later, Carter was displaying on the kitchen table three sets of plates in different colors, two glass sets, and various cutlery from the simplest to the fanciest he could find at the store.

“Which one do you think Aron would like best?”

To test Taz’s taste in cutlery, he offered his dog one plate, then another, so that the pet could sniff them. The golden retriever seemed completely unimpressed.

“Really, you’re not helping,” Carter glared.

Now where was he going to store everything? He opened the cabinets and looked inside. Well, there were the plastic plates he needed to get rid of, and also some suspicious cereal boxes. Grabbing a trash bag, he began stuffing them inside, until he managed to almost empty all the cabinets.

Taz stood up straight, twitching his ears.

“What is it?” Carter asked, and then he heard the sound of the keys in the door.

Ah, damn, he looked around panicked. The house was now even messier than before. They didn’t even have enough room to eat. And Aron was probably dead beat tired and just wanted to have something to chow and ...

“Are we turning into a china shop?” Aron asked from the kitchen door, looking amused at the loaded table.

“No,” Carter said slowly, “but I realized I needed some plates.”

“Some indeed,” Aron’s lips twitched. “Come here,” he added in an affectionate tone.

Carter almost stubbed his toe in a chair as he went straight into Aron's open arms. The man grabbed him and kissed him deeply.

Oh, fuck, that was ... oh, that was ... His mind was totally blank, and his eyes were probably rolling in his head, as Aron's tongue was giving him a shiatsu massage or something.

"Are you hungry?" he barely managed when Aron reluctantly let go of him.

Aron shook his head and bore his eyes into Carter's. Okay, now that was an intense look, right there. What could it mean?

Aron suddenly took his hand and began walking toward the bedroom, pulling Carter after him.

"Taz, stay here, and be a good boy," Aron said sternly at the dog that was happily marching after them.

The dog whined, but decided to curl into his dog bed.

"What are we ..." Carter mumbled.

Aron pulled him inside the bedroom, and closed the door after them. Carter watched in fascination as the man was undressing with efficient moves and a concentrated look on his face. Maybe he should undress, too? Or maybe Aron wanted to do that?

His dilemma was short-lived, as Aron moved to grab him, now completely naked, pulling him into another hungry kiss, while his steady hands pushed Carter's t-shirt up.

"All day," Aron spoke softly, but urgently, "all I could think of was getting back to you. So sorry, hun, but food will have to wait."

"Hun?" Carter wondered.

Aron didn't reply. Instead, he pushed Carter on the bed, making sure to pull his pants and underwear in the process, leaving Carter just as naked. Aron's body was heavy over his, and it was so damn great to feel the guy skin on skin.

Oh, Aron surely knew how to kiss, but it wasn't the only thing he was good at. He was now using one rough hand to tease Carter's nipples, first one, than the other, alternating his moves with brushes of the fingers and small pulls. And all this time, he was kissing Carter like his next breath was depending on him doing so.

It wasn't like he minded. If anything, he could not care less if the world was going down in flames right that very moment.

"Ah, I bought something for us," Aron let go of him to straighten up and rummage for something in his work bag.

"Ah," Carter replied matter-of-factly, seeing the lube. "That thing I had wasn't very good, right?"

Aron nodded, a bit amused.

Oh, so Aron was going to ... By all means, he had no idea why he was nervous. Maybe he was too excited. He didn't need to look down to know that his dick approved of whatever Aron wanted to do. So he opened his palm, gesturing for Aron to throw him the lube. Funny his hand wasn't trembling when catching the thing.

Pretending to be interested in what it said on the label, he raised the tube and squinted at the fine print.

"10 out of 10 gay guys vouch for this thing," Aron said with a small, all-knowing smile. "Perfect reviews, cross my heart."

Carter looked over at his friend. Of course, the guy was in the mood for joking. But it was important to know that the product was tried and tested.

"So, should I ... put it on me? In me, I mean?" Carter stuttered.

"No, let me," Aron climbed back on the bed close to him and took the lube from his hand.

Carter could swear that the next moment when Aron was going to touch him, he was going to come apart. Or maybe he was just going to hold himself into that one point, and if Aron was going to remove his hand, he was just going to break in tiny little pieces, so it was vital for Aron to touch him forever like that.

“Relax,” Aron cooed into his ear, as he aligned his body with Carter and his hand moved lower.

Aron hovered over Carter’s abdomen, caressing it in passing, pulled a bit at the hair just above Carter’s sex, and brushed over the half-hard and weeping cock lying on the side. Of course, the guy was going straight for that.

He was sure he was making all kinds of sounds, as Aron’s deft fingers pushed into his ass crack, making way for them.

“Do you want this?” Aron asked, his voice low and a tad strained.

“Oh-ho,” Carter replied. “I want it really bad.”

“Could you ask me?” Aron begged.

Why did Aron think he had to beg for such a thing? It was taking Carter all the patience he didn’t have not to spread open, squirt half the tube of that thing into his ass, and be the one to beg to get wrecked.

He turned his head just enough so that he could stare into Aron’s eyes.

“Fuck me, A,” he said simply.

Aron’s eyelashes fluttered and Carter made a small surprised sound when the guy pushed him on his back, climbing on top and between his legs.

“You okay with the missionary position?” Aron asked, his voice tender and now lacking any trace of humor.

“Are you kidding me? I’m more than okay,” Carter replied, caressing Aron’s broad shoulders. “I want to stare at you, like this,” he added, pulling his friend closer for a kiss.

“Okay,” Aron said with a small sigh. “But don’t hate me, okay?”

“Why should I ...”

Carter’s words died on his lips, when Aron found the way between his legs and pushed. He was barely at the entrance, but the small play with fingers and lube hadn’t quite prepared him for what was about to happen.

“Sorry, give me a second,” Aron mumbled. “I have no idea why I’m so impatient.”

Carter moved to capture Aron’s waist with his legs.

“You know that you’re not exactly helping,” Aron glared.

“Oh, but that is exactly what I’m doing,” Carter grinned, and pushed his body up to rub as much of him as he could against Aron’s erection. “I can take it,” he added bravely.

“I’m sure,” Aron chuckled. “But I don’t want to be sent to sleep on the sofa later.”

“Funny, but not funny,” Carter said back. “If my ass hurts after this, I’ll just fuck your ass, and be even.”

“Deal,” Aron said affectionately and moved only enough so he could sneak a hand between them, reach his cock, and guide it home.

“Oh, yes,” Carter moaned, despite the small pain.

His body was adjusting. It was actually getting hungry for Aron, swallowing up the guy’s dick, and Carter was totally agreeing with it.

“Fuck, you’re so damn hot,” Aron praised, and leaned in for a kiss.

Carter used both hands to grab Aron’s ass. His heels were already digging into Aron’s hamstrings, and now he just needed to use his hands, too, to bring the guy closer.

“Fuck me hard,” he whispered, and Aron’s breath hitched for a second.

Oh, but Aron did know how to fuck, how to move amply and give it to him good.

“Yes, yes, yes,” Carter encouraged his friend, bucking his hips upward, trying to get even more of that good thing.

“Oh, damn, you surely know how to drive a guy crazy,” Aron whispered. “I thought about this all day, and now I feel like it’s going to be over too soon.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll fuck again later,” Carter promised.

Aron's hammering was making him get close to the edge, too. This wasn't the right moment to try postponing this. There was going to be time later for seconds. This was just the first course, nothing else.

"It's like the entrée, or something," he mumbled.

Aron was speeding up now.

"Entrée?" he asked, but it was clear, by the hazy look in his eyes that he could not even understand the word.

"Yeah, let's have a five-course meal or something. Fuck five times a day," Carter moaned the words as he could no longer speak normally.

"Wow," Aron breathed hard. "I might have a problem keeping up with that."

"I don't think so," Carter whispered in his ear. "And I'll fuck you when you get tired."

Aron's voice was ragged and strangled at this point. He was using one hand to grab Carter's cock and rub it frantically.

"Oh, fuck," Carter pushed his head against the pillow, as he came all over.

Aron was now making the bed rattle as his thrusts became short and hard. A few seconds later, he pushed himself in and stood there for what Carter felt like the perfect kind of forever, only to drop by his partner's side a bit later.

"Better?" Carter grinned. "Fuck, there's jizz all over," he added with a small laugh, touching his chest. "I'm like a spitting fountain, or something."

Aron laughed, but it was clear that he had serious trouble getting his breathing back to normal.

"Spitting fountain? What's that?"

"Like a jumping fountain, only that it's spitting instead of jumping," Carter explained.

"I suddenly have a weird passion for fountains," Aron joked. "Sorry I took you by surprise."

“You were horny,” Carter shrugged. “So no sweat. And you know, whenever you’re horny, just ... go for it.”

“Ha, ha, you have no idea what you’re proposing,” Aron laughed. “I told you, I might jump you at the weirdest times.”

“As long as we don’t end up in jail,” Carter replied, but he was laughing, too, now.

“Carter,” Aron turned toward him. “You don’t mind me staying here.”

It wasn’t a question.

“Nope, not at all,” he replied nonetheless.

“And this,” Aron pointed at the two of them with a flick of the wrist, “this doesn’t bother you, either.”

“You sure know how to fuck,” Carter said. “I don’t remember ever coming like this.”

“But when you experimented, you know, with the dildo, how was it?” Aron asked.

The dildo? Ah, that lie.

“Definitely not like this,” he replied promptly.

“I’m sorry if I’m being nosy, but how come ... you never told me you wanted this?” Aron insisted.

“Something up my ass, you mean? I don’t know,” Carter shrugged. “I mean, it only happened after you got married.”

Oh, what a tangled web ...

Oh, shut up. I’m sticking to the truth as much as I can.

“Was I responsible then?” Aron asked.

“For me wanting a fucking? I don’t know,” Carter mumbled.

Fuck. This was getting difficult.

“Hey, you didn’t tell me stuff, either. Like who’s this David dude?” Carter inquired.

“Ah, David,” Aron chuckled. “You made quite an impression on him over the phone. Oh, he cannot wait to meet you in person. I bet he’ll be totally smitten.”

“Why, is he gay, too?” Carter asked.

And the award for the most credible performance goes to ...

There is no such award, shut the fuck up.

“Yes, he is. He runs a club, one that caters to more specific tastes,” Aron explained. “He’s a good friend. Back in the days when he was trying to lift his project off the ground, I helped him with some money. And we’ve been friends ever since.”

“For how long?” Carter inquired.

“Several years,” Aron answered.

“Ah, so that means that we were still friends when you met David,” Carter said. “And you,” he pointed an accusing finger at Aron, “didn’t tell me about him.”

Aron shook his head.

“That was stupid of me. I was trying to keep the two parts of my life apart. Trying to manage, I think.”

“What parts?” Carter asked.

“The one that involved me being gay, and the other that involved ... you,” Aron said, and this time, he looked away, seemingly embarrassed.

“I was the only one who didn’t know you were gay?” Carter demanded, and he could feel his heart getting a bit smaller.

“The only one important to me, yes,” Aron admitted. “I should have just told you,” he added with a deep sigh. “But I felt it was such a big risk.”

“Not that I exactly blame you,” Carter mumbled. “I was an ass at the wedding. But I couldn’t ...”

... be happy for you.

“... accept it,” he said instead.

“Just out of curiosity, what were you thinking during that time?” Aron asked, his voice soft and calm. “That I betrayed you? By not telling you?”

Carter swallowed hard a few times.

“Yes,” he said in a meek voice. “Really? Everyone knew except me?”

He couldn't even sound properly annoyed with the idea. For the simple reason that he couldn't be annoyed with Aron ever.

“I'm sorry, buddy,” Aron touched his arm and let his hand there. “I should have trust you not to judge me, instead of sending you into a shock and ...”

“Hey, I was an ass. Don't make up excuses for me.”

“Okay,” Aron agreed and smiled. “But, for the record, I think I was more pissed at me for not being able to explain to you about me, then at you.”

“Can you imagine how that conversation would have gone?” Carter snickered.

“Yeah,” Aron snorted. “I bet it would have been messy, either way.”

“Yeah, for sure,” Carter agreed. “Even in college ... I mean that was when you started fooling around with dudes, right?”

Aron nodded.

“I would have probably wanted a demonstration,” Carter continued. “Ask you about the mechanics of, you know.”

“Anal sex,” Aron filled in the gap.

“Yeah,” Carter nodded. “I would have wanted to see you doing it.”

“Really? Would you have watched me fucking some guy?” Aron looked surprised.

“No,” Carter scowled. “I would have liked to see a dildo up your ass.”

The moment the words flew from his lips he knew he was in it deep. Just the image of Aron playing with a dildo and making it magically disappear inside his sexy ass was making his dick twitch and throb some. Which was weird since he had just come.

“Oh, damn,” Aron said softly. “Well, let’s not cry over spilt milk. Now I think I’m hungry. Let’s try fitting two people into that shower and then into that kitchen.”

“Oh, no,” Carter murmured. “There are just plates and all kinds of stuff everywhere.”

“Then I’ll take you and Taz out. Or we can order a pizza,” Aron shrugged.

“Your mom would kill us knowing that we skip eating decent food, food she made, so we can stuff our faces with junk food,” Carter recited in one breath.

“Look who’s suddenly health conscious,” Aron laughed. “Okay, let’s wash, and then we’ll put things in order in that kitchen. What do you say?”

“Perfect,” Carter nodded eagerly.

“Just a quick question since I’m sure you have an interesting answer lined up,” Aron said.

“Shoot,” Carter shrugged.

“Why did you buy so many plates? It’s just the two of us, and Taz has his own bowl, right?”

“Ah, that was just because I had no idea which ones you’d like.”

Aron remained silent for a second.

“You wanted me to like your plates?” he asked tentatively.

“Yeah,” Carter said promptly. “I wanted you to like my plates.”

And decide that you never want to leave.

“Soon, I will have to look for a new place,” Aron’s words brought him back to the real world.

“Sure,” Carter said in a small voice.

Ah, fuck.

Maybe he hates plates, and you blew it.

“I’m not that hungry,” he decided. “Let’s have sex again.”

Seriously, there was no time to waste with eating, and anything else besides sex.

Aron laughed.

“Not that I don’t appreciate your enthusiasm, but I really need a shower and refueling. I practically jumped you like an animal.”

“So, what kind of place do you have in mind?” Carter changed the subject, just to hide his disappointment.

“I don’t know,” Aron shrugged. “Something that has enough room for a lot of plates,” he said with an enigmatic smile.

See? He likes plates!

Maybe he just hates the ones you picked.

“Do you hate the plates I picked?” he let his mouth flap for no reason.

“Hate?” Aron burst into laughter. “I really like them a lot actually.”

“Okay,” Carter said relieved. “I’ll show you where I bought them. Or I can just give them to you, as a gift, when you’ll go ...”

He almost squealed when Aron grabbed him and shut his mouth with a kiss.

“Shower now or I’ll have to pin you to the bed again,” Aron stared into his eyes for a second, like he was searching for something.

There was no wonder they made a mess in the bathroom, but eventually, they were decently dressed and now busy putting everything Carter bought away in the

cupboards. Aron seemed to be much more efficient than his roomie, like he was about everything.

He liked that. Yeah, he liked that very much, Carter mused, as he watched Aron eating. They were both silent, and a bit tired, but, between them, the silence wasn't awkward and everything seemed to be exactly how it had to be. But, as much as he hated doing that, he needed to break the silence and ask a few questions.

“Have you talked to Alex since the separation?” Carter inquired.

Aron frowned for a brief second.

“No,” was the curt answer.

“Are you pissed at him really bad?” Carter asked again.

Aron shrugged.

“Do you, ahem, have still ... feelings for him?”

Geez, that sounded like taken straight out of a reality show. And what's with the squeaky voice?

“You might say I'm callous, but I feel like ... I never really loved him,” Aron sighed. “I wanted to. Sometimes I wanted so much to believe. But except in the beginning, when I felt like I was finally thrown a rope to get myself out of the mess in my head, and more recently, strangely enough, when you were in a coma ... he seemed to be in love with me ... I don't know. He loves playing games too much. And I'm done playing games.”

“But we're playing, I mean, fooling around now, right?” Carter mumbled.

“Fooling around?” Aron's hooded eyes were doing nothing good to his nerves. “Sure.”

He could not really tell what Aron was thinking. And that was so strange, seeing that he usually knew everything. Maybe he was just a little bit broken when it came to understanding his best friend. Maybe it came with them having sex. Sex was complicating things. But he didn't want to let go of that kind of complication.

Aron stood up and gathered the dishes.

“No,” he hurried.

“You hate doing the dishes,” Aron laughed and kept the plates up, like he didn’t want Carter to reach them. “Don’t you think I forgot that.”

So he was left sitting, while Aron made himself busy at the sink.

“What would you like to do next? Rest a little? Go out for a walk with Taz?”

“Fool around,” Carter answered promptly. “I mean, if you’re not tired. And it’s not yet Taz’s time for the evening walk.”

Aron remained silent for a few seconds, and Carter wondered if the guy had really heard him.

“Done,” Aron said, wiping his hands on a cloth, and turning toward Carter with a smile.

He needed to take a picture. The kind to always keep in his wallet or something. Aron was leaning against the sink, his eyes intense and trained on Carter. But he wasn’t sure if a picture was enough to really capture how peaceful this scene looked like.

All right, maybe peaceful was not the right word, he thought, as Aron moved slowly. The man leaned in just enough to reach Carter, place one hand on the back of his head and angle their lips so they could kiss.

“Let’s fool around, then,” Aron whispered, and there was no other thing to do but to agree.

“Am I doing this right?” he asked, while he stared, his heart beating wildly in his chest, at his cock buried deep into Aron’s perfect ass.

Despite his protests, Aron had convinced him to go doggy-style this time. And it was true. It was too frigging amazing the way the guy’s ass was squeezing his cock in this position. There wasn’t any need to panic just yet, but he could feel his cock pulsing inside the tight channel of muscles, and he wasn’t sure whether he was going to blow too soon, or end up performing at least decently.

“If you moved, it would be even better,” Aron smiled at him, looking over the shoulder.

“Okay, I’ll try,” Carter mumbled.

His first moves were a bit clumsy, but he was finding his rhythm.

“Oh, fuck,” he whispered.

He loved grabbing Aron’s waist and pulling the guy to him. By the way Aron was bucking his hips to meet him halfway, he was doing it right, indeed.

But somehow it wasn’t enough. He needed to know how Aron felt. This was definitely different from his *modus operandi*, as he searched blindly for Aron’s cock beneath. The hardness filling his hand was making both his heart and cock swell with pride.

“Oh, damn, you’re so hard, A,” he said slowly.

“You have a huge dick and you know how to use it,” Aron joked back.

Okay, maybe half-joked, Carter thought. The guy’s voice was heavy, and the sounds he was making showed no signs that Aron was amused. Carter peeled the skin down from the hardened member in one move, and Aron cursed softly.

“Go faster,” Aron urged him.

He could do this, moving his hips to the rhythm, enjoying the amazing sensation of being squeezed and the incredible warmth of Aron’s body, and listening to the small chant of his best friend’s breathing falling into synch with everything else.

“Can I come in your ass?” he asked, through ragged moans.

“No need to ask, do it,” Aron urged him.

He wasn’t going to last. Now he was really going to make a fool of himself if he wasn’t going to make Aron come first. It was clearly common courtesy. And also a desire as huge as an entire planet, to feel Aron writhe and moan beneath him, in the throes of ecstasy.

The way the guy was moving his ass was driving him crazy. There was just so much need, and he could feel that doing it raw like this was the best way to claim Aron, even if for a fleeting moment.

“Yes,” he whispered, as hot liquid touched his fingers curled around Aron’s cock.

Now that was his cue. He pushed and pushed, the pleasure coursing through his veins at the speed of light, and came in waves that seemed to go on forever.

When he crashed by Aron’s side, breathing like a drown man barely pulled out of the water, he knew, with the utmost clarity, that he could never be with anyone like this.

“You were amazing,” Aron praised him, half turning to nuzzle his cheek.

“I was?”

“I can’t understand how you can be so insecure in your abilities as a lover, seeing how many girlfriends you had.”

“But no boyfriend,” Carter pointed out.

“Ah, of course,” Aron chuckled. “So there’s no term of comparison? Is this what you’re trying to say?”

“Well, probably, the mechanics of things are the same, but,” Carter raised one finger, “I cannot know for sure if my experience counted or not. Plus, I don’t really know if my girlfriends enjoyed it. I mean, I did ask, but ...”

“By the way they were gossiping about your performance,” Aron laughed, “I’d say they were pretty satisfied.”

Carter propped himself on his elbows, to stare at Aron.

“Were you gossiping with my girlfriends?” he asked, perplexed with this kind of revelation.

Aron dared to laugh at him.

“No, of course not. But girls sometimes talk, and sometimes one cannot help but overhear. Plus, with so many of them coming to me and asking me to introduce them to you ... I’d say you had quite the reputation.”

“Ah, great,” Carter dropped back on the pillow. “Now you think I’m easy.”

Aron was now laughing so hard that he had to straighten up not to choke himself.

“Easy?” he eventually managed.

“Yeah,” Carter said, a bit miffed now. “Since I had so many girlfriends.”

“Ah, I didn’t think you were easy. You were yet to meet the right one,” Aron said.

I’ve met the right one. He’s next to me.

Tell him.

No way. He’s not yet divorced. After that, maybe.

You’re just afraid he’ll say ‘no’.

Of course I’m afraid.

“Yeah,” he mumbled in reply instead of the storm inside his head.

“You think you will? Meet the right one?”

His body was weightless, and his bones were still melting after the orgasm from earlier. Yet, Aron’s words had a way of making him touch the ground.

“Yeah,” he whispered, still too afraid of speaking the truth.

Aron moved to get out of the bed.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“I think I need another shower,” Aron replied, and this time his smile as he looked over at Carter was no longer a happy one. It wasn’t reaching his eyes. Actually, his eyes were sad.

He remained in bed, listening to the sound of the water running.

We need to do something to keep him here.

Like what?

I don't know, but we need to be clever.

And that without blurting out how I'm in love with him, and going on one knee. It's the last thing a guy who's divorcing wants to hear. About another frigging wedding.

Seriously, are you really thinking about getting hitched?

With Aron? Of course. But all in due time.

Alex was married to him and couldn't keep him.

Ah, well, I'm not Alex. I'll do anything to keep him happy.

Aron was back, and still silent. Carter jumped out of the bed, to wash, too. Soon enough, he needed to take Taz out. No matter how much he wanted to, they could not spend all their waking hours in bed.

Happiness had to be in all the little things, Carter thought, as he almost stumbled over Aron's shoes on his way in. There hadn't been any awkward conversations for weeks, and Aron had talked no more about finding a place and moving out.

Also, they were busy fucking the brains out of each other, cooking together, okay, so that was more Aron and less him, taking Taz out, that was more him and less Aron, going out, sometimes even dancing, although they weren't doing much of that, either, because they were always ending up in a bed ...

All in all, life was good. Baby steps were good. There was no point in rushing and making Aron uncomfortable with declarations of love. Carter was pretty damn certain that he was going to suck at it when he was going to say the words.

And who knew what Aron was going to say then?

Aron seemed to be busy on the phone.

“And how many bedrooms?” Carter heard his roomie inquiring.

Ah, damn. His heart sank.

“A big yard is important, yes. Yes, we do have pets.”

Pets? Carter’s ears twitched. What was Aron doing, exactly?

The guy seemed pretty pleased as he finished his conversation with probably a real estate agent.

“Hey,” Aron smiled and beckoned him close.

That was one of his favorite moments of the day. When Aron was kissing him after coming home from work, or, like right now, when Carter came back from some errand.

“What were you doing?” Carter asked the soonest Aron let him breathe.

“I found the perfect place,” Aron said with satisfaction.

“Ah, you’re leaving?” Carter asked, not wanting to let his disappointment show.

“It’s perfect,” Aron’s smile widened. “It has a large yard.”

“I heard. What do you need it for?” Carter asked.

Are you really hoping ...?

Hush!

“Taz needs plenty of space to play,” Aron said promptly.

“Hmm,” Carter barely managed.

“And it has an excellent room that can be turned into a home office,” Aron added, pulling him close and tipping his chin, so they could stare into each other’s eyes.

“What for?” Carter mumbled again.

“For you,” Aron said softly, his eyes filled with warmth. “You’re my roomie, right? You and Taz are coming with me.”

“Oh,” Carter said.

“Not ‘oh’,” Aron corrected him. “It’s ‘yes’.”

“Yes,” Carter said automatically.

“Great!” Aron said cheerfully.

Carter was certain he was about to gush out like a little girl, starting that very moment, when Aron’s ringtone went off.

The man stared at the screen, and his face darkened. His voice was rough and harsh when he answered.

“Weren’t the terms clear?” Aron said.

Carter took one step back.

“You wouldn’t dare,” Aron hissed.

Ah, damn, something was wrong, Carter thought.

“No, I refuse,” Aron continued. “Are really willing to make this messy and ugly?”

Carter had a hunch who was on the other end.

“I will find a way,” Aron said, his voice strung now. “I don’t want anything. You cannot give me what I want.”

Carter wanted nothing less but to tear the damn phone out of Aron’s hand and yell at his rival that Aron wasn’t his anymore. But he knew that Aron could not bear let him carry this battle for him.

“Fine. You win for now. But just know this. That every moment I breathe, I will put into making this end.”

Aron’s mood was even worse when he put the phone away.

“Was that Alex?” Carter asked, unsure that he could still talk while not breathing.

“Yes,” Aron said, pursing his lips. “I will have to go back for a while.”

“To try to make things work?” Carter attempted.

Aron’s eyes were filled with hurt and anger as he looked at him.

“No. To end them for good.”

“But ... why do you have to go back? If you two don’t plan on getting back together?” Carter asked.

“Because my soon-to-be ex-husband dares to blackmail me by telling me that he would go to the police and tell them that he remembers all about the accident and that you pushed him in front of that fire truck. Yes, I know, it’s not the first time he’s saying this lie,” Aron shook his head.

“I didn’t push him!” Carter said firmly.

“Do you remember now? The accident?” Aron was hopeful, the clouds starting to leave his face.

“No,” Carter sank back into the sofa. “But I just know. I could have never done that.”

“I know,” Aron exhaled. “Don’t worry. I will deal with this situation,” he said through his teeth, “and then I’ll come back.”

“You don’t have to leave,” Carter spoke, fiddling with his thumbs. “Let him go to the police. He has to prove it, right?”

Aron sighed, and there was so much bitterness in that sound that Carter could feel his heart breaking in half.

“I don’t want you dragged into this mess. I’ll sort it out. Alex, he has a way to sound very convincing when he wants. I don’t want you hurt in any way.”

“But ...” Carter tried to protest.

“No. I know what you want to say,” Aron raised one hand. “And I know that you’re generous and kind and you would go through a scandal just for my sake. But I won’t put you at risk. Hell, I know I’m tempted to just stay here, and let that ... Just promise me this.”

Carter was almost forced to his feet, and Aron was grabbing his shoulders tightly.

“Promise me you’ll wait,” Aron said slowly, but firmly.

“Where could I go?” Carter mumbled.

“Promise me. It’s all I ask. Promise me that I’ll find you right here, when I come back.”

“Sure,” Carter nodded, hoping that he wasn’t shaking or doing other stupid thing. “I promise,” he hurried. “And I do know what you mean. Like no girlfriends.”

“And no boyfriends,” Aron added.

By all means, that should have sounded like a joke. But it wasn’t.

Aron pulled him into a tight embrace. For Carter, it felt like it was the last time he could hold Aron like this. And he feared, although he said not one word, that Alex was going to win again. And that he needed to find a way to fight this if he didn’t want to lose Aron forever.

Taz was sitting next to him, most probably sensing that something wasn’t right. Carter was staring at the nicely stacked plates in their cabinets, his hands resting on the cabinet knobs.

“Now what the hell am I supposed to do with all these plates?”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Ah, damn, it was raining. Carter didn't exactly feel like going out in the rain, but Taz could care less about that and needed out like five minutes ago. Well, it wasn't like he was the one depressed, right? There was no point for him, as a dog, to mope around the house, in slippers and pajamas.

Could dogs feel depressed? He wondered.

"Wanna go outside?" he scratched the dog's fluffy ears.

Taz placed his head on his master's knees and stared up, right into Carter's eyes. He whined.

"I suppose you can feel sad, too," Carter said. "Do you miss Aron, buddy? Because I do."

His brain didn't care to bother him with suppositions and whatnot. Maybe he wasn't in the mood to listen. Also, he had Taz to talk to. Sort of.

Aron hadn't called. They had not seen each other since that day. And, from that day, Carter could say that a new chapter of his life had started. One that was not nice at all.

"Couldn't it be just a filler?" he asked Taz, while continuing to scratch the dog's ears. "You know, like those episodes in the middle of the season that are a bore to watch, but you watch anyway, and the producers know that you won't skip because you're already in love with the characters and ..."

He trailed off.

"Let's just go outside," he finally found enough power of will to get up from the sofa.

Taz was quiet as Carter put on the leash.

"Not so happy to go outside in this kind of weather, huh?" Carter said. "It's raining cats and dogs. Like it's raining others like you. Like it's raining you."

He tried to chuckle to himself. He was attempting to tell his own dog a joke. And he was bad at it.

“He’ll call,” he said out loud.

Taz moved to push his head into his master’s hand.

“Glad we’re on the same page, buddy,” Carter patted the dog’s warm head. “We’re trusting Aron, right?”

Funny how lonely he could feel. Even with Taz around. It was like a portion of space, in the shape and weight of Aron, had been displaced from his shoe box like apartment. When sitting on the sofa, watching TV, he often turned to his right, like he was expecting Aron to be there and laugh at his shitty jokes.

Or when he was having dinner in the kitchen and he just stared at the empty place across from him.

Or when he was in his bed, and there was no heavy arm thrown around his waist. That was the worst part. How much of a movie cliché can he be, waking up in the morning, and searching blindly with his hands for the one who was supposed to sleep on the other side of the bed? He kept to his side. Aron said it clearly to wait for him. There was no point to get used to having the whole bed to himself again.

At least he had his work. And, of course, the TV. Which he got stuck on the local entertainment channel, in hope of hearing of Aron’s and Alex’s divorce. Of course, he could just call Aron and ask what the hell was going on. But there seemed to be a code of silence Aron had imposed and he felt he needed to abide by it, as well.

It wasn’t like him to be left with nothing to do like this. What the hell was going on?

Maybe Alex convinced Aron they’re good together and he’s never coming back.

Shut up. I told you I can talk to Taz if I feel lonely.

It’s not about that. It’s about stating some facts.

There’s only one fact I care about. Aron told me to wait for him. So I’ll wait.

There was no point to be doubtful. But waiting like this was the worst torture he could imagine. Most probably, that douchebag Alex had imposed Aron not to call, or else ... something.

He didn't have the mind of a diva, to imagine what 'else' could mean in Alex's vocabulary. Was the guy still keeping it up with that lie? Aron should have just ignored the bastard. And let the police come and investigate him or whatever.

Aron would never do that to you and you know it.

I just wish, this time, he would not care so much. I wish he was here already.

He put on the raincoat and began descending the stairs. Taz was whining softly while following him.

"Sorry, buddy," Carter murmured. "I'm not the best father right now, am I?"

Maybe he could call someone else. Maybe he could talk to Aron's parents. But something was telling him Aron didn't want his folks involved. And he could respect that.

He went to the park, even though the rain kept pouring. Taz needed the exercise, regardless of weather. There was not a soul in sight. The only noise was the rain hitting the pavement.

The weather had been bad for several days now. It wasn't making him feel any better, although maybe seeing too many cheerful people around might have just pissed him off, right now.

He was lost in thought, when Taz started to bark. As he raised his eyes from the pavement in front of him, he noticed that he wasn't, after all, the only living soul in the park in that kind of weather.

Slowly, he approached the guy and took a seat next to him. Simon sighed, but said nothing. He wasn't wearing a raincoat, and he still had his normal jogging clothes. Water clung from his hair, and his garments were wet. But he didn't seem to care.

"Hey, man," Carter made the first attempt to speak.

"Hey," Simon said back, in such a dejected voice, that Carter could swear the guy was even more depressed than he was. "What's with you here?"

“I need to walk the dog,” Carter pointed at Taz who had taken a sitting position right away. “What’s with you?”

“You know,” Simon shrugged. “The usual. I’m out jogging.”

“Seriously? ‘Cause I see you’re sitting,” Carter said.

Even Simon’s laugh was apathetic.

“What the hell is happening? Do you have any idea?” Simon asked.

The man half-turned to look at Carter with his beautiful puppy eyes. Carter could feel his heart breaking a little.

“No, none. But you’re the one working with Alex. What is he telling you?” Carter pointed out.

Simon cast his eyes down in defeat.

“He broke it off with me. No explanations, no nothing. He just told me that he needs to put his marriage in order. But I don’t think that’s that.”

Hmm, even puppy eyes knew something was not okay with that bastard.

“Have you talked to Aron? What is he saying?” Simon asked.

“No, we haven’t spoken. I think Alex forbid him or something,” Carter replied.

“I can imagine him doing that,” Simon blew hot air into his cupped hands. “So they don’t have an open marriage, after all?”

Carter sighed.

“I don’t know Alex that well. Aron thought they were or else he would not have been with me,” he lied. But it wasn’t like he could tell puppy eyes the truth.

“Alex ... he likes playing games,” Simon said. “When I mentioned you to him, he seemed annoyed and surprised. But I guess it was just his way of pretending that he didn’t know about you.”

“Simon, may I ask you something?” Carter spoke.

“Shoot,” the young man replied.

“What exactly do you see in that guy? Okay, I know he’s beautiful and ...”

“Seriously, I have no idea,” Simon interrupted him. “I just have the impression that he has taken me for a fool, all this time.”

“Really?” Carter expressed his surprise at that statement. “How come?”

“I think he’s just not pretending anymore. I think he pretended for a long time. He has a way of getting under other people’s skin. He does that at work. A lot. People eat from the palm of his hand, that’s how good he is,” Simon spoke bitterly. “He fooled me. He made me think that I ... oh, just screw him,” he added with a sigh.

Wow, Alex must have really shown his true colors, Carter thought. With someone as gullible and as in love as Simon, it had had to be difficult to make the guy think otherwise. Which meant that the Wicked Witch of the West cared not for appearances anymore.

“Simon, would you say that you don’t hope for him to get back to you?” Carter asked cautiously.

Simon looked at him again, pondering for several seconds. Carter observed, without a word, the flicker of hope in the caramel eyes, followed quickly by despair, and then by resignation.

“No, I can’t be that stupid,” Simon said and shook his head. “You know, fool me once ...”

Taz barked one time.

“Would you like a small treat, buddy?” Carter searched his pocket for Taz’s treats.

What was that thing doing there? He wondered as he pulled out a small elegant business card. Ah, it was from David’s club. Aron had given it to him, and he had just put it in these pants by accident. They had been too busy to go visit.

He stretched out his hand.

“What’s this?” Simon asked, taking the card from Carter’s hand.

“Just some place,” Carter replied. “I mean, it’s pretty cool. It’s run by a guy named David. If you decide to go and forget about Alex for some time, just tell David I am the one who recommended you his club.”

“Um, okay,” Simon said. “But I’m not in the mood to party right now.”

“Oh, no, it’s not for that,” Carter said. “Well, it’s for that, too. But David is quite a cool guy. You might feel good talking to him. Also, I should tell you. It’s kind of a BDSM club. Really tasteful, though,” he hurried to add, seeing that Simon was staring at him, wide-eyed. “Nobody’s jerking off out in the open or anything like that.”

“Just how much did Alex tell you?” Simon murmured. “And he really made fun of me for being into that kind of stuff,” he said that mostly to himself.

“Well, just forget about the douchebag,” Carter urged the other. “He’s not worth it, okay?”

“Why are you helping me?” Simon asked, turning to look at Carter again. “I mean, I was kind of an asshole to you and Aron that night.”

Carter waved.

“No sweat. You seem to be just another person caught up in this whole drama thing,” he gestured. “Well, it would have been easier for me if Alex was interested in you and left Aron for good, but ...” he made a lame attempt to joke.

Simon snickered.

“So you’re not keen on pushing me back into that guy’s arms? Even if that means, you know, that you and Aron ...” the young man trailed off.

Carter patted him on the back.

“I could never do that to anyone. That guy’s really bad,” he said.

“Funny, I thought you said you didn’t know Alex that well,” Simon pointed out.

Carter sighed.

“Let’s just settle for the simple truth that I probably meant every bad word I threw at the guy at their wedding.”

Simon giggled again.

“He told me about that. As a gay guy, I feel like I should be mad at you, but, as he was telling me what you said ... I don’t know, I felt like finally, someone stood up to him and told him something bad to his face. It’s petty, I know. But I felt a bit avenged, for all the times when he put me down. I bet he made such a face,” Simon shook his head, smiling.

“Ah, well, it looks like I’m batting for your team now, so I certainly exaggerated back then ...”

“Hey, I’m glad you joined our team,” Simon hurried to hug him. “You know what? I think I’ll go visit that club. Alex never wanted to go to anything similar, so I’m glad for this chance. I really feel like it’s something I’d like to try.”

“Great,” Carter patted the guy’s back. “Now how about you go home, take a hot shower and spend the day in? Call in sick. A day away from that douchebag will do you good.”

“Excellent advice!” Simon stood up, and clapped his hands in glee.

And sneezed loudly.

“Bless you,” Carter said, and Simon grinned at him.

He wasn’t expecting to be embraced so effusively again. But he could live through it.

“Are you sure you don’t double as a shrink in your spare time?” Simon asked. “The second time I’m talking intimate stuff with you and I feel great.”

“I’m pretty sure,” Carter replied, “being a shrink is not for me. Although I would like one of those couches they show in movies. They look really comfortable. Do you think they sell them online?”

Simon smiled at him.

“You’re a bit different,” the guy said. “From anyone else I know, at least. But I like you, man. You’re cool.”

“Thanks,” Carter replied promptly.

“See you,” Simon waved while walking away. “And thanks for this,” he pointed at the card.

Carter looked after Simon for a while. He felt a little better, too. Even if helping Simon wasn’t going to get him closer to Aron, it felt good, nonetheless. Plus, he had a little idea about what to do next.

It wasn’t difficult to spot Alex’s Spyder, even among the numerous luxury vehicles parked in the parking lot at Beauty X. Unless the douchebag was working late, he was going to be there any moment now.

Carter decided to wait, and fortunately, didn’t have to do that for long. He noticed Alex coming out of the building, while chatting and flirting with some co-worker, by the way he was throwing his head back and gesturing with both hands.

The guy slowed down when he noticed him, but, after a short moment of hesitation, he decided to continue walking.

“I want to talk to you,” Carter said, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Are you here to make a scene?” Alex huffed and tried to maneuver himself around Carter.

No way. The scumbag wasn’t going to run away from this.

“No, I’m here to set things right,” Carter said.

Alex sighed theatrically and stood in front of Carter, mimicking his moves and crossing his arms over his chest.

“Let Aron go. You don’t want him,” Carter spoke first.

“And you do,” Alex set his chin high. “Seriously? How long have you two been screwing each other? I have to say I was pretty damn surprised to hear about it.”

“Not long enough,” Carter said through his teeth. “It was after you two got separated, just so you know. Unlike you and Simon,” he added.

Alex assessed him, his eyes at half-mast.

“You seem to know all kinds of things. It makes one wonder,” Alex said slowly, measuring every word.

“Wonder what?”

Alex shrugged.

“It doesn’t matter. I’m not giving up on Aron.”

“Too bad. Because he has given up on you already,” Carter said.

For a brief second, Alex’s green eyes shadowed.

“Well, there’s no marriage without rough patches. We’ll work through this one. I’m sure.”

Alex made a move to go for his car, but Carter caught his arm.

“What’s this story about me pushing you in front of the fire truck? You know it’s not true,” he hissed at the other.

Alex shook his arm free.

“No, it’s not,” he admitted, as he searched his man purse for the car keys.

“So why are you insisting on it? Do you want to see me thrown in jail? Will that make you happy?”

To Carter’s surprise, Alex’s eyes became even darker. Suddenly, the guy was looking older than his age. Now that was one of Alex’s faces he could not remember seeing.

“No one’s throwing you in jail, don’t worry,” Alex sighed. “I’m not going to say that.”

“So? Did you tell Aron that?” Carter asked, hope rising inside.

“Why should I?” Alex said, the corners of his mouth dropping lower. “It’s the only way I’m keeping him right now from shutting down our marriage.”

“You’re impossible!” Carter exclaimed, fighting with the guy over the car door.

“And what do you care?” Alex hissed like a wild cat. “Aron loved you like a shmuck for years, and you were blind. I come along, I marry him, and you suddenly want him? Is that it? You only care when the toy’s taken away from you?”

Carter gaped in shock. The scumbag was right. In a fucked up way, but he was right. What could he say to defend himself against that? He had practically given Aron the cold shoulder for years. And he had no excuse for that.

Alex took advantage of his surprise to slide inside his car and slam the door shut. Carter barely managed to get out of the way, as the asshole kicked the Spyder into gear.

Cereals. Without milk. He didn’t care for food much lately. At least he wasn’t leaving Taz unfed. Yay. He could congratulate himself for doing something half right, and that was taking care of his dog. If it hadn’t been for Taz, he was pretty certain he would have gone without food or leaving the house for days. At least, he was going through the motions. Sleep, work, shower, shave, stuff like that. But he wasn’t in the mood for eating, that was all.

The problem was, that asshole was right. How could he claim Aron when he had been such a stupid piece of shit for years? He wasn’t in his rights to do that. Not that he wanted to let Alex have him. If there was one thing he was certain of, that was that Aron should be free from that asshole. And then, well then, Carter was going to love him for at least 15 years until he was going to muster the courage to tell Aron how he felt. It was only fair. 15 years for 15 years.

The TV blared as some energetic anchorwoman wearing vibrant war paint was reading the latest in show biz.

“And, now, we are live with our correspondent on the ground,” the woman spoke cheerfully.

Carter was busy searching for a piece of raisin in his cereals, when something from the reporter's commentary drew his attention. He almost had to turn the couch upside down to find the remote and pump up the volume.

"Yes, we all heard the rumors," the reporter was conversing with the anchorwoman in the studio. "But it looks like Alex Ruskin is back in love with his husband, as they are both attending this very special event for our fashion icon."

The camera panned over a beautifully adorned room, where people dressed up to snuff were seated at tables, in what looked like a restaurant or club setting. His heart clenched as the camera zoomed in on Aron and Alex who were at the same table with others Carter remembered to be Beauty X employees.

"So, no more trouble in paradise?" the anchorwoman demanded to know.

Alex was clearly busy chatting with the others at the table, but, when he made a move to take Aron's hand, as the man was keeping one resting on the table, Aron stood up brusquely. Alex turned his head to watch his husband with a frozen look on his face.

Carter watched in fascination while tuning out the reporter's commentary. He was too busy looking at Aron. The man's face looked dark, his lips pursed as he leaned over his husband, probably whispering something only the two of them could hear.

Alex seemed surprised for a fraction of a second and then he seemed to notice the camera focused on him. Right away, he began smiling charmingly and waved. The camera zoomed in for a few seconds. When it zoomed out, Aron was nowhere in the picture.

Carter sighed. Aron looked good. But pissed like hell. So, at least, whatever Alex was doing to fix that so called rough patch, it wasn't working.

I thought you wanted to save that marriage.

No way. I decided to be an egoist. I hope that marriage gets wrecked.

Wow.

Yeah, wow. Sue me if you don't like it.

He was done fighting that kind of moral dilemma. Aron wasn't happy with Alex. He was better out of that marriage.

Anyways, he thought, as he took his half eaten bowl of cereals to the kitchen. He needed to be patient. Aron was going to come back to him. He had to. And then Carter was going to make sure that the guy was going to be happy until a faithful day, 15 years from now, when he was going to be in his right to say the words. And ask for Aron's hand in marriage.

Yes, he thought to himself, satisfied with that order of things.

What if Aron gets bored and finds someone else?

No way. I'm going to keep him so busy, he won't have time for chasing guys.

You know what they say. Even the tastiest food if you eat it every day ...

Shut up. I'll learn how to be kinky. I'll have David teach me. Aron will never get bored with me.

It's not all about sex. What if you two run out of things to say to each other?

We'll travel. And I'll learn ten foreign languages, so I can impress him when we go abroad. Donde esta la biblioteca? Shnelle, shnelle ... Voulez vous coucher avec moi? See, I'm already more interesting than five minutes ago.

His brain was right. That was a serious issue. At least until they were going to get married, 15 years from now, he needed to make sure Aron wasn't bored. Hmm, he needed a plan. Something to cover all weekends and vacations.

But, first things first, he needed a daily plan. And a list of things he needed to learn to keep Aron next to him for the next 15 years.

So you're planning to let yourself go after he says 'yes'?

No, but he'll already be so used to me, that after he says 'yes', I won't have to learn so many new things. Now focus, we need a list of things to learn and do so that we can make and keep Aron happy for 15 years.

Maybe he should use his laptop, but decided against it right away. Using pen and paper was making the commitment he was taking more solemn and serious.

“So,” he said out loud. “Cooking? But Aron already cooks ... No, no, no, I need to be serious about this.”

He began scribbling down. Once he started, he was on fire. Yeap, he was going to keep Aron so busy.

He was already scribbling down item number 46, when he heard an energetic knock on the door. Who could be so late?

Making a sign to Taz to go back to sleep, he headed for the door. He pulled it open and stood there, dumbstruck. Aron was in the door, with such a pain stricken look of longing on his handsome face that Carter felt his heart clenching. The guy was wearing the classy suit Carter had seen him in on TV just earlier.

Without a word, Aron walked in, pushing the door closed with a short flick of the hand, and grabbed Carter, cupping his face with both hands and making him walk backward and fall on the couch.

Carter’s surprise was short lived. He answered to the hungry kiss with hunger of his own. They were trying to tear their clothes apart, but Aron’s jacket was way too well made to give in to the clumsy attack.

“Wait,” he whispered, pushing Aron back only a little. “Bedroom.”

Aron nodded shortly. Carter didn’t complain as Aron made him miss one or two steps by half-dragging him. When they collapsed on the bed, Aron’s jacket was already gone. The man pulled at his tie and managed to make some buttons fly as he hurried to get rid of his clothes. Between his bouts of anger directed at his own clothes, he was busy kissing Carter, biting the lips a little, famished and impatient.

Carter was in just as much a hurry, shedding his t-shirt and track suits pants with the speed of light. Now he was congratulating himself for taking a shower just earlier. They had no time to waste with stuff like that.

Aron was still partially dressed when he pushed Carter’s legs apart and climbed on top.

“Fuck, I missed you,” Aron murmured, as he took Carter’s mouth again, making rough love to it.

Carter searched blindly for the only thing they needed to make this happen.

“Wait, just a sec,” he said breathlessly as he got busy to lube his ass fast. “C’mon, fuck me,” he urged the other, and Aron didn’t wait for another invitation.

The invasion of his body was a bit too much, but he didn’t mind it. Aron curbed his enthusiasm, sensing Carter’s involuntary resistance to the attack.

Carter moved just enough to ensure Aron had the right angle to gain access inside.

“Sorry, I just need to ...” Aron’s words became muffled, as Carter dragged him down to kiss him again.

They were clumsy, their moves were short and brusque, but Aron’s increasing patience, and Carter’s willingness to relax, finally made it happen. Carter grabbed Aron by the back of his neck and clamped his body down hard on the guy’s cock.

“Oh fuck,” Aron whispered, as he let go of Carter’s mouth, and began moving. “Did you miss me?”

“Yeah,” Carter said simply. “Just give me all you got.”

Aron was not one to ignore such a direct request. The bed was squeaking, and Carter was pretty damn certain that his groans of pure pleasure could be heard half a block away, if not more. Ah, well, he could not care less. Until now, he had been an exemplary citizen. No one could exactly reproach him anything. If anyone was going to ask, he planned to say the truth.

My man came back to me and screwed my brains out.

Aron was pushing himself in with all his might, and Carter was making sure to meet him half way. It was like it wasn’t enough. From up close, Aron’s dark eyes looked straight into his soul.

“Let me, too,” he whispered, and turned the tables, ending up on top, in a riding position.

Aron kept his hips steady and he began moving. Hard, fast, just as he needed it. Given the circumstances, it was everything they needed.

“Ah, damn,” Aron whispered, watching him. “You’re going to make me come like this.”

“Fill me up,” Carter urged him, moving faster and faster.

Aron embraced him fast and again, he was on his back.

“You want me to give it to you hard like this?” the man finally understood how much Carter wanted it.

Not only hard. Fast, too. And he needed to be filled, right to the brim, because it had been so long, and he could not take it anymore.

The bed was no longer just squeaking. It was making some strange sounds that not even some rickety old man’s bones could. It was going to break. Hell, whatever.

“Missed you like fucking crazy,” he told Aron as he focused on the sensation of having his ass wrecked.

It was pure fire licking his arteries, nothing less. His cock was hard, and he had no idea if he was going to come without touching, but that had to happen because there was no way he was going to let go of Aron.

Holding his man like this was everything. It made everything real. Aron growled and pushed his lover into the bed, making both sink with each fluid motion of the hips. He grabbed Carter by the hair at the back of his head, and diving low, he began biting the exposed neck.

Carter felt an instant jolt, something akin to electricity, at that raw and honest claiming. His own dick seemed to agree, swelling and responding to the quick hammering of the bud of pleasure inside his ass.

“Coming, coming, coming,” he murmured, and Aron didn’t let go of his neck, nor of his body, instead going stronger, faster, his moves a bit jerkier, but even more efficient that way.

It was fucking magical, Carter thought, as they came together, he hands free, while Aron’s cock remained prisoner inside the tight channel of muscles squeezing him.

Their heavy breathing was filling the room as they remained glued to each other, joined at the hip.

They stood like that forever. The TV was still blaring in the other room, but it sounded so distant, like it could have just been part of another galaxy, far away.

Carter was certain that the only sound that mattered was the beat of their hearts that must have been, just like in books and movies, chanting to the same rhythm.

Aron finally fell to one side, but he kept one hand on Carter's chest, making that synched heartbeat theory even more a reality. For minutes, they said nothing.

Carter finally turned to watch Aron in the eyes.

"You're not staying, right?" he asked, although he knew the answer.

Aron blinked instead of answering.

"How come Alex let you ..." Carter wondered out loud.

"I just came up with a lame excuse and made myself scarce," Aron replied. "He doesn't know."

"He's not going to say it. That I pushed him. He told me so," Carter said. "So you don't have to go now."

Aron's face turned to stone.

"Don't believe a word he says. But don't worry. I have set a plan in motion. It won't be long, I promise."

"What did you do?" Carter asked, relishing in how Aron began to caress his cheek.

"I hired the best guy in the country to find the witness. That girl who saw the accident. I will put that to rest, once and for all."

"Ah, the eyewitness," Carter remembered.

"This guy guarantees results," Aron continued. "He's great at finding people. I should hear from him any day now. And then Alex will have nothing to keep me away from you."

“You’re really pissed at him. I saw you at that event ...” Carter trailed off.

“He doesn’t want to see reason. I offered him a fortune to walk away. I offered him everything, actually. But he is just stubborn and continues to say ‘no’. I’m not pissed at him. I seriously hate him,” Aron said, his eyes dark.

“I’m sorry,” Carter spoke, caressing Aron in turn.

“Don’t be. I made my bed. But I will un-make it, don’t worry. And then nothing will stop me from being with you.”

Do you love me?

It’s not exactly a good moment to ask that. Just take what he’s giving you right now. He wants to be with you. That’s enough.

Carter pushed away any thought of asking Aron such a thing.

“It doesn’t matter, you know,” he said instead. “If it takes a while until ... I can wait. I will wait.”

“So I’m the only one who’s impatient?” Aron laughed.

“No. I just came hands-free. That’s a clear sign of impatience. Also, I haven’t jerked off since you left, so I suppose that’s what happens.”

Aron’s eyes filled with warmth.

“I haven’t, either.”

“Seriously? So Alex didn’t jump you, or anything?”

“Probably he wanted to. But I suppose that I have murder written all over me, so he doesn’t dare,” Aron joked.

“Did you tell him about us?”

“Yes. Apparently, he knew from Simon, anyway. But I don’t care. He’s selfish and mean. I don’t know what I saw in him. Maybe I just tried ... well, it doesn’t matter now, anyway. I’m through with him, and once the private eye I hired gets hold of that girl, and she tells us what the hell happened, he won’t be able to stop me from filing for divorce.”

“So I won’t be seeing you until then?” Carter asked.

Aron shook his head slowly.

“It was a chance I took tonight. But I cannot risk it. Not until I have the ace up my sleeve.”

“What made you take the risk tonight?” Carter asked again.

“I couldn’t stand it, not seeing you for so long.”

“Not fucking me, you mean,” Carter snickered.

“Shut up, you came like a hose. The feeling’s mutual.”

“Of course it is,” Carter agreed. “Then it’s back to waiting for me, then?”

“I’m afraid so,” Aron confirmed. “But I’m paying this guy a small fortune. He is pretty damn motivated. I cannot wait for the truth to be revealed.”

“Okay. I cannot wait for you to come back for good,” Carter said simply.

Aron opened his mouth, as if he wanted to ask something, but then decided against. He kissed Carter, long and passionately.

“Can you stay for another round?” Carter almost pleaded.

Aron sighed and pushed himself up.

“No, unfortunately. I will go and take Alex home. Then I’ll phone the detective to see what progress has been made.”

“Okay,” Carter said softly.

Aron caressed his hair.

“Oh, stop it, man,” Carter forced himself to laugh and pushed the guy’s hand away. “You’re making doe eyes at me while you know we can’t fuck again. That’s cruel, you know?”

Aron nodded.

“Just wait. For a little while longer. That is all.”

Three days later, Carter was up early. He could not really say why he felt the need to be up at 6.30, but he was up, so nothing to do anyway but wake up.

He turned the TV on, while he stretched and yawned.

“An interesting new development has us on the edge of our seats,” the annoying voice of the anchorwoman almost screamed into the mike. “Finally, it looks like we’ll know the truth about the accident our favorite fashion icon Alex Ruskin was involved in, several months ago. Strangely enough, none of those involved could remember how it happened ...”

He froze, his arms stretched above his head in an awkward position. On TV, the camera switched from the studio to another setting, where a bunch of reporters were practically sieging a girl with ponytail. Next to her, someone from the local police stood proud and vigilant while a few other people in uniforms were busy keeping the crowd away.

As the girl began speaking, Carter’s arms fell to his sides.

“I’ll be damned,” he said matter-of-factly.

Well, he wasn’t that surprised. After all, all of a sudden, his memories began flooding his brain, like long awaited rain.

Chapter Thirty-Four

So what the hell was he going to do now? Had Aron called and he missed it or something? He checked his phone. No calls. Okay, he needed to see Aron.

Wait, he needed to take a shower first. They were seriously going to have sex. If what the girl had said was true ...

Of course it's true. Now we remember everything.

I'm so amazed how quickly you take credit. You said you had nothing but blank space in that part.

But now we know.

Yes, he knew. The news was everywhere now. The entertainment channel clearly had a slow day and it was just repeating it every half an hour. Although he needed to take that shower, he chose to sit on the couch and watch the news again.

The ponytail girl seemed undaunted by the cameras and microphones pushed in front of her.

“Yeah, I do have the video,” she said. “But the police need to take a look at it first. It's pretty dope,” she added with conviction.

“So did you catch everything on your smartphone?” one of the reporters asked.

The girl nodded and smiled, seemingly quite pleased with herself.

“Can you tell us everything, from the top?”

This time, the girl looked at the police officer to her right, and the man nodded shortly.

“Well, I was, like, walking to catch the bus, and all of a sudden, I see Alex Ruskin,” she started, her eyes all shiny now.

Of course, the guy was gay, but chicks still digged him. Who was he kidding? Every gal and guy, gay or straight, digged the fucker. Ah, well, Carter shrugged and continued to watch.

“So I take out my phone and I start recording, but, you know, so that he doesn’t see me or anything,” the girl said. “He’s looking behind him for like a couple of seconds, I don’t know why, and then he just turns and stares ahead, chin up high, and looking fabulous.”

“Did he notice you?” another reported asked.

“No, he was just looking ahead and he started crossing the street. Frankly, I didn’t notice the fire truck, either. I guess I was too taken with Alex,” the girl half-giggled. “He’s just so cool,” she added dreamily.

“What happened next?” someone interrupted the girl’s wide-eyed dream.

“Well, I hear someone yelling, and I think like, what the heck, and there’s this guy coming from behind, and bang! He practically pushes Alex away from the front of the freaking truck!” the girl said, now clearly excited. “And I’m like in total shock and Alex is basically rolling on the ground, but he doesn’t look that badly hurt, and bang again! The fire truck practically hits this other guy full frontal, like I can still hear that sound! It was horrible!”

“So why didn’t you help them or stay to call an ambulance and tell the police what happened?”

The girl stole a look to her right again, and this time some of her excitement vanished. The police officer was frowning, but again, he nodded.

“Well, I saw the fire truck driver getting down and hurrying toward the victims, and I said to myself, what the heck, he’s more qualified than me, anyway, and also it was like, his fault. And I had to catch the bus, because otherwise, I wasn’t going to catch the plane, and then ...”

“But the police tweeted about the accident, didn’t you see anything?”

“What can I tell you, man? I was off-grid, I was with a group of friends, we all decided to live like Mother Nature intended for the whole summer, you know, no electricity, no nothing. I had to, like, take half of the house with me,” the girl said again. “As soon as someone came looking for me, I was all down with saying everything I knew.”

The police officer finally grabbed the microphone, and the girl took a step back.

“I want to tell all the young people who are watching this how important it is to take the right type of action when something like this happens,” the man began.

Carter tuned out the police officer’s lecture that followed. It was still un-freaking-believable, but now he did remember everything. He sighed in contentment. Okay, he hadn’t pushed that obnoxious scumbag in front of the fire truck. Actually, he had saved the asshole’s life.

And he knew very well why. Yeah, he needed that shower, and maybe he had to comb his hair, too. Making himself pretty and all that, ready to see Aron.

He was barely out of the shower, and his hair was practically sticking in all directions, after rubbing it with the towel, when he heard keys turning in the door lock. Ah, Aron was here already and probably didn’t want to wake him up so he was using his keys. He hurried for the door and grabbed the handle, barely reigning in his excitement.

“Hey,” he said with a smile, opening the door wide.

His smile quickly vanished, though, as Aron pushed him inside, making him take hurried steps back until he hit a wall. Aron looked damn serious. And he was looking into Carter’s eyes, like he wanted to extract some truth out of them.

“Can you please tell me what the hell is this?” Aron asked, using one hand to keep Carter glued to the wall, and the other to bring forward his phone.

Just for a second, he freed his victim to press play on the video displayed on his phone. Carter watched in horrid fascination. The angle was not the best, and it was clear that the one who had taken it was more bothered with catching Alex on camera, but it was all there. So Aron had the video, unlike the scumbags at the entertainment channel. That meant that the operation private eye had been a major success.

“So the detective found the girl?” he asked. “Great guy, that guy. I mean, I know. I saw it on the news.”

“Shut up,” Aron growled and almost pressed his phone against Carter’s nose.

“Well, that’s the accident,” Carter said matter-of-factly. “I do remember everything now. Isn’t it really strange?”

“Carter,” Aron breathed out, “listen.”

Aron brought the volume to the maximum and replayed the video.

Oh, great, now he could hear himself yelling something like ‘I just want Aron to be happy!’ while pushing Alex away from the fire truck. Okay, that was pretty awkward if he were to think about it.

“Well,” he frowned and started scratching his head.

“Hmm,” Aron interjected, after tossing his phone on the couch without even looking if it landed safely. “What do you have to say for yourself?”

Okay, so Aron was mad. Why was he mad?

Why is he mad?

How the hell should I know? It must be that you did something stupid.

Well, it wasn’t like I had that much of a choice. If Alex had died, Aron would have been very unhappy.

Aron almost shook him.

“Carter, please, stop losing yourself in your head for a second and tell me, okay? You jumped in front of a freaking car!”

“Fire truck,” Carter raised one finger.

Aron groaned and this time really shook him.

Sensing the distress in the small apartment, Taz got up from his place and started barking at the intruder.

“Don’t worry, Taz,” Aron spoke to the dog, easing his grip on Carter for a fraction, “I’m not going to kick your dad’s ass. Not yet, at least.”

Okay, he needed to choose his next words carefully. But he was kind of blank.

“Why are you so mad?” he eventually asked.

Aron looked at him, and there was a mix of wonder, affection, but also some very entitled rage in the man’s eyes that Carter had no idea what to make of.

“You jumped in front of a fire truck,” Aron spoke, this time a little appeased. “To save my husband’s life. Without caring how I would have felt if you had died.”

Carter opened his mouth and then he closed it.

“That’s quite the dilemma,” he murmured.

Taz stood on his back legs and set his front paws on Aron’s leg, looking up. He wasn’t barking anymore, but wagging his tail.

“What a traitor,” he looked at his dog.

“So can you tell me what were you thinking?” Aron asked, and now there was a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“Hmm, the fire truck was moving at a velocity of, I don’t know, 60-70 miles? And I thought that I had enough time to ...”

Aron sighed, interrupting him.

“Allow me to do it. Let me make this easy for you.”

The grip on his shoulders eased, and Aron cupped his face, caressing it slowly with the thumbs.

“You love me,” Aron said with conviction.

Carter could feel his heart growing smaller with Aron’s simple statement.

“I do?” he whispered.

Aron nodded slowly.

“It’s okay. I know how things are with you. I should have been the one to talk about it, to make it clear. I shouldn’t have been the coward I was. It’s okay if you won’t say it,” Aron said, as he continued to caress Carter’s cheeks. “I should know better, that words like this don’t come easy to you.”

No, it wasn't okay. Carter caught Aron's hands into his, pushing them down. And then the words started tumbling from his mouth like sweets from a jar.

"No, it's not okay. I do love you. Because I do, okay? And no, I didn't think of the velocity of the fire truck, although I could. I mean, I did. But only a little. I had like a flash, a vision, or whatever, I don't know how that's called. Of you, all dressed in black, crying at a funeral. And I just couldn't stand it, okay? And maybe I can't stand Alex because he stole you from me, but I didn't want you hurt. So I just ... you know, I found myself there, in the middle of the street, pushing him away. And I understand why you couldn't say it because I know myself. And it's true that I have all these boxes that I use to compartmentalize everything. And you, you, you ..." he struggled, trying to find his words.

"I was a box?" Aron tried to help him.

"No," he protested, feeling frustration growing at no other but himself. "You're not a box, you've never been. You were ... are everywhere ... inside me. But I have all these boxes, like you said. And this, what I feel for you, it didn't fit anywhere, you know? Although I thought it had to."

"So love is a box?" Aron was smiling now, and his eyes were filled with fondness.

"No!" Carter exclaimed again. "I am ... no, my heart is like a box," he let go of Aron's hands to gesture with his arms, and try to make a solid square with them.

Aron was now chuckling softly.

"Okay. So I'm finally welcome into your box shaped heart?" he asked, pulling Carter to him.

"How could you be? You've been there since forever. And never left," Carter said, with all the seriousness he could muster now, as he began to melt in the other's arms.

The kiss that followed wasn't like the usual, or at least, he felt like it was different. Because he felt like he was getting really swept off his feet, although he clearly knew for a fact that his feet were on the ground, and there was no way those people in those romance movies or books or whatever, could have been so accurate describing something as impalpable as this.

Taz barked, but now it was his happy bark. Carter knew it. Well, the kid probably felt left out. Aron let him go, albeit reluctantly. He was the one to look at the dog and talk to him first.

“Taz, you should get ready, kiddo. Because I’m here to take you both home with me.”

“So what are we now?” Carter felt the need to check.

Aron smiled.

“Well, what do you think?” he asked.

“We’ve been best friends, fuck buddies, roomies ...” Carter counted on his fingers. “What’s next?”

“Let’s start with the obvious,” Aron spoke. “We are, well, you are a straight guy who got flipped by his gay best friend, and I’m the flipper!”

Aron was so pulling his leg right now.

“Flipper, huh? I had no idea you had a sense of humor,” Carter pretended to frown, but he began to grin, too.

“I don’t. I’m just saying it like it is,” Aron drawled the words, while pulling Carter close for another kiss.

“So, are we going to get married?” Carter asked when Aron finally allowed him to breathe.

Aron feigned seriousness.

“I think I’m done with marriage for a while. I’m all for a trial period,” he joked.

Carter punched the guy’s shoulder. This was friggin’ serious.

“Asshole. I’m not at all for a trial period,” he protested.

“Oh, so you want to get married,” Aron teased. “You’re so gay now that you want a gay wedding?”

“Why shouldn’t I want a gay wedding? I want a gay cake, too!”

“A gay cake? Do you really believe there’s such a thing? How does a gay cake look like?” Aron questioned him.

“I have no idea. We should google it,” Carter shrugged.

Aron was really laughing now.

“I still need to go through a divorce first,” he pointed out. “It might get nasty. And expensive.”

“Fine, I’ll buy the rings,” Carter rolled his eyes. “And a gay cake.”

“Rings, huh?” Aron bit his lips, to stop himself from laughing. “I had no idea you would be a stickler for tradition.”

“I’m down with everything if it’s about you,” Carter replied, glaring a little. “Hey, did you say you love me? Because I don’t think ...”

Aron pressed their bodies together once more.

“I must have been too busy kicking myself over not saying it that I forgot. I love you. Is this fine?”

“Hmm, not very romantic,” Carter feigned complaint.

“Well, we have all the time in the world to get it right,” Aron smiled.

Carter smiled back, feeling all giddy inside.

“Don’t worry. I’m just joking. But seriously, what would you have done if I had never said it? Or if the eyewitness couldn’t be found and all that?”

“Ah, I would have bribed Alex in the end and divorced him anyway. And I would have taken you very, very slowly, not to scare you,” Aron began explaining. “I had an entire plan in motion. First step was, as you know it, to have you move in with me. Then I would have made everything possible for you never to want to leave me. And, at our 20th anniversary, when we were going to throw a party, and there were going to be a lot of people coming over, and you were going to ask ‘what’s the occasion?’ I would have told you: well, we’ve spent the last 20 years together, and so we are going to spend the next 20, and the next 20 ...”

“Oh, I cannot believe you!” Carter pretended to be scandalized. “So you were going to be really sneaky about it! I bet you would have gotten the kids to help, too, for this plan of yours!”

“The kids, huh?” Aron glared, but then immediately burst into laughter. “Ah, damn, how could I be so damn stupid and blind?”

“If it’s any consolation, I’m the stupider one,” Carter said with a sigh. “I should have told you what I felt instead of insulting your husband at the wedding. I didn’t realize that, you know. Although it would have been too late, right?”

Aron made their foreheads touch.

“You could never be too late. I’m glad that we’re together now, and that’s all that matters. Now, hurry. Pack only the essentials. I can barely wait to show you the new house.”

“All right,” Carter replied gleefully. “Should I get the plates?”

“Forget about them. We’ll come later to get them. Just grab your laptop, Taz, and yourself.”

“You can’t be serious. Do you have a dog bed? I bet you don’t.”

“I already have a dog bed. And shiny new toys. And a yard Taz will love,” Aron replied promptly.

“Still, I need my toothbrush and some clothes ...” Carter tried to argue with his best friend, now soon or not so soon to be husband, depending on the divorce and all that.

“I have everything you might possibly need, trust me,” Aron replied. “But, okay, grab a few things that you feel you don’t want to live even one day without, and let’s go.”

Okay, he had enough motivation to pack quickly. A few clothes, the laptop and his toothbrush had to do for now. He returned to the small living room, only to find Aron reading some piece of paper with a deep thoughtful frown on his face.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

Aron threw him a curt look and started reading.

“Things to learn and do to make Aron happy for the next 15 years.”

“Oh, fuck,” Carter mumbled and hurried to snatch the paper from Aron’s hand.

Without too much effort, Aron dodged him and stopped him with one hand, keeping him at arm’s length. He continued to read.

“Cooking. Anything but lasagna. There is no way I can top the kind Aron’s making. Learning French. Waxing my ass?” Aron looked at him questioningly, and now he was laughing for real. “Why would you do that? Oh, and you even put a small dot here, and wrote ‘this will hurt like a bitch’. But why 15 years? Were you planning to stop making me happy after 15 years?”

“No, that was the time limit for asking you to marry me,” Carter answered promptly.

“Oh, damn, why?” Aron asked, barely keeping in a bout of laughter.

“Because you loved me for 15 years before, so I had to compensate.”

“Of course you had,” Aron shook his head, like he could not believe all that. “Well, we won’t need this list,” he decided, and finally letting Carter, he made a small ball out of the piece of paper.

“Hey,” Carter protested, trying to reach his hard work. “It took me hours to put that together!”

“Well, you won’t wax your ass,” Aron said promptly, throwing the crumpled paper over one shoulder and grabbing Carter to embrace him tightly. “And I don’t trust you in the kitchen alone.”

“Ouch, that hurt,” Carter said, placing one hand over his heart.

“Let me finish,” Aron interrupted him. “And you don’t have to learn French for my sake. See, I’m just making things easier for you.”

“But what if I let myself go?” Carter complained.

“You’ve already asked me to marry you, and I said ‘yes’. I’d say that you can let yourself go a little. Not much,” he joked. “But still, learning French?”

“What if we travel to France and we don’t have a guide?” Carter started.

“France has many tourist oriented places. I doubt we really need to speak French to visit.”

“But what if we land in some place where no one speaks English?” Carter insisted. “And we end up like in those movies, you know, horror movies, where you get judged for not knowing the local laws, and they throw us in jail or something?”

Aron started laughing again.

“Okay, learn French, if you’re so bent on this. Wait, do you want us to go there?”

“No, not in particular,” Carter shrugged.

“Good, because first I want to keep you close for a while, without that many people around us.”

“Hmm, and you won’t get bored? Just with me around?” Carter wondered out loud.

“I don’t think so,” Aron hugged him and made their lips touch again.

When Aron let him go, minutes later, Carter didn’t need any additional explanations. So what was that he needed to pack? Ah, only his laptop and Taz. And Aron had already moved to the door, with Taz on the leash.

Seeing his best friend at the door, smiling a million-dollar smile, seemed like something out of a fairytale. But he was certain it was real. He was damn certain it was all real.

“Hi,” Alex spoke curtly as he practically blocked the way as Carter was trying to reach his car.

He wasn’t exactly expecting that to happen, but moved the bag of groceries from one arm to the other while waiting for Alex to speak whatever the guy had on his mind. Aron was at work, and he was doing the necessary shopping. His hopefully

soon to be husband had made a comprehensive list and he was pretty certain he had followed it to the letter. Somewhat.

“I think I should say ‘thank you’,” Alex began, his voice a bit hesitant, but honest, as far as Carter could tell.

“You’re welcome, I suppose,” Carter replied. “Although I didn’t do it for you,” he hurried to say.

Well, that sounded bad.

“Sorry,” he added.

Alex smiled, but his lips remained pursed, like he had just licked at least half a lemon.

“People say you’re a hero,” Alex said.

“Yeah, they exaggerate,” Carter replied. “Because I’m not sure I would have ... You know.”

“Yeah, probably no one would,” Alex said with a sigh.

Carter knew he had to be on his toes around this guy. But Alex didn’t seem to be his usual diva self. If anything, he sounded genuine. Also, a tiny bit sad.

Are you feeling for the guy now?

A little. I mean, he could have been dead. That changes a person.

I’d say you should be careful, that’s all.

“I thought I was remembering everything about the accident. But, oddly enough, until that girl came up and spoke, I wasn’t. Not everything,” Alex explained. “I had no recollection of you saying that, you know, before seeing the video. About how you wanted Aron to be happy. It must be nice,” he said, his beautiful green eyes darting to one side.

“What?” Carter asked.

“You know. To feel for someone like that. To have someone feel for you like that.”

Ah, that. All right, this was awkward. He had no idea what to say to the guy.

“You’ll find someone,” he said, remembering some of the things he had seen in a movie where some girl was trying to console one of her friends who tended to be awfully and unexplainably unlucky in love.

Alex smiled.

“You’re just saying that,” he said, but his eyes shone a little brighter.

“I suppose,” Carter sighed. “I don’t really know what to tell you. I just thought that would make you feel a little better.”

“I think I understand now what Aron sees in you,” Alex measured him through his eyelashes, his head a little thrown back. “You’re a funny guy. And choked full with good intentions.”

“Thanks, I guess,” Carter mumbled.

The grocery bag was getting heavy in his arms. Taz was getting restless, too.

“Anyway, I’ll sign the papers and I promise the divorce won’t be a problem,” Alex spoke.

“Ah, that’s nice.”

“But I’m keeping the car,” Alex’s eyes thinned.

“Keep the frigging car,” Carter shrugged. “Aron would never take a gift back. And driving that kind of car is overrated, anyway.”

“How do you know?” Alex snorted.

“I watched a documentary. A Veyron is still better,” Carter said promptly.

To his surprise, Alex didn’t get mad at hearing his precious vehicle getting insulted so directly. Instead, he laughed.

“Just like I said. You’re funny. All right. So I suppose my karma gets a bit of its rightful balance back now that you and Aron have my blessing to get hitched,” Alex spoke, but that last part seemed addressed mostly to himself.

Alex didn't seem to remember the body swap. Yet, he seemed a little changed. Maybe the whole thing did change him, at least to some degree.

"Well, I suppose this is it," Alex put on his sunglasses and threw Carter the kind of smile that was making him a star. "I would say to give my best to Aron, but frankly, I think he doesn't care about that."

"I'll tell him, anyway," Carter replied.

Alex squared his shoulders and waved goodbye as he started walking toward his car. For a while, Carter just stood there and watched the guy climbing behind the wheel. Funny, the guy was slightly turned to one side and seemed to talk to someone next to him.

Someone who did not seem to be there.

Ah, probably the guy was just using his hands-free and was talking on the phone.

"Would you go a little outside and look for the moving truck?" Aron stole a small kiss from him, as he held his hands away from his body, like a surgeon.

"Sure thing," Carter replied with a kiss of his own.

Aron was cooking, and his hands were covered in flour. He could barely wait. Aron had said it was going to be a surprise. And this time, he hadn't bought the ingredients so he had no idea what the treat was going to be. No problem. He was ready to be surprised.

Only his things had to arrive. Although Aron had had the house completely furnished, he had agreed that a few things could be transferred from Carter's place, if not for another reason than that they both decided that it would make their home a little more Carter oriented. Aron was all for equality. Carter didn't care that much. He loved Aron's taste in curtains and everything. Although he had put some effort into choosing those plates. He only hoped the moving guys were not going to turn them into more pieces than they were.

He rushed into the street. There was no sign of the van. He was about to go back into the house when he noticed someone waving at him from the other side. Could it be ...?

Mark was gesturing for him to cross the street and he was smiling widely.

“Hey,” he said, and eyed his not exactly guardian angel with a bit of unease.

“Relax, Carter,” Mark patted him on the shoulder, the moment they were on the same side of the street. “I just came to say goodbye, this time for real. I’m glad to see that you remember the accident now.”

“I do,” Carter said slowly. “Wait, now that I remember ... oh, no, are you here to take Aron away from me?”

Mark laughed.

“Carter, you earned your happiness. And could anyone really take Aron away from you? Ever?”

“Ah, cool,” he relaxed. “So, any funky business from pesky humans you need to take care of? Or you’re ready to go ...” Carter gestured with his hands as if he was expecting Mark to stretch a pair of wings suddenly and soar into the sky.

“I’m actually done here for the moment and that makes me really happy. Maybe I’ll even take a holiday,” Mark said with mirth. “Although I must say you really did scare me. As I told you, you gave me quite the fright. Do you know now what your most ardent wish was? Still is?”

“Yeah,” Carter smiled widely. “For Aron to be happy.”

“That was quite an important point in the case I made for you,” Mark said, nodding gravely.

“Up there, you mean?” Carter pointed at the clear sky above.

Mark nodded again.

“Can you imagine? I was just having my tea when your name started rolling on the list of people ready to be taken over the river,” Mark spoke, his eyes a bit unfocused.

“Over the river? Like Styx?” Carter asked.

“It is incredible how spot on some aspects from humankind’s religions are,” Mark said. “Of course, it is not a river like others.”

“I guess,” Carter murmured, dumbfounded with the revelations Mark was so leisurely sharing with him.

Probably it was no vital information, and the not exactly guardian angel could talk about it with a mere human.

“I ran downstairs right away and pleaded with the guy responsible with wiping the names to put your case up for hearing. The fact that you yelled from the top of your lungs that you wanted Aron to be happy really helped. It was just the stuff I needed to point out that there would be no ground for your name to be wiped so prematurely. Since your demise would have just made Aron unhappy, thus making your wish impossible.”

“Wow, so you were like my lawyer?” Carter wondered. “Glad you won.”

“I’m glad, too,” Mark chuckled.

“Can I ask you something?” Carter said.

Mark nodded, with the same big smile on his good natured face.

“Will, you know, Alex be okay?”

Mark’s eyes filled with fondness.

“Yes, I guess he will be all right. Nice of you to ask about him. Would you like a mint?” Mark changed the subject.

Carter looked at the open metal box offered and picked one.

“Does my breath stink?” he asked, and attempted to exhale into his palm to test that.

Mark laughed.

“No. But I couldn’t find any blue and red pills. Plus, I like mints.”

“I like them, too,” Carter said and popped one into his mouth.

Hmm, it was a really good mint. Not so minty, and a little sweet? He wondered as he savored the taste.

“Where did you get these?” he asked and turned toward Mark.

Only to discover that the guy had simply disappeared.

Well, it was a bit sudden, but probably the guy was busy with who knew what other situation. It was not like he could keep a guardian angel all to himself.

Plus, he had Aron. So, all in all, it was a pretty good deal Mark had cut for him. Carefully watching for cars, he crossed the road, and walked back into the house. A pleasant smell wafted to his nostrils. Hmm, cookies?

“So, still no sign of them?” Aron called from the kitchen.

“What?” Carter asked, shaking his head.

Aron looked at him, a bit surprised.

“The moving truck. Did you make a round of the neighborhood? What do you think about it?”

“Ah, no, not exactly,” Carter replied, a feeling of confusion tickling his brain like the soft feathers of a flock of birds.

“You were out for more than half an hour. Ah, you went to that small store at the end of the street?” Aron moved closer and sniffed him. “I grabbed some mints the other day from there. They don’t make them like they used to, but these guys still know their stuff.”

Ah, Carter clucked his tongue. Yeah, he had been to the store. And the mints were great, too.

“Want some?” he reached into his pocket and took out a metal mint box.

Aron smiled and took one.

“Yeah,” Aron confirmed. “They’re really good. Hey, is everything okay with you? You seem a little off.”

Carter stared into Aron's eyes, and smiled.

"Worried about me?" he laughed.

Aron put his hands on Carter's shoulders and squeezed them tightly.

"Well, you do have the bad habit of running into the street, right in front of moving cars," he joked. "I might have to get a leash. For you, not for Taz."

"Ah, I'm pretty sure I'm not going to do that again," Carter snickered. "Losing weeks of my life, just lying in a hospital bed, in a coma, is not exactly among my priorities. I might feel a little confused over that lost time, I think."

"Do you feel any dizziness? Or headaches?" Aron asked, looking at him, like he was ready to whisk him to the hospital that very moment.

"Nah, nothing like that. Although," Carter said slowly, "I just feel like I had the most amazing dream, and I cannot remember much of it. Ah, damn it, it's like on the tip of my ... brain."

"Your brain has a tip?" Aron chuckled.

"You have no idea," Carter laughed, too. "And he's a scumbag, too. I don't particularly like talking to him."

"You don't have to talk to him anymore," Aron brought him closer to embrace him. "I'm here, and you can talk to me anytime."

"And damn I'm glad for that," Carter laughed. "Although I'll still talk to him. Just when you're not around. And not because I'm lonely. Because I'm not. Not anymore."

Aron kissed him sweetly.

"Hmm," Carter purred in delight. "So what did you make?" he pulled at Aron's collar to hold his soon to be husband accountable for the delicious smells coming from the kitchen.

"Let me get you a madeleine," Aron said. "It will make you feel good."

“A madeleine? There’s nothing you can’t cook, right?” Carter commented, but he let himself dragged along, without putting up any resistance.

Aron didn’t reply to that, and just pushed him to sit at the table on which a plate loaded with the small French cakes. He took one and groaned in pure delight the moment the taste hit his buds.

“Would you like some tea, too?” Aron turned holding a steaming pot.

Carter nodded enthusiastically. He was already feeling better. And memories of a strange dream involving something weird, like him living for a while in Aron’s ex-husband’s body, slipped from his mind as they had never been there.

Aron was his. Forever.

Epilogue

“Do you realize we are practically hiding in a closet?” Carter snickered.

Aron hushed him.

“They’ll find us,” his husband reproached.

“Of course they will,” Carter said matter-of-factly. “They have the dog with them. They’re already tracking us as we speak.”

“The fact that you’re making so much noise is not helping,” Aron glared.

“Okay, okay,” Carter agreed.

They stood in silence for a couple of seconds. There was no noise from outside. Well, they had found the perfect hiding place, in the closet under the stairs in Aron’s folks’ house. Great, they could relax a little.

“So,” he whispered, getting close to his husband, “what’s up?”

Aron circled his waist with one hand.

“Are you sure you want an honest reply to that? Because I know exactly what’s up right now, seeing that we’re all alone, in a confined place, and I only have to lean in like this, and kiss you.”

Carter was pretty certain that they were going to smooch each other so loudly that their trackers were going to find them any moment now.

“So, should we schedule a date for tonight? After 10 am, when everyone’s finally asleep, just you and me, the dads’ bedroom, and a bottle of wine?” Aron nuzzled his neck.

“I’d rather have a beer,” Carter protested. “I haven’t had one in a while. Why am I always the designated driver?” he faked complaint.

“Because the kids prefer your driving style for some reason.”

“Well, I do take them everywhere they want,” Carter pointed out.

“Yeah. You’re soft,” Aron chuckled.

“Someone’s got to be. Hey, it’s like I’m the good cop, and you’re the bad cop!” Carter exclaimed.

His husband hushed him with another kiss.

Then, Aron stopped and frowned.

“Hey, why am I the bad cop?”

It was Carter’s turn to laugh.

“Frankly, I think they are a tiny bit afraid of you. Deidre told her friends in kindergarten that her dad is as big as a mountain. And that her daddy, aka me, is just a little smaller. Of course, that was an exaggeration. But they believed her.”

“I don’t think they are afraid,” Aron glared.

“They are. Although you wouldn’t believe Freddie and what kind of explanations he’s coming up with for your behavior.”

“My behavior?” Aron exclaimed.

This time, Carter hushed him.

“It’s okay. They need the ground rules,” Carter whispered, sneaking his hands under his husband’s t-shirt.

Even in his forties, Aron still had the same awesome hard body. Carter could feel himself drooling.

“Well, if it were after you, we would all sleep in the same bed and have the dog on top of us all. We would have zero sex life,” Aron said, but Carter knew him well enough to notice the bubble of laughter underneath it all.

“Good thing I have you to play the bad cop role. I would never be capable of doing that,” Carter mumbled, his attention arrested by the hard planes of Aron’s torso. “And I would not like a zero sex life either.”

“Hey, don’t you think they should have found us by now?” Aron caught his hands and listened intently. “What do you think they’re up to?”

Carter sighed.

“I bet they came up with some plan of dragging us out of our hiding place. I’m sure Freddie said something like ‘oh, let’s just let them get bored and hungry, and they will come out’. Yeah, I think so.”

“That boy,” Aron laughed. “I swear he’s smart beyond his years. And I know someone who’s exactly like that.”

“Or he’s just counting on his own experience of playing hide and seek,” Carter continued his train of thought. “He’s the one who got bored and hungry and came out of his hiding place, after we almost turned the entire place upside down searching for him that one time when we played at home.”

Aron nodded with a smile.

“Should we play along?”

“Yeah,” Carter admitted. “We’ll have plenty of time to play adult games tonight. Plus, I don’t want to miss the chance of getting out of the closet together with my husband,” he linked his fingers with Aron’s.

Aron beamed at him.

“I’m sure they have already forgotten about us, but, yeah, how could I skip that?”

“Where is Freddie?” Carter asked his mom, the moment they were out in the yard.

“He is busy inspecting the place. I think he is currently interested in dendrology,” his mother pointed out at the boy now carefully looking at the big oak overlooking from their yard into the Ruskins’ lawn. “Just make sure he doesn’t climb it like you did back in the day,” she wagged the finger at him.

Carter just laughed and waved. But seriously, he wasn’t going to let Freddie give him a heart attack like he had probably almost given his mom that day.

“Hey, buddy,” he called and their son turned to look at him.

“Grandma was talking to granny and telling her that this tree has a hell of a story to tell,” Freddie pointed out at the old oak, somewhat accusingly. “Do trees tell stories? Do they talk?”

Carter moved to stand side by side with the boy.

“Did grandma said ‘hell’?” he eyed Freddie, and the boy just looked away and shrugged.

It was clear that the matter of talking trees was much more interesting than whatever lecture his daddy had in store for him.

“Okay, I can tell you that story. But let me tell you a secret,” he caressed the boy’s head. “That was just the beginning.”

“The beginning? I want to know the end,” Freddie replied.

“Hmm, are you still looking at the end of books first? I told you’re ruining all the fun that way,” Carter said, but he was not really scolding Freddie.

After all, he was doing exactly the same thing. Even now, as a complete grown up, married with children.

“I can tell you the end,” he said with a smile.

Freddie turned to stare at him. Carter took his and Aron’s son by the shoulders to guide him back to the big table where everyone, from three generations, was gathered around. Aron was bouncing Deidre on one knee, making their little girl squeal in delight, while the two grandmas were debating what to bring first to the table, and the grandpas were absorbed with talking about the last night’s game.

Aron looked at him and smiled. The biggest smile in the world on the most beautiful face Carter had ever seen in his entire life, with no chance of having anyone surpass that in a thousand years or all eternity. He wasn’t sure which one lasted longer.

“So, dad, the end? The story?” Freddie pulled at his sleeve.

“Ah, that’s easy,” Carter caressed their son’s head, and took in once more the family picture in front of his eyes, especially Aron playing with their daughter. “The end is ... And they lived happily ever after.”

THE END