

Suncoast Society

Roll With the Punches

Stuart has no regrets about his new life with Brandon and Jeff. For the first time, he feels he's exactly where he's supposed to be, with a family who loves him for who he is. Even despite the craziness with Brandon's ex, it's all worth it.

Jeff knows this is for life with the two men and has never felt happier. When a mission to help his sister's friend leads to an unexpected health crisis with an uncertain outcome, he is forced to admit he's also vulnerable in ways he never imagined, both physically and emotionally.

Brandon gets that his ex has issues, but he won't let those stand in the way of him and his husbands parenting Emma, his teenaged daughter. Jeff and Stuart have proven they're there for life.

Now their sanity is stretched to the max in ways they never imagined by a horrific truth—they're raising a teenaged daughter who's starting to date.

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Length: 58,591 words

ROLL WITH THE PUNCHES

Suncoast Society

Tymber Dalton



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ROLL WITH THE PUNCHES

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DEDICATION

To Hubby and Sir. Always.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tymber Dalton is the wild-child alter-ego of author Lesli Richardson. She lives in the Tampa Bay region of Florida with her husband (aka “The World’s Best Husband™”) and too many pets. Active in the BDSM lifestyle, the two-time EPIC award winner is also the bestselling author of over one hundred books, including *The Reluctant Dom*, *The Denim Dom*, *Cardinal’s Rule*, the Suncoast Society series, the Love Slave for Two series, the Triple Trouble series, the Coffeeshop Coven series, the Good Will Ghost Hunting series, the Drunk Monkeys series, and many more.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a direct sequel to *Heartache Spoken Here* (Suncoast Society 54) and picks up where that book leaves off.

While all the books in the Suncoast Society series are standalone works which may be read independently of each other, the recommended reading order to avoid spoilers and to not miss any backstory information is as follows:

1. *Safe Harbor*
2. *Cardinal's Rule*
3. *Domme by Default*
4. *The Reluctant Dom*
5. *The Denim Dom*
6. *Pinch Me*
7. *Broken Toy*
8. *A Clean Sweep*
9. *A Roll of the Dice*
10. *His Canvas*
11. *A Lovely Shade of Ouch*
12. *Crafty Bastards*
13. *A Merry Little Kinkmas*
14. *Sapiosexual*
15. *A Very Kinky Valentine's Day*
16. *Things Made Right*
17. *Click*
18. *Spank or Treat*
19. *A Turn of the Screwed*
20. *Chains*
21. *Kinko de Mayo*
22. *Broken Arrow*
23. *Out of the Spotlight*
24. *Friends Like These*
25. *Vicious Carousel*

26. *Hot Sauce*
27. *Open Doors*
28. *One Ring*
29. *Vulnerable*
30. *The Strength of the Pack*
31. *Initiative*
32. *Impact*
33. *Liability*
34. *Switchy*
35. *Rhymes With Orange*
36. *Beware Falling Ice*
37. *Beware Falling Rocks*
38. *Dangerous Curves Ahead*
39. *Two Against Nature*
40. *Home at Last*
41. *A Kinkmas Carol*
42. *Ask DNA*
43. *Time Out of Mind*
44. *Happy Valenkink's Day*
45. *Splendid Isolation*
46. *Similar to Rain*
47. *Happy Spank Patrick's Day*
48. *Fire in the Hole*
49. *Pretzel Logic*
50. *This Moody Bastard*
51. *Walk Between the Raindrops*
52. *Rub Me Raw*
53. *Any World That I'm Welcome To*
54. *Heartache Spoken Here*
55. *Roll With the Punches*

Some of the characters in this book appear in or are featured in previous books in the Suncoast Society series. All titles available from Siren-BookStrand.

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ROLL WITH THE PUNCHES

Suncoast Society

TYMBER DALTON

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Chapter One

Brandon sat at the breakfast bar and nursed his mug of coffee early that Monday morning.

Two pairs of eyes, one hazel and one green, stared at him in response to what he'd just announced.

"What?" It wasn't quite dawn yet. He was still trying to wake up enough to take a shower and leave for work. Emma had already departed for her early swim practice before her summer school session started.

Jeff finally spoke. "Can I ask a question, Sir?"

"Of course."

"Not that I'm complaining about our collaring being next weekend, but by next weekend do you mean *this* coming weekend, or the weekend *after* that? Because I thought Emma was home this weekend?"

"The weekend after. Sorry." Brandon couldn't hold back his yawn. "You two know I don't morning well."

Stuart smiled. "Sorry, Sir."

"And yes, she is home this weekend. Next weekend she's going to Grace's. Her parents are taking them to a special presentation up at Mote on Saturday night."

Emma was Brandon's sixteen-year-old daughter, who primarily lived with them. When school started up again at the end of summer, she'd be a junior.

He couldn't believe it, when it seemed like she'd only been born a few months ago. That's what it felt like, anyway.

The three men had been living together for four months now, following three months of dating. The better part of a year spent together, and Brandon knew the men were who he wanted to spend the rest of his life with.

Which was why he'd broken the news to them that morning, letting them know when their collaring would be. Up until now, he'd left the date flexible, both to keep the men on their toes and because he hadn't been sure what Emma's schedule was.

Brandon was still trying to help Emma repair her relationship with her mother, Tracey, his ex-wife. Tracey wasn't making it easy, unfortunately. Due in no small part, Brandon suspected, to Tracey's husband, Pat.

The collaring was something he'd actually wanted to do for weeks, but he hadn't wanted to schedule a date for their ceremony only to have to change plans at the last minute because of something his ex-wife did to make Emma not want to go visit her.

But Emma never missed a scheduled event with her bestie, Grace. Ever. The girls were practically inseparable.

Brandon had already received the chainmaille necklaces he planned to give Jeff and Stuart to wear as their day collars. Something they could wear to work and around Emma without it raising any awkward questions.

Stuart hadn't commented on his announcement. "Would you like to add something?" Brandon asked him.

Stuart smiled. "No, Sir. I'm happy we're doing it."

"Collaring will require a new level of behavior from you both, though. I'm working on a few rituals we can do, even when Emma's around, that won't ping her radar. Hopefully. I consider collaring the two of you to be every bit as serious as marriage."

Both men's smiles widened. "Yes, Sir."

Brandon took another sip of his coffee, his cock trying to wake up. "I do like it when you talk in stereo."

* * * *

Someone who didn't know Brandon and Jeff might tell Stuart he was being an idiot. That the first relationship he'd been in with a guy—*guys*, plural—had resulted in him moving in with them, and now working toward making it a committed, permanent dynamic?

Crazy.

Except Stuart considered himself damned lucky. A series of events had culminated in him standing where he was right then, with these two men, and there was no other place he wanted to be.

Definitely not in Iowa, where he'd moved from, and where all his family still lived.

His oldest brother, Jake, had phoned him a few weeks ago, deriding him for coming out to their mother over the phone and calling him a number of different names before angrily hanging up on him.

Then again, his brother was a bully raising two bully sons, and Jake's

opinion no longer mattered to Stuart.

Especially not when Stuart lived over a thousand miles away from the guy, and the rest of his family.

He had a new family. He had Brandon, Jeff, Emma, and their growing band of friends from Venture and the Suncoast Society. A few times already they'd attended family-friendly Suncoast Society cookouts with Emma.

Being with this group of people felt more like a "family" than Stuart had ever felt growing up surrounded by people related through birth and blood.

Damn sure more pleasant to be around.

"You want breakfast, Sir?" Jeff asked.

"That'd be nice, thank you."

Stuart set to helping him fix it when Brandon spoke again. "Another thing we need to handle is setting up a joint bank account for the three of us."

That made both him and Jeff turn, stereo again.

"Sir?"

Brandon's handsome, sleepy smile curved his lips. "You keep up the stereo act, I'm going to want to fuck you both this morning, and I don't have time for that." He took another sip of coffee "Bank account. Joint account. The three of us. I don't understand what's so complicated about that?"

"Um, why?" Stuart asked.

"For us to deposit our monthly share of expenses, and the grocery expenses. Instead of you both handing money to me. That just creates more work for me. We can each have an ATM card for it. I'll set up our household bills to auto-pay from that account for simplicity. Which brings me to another point—I need to get both of you added to the utilities."

Stuart didn't understand why his pulse started racing. "Utilities?"

"Yeah. If something happens to me, you both need to be able to access all of that. I'm going to talk to Ed about what we need to set up in terms of a trust for all of us for powers of attorney, things along those lines. He's an expert in all of that."

Jeff patted Stuart on the back. "Why do you look terrified, buddy? This is a good thing."

"I know. That's why I'm terrified." Stuart stared up into Jeff's hazel eyes. Both men were taller than Stuart's five nine. Jeff was six feet, and Brandon six two. "This is...real. This is *happening*. It's the good kind of terror. I've never done anything like this before."

Brandon set his coffee mug on the counter, stood, and rounded the end of it to engulf both men in a hug. “It’s okay, buddy. We’re not going anywhere. We love you. I know Emma loves you guys. I’m kind of scared, too.”

“Me, too,” Jeff said.

“I don’t think we’d be human if we weren’t at least a little scared,” Brandon added. “This is a big step for all of us, but I feel it’s the right one. If you need us to slow down—”

Stuart vigorously shook his head. “No, Sir. I don’t want to slow down. I want to be with you both.”

“Okay, then.” He smiled. “Somebody better get breakfast started, before they earn a bad kind of spanking.”

Stuart grinned. “Yes, Sir!”

* * * *

Jeff understood. Stuart was younger than him and Brandon. He’d just turned twenty-six a couple of months earlier. This was a huge step for him. His family were assholes, and he hadn’t even come out to them before he’d left Iowa and moved to Florida.

Hell, the first time he’d truly lived on his “own” had been the short stint he’d spent in the extended-stay hotel after his arrival in Florida, before moving in as Jeff’s roommate.

It was his and Brandon’s good luck that all three of them met at the same time.

After breakfast and showers, they kissed good-bye and headed out to their respective jobs. Stuart was an electrician, working for a guy who, ironically, was the former father-in-law of one of their friends from the Suncoast Society group. Even more ironically, that wasn’t how Stuart ended up meeting Jeff and Brandon. The poor guy had been catfished by a woman, using a picture of Brandon they’d e-mailed Stuart.

A bad-luck incident that immediately turned into good luck for all three of them.

Jeff was halfway to work when his cell phone rang from where he’d left it on the passenger seat.

His sister’s custom ring tone.

Iris rarely called him, even though they texted nearly every day, usually

several times during the day.

With his heart in his chest, he grabbed it and answered. “Hey. What’s up?”

“I’m sorry to call you so early, but I need help.”

“What’s wrong? Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. Do you remember my friend Sylvie, the girl I roomed with in college?”

Okay, so this wasn’t about her or their parents. He tried to will his pulse into a slower, more normal rhythm. “Vaguely. Why?”

“She’s leaving her husband and asked if I can help her move. Calvin’s going, too, but we need help.”

He knew he’d have to run it past Brandon, but could tentatively offer assistance. “I might be able to help. When is she moving?”

“This weekend. He’s going to be at a business seminar out of town. She wants to get out while he’s gone. She doesn’t have anyone up there she can ask for help. He’s abusive. She’s afraid if she says anything to anyone up there that it’ll get back to him, and then she’s doubly fucked.”

“Up there, *where*?”

“New Hampshire.”

Oy. “New Hampshire?”

“Yeah. I’ll pay for your ticket to fly up with us on Thursday. I need to book them this morning. She’ll pick us up when we get there, we’ll pack the house, get the rental truck, load it, and be out of there no later than early Sunday morning, driving back here to Sarasota. Depending on when we leave up there, we’ll probably get back some time late Monday, and we’ll put nearly everything into a storage unit she’s already reserved. I know this is a lot to ask, but she’s really scared.”

His sister was one of the most stable people he knew. She had a great job with an engineering firm, had a long-term live-in boyfriend, but hadn’t married him or had kids yet. “And Calvin is definitely going with us?”

“Yes. Sylvie’s husband owns the house, but a lot of the furniture was stuff she had when they got married. She knows if she walks away from it she’ll never get any of it back. Most of it was stuff from her grandparents’ house, lots of sentimental value to her. Morse’ll burn it on the front lawn rather than give it to her.”

“Do they have kids?”

“No. Two dogs, which she’s also taking. They’ll ride in her car with her. Please? I’ll pay for your meals and—”

“Let me talk to someone real fast, and then call you back.” He didn’t lie to her and specifically say he was going to ask his boss if he could take the time off, although if she made that assumption, he wouldn’t correct her.

He would have to clear this with Brandon, though. Just as a matter of courtesy, not even as a D/s dynamic kind of thing. Although he couldn’t imagine Brandon saying no, he couldn’t go.

“Okay, thanks.”

He ended the call and immediately called Brandon. Today, Brandon had to drive to Ft. Myers, to one of the bulk warehouse stores in his district that he managed. He’d still be driving.

He answered on the second ring. “Yeesss?”

“Hey, Sir. I need to talk to you.” He quickly laid out the issue to him and then waited.

Either Brandon would or wouldn’t okay it. He wouldn’t argue with him if the answer was no, however.

His Sir’s word was law, as far as Jeff was concerned. And Brandon had never been an asshole.

“I can’t go with you this weekend, and neither can Stuart,” Brandon said. “I have to supervise an inventory down in Ft. Myers on Friday, and Stuart’s covering for another guy out with a new baby.”

“I know, Sir.”

“Do you feel this will be safe?”

“Calvin’s not the kind of guy who will take shit from anyone. I think between the two of us, if the guy shows up, we’ll be okay. But the plan is to get out of there before he comes back and avoid that happening in the first place.”

“As long as you promise to be safe, then I don’t see any reason to say no. But thank you for asking me and not just assuming.”

“I wouldn’t assume. Especially not about something like this.”

“Good boy. Keep me posted on the details.”

Jeff’s cock stirred. He couldn’t help it. Every time Brandon called him his good boy, it had that effect on him. “I will.”

When he called Iris back, she answered on the first ring. “Well?”

“I can go. What information do you need from me to book the tickets?”

By the time he reached the car dealership he worked for and parked in the employee lot, Iris had already confirmed their tickets and e-mailed him the information.

Apparently, the husband would be flying back on Monday, meaning they'd be out of there long before he returned. And since Sylvie had found evidence the guy was meeting one of his girlfriends out in California, where the seminar was being held, she doubted he'd cancel his plans at the last minute, business trip or not. Being it was California, no chance of him just happening to stop back home to "check in."

Sylvie had already talked to an attorney and started things on her end. He would file the paperwork for her on Monday. She'd also be taking half the money from their joint bank accounts before her husband would have a chance to move it or withdraw it himself.

According to Iris, this had been a plan more than two months in the making, simply waiting for an opportunity to schedule it. Sylvie had also been putting on an act for her husband to make him complacent and think she wasn't going to do anything to leave him. She'd threatened to leave him once before, and he'd told her he'd burn down the house with the dogs in it if she did.

That was why she needed to leave the state. She had family in Florida, but she was estranged from them due to her husband's actions over the years. Iris hoped that with Sylvie back in Florida, she might be able to repair those relationships.

Plus her husband was lazy. It was doubtful he'd come after her in Florida, especially when he had girlfriends on the side he could simply latch on to, move one of them into the house, and whine to them about his horrible wife.

This should be an interesting weekend.

At least Brandon's ex-wife had settled down somewhat. Tracey was making hit-and-miss efforts to mend her relationship with Emma. But Emma still hated her stepfather, Pat, and Pat's thirteen-year-old son, Corey.

AKA "the Goober."

Things could always be worse.

He headed inside to see what interesting problems would await him in the service bay.

Chapter Two

Brandon still hadn't reached work yet when his cell phone rang again. Tracey.

Groaning, he initially debated whether or not to send it to voice mail when he decided delaying the inevitable wasn't worth it and answered.

"Yeah?"

"Hi, Brandon." Her tone sounded subdued, non-snarky.

In other words, totally not like Tracey had sounded over the past couple of years when talking to him.

He opted to keep an open mind and be the bigger person. "What's up?"

"I wanted to know if you thought it'd be okay for Emma to come visit this weekend?"

"That's up to her. You'll have to ask her yourself."

"She's not answering my calls."

That was news to Brandon. Emma normally told him when her mom tried to contact her. Not that he required Emma to tell him, but she usually volunteered it. Last he'd heard, Emma was slowly regaining her trust in Tracey.

"I thought you two were okay. What happened?"

Tracey let out a sigh he could hear on his end of the line. "I made the mistake Friday of asking if she'd be okay if we had Corey at the house the next time she spent the night."

He groaned. "I could have told you that was stupid." He belatedly realized how that sounded, but Tracey didn't ding him for it.

"I know, I know. Pat was pushing me to ask."

Another point he decided not to bust her balls over at that moment. "I'll ask Em to call you, but I make no promises. I won't order her to call you or order her to visit you."

"Do you have any advice for me on how to fix this?"

That pulled him up short. *Tracey?* Actually asking *him* for advice dealing with Emma?

Maybe she's dying.

He didn't even think that snarkily, but with genuine concern. "Are you okay?"

“I miss her living here. I...I want to try to fix this.”

Getting in the middle of this would only bring bad things. This he knew with a certainty, from prior disasters. As long as Tracey was married to Pat and still giving his opinions weight over Emma’s well-being, there would be no full reconciliation between her and Emma.

“Well, for starters, no way will she live with you again if you’re married to Pat. She’s flat-out said that. That’s her decision, not mine. Secondly, do not push her to spend time with Corey. Maybe try taking time off from work and making some of her swim meets for a change. Alone. No Pat, no Corey.” To the best of his recollection, Tracey had never made one of Emma’s swim meets, usually using work or exhaustion as her excuse.

He suspected the true reason was Pat badgering her in some fashion.

“When’s her next one?”

“She’s got a small one Wednesday afternoon at four. At the pool her team trains at. It’s not a sanctioned meet, more a practice competition between three local high schools ahead of the big meet she’s got Saturday morning. If you take an active interest in what she does for a change, it might help.”

Sure, it was a low blow. But after the way Tracey had sided with Pat against Emma about the stupid religious retreat cruise they’d tricked Emma into going on, Brandon could no longer back his ex-wife’s parental role.

In front of Emma he’d try to stay neutral, sure.

Tracey had burned up the last of his goodwill when it came to her. Which had been a considerable amount, considering how guilty he felt having to divorce her in the first place.

To her credit, Tracey didn’t snipe back at him. “Okay. I should be able to make the one on Wednesday. I have to work Saturday morning, though. I can’t make that one.” Then she crossed the line. “Corey’s not a bad kid, he just has...issues.”

Aaannnd we’re done. “Nope, not buying what you’re selling. He tried to take hidden video of our *daughter*. You do *not* get to side with that little shit over Emma. Not without it biting you in the ass. If he was six, maybe. He’s going to be *fourteen* in a few months, so he knew damned well what he was doing. I still stand by my statement that if he tries anything like that again, Emma has orders to call 911 and then me, in that order. And I *will* make sure charges are pressed. That means he’ll likely end up on a sex offender registry.

I will *not* have him doing something to ruin her life.”

Tracey was silent for so long he wondered if she’d hung up on him. “I understand,” she quietly said.

Well, that’s progress. “Anything else?”

“No. I’ll see you Wednesday.”

“Okey dokey. Later.” He hung up on her without waiting to see if she had anything else to say.

Tracey’s in-laws were rabidly religious Christian Scientists, to an obsessive level.

They also had a lot of money.

Pat had tried to worm his way into their good graces by forcing Emma to go with him, Tracey, Corey, and his parents on the religious retreat...on a boat. Tracey and Pat had lied to Emma and told her it was a family building retreat, leaving out the religious part of it.

And on the basis of Pat’s parents’ religion, they’d forbidden Brandon’s secular and extremely prone to seasickness daughter the over-the-counter motion sickness meds Brandon had purchased for her.

The predictable results being that Emma had spent the weekend sick, and had spectacularly—and deliberately—puked all over Tracey’s mother-in-law in front of a dining room full of passengers.

After eating two bowls of red Jell-O.

Then, due to Emma being dehydrated from puking all weekend, the ship’s nurse had requested the captain call the Coast Guard to airlift Emma to the hospital.

None of this was relayed to Brandon until after the fact, when they’d returned home and Tracey had called Brandon to come get Emma after Emma had told Tracey she wanted to live with Brandon.

That was when Emma came to live with him full-time, coincidentally on the same weekend he’d first met Jeff and Stuart and started dating them.

Pat and Tracey did not have a lot of money. Pat worked as an assistant manager at a fast-food restaurant, and had been stuck in that same position for years. Tracey’s job as an office manager at a grocery store chain also didn’t pay very well. From what Brandon had garnered from Emma, Pat was always trying to scheme ways to finagle money out of his parents, usually by using her or Corey as an excuse.

Brandon had no sympathy and gave zero fucks about either Pat or

Tracey, in that respect. Brandon had taken his high school education and a job as a stock clerk for a bulk warehouse chain, and worked his way up to district manager of the same chain, in charge of several locations in southwest Florida, all while also getting his college degree, and later raising his daughter as a single dad when she was with him. That, on top of buying a short-sale house and renovating it.

Pat was fourteen years older than Brandon, and far worse off in life, with no inclination to improve himself or better himself through hard work. Tracey had apparently let him drag her down to his level.

At least Emma inherited my drive to succeed.

* * * *

Emma texted Brandon during her lunch period.

Why is Mom so eager to talk to me?

He groaned. He wasn't going to lie for Tracey or do her dirty work for her.

She called me this morning. I told her to start taking an actual interest in you. She might come to your swim meet Wednesday.

Ugh.

Brandon sympathized. *Why didn't you tell me you'd stopped talking to her again?*

Because it was just a couple of days ago. She brought up Corey and I thought giving her the silent treatment for a while would give her a hint. Carrot meet stick, like you taught me.

He chuckled at that. Totally Emma. *Sorry, but she'll probably keep trying. At least she is trying.*

I don't trust HER. Or Pat.

Again, he couldn't blame her. *Then tell her that. I thought you two were starting to fix things between you?*

We were, until she said she wished I would give Corey another chance. She blew it. Again. Do I have to call her?

Totally your decision. I told you that.

I'll think about it. I'll text you when I get home. Can Grace come home with me today? We need to study.

If her parents say yes.

They did. Thanks. Love you.

Brandon smiled. Somehow, he'd lucked out and she hadn't turned on him yet.

Or maybe Tracey's antics had given Emma a litmus test when comparing Brandon to Tracey.

Love you, too. See you when I get home.

Grace didn't drive yet. She was three months younger than Emma and had just turned sixteen, but her eyesight was bad due to her being born prematurely. Plus being a very thin and frail-looking five two, she could barely see over the steering wheel and reach the pedals. Compared to Emma's five seven and strong, lithely muscled swimmer's build, Grace appeared tiny and fragile.

Grace still felt very nervous when behind the wheel during driving lessons, and wasn't eager to get her full license yet. So either Brandon, her parents, or Emma drove Grace around. Well, and Jeff and Stuart now, since Grace's parents had met them and signed off on it.

In fact, the five of them—and the two girls—frequently had family dinner nights together. He'd wondered at first if Grace's parents would have a problem with their blended poly family, but they hadn't.

What Grace lacked in physicality, she more than made up for with her brain and personality. Sweet, wicked smart, and with an incredibly funny and snarky sense of humor, she usually had all of them cracking up at the dinner table.

Brandon, Jeff, and Stuart had already sworn to Grace's father to help him put a serious hurting on any boy who broke Grace's heart, but so far, like Emma, she seemed dedicated to her studies when the two girls weren't doing stuff together.

* * * *

It was a little after one in the afternoon, and Jeff had just finished working on his latest vehicle when his cell phone rang from its resting place on top of his toolbox.

Emma's custom tone.

That was extremely unusual. She never called him at work. He peeled off his work glove to answer it. "Hey, kiddo. What's up?"

"You know how you said you were going to teach me how to change a tire on my car?"

"Yeah?"

"Can we do that right now? We came out to drive home after class, and I've got a flat."

The dealership he worked at was only ten minutes from her school. He could be there a lot faster than making her call AAA and waiting for them, and both Stuart and Brandon were much farther away.

"Sure, honey. Give me a few minutes and I'll be right over."

When he arrived, the student parking lot was almost completely empty, making it easy to find the girls. To Emma's credit, she'd already removed the spare, jack, and tire iron from the trunk, and had them lying on the ground next to the front driver's side tire.

"Did you feel anything this morning when you drove it? Was the steering wheel pulling or pulsing or anything?"

"A little, but only on the way to swimming. After swimming, it was rush hour traffic, and the pool's only a couple of minutes from here. I barely got up to thirty then."

He really didn't have time to let her change the tire herself with his

supervision, so he did it for her. Ten minutes later, he had the donut on, lug nuts tightened, and her tire in the back of his truck. He'd take it to the dealership and fix the leak, a roofing nail that had gotten embedded in it.

"There you go. I'll put this one back on when I get home."

Despite him being all sweaty and dirty from work, Emma still threw her arms around him to hug him. "Thank you! I love you."

He kissed the top of her head. "Love you, too, kiddo. Send me a text when you get home so I know you made it."

"I will."

He got into the truck and followed them out of the parking lot, turning the opposite way to return to work. It took him less than ten minutes to fix the tire, and he was able to fit one more repair job into his day before knocking off for the evening to head home.

When he arrived, he parked in his usual spot and went to go get Emma's keys from her so he could change the tire. When he opened the door, a delicious aroma hit him.

"Wow, what's for dinner?"

"I made your favorite meatloaf." She and Grace were busy in the kitchen.

"Thanks, but how'd I get so lucky?"

"For rescuing us this afternoon. We really appreciate it."

"I need your keys so I can swap the tire."

"Can I help? I want to learn how to do it."

"Sure."

Both she and Grace followed him outside. Grace watched while Jeff talked Emma through the process. She had a little trouble loosening the lug nuts, but once he showed her how to stand on the tire iron handle to break them loose, she was able to get them.

After the tire was replaced, he'd double-checked that the lug nuts were tight enough, and the spare, jack, and tire iron were stowed in the trunk, he offered her a high-five.

"Good job, kiddo."

"Wait'll Dad hears about this," she said.

"You didn't tell him yet?"

"I didn't want to bug him since you were able to help us."

"Eh, shoot him a text, please. I know it's fine, but it's a courtesy."

"I will."

He headed inside to shower and change, his stomach growling from the delicious aroma of meatloaf. Emma was a damn good cook, for sure. Grace, too. Plenty of times that summer the three men had arrived home to find the girls had prepared them a nearly gourmet feast as they experimented in the kitchen.

It was already difficult to remember what life had been like before he lived with Brandon and Stuart. His family had accepted the situation, even though he could tell his parents didn't understand it.

Not about him being gay, that they'd had no problem with when he'd come out to them and his sister not long after graduating from high school. His parents were open-minded, and had likewise accepted his sister's boyfriend, who was black, without hesitation.

But Jeff having two partners...that had thrown them for a little bit of a loop.

Fortunately, when they'd learned that Stuart's parents had reacted badly when he'd come out, they'd stepped up and welcomed him as part of the family.

Emma having friends in school whose parents were also poly—and ironically fellow members of the Suncoast Society—had made acceptance a non-issue to her. They loved each other. They were a family. She didn't care her dad had two guys instead of one.

They weren't Pat, or like Pat.

To her, that was a total win.

The girls were sitting at the kitchen table with textbooks spread out around them when he walked in. "I might have to sneak a few bites of that meatloaf now. I'm starving."

"There's some fruit salad in the fridge," Emma told him. "Snack on that. It's healthy."

He shot her a smirk. "Trying to watch out for me, huh?"

"Someone has to watch out for you three. You'd all be living on Chinese takeout and pizza if it wasn't for us."

He started to argue with her...except she was right.

"I hate when you're right."

Grace giggled. "She's almost always right. She *is* a genius, after all. With the papers to prove it and everything."

Emma blushed. "Stop," she mumbled.

Jeff turned, studying them. "Wait, what?"

"Nothing," Emma mumbled again.

"No, what's going on?"

Grace stared at Emma, obvious confusion on her face. "Didn't you tell them?"

"*No*. I hadn't. Thank you very much."

"Tell us what?" Jeff asked.

When Emma obviously wasn't going to say it, Grace spoke up again. "The guidance counselor gave her an IQ test. She scored 172. She told Emma she should apply to Mensa."

"Holy crap!"

"It's *nothing*," Emma said. "Those tests aren't even accurate."

"When did this happen?" he asked Grace, since Emma was obviously not wanting to talk about it.

"Two weeks ago."

Jeff stared at Emma. "You got this news *two weeks* ago and didn't tell us?"

"It's *not* a big deal," Emma insisted.

"I've been trying to talk her into applying for Mensa," Grace said, "and she's chicken. *Bok bok*."

Jeff leaned against the counter. "Anything else you've been holding back?"

Emma's face turned even pinker, but she shook her head.

"Why are you embarrassed by this?" he asked. "This is a good thing."

"Because it's just a number. It's not the sum of who I am. That'd be like saying my best swimming times define me. Or like how many cars you can work on in a week defines you."

Jeff immediately spotted the irony in this, that he didn't have a ready comeback for her because she wasn't completely wrong.

"You need to tell your dad about this," he said. "If nothing else because he'll be damn proud of you for it. Tonight. Okay?"

Mumbling seemed to be her go-to tone. "Okay. Fine." She shot a dark glare Grace's way, who stuck her tongue out at her in reply.

"Thank you," Jeff said.

Now, if Emma would only go through with it.

Chapter Three

When Brandon arrived home Monday, he headed straight for the dining room, do not pass go, do not take a shower. He was starving, and whatever Emma and Grace had made to repay Jeff for changing the tire smelled delicious.

It looked like Jeff and Stuart had already grabbed their showers, and Grace was joining them for dinner, as usual.

“Oooh, meatloaf.” After giving Emma and Grace hugs, and Jeff and Stuart quick kisses, he took his usual place at the head of the table.

One subtle way for Jeff and Stuart to have a protocol safe to do in front of Emma, Grace, and any other vanillas who might join them for a meal. Jeff on his right, Stuart on his left.

And, as always, both men waited for his head tip to them before they started eating.

“So did you call your mom back?” Brandon started, wanting this discussion out of the way.

Emma rolled her eyes from the far end of the table. “Not yet. I texted her.”

“That’s progress, I suppose. You have every right to tell her no, if you want to.”

“I want to, believe me. I can’t believe she had the nerve to ask me if I’d be okay with the Goober being there.” She pointed at Jeff. “Can we talk about the hero of the day instead of Mom?”

Jeff blushed a little, but Brandon didn’t miss the pleased smile on his face.

“Thanks for doing that,” Brandon said. “I appreciate it.”

Jeff shrugged. “No big deal. Glad I could take care of it.”

“How much do we owe you for the tire repair?”

He snorted. “Seriously, the patch is like two bucks. I did it myself. They cooked me my favorite dinner—we’re more than even.”

“And he taught me how to change it so next time, I can do it myself,” Emma added.

“That’s good. So what else is new?”

When Grace cleared her throat, Emma’s face went red.

Beet. Red.

Brandon leveled his gaze at Emma. "Em?"

"If you don't tell him," Jeff said, "I will."

"Or *I* will," Grace said.

Brandon laid down his silverware, clasped his hands together, and rested his elbows on the table. "Care to enlighten me, sweetheart?"

"It's not a big deal, Dad. Seriously. I wish everyone would quit thinking it is."

"How about you let *me* be the judge of that? *Right* now." That was not a tone he had to use on her very often. Full-on Dom tone, which also conveniently did double-duty as Dad voice, when needed.

He'd never laid a hand on his child. He'd never wanted to, much less needed to. He had *the* voice.

The same one he'd used on Tracey when they were still a couple and he was her Dom.

Another seismic eye roll, plus Emma suddenly found her plate interesting. "It's nothing. Just a stupid score."

This was a surprise. Emma was usually a straight-A student, although he'd been careful to never scold her over the rare low grade. He preferred a constructive approach. Besides, she would mentally beat herself up and punish herself for low grades far worse than he would ever think about doing.

"How bad? And in what subject?"

"172, but Dad, *please* don't make a big deal over this, okay? I'm not some uber-genius."

He blinked, confused. "Say what?"

Grace spared him. "She scored 172 on an IQ test, the guidance counselor told her to apply to Mensa, and she won't, because she's a stubborn chicken. *Bokity bok bok.*"

This took him a moment to process. Emma's reaction totally looked the opposite of what he thought he'd just heard. "You're trying to tell me that you're upset because you scored *high* on an IQ test?"

"No, I'm upset because everyone's trying to use it to label me as a genius or something. I suck at chemistry, okay? I'm good in a couple of subjects, yes, but I'm no Nobel Prize winner."

Brandon really felt he was missing some crucial bit of information, so he changed tactics and went to the more helpful source of information in this

case.

“Grace, I know I’m a stupid dad, but what am I missing here?”

Grace smirked. “She’s about three days from her period starting.”

“Oh. My. *God!*” Emma shrieked. “How *could* you?”

Grace remained unfazed. “Well, you’ve been kind of bitchy. Mrs. Jergens said if you’re in Mensa *and* National Honor Society that it’ll really pad your college applications.”

Brandon struggled and won the war to not burst out laughing. Emma’s face looked the deepest shade of red he’d ever seen her turn, and she also looked like she wanted to kill her bestie.

It wasn’t the first time Grace had engaged in some sadism at Emma’s expense, and it always cracked him up when she did.

“Honey, I’m proud of you. If you want to be stealthily smart, okay. But if it’ll help you with applying to college, I don’t understand why you’re fighting it?”

“Because life is more than labels, Dad. And I’ll face enough of them as it is. ‘Oh, there’s the smart chick. Oh, there’s the swimmer girl. Oh, there’s the girl with the non-traditional—’”

Her mouth clamped shut.

He studied her for a moment. “Do we need to go have a talk in private?”

She shook her head and shoved a bite of meatloaf into her mouth.

“Is this about Jeff and Stuart? I thought you were okay with them?”

“I *am*! Dad, seriously, I love them. This is about *me*. I face enough flak from Pat about how smart I am. I don’t need to call more attention to myself.”

That still didn’t feel...completely honest. “Since when do you give a flying fu-art what Pat thinks about you?”

“I don’t. But I...” She sighed. “I don’t want to rub Mom’s face in it.”

This didn’t feel like the true crux of the issue, either, but he’d allow her the gracious out.

For now. “You could still apply and if you make it we don’t tell anyone. Not like we have to take out a billboard outing you.”

That finally earned him the ghost of a smile.

They made it through dinner and, while Brandon went to grab a shower, Jeff and Stuart helped the girls clean up the kitchen.

Once Emma had left to drive Grace home, Jeff and Stuart joined Brandon

in the shower.

“Clock is ticking on noisy sex, Sir,” Stuart teased. “We have about forty-five minutes until Emma returns.”

“What did I miss during that dinner conversation tonight?” Brandon asked. “Or was it something that happened before I got home?”

Jeff shook his head. “She was like that when Grace let it slip to me earlier. I don’t get the feeling it’s about me or Stuart. It’s something Emma feels, and when she’s ready to tell us, she will.” He dropped to his knees in front of Brandon. “So can we have some quick and noisy beatings and sex before she gets home? *Please?*”

Brandon grabbed Jeff’s head and pulled him onto his cock. “Get busy, boy.” He reached out, pulled Stuart in for a kiss, then pushed him down onto his knees. “You help him. Don’t make me come, just get me nice and ready.”

There weren’t many things better than his two boys going at his cock and balls in tandem. One on each side, or one sucking his cock and one working on his balls. Either way, he wasn’t picky.

With a hand on each of their heads, buried in their hair, he took charge, fucking his cock between their mouths.

“That is sooo fucking hot,” he said. “And I think Jeff’s earned an extra reward tonight for changing Emma’s tire. I’ll be the middle of the sandwich. Jeff can fuck me while I fuck Stuart. We haven’t done that permutation in a while.”

Both men moaned around Brandon’s cock, which only made him stiffer. He was forty-two, where Jeff was thirty-eight, and Stuart was twenty-six. Meaning their little beta subby sometimes ran the two of them ragged.

In their situation, three was definitely a magic number, especially when it came to keeping Stuart contentedly fucked into a happy, gooey mess.

Moving them from the shower to the bedroom after they’d all dried off, Brandon grabbed an acrylic paddle from the toybag stashed under his bed and had both men bend over the edge of the bed once they’d both donned their leather cuffs and collars.

“Fast and furious so we can get to the fucking,” he joked, quickly delivering a series of hard strokes to both men’s asses, turning them a lovely shade of pink and leaving both their cocks hard and dripping.

It hadn’t taken Brandon long to condition both men to get horny from pain. That’d been the easy part.

Keeping up with the two of them sometimes proved tougher.

Once he knew he had two well-spanked and horny boys ready for fucking, he got Stuart up on the bed, on his back, wrist cuffs hooked to the headboard and legs spread wide as Brandon got him lubed. He took his time working his condom-sheathed cock into Stuart's ass, falling still once he was balls-deep inside him so Jeff could do the same behind him.

"Mmm, yeah." Brandon kissed Stuart, enjoying the feel of Jeff's fingers in his ass, his cock twitching inside Stuart with every movement Jeff made. "Sooo fucking good." He smiled down at Stuart. "So when are you going to get curious about DP, hmm?"

They'd helped Jeff check that off his sexual bucket list not that long ago. Wasn't something they did every time they made love, but the few times they had done it, Jeff's eyes had nearly rolled back in his head from how good he said it felt.

Between them, Brandon felt Stuart's cock twitch. "I've been thinking about it, Sir."

"You have, hmm?" Brandon's eyes fell closed again as Jeff worked up to three fingers in his ass. "*Yeah*, boy. That's the spot."

"I think I'd maybe like to try it. At least once. At some point."

"Oooh, someone's going to be getting some new butt plugs," Jeff teased from behind Brandon.

"Someone better be getting their cock up my ass if they want to get off tonight before Emma gets home."

Jeff was soon doing just that, making Brandon moan as Jeff slowly fucked him a little at a time. He didn't bottom to them like this as often as they did to him or each other, so whenever one of them fucked him, they had to ease him into it, at first.

Then he liked for them to plow him hard.

Even better when his own cock was buried in one of their asses or mouths at the same time. There was nothing quite like that exquisite pleasure, sliding back and forth between them, filling and being filled.

He leaned in again and sucked on Stuart's lower lip. "Don't you come yet, boy."

"Yes, Sir." His sweet green eyes had glazed over. Their gorgeous, eager little beta subby boy.

In their time together, he and Jeff had countless hours of fun introducing

Stuart to all sorts of pleasures he'd only been able to dream about before he moved to Florida. When the two of them topped Stuart at the same time, it drove the younger man hard and deep into subspace, where he was happy to stay for as long as possible.

Whether it was taking a beating from them, or being filled at both ends by their cocks—or all of the above—Stuart was always eager and willing to please and play.

Sometimes, Brandon enjoyed taking his time fucking Stuart like this, slowly building him up, hitting just the right angle to make him come without even having to touch his cock for him. The first time that had happened, it'd surprised the hell out of Stuart in the good way.

Tonight, however, they wouldn't have time. Not with the clock ticking and Emma due back soon. "Jeff, don't you come yet, either."

"Yes, Sir."

Brandon hooked his arms under Stuart's shoulders, cupping his hands around the top of them to hold him in place and get better leverage as he slowly started fucking the men, rocking himself back and forth between them, a sexy seesaw he wished he could ride all damn night.

Brandon closed his eyes as he fell into a good rhythm and Jeff nudged into the perfect position behind him.

"Oh, *fuck* that's good." He felt Jeff's hands on his hips steadying himself.

Nights like this, he gave serious thought to maybe trying DP himself one day, on the receiving end. They had a couple of toys he'd ordered, a thick, fuckable sheath with a nice fat knob at the end, one for Jeff and one for Stuart. The men loved being fucked with them in. Brandon had tried one, too, and agreed it felt great.

Jeff's breath felt warm against Brandon's back as Jeff struggled to obey Brandon's command not to come. When Brandon peeled his eyes open again, he stared down into Stuart's green gaze. His hands had clamped around the restraints clipping his wrist cuffs to the headboard, and from the glazed look on his face, he'd fallen deep in subspace.

Brandon picked up the pace, hating to rush but not wanting to get caught by Emma's return.

He ground his hips against Stuart, fucking him hard, deep, using the leverage to pound his cock into his boy's ass the way Brandon knew he loved.

“Jeff, help him out,” Brandon ordered.

Jeff reached around him and found Stuart’s cock, stroking it between them as best he could with the limited space.

Stuart let out an adorable moan, his lower lip now clamped between his teeth.

“Yeah, you’re close, aren’t you?” Brandon asked.

“Yes, Sir,” he gasped.

“So am I.” A few more thrusts would do it. “Get ready. You both can come once I do...*now*.” Pleasure engulfed him as he buried his cock deep inside Stuart’s sweet, tight ass one last time. Jeff’s hand and hips both started moving, getting Stuart off a split second before Jeff let out a moan and fell still behind him.

From out front, they faintly heard the chirrup of Emma’s car locks being engaged.

Brandon rested his head on Stuart’s chest, loving the sound of his racing pulse starting to slow, thumping in his ear. “That was impeccable timing, boys. Good job.”

Chapter Four

Wednesday afternoon, Brandon left work early enough to make it to the pool for Emma's meet. He rarely missed one, and ever since Jeff and Stuart had moved in, if Brandon couldn't make a meet, one or both of them went in his place.

The pool was attached to a large community fitness center that also had a gymnasium, workout equipment, and outdoor courts for tennis and other sports, along with holding classes such as yoga and spinning.

He'd just pulled in when Stuart's truck turned into the parking lot.

God, I love those two men.

Jeff wouldn't be able to make it today since he'd be missing enough work as it was because of going out of town to help his sister. But with the three of them living together, Jeff and Stuart made a point of trying to get to as many of Emma's meets as they could.

Brandon got out of his car and waited for Stuart to park and cross the lot to join him. "That was perfect timing, Sir," Stuart said as Brandon leaned in for a kiss.

"Sure was."

Emma's car sat parked in the lot, meaning she was likely warming up already. The two of them headed inside to walk to the door leading out to the pool deck.

It only took Brandon a moment to spot Grace in the bleachers, and they joined her there. Since Emma was usually her ride after school, if there was a swim meet, Grace was there by default.

Despite sitting in the shade, she wore a large, floppy-brimmed hat and dark sunglasses that fit over her regular glasses. She was pale with freckles, her fair skin prone to burning easily. "Are we taking bets if her mom shows up?" she snarked.

"How's Em doing with that?" Brandon asked, hoping his daughter's bestie might give him a little more info than he currently had.

She shrugged. "She's not talking much to me about her, either. I have to tell you, Pop, that woman's a piece of work. I think Em's afraid to get her hopes up. Again."

He'd always felt a little uncomfortable with Grace calling him "Mr.

Ziegler” when she was like a second daughter to him. Likewise, she hadn’t felt comfortable calling him by his first name. When Grace had come up with the nickname for him, he’d been secretly pleased by it.

“I can’t blame her,” he said.

“Neither can I.” At the sound of Stuart’s dark tone, Brandon reached over and patted his thigh before lacing fingers with him. Stuart didn’t exactly have the best relationship with his family. Tracey’s poor relationship with Emma was definitely an emotional trigger for him.

“You’ve got us,” Brandon told him.

“Yeah,” Grace said. “And me, if I count.” She grinned.

Stuart managed a smile for her. “Of course you count. You’re family, too, kiddo.”

“Oh, Mom and Dad told me this morning to ask if you guys want to come over for dinner Saturday night. Dad’s trying out a couple of new recipes and needs guinea pigs.” Her father, Bill, was an amateur competitor in barbecue contests.

No way would Brandon turn down an offer like that. Even the man’s fails were delicious.

“Sure,” Brandon said, “but Jeff won’t be there. He’s going out of town tomorrow.”

“Oh, that’s right. Em told me. Well, Mom said seven, bring your appetites, and wear your stretchy pants, because he’s going to grill up a storm.”

The meet was five minutes from starting when Brandon spotted Tracey walking onto the pool deck.

“Oh, boy,” Stuart muttered when he saw her. “Here we go.”

Tracey walked over to them. “Can I join you?”

“Sure,” Brandon said. There was plenty of room, so it wasn’t like they could stop her from sitting close by.

Brandon knew it was better to take the high road. In less than two years, Emma would be eighteen, and then any troubles she had with Tracey wouldn’t really be his troubles anymore. Whether Emma patched things up with his ex-wife or cut her out of her life entirely, Brandon would still have his relationship with Emma, and he’d support her either way.

Emma, standing on the far side of the pool deck with some of her teammates, spotted her mom and finally lifted her hand in what looked like

the most noncommittal wave Brandon had ever seen in his life.

From the way Stuart nudged him, he knew it wasn't just his imagination.

It had always secretly irritated Brandon that he had been the single dad, also working full-time, and yet had been the one to get Emma to most of her events after the divorce.

Hell, even before the divorce.

He'd even volunteered as a parent chaperone for school trips when Tracey said she couldn't go because of her work schedule. That shit had always fallen on him.

I guess I wasn't a very damn good Dom in that relationship.

Truth be told, he'd known there was trouble long before Tracey had. Maybe he hadn't pushed her harder, had taken on more than his fair share of the load, knowing the inevitable was always just over the horizon.

Guilt.

Loads of it, spread all around. More every day he'd remained married to Tracey and tried to force himself to live a lie. Most of their BDSM dynamic had existed in their bedroom, and had only involved sex and a little bit of restraint, not impact play or an overall dynamic like he had with Stuart and Jeff.

At least Emma was happy living with him now. Far happier than she'd been shuttling back and forth between their houses all the time.

Except it hadn't been too bad before Tracey had met and married Pat. She'd been more attentive to Emma, more *there* during that time. Once she'd met Pat...

These weren't things he'd pointed out to Emma, they were mental comments he knew were best kept to himself.

Well, and somewhat to Jeff and Stuart, now that they were a part of his life.

* * * *

I think I've earned a cookie.

Stuart personally thought Brandon was acting far more charitable to Tracey than she deserved. Especially after Emma had spent plenty of time bending his ear and Jeff's and venting to them about her mom in a way he'd never really heard her talk to Brandon before.

He also resented Tracey being there, intruding on their time with Emma. Wasn't his fault Tracey had shitty taste in second husbands and drove her daughter off. At least she wouldn't be there Saturday morning.

Brandon hadn't ordered him or Jeff to keep quiet about Tracey around Emma and Grace, but he had asked them to please exercise restraint.

Out of respect for Brandon, they did.

He still couldn't believe it'd taken Tracey this long to finally show an interest in Emma's life.

Then again, considering his own mother had told him he was going to Hell, and he'd basically lived in fear of his secret being discovered before he'd moved to Florida, maybe it wasn't that much of a stretch after all. At least Jeff's family had accepted him into the fold. And Grace's parents were amazing people, as much an extended family as Jeff's were.

He didn't have much contact with Brandon's family. Brandon wasn't very close to his two brothers the way Jeff was with his sister. While Brandon's parents lived locally, Brandon didn't see them very often. Even then, usually only for things like holidays, or when they wanted to see Emma. Brandon had told him and Jeff one of the reasons he'd married Tracey in the first place was that he'd thought it'd earn him approval from his family.

And they all knew how that had ended up.

It took maturity and Emma's birth to make Brandon see that the only person he could live for was himself, and he shouldn't live his life trying to get people to give him affection they weren't capable of giving.

Especially not when it made himself miserable in the process.

The meet lasted nearly two hours, and Stuart enjoyed cheering Emma on with Brandon and Grace.

Tracey didn't seem to understand what was going on, and Brandon apparently took pity on her, explaining the events Emma was participating in.

Finally, when it ended, Emma rounded the pool to speak to them before heading inside to change. "Did you want to go out for dinner?" Brandon asked Emma.

Stuart hung back with Grace, watching.

Emma's gaze darted to her mom, then back to her dad. "We've got a lot of leftovers at home. And Jeff's leaving tomorrow. I'd rather go home. Plus I have to study for tomorrow. And I need to take Grace home first."

"Okay. No problem. We'll wait for you outside." He patted Stuart's

shoulder and indicated for them to go, leaving Tracey there with Emma and Grace.

Once they were through the doorway into the building, Stuart leaned in. “She’s not exactly warming up to her mom being here, is she?”

“Nope. Can’t blame her.”

“Neither can I.”

* * * *

Brandon knew Stuart would probably have an earful to say once they were alone, and he didn’t disappoint.

“I’m sorry, Sir,” he quietly said so they couldn’t be overheard, “but I’m not happy she’s here.”

“I know.” He pulled him in for a hug. “But thank you for being so good about this. I appreciate it.”

Stuart relaxed in his arms. “This is *our* family,” he whispered. “She had her chance and screwed it up.”

His poor boy. He might always bear scars from his family of origin.

All he and Jeff could try to do was heal him with their love.

Grace and Tracey emerged a few minutes later. Tracey hesitated, finally giving Brandon a smile. “Thanks for today.”

He shrugged. “I didn’t do anything. She’s old enough to make up her own mind. That’s something you should remember.”

Tracey seemed to huddle in on herself, her arms crossed over her chest, hands gripping her arms.

She didn’t resemble the woman he’d known and thought he’d loved.

Tried to love.

Correction, he *had* loved her. He hadn’t been *in* love with her.

“How do I fix this with her?”

Brandon shrugged. “One step at a time. Without Pat in tow. The more you do that, the more she feels like you put her first, the better your chances. I can’t fight this for you, Tracey. This is all on you. You need to regain her trust. Accusing her of faking being sick when you tricked her onto that cruise that time, and then Pat took her meds from her, was pretty shitty.”

She blushed. “I know,” she said, so softly he almost couldn’t hear her.

“Taking Corey’s side over hers when he tried to video her without her

consent was also not the right move.”

She swallowed hard and nodded.

“Does Pat even know you’re here?”

She shook her head.

“Are you afraid of him?”

“He’s my husband, Brandon.”

“That wasn’t an answer.” He stepped closer, forcing her to look up at him. “Were you ever afraid of *me*?”

“That night you came and got Emma after we got home from the cruise.”

“I had every right to be angry at you and Pat that night. And you know what I mean.”

She finally shook her head.

“So why are you afraid to stand up to Pat? You shouldn’t live in fear.”

“It’s not that simple. He’s never hurt me. But I can’t exactly go out and make a living all on my own. Sometimes, in marriage, you have to make sacrifices.” She tipped her head up slightly, nose in the air. “It’s what *responsible* adults do.”

With that, she turned on her heel and stomped off.

Stuart stepped forward. “I feel like I should snap my fingers and say, ‘Oh, no, she did-*unt*.’”

Brandon offered him a fist bump.

Grace snapped her fingers. “Oh, no, she did-*unt*.”

Brandon fist-bumped her.

But Brandon got it. Tracey had been completely in love with him. When he’d finally come out to her and told her he was filing for divorce, it had devastated her.

Then she’d latched on to the first prospect she’d found for her next husband. She’d taken plenty of potshots at Brandon over the past several years about him “turning gay” and leaving her, abandoning his responsibilities, even though that wasn’t exactly the truth or anywhere close to it.

He’d given her plenty of passes, knowing she was in pain and scared and angry.

Grace wore a dour glare as she watched Tracey march across the parking lot. “That woman doesn’t have issues—she has subscriptions. If she thinks Pat is her best chance in this world, she’s also delusional. The guy’s a

freaking idiot.”

Brandon fist-bumped with her again.

Chapter Five

Thursday morning, Jeff stood in “his” bedroom, staring at the stuff he’d laid out on the bed. “His bedroom” meaning that’s where his clothes and some other belongings were located, but he rarely slept in there now.

Not alone, at least.

Sometimes he and Stuart slept in there on the rare night Brandon was too exhausted to do more than face-plant onto his bed after work, but he and Stuart were still in the mood to have sexy fun.

Although there had been one night Stuart had eaten Mexican at lunch and fell asleep with a massive case of the farts. Rather than wake him up, Brandon had signaled to Jeff, and they’d vacated the master bedroom in a hasty retreat to Jeff’s.

It was that or have two bedrooms smelling instead of just one. At least the master bedroom had sliders opening onto the lanai and they could air it out more easily the next morning.

Jeff was trying to get by with only one carryon, and tried to guess what he’d need. Shorts and T-shirts, mostly, because it would be warm up there. A pair of jeans and a button-up shirt for the plane ride, and in case they went out somewhere Friday night.

He doubted that’d be on the agenda, but just in case, it didn’t hurt to be prepared.

Extra pair of old jeans and a light jacket. Socks, and he’d only take the one pair of sneakers. Briefs.

To save space, instead of taking toiletries, he would only bring his electric razor and buy everything else he’d need once they were up there. He would take his phone, tablet, and chargers for both, but not his laptop. No time for that, anyway.

Emma had already left for the morning, but Stuart and Brandon walked in to hug him before they left for work.

“Stay safe,” Brandon ordered. “Don’t hesitate to call 911 if something happens. Don’t be a hero. Come home safe.”

“I promise. Sylvie is sure there won’t be any trouble. We’ll be in and out.”

“Take no chances,” Brandon said. “That’s an order, if I wasn’t clear.”

“That was clear, Sir.”

“Good. Love you.” Brandon kissed the top of his head.

“Love you, too, Sir.”

Brandon finally released him so Stuart could hug him one more time.
“Text me before you take off and when you land.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Once Jeff was alone again, he started to pack. He’d leave his truck parked at Iris and Calvin’s because a friend of hers was driving them to the airport.

I hope we never have to go through something like this with Emma.

Then again, Emma seemed steadfastly determined never to date. Any guy she did finally deem worthy would hopefully not be an abusive asshole.

If he was, Jeff was sure he, Brandon, and Stuart would be stepping in and getting the guy to step off post-haste.

Once they were finally in the air, Iris patted his hand. “So how did Jeff and Brandon take it when you said you were helping?”

“They send their apologies they couldn’t come, too. They would have, except for work.”

“I don’t understand why you’re with two guys, but I’m not going to question it. And Emma is a sweetheart.” Their parents had also expressed some confusion, but since they’d basically adopted Emma as the only grandchild they were likely to have for the foreseeable future, they were fine with the situation.

“I’m a lucky guy, and I know it.”

She grinned. “How’s the Edsel?”

“Still some more to do to it.”

“That thing’s so ugly. I can’t believe you wanted it.”

He laughed. “Hey, at least I knew I wouldn’t have to fight you for it.”

Calvin shuddered. “I think I would have put my foot down if she’d tried to bring that monstrosity home.”

* * * *

Thursday evening and Friday morning were a flurry of packing activity. Friday afternoon, Jeff and Calvin sized up the furniture they’d staged in the garage ahead of picking up the rental truck the next morning. Since the

garage doors didn't face out onto the street, it was safer to stage everything there. The longer a rental truck sat in the driveway, the greater the chance of someone seeing it and tipping off Sylvie's husband.

Inside, Iris and Sylvie were frantically going room by room, packing boxes and stacking them in the garage as they filled them. The hope was that by the time they got the truck, they'd have everything packed and ready to load so they could immediately leave.

During a quick lunch break, they sat out at a picnic table in the fenced-in back yard immediately behind the house, while the dogs ran around and chased each other. Hamilton and Burr, two-year-old yellow Labs, were loving goofballs and brothers from the same litter.

Sylvie watched the dogs playing. "This was my dream house," she softly said. "We had our first big fight, and he apologized and actually suggested going out house-hunting. When I saw this place, I fell in love with it, and he bought it for me. I didn't even question him putting it in his name instead of mine. He said it was because he bought it with his inheritance money. Since then, I've learned that because he did that, technically it's not 'marital assets.' Now I can't stand to be here. It's an emotional prison."

The backyard was pretty, but from the way the grass had grown to mid-calf Jeff could see she hadn't mowed it lately, unlike the manicured front yard. Outside the fenced area lay the thick woods that made up the bulk of their property.

"Do you have any plans yet for when you get back to Florida?" he asked.

"Already have a job lined up."

"Oh. What do you do?"

"Real estate agent. I'm looking forward to having my life back. And to not having to look over my shoulder every time I turn around, or wondering when the next shoe will drop right on my head."

"Are you worried about him coming after you in Florida?"

"Not really. That's too much work for him. Morse only hit me once, and..." She held out her hands, indicating the house. "I told him if he hit me again, he'd be in jail. He didn't have to hit me again, though. He's verbally, mentally, emotionally, and sexually abusive. He's threatened me so much that I'm finally numb. I knew I couldn't live like this anymore. Life's too short. Eight years with him has been eight years too long."

One of the two dogs brought Jeff a stick. He took it from him and threw

it. "Life *is* short."

"I am afraid he'll hurt the babies," she said. "About six months ago, when I started hinting to him about getting divorced, he outright threatened to kill them. That's when I knew I had to get out. He knows how much I love them, even though they were another peace offering for me when I found out about his first affair."

She wiped at her eyes. "Thank god I didn't have children with him. I can only imagine what he'd be threatening me with then." She slowly shook her head. "This place is forty acres. He'd talked about getting me a couple of horses. Another thing I'm glad I didn't go through with now. I can only imagine trying to move horses."

"What about your car?" She drove a Mercedes SUV.

"It's in my name."

"Another peace offering?"

"Yep." She smiled, but it looked grim. "Stupid me, I knew he wasn't perfect when we met. I mean, duh, who is? But I thought the little hints I picked up from him here and there were just...nerves, or him trying too hard to impress me. Anything. I made lots of excuses for him." She sighed. "No more. Next guy in my life will have a hella number of hoops to jump through before I trust him."

* * * *

The house looked pretty spartan by the time they all crashed on Friday night. She had two guest rooms, so Jeff was able to have a room to himself when he FaceTimed Brandon and Stuart.

The men were together in Brandon's bed, both staring at him through the phone. "How's it going?" Brandon asked.

"Fast. We'll get the truck in the morning and hopefully be out of here by tomorrow afternoon ahead of schedule. We've got everything boxed up except some kitchen stuff and knick-knacks in the living room."

"Why don't you have the truck yet?" Stuart asked.

"We don't want it sitting in the driveway. Everything's in the garage for now. We know that once we're loading, we're at risk of someone who knows Morse calling or texting him about it. The good thing is that she lives sort of in the country, and they're not really familiar with the neighbors. But he has

some family about twenty minutes away. That's a little closer than she's comfortable with."

"Makes sense," Brandon said. "Keep us posted."

Once he ended the call about twenty minutes later, Jeff thought he heard something...odd outside. Getting up, he found Sylvie downstairs on the back porch, the outside flood lights on, washing the dogs and sobbing.

"What's wrong?"

"They've got ticks!" She knelt on the deck, her nightgown soaked. "It's like I *cannot* catch a damn break! I was petting them and felt something and damned if they both aren't covered in the fucking things. At least I had some dip left from a few months ago when we went through an infestation, but the vet gave me the once-a-month stuff for them. I must have forgotten to give it to them this month."

"Hey, it's okay. Can I help?"

She sat back on her heels and sniffled. "Thanks." She pointed to a flea comb. "If you could start combing through Ham's coat for me, that'd be great. I already washed and soaked them with flea and tick shampoo. I don't want to use up the dip until I know I have the ticks off them."

At least with the dogs' light-colored coats it made it easier to find the ticks. She'd also brought out a flashlight, tweezers, and a bowl of rubbing alcohol to drop any in that they found.

"Well, look at it this way," he said. "Maybe Morse will be dealing with a tick infestation."

She finally laughed. "That'd be ironic. He'll blame me for it, say I did it on purpose. But I'm glad I found them now instead of halfway to Florida and have my car get infested with them. I'll have to walk them on a leash in the front yard. I was going to mow this weekend, but once I knew I was leaving I thought *why*?"

"I was wondering why the front was mowed."

"It's smaller. And we get it sprayed because he likes having a nice lawn to show off to people. We're never out in the back part of the property, so I don't even bother with it." She took a deep breath and let it out. "I guess I should just roll with the punches and keep my focus on the fact that I'm finally getting the hell away from the guy for good. This is only a speed bump."

It took them an hour, and literally going over the two dogs with the fine-

toothed comb several times, but they finally thought they'd gotten all the ticks. Finally, she washed the dogs again, just to be sure, and dipped them.

Then the dogs got locked in a downstairs bathroom for the night with towels all over the floor so they could dry off.

Jeff took another shower, carefully examining his clothes before going to bed to make sure he hadn't picked up any stragglers himself. He once again collapsed into bed, now feeling even more exhausted than before.

At least I know I have a loving family to go home to.

Chapter Six

After ending their chat with Jeff, Brandon pulled Stuart into his arms. “Sorry we can’t get wild and crazy tonight. No spanking.” If Em wasn’t home, he’d tie Stuart up and cane his adorable ass before fucking it.

Unfortunately, there was no way to hide that kind of noise. They knew, because one evening when Em wasn’t home, the men had conducted a few sound tests. Even with the master bedroom on the other side of the hall and at the far end, spanking and other impact play sounds carried, even with both TVs turned on and the doors closed.

Good old fucking, however, didn’t.

As long as no one was moaning too loudly.

Or screaming.

“I think I’d rather try slow and steady tonight, Sir.”

Brandon rolled on top of him. “You would, huh?” He laced fingers with him and raised Stuart’s hands over his head, pinning him there. “I think I know what that means. Might take us a while.”

Stuart grinned up at him. “Can we try it? We get to sleep in late.”

“Not real late. Em’s got the swim meet tomorrow morning at nine. I figured we could go out for a late brunch with her and Grace after.”

“Oh, yeah.”

“You don’t have to go. You can sleep in.”

Stuart wiggled his hips against Brandon. “No, Sir. I want to go. We can film it for Jeff.”

Brandon slanted his lips over Stuart’s, slowly exploring, teasing, tasting. “Do you have any idea how much I love you?”

He wiggled his hips again. “Because of my spankable ass?”

“I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t spankable. But that’s not what I meant. I love how you take an interest in Emma.”

For a moment, pain seemed to linger in Stuart’s green eyes before he blinked it away. “This is my family, Sir,” he quietly said. “All of you. I’m finally getting the kind of family I wished I’d had growing up.”

Brandon licked a path down Stuart’s jaw, to the hollow of his throat. “I’m sorry. My family wasn’t great, but not anywhere near as bad as yours.”

“No reason for you to apologize, Sir.”

Brandon sat up, releasing Stuart's hands and smiling down at him. "Stay." Already, he could see—and had been feeling—the outline of Stuart's cock pressing against the front of his shorts.

After double-checking their bedroom door was locked, Brandon turned on the TV for a little background noise insurance. Then he fetched Stuart's leather cuffs and collar from the dresser and brought them to the bed. He retrieved a towel, condom, and lube, too.

Last night, both of them had been too tired to do anything but cuddle. It felt weird with only the two of them in the king-sized bed, and they'd ended up in the middle, spooning together.

It didn't feel right not having Jeff there with them.

He completed them.

Their personalities made this work, in spite of their age differences. They complemented each other.

Brandon stripped. Kneeling on the bed, he buckled Stuart's ankle cuffs on him first. Stuart still didn't move, Brandon's good boy, obeying instructions.

As he pushed Stuart's thighs apart, Brandon leaned in, mouthing Stuart's cock through the fabric of his shorts and enjoying the sound of his boy's soft moans.

"That's it, baby," he said. "You know what your Sir likes to hear."

He reached up and hooked his fingers under the waistband of Stuart's shorts and started edging them down his hips. He smiled as Stuart's rigid cock was exposed, standing up from his body.

"That's what else I like." He leaned in and licked the tip of Stuart's cock. "Love knowing my boy's cock belongs to *me*." He glanced up Stuart's body and the sweet, glazed look on his face made Brandon's cock twitch in response.

Subspace achieved.

Both he and Jeff could drop Stuart hard into subspace. Stuart didn't need impact play to get there, either. Jeff could be switchy when the mood struck him, but Stuart wasn't. Not really. Sure, he could pitch in bed, or even use implements, if ordered to. But he wasn't a Top.

Definitely not a Dom.

His boy loved to serve and loved serving up his body to Brandon and Jeff in any and every way they wanted him.

I can't wait to get my collars on them.

The collaring ceremony next weekend was never far from his mind. He'd already exchanged a few e-mails with Loren about what he wanted to do. After the ceremony, he was going to cane both of them, a hard and fast scene to make sure their heads were deep in subspace before he brought them home and fucked their brains out.

This felt...like perfection. Like his life had finally shaken out and settled into a comfortable groove he was meant to be in.

Unlike when he'd married Tracey. He'd done that more because he'd thought it was what he was *supposed* to do. Assumed that once he was married, he wouldn't have to worry about the things he'd thought and felt.

He'd been so eager to finally earn his family's approval that he'd pulled Tracey into his orbit—she'd willingly come, but still—without really giving thought to the future consequences.

It was only once he'd become a father and he realized what a sham of a life he led that he knew he'd have to come out and divorce her.

Jeff and Stuart...he could see himself spending the rest of his life with them.

It felt *right*.

No longer caring what his family thought of him, this felt like the most perfect decision in the world.

He only wished he could legally marry both of them.

Straddling Stuart's body, he buckled his collar on him, then the wrist cuffs. Those he clipped to the headboard, the well-hidden length of chain there, always ready for use.

Usually for Stuart, but sometimes for Jeff, too.

Kneeling over Stuart's head, he didn't even have to tell him to open. Stuart's lips parted, ready for Brandon to slide his cock between them and slowly start fucking his mouth.

"My very good boy," he whispered. "You always know what your Sir wants, don't you?"

He softly moaned around Brandon's cock as his lips and tongue eagerly worshipped it.

"Don't make me come. That goes in your ass."

He could sit there all night like that, Stuart's delicious mouth exploring his cock and balls. He'd gone from never being with a guy to expert-level

oral skills in a short amount of time with both Jeff and Brandon going after him.

Two against one was barely enough sometimes, considering Stuart's sex drive.

Rising up a little, he pulled his cock from Stuart's mouth, replacing it with his balls, sighing with pleasure as Stuart knew just what to do. "Such a sweet mouth on you, baby," Brandon told him. "Gonna give you a nice reward for how good you are."

Finally, he pulled himself off Stuart and moved down his body again, licking and sucking, nipping, teasing. Especially Stuart's sensitive nipples. One night, they'd tied Stuart down to the bed spread-eagle and had spent nearly an hour doing nothing but playing with his nipples after they'd both busted their nut and were trying to work Stuart into a frenzy for his big finish. When Brandon had finally reached down and fisted Stuart's cock, he'd exploded at the first pump.

One day, Brandon would like to spend more time seeing if they could actually make Stuart come simply from nipple play.

Not tonight.

He slid the towel under Stuart's hips after pushing his legs up and back, leaving his ass deliciously exposed. He rolled on a condom, lubed himself and then Stuart's ass, using two fingers.

Stuart moaned, trying to rock his hips to get Brandon to finger-fuck him. Pre-cum leaked from the tip of his rigid cock, which twitched with every movement.

"I know, buddy. Sir's going to make you feel really good here in a minute." He wiped his hand and then nudged into position, pressing the head of his cock against Stuart's rim. "Nice and slow tonight, baby. Nice and slow."

Brandon draped Stuart's legs over his shoulders and leaned in, planting his hands on the bed on either side of the other man. "Look at Sir while he plows your ass."

Stuart forced his eyes open. Brandon fell hard and fast again, as he always did for the men. Stuart's green eyes had flecks of gold and hazel in them, sometimes taking on different tones, depending on the light and his mood.

"That's my good boy." He eased his cock all the way into Stuart's ass,

until he felt his balls pressing against the other man's flesh. Then he ground his hips against Stuart, rubbing, pressing his weight into Stuart until he heard the soft, tell-tale gasp that he knew meant he'd hit gold.

"Right there, baby?"

"Yes, Sir."

He smiled. "Excellent. You may come, boy."

* * * *

Helpless, Stuart held on to his restraints and settled in for the ride. He'd never known guys could come just from being fucked before he'd met Brandon and Jeff.

Now that Brandon had unlocked that ability in him, he loved repeating it.

Tonight, it seemed, that was the goal.

And once Brandon had rounded Stuart's spine a little more, pressing Stuart's thighs against his chest from Brandon's weight on him, he felt Brandon's cock slide perfectly against his prostate.

Thusly oriented, Brandon began a slow, seductive grind, every stroke perfectly rubbing against his button and making his own cock twitch. Like this, Brandon could literally fuck him until one or both of them became exhausted or came, whichever happened first. The slow strokes didn't get Brandon over the edge, but drove Stuart nearly insane with need.

The way Brandon's body pinned him to the bed, he couldn't even rock against him, either. Helpless, he turned his body completely over to his Sir and held on for the ride.

Literally.

"Tomorrow morning, I want you to wear that toy in your ass, the jack sheath," Brandon said. "It goes in before we leave, and I *will* check." He leaned in and nipped Stuart's lower lip. "When we go to brunch, I know exactly what restaurant we'll go to. They have a two-stall men's room, and maybe I'm going to bend you over and fuck you right there, baby."

Stuart whined. He knew Brandon would never do anything to get them in trouble, but one of his fantasies was Brandon—and Jeff—using him somewhere like that, the risk of discovery. So far, they hadn't been able to do much about it, just a couple of quick encounters where they'd teased him with an uncompleted hand job, or made him suck their cocks.

They hadn't been able to actually fuck him like that, though.

"Yes, Sir."

Brandon sucked on Stuart's lower lip before slanting his mouth over Stuart's for a crushing kiss. "When we come home, you can take it out for a little while. Then put it back in before we go over to Bill and Faith's for dinner. You *will* get fucked there before the evening is over."

He punctuated that with a hard thrust that nearly sent Stuart over the edge. "Yes!"

"Is my boy close?" He picked up the pace. "Because if you don't come before I do, you're going to get the chastity cage tonight."

"Please make me come, Sir!"

Brandon nibbled a line of heat along Stuart's right jaw, to his ear. "Such a handsome slut for me. Such a good boy. I love owning this ass of yours, baby."

Another whine escaped him. He was *sooo...fucking...close!*

"I love using that toy on you both. That way, I can fuck you bare and then make you suck me clean, because it's inside the toy. You love having that thing knotted inside you, don't you?"

"Yes, Sir!"

His lips were right next to Stuart's ear. "Tell me why, boy."

"I...I love feeling it inside me. I love wearing it. It's like having Sir's cock in me all the time."

"You like having that big ole thing in there, don't you?"

"Yes, Sir!"

"Anything else you'd like in there?"

"Please train me, Sir. Like you did Jeff. I'm ready. Work me up to you both fucking me."

There. He'd *finally* been able to ask for it, which he'd known damn well Brandon had been waiting for, no matter how many times Stuart had hinted or agreed to things he or Jeff had said.

Brandon had told Stuart it would not happen until Stuart outright asked for it.

It felt terrifying and freeing at the same time. He knew if he couldn't do it, he could safeword and Brandon and Jeff would stop.

But...

He wanted to try.

“Oh, *baby*.” Brandon picked up the pace. Stuart surfed the deliciously hard edge of his orgasm, right *there*, not quite tipping over the edge yet. “One more way for Sir to have another first with you.” His voice dropped, deep, hard. “Do you know how much I love being the first man who got to blow you, to fuck you, and the only man who’s ever owned this sweet body of yours?”

That finished Stuart and his orgasm swelled, burst. Brandon grunted his approval as he started fucking Stuart hard, fast, pounding him, the sound of their flesh slapping together filling the bedroom.

“Yes!” Brandon took one last, hard stroke inside him and fell still, moving Stuart’s legs, pulling them around his waist so he could stretch out on top of him. Brandon felt his cum squished between them from where it’d landed all over his and Brandon’s stomachs when he’d exploded.

Stuart wished he could wrap his arms around Brandon, but the restraints kept him in place. Instead, he nuzzled his chin against the top of Brandon’s head.

“Such a good boy,” Brandon whispered. “*My* good boy. You did exactly what your Sir asked you to do.”

“Thank you, Sir. I love you.”

Brandon kissed his chest. “Love you, too. I know I need to move, but I love this.”

“Me, too, Sir.”

He lifted his head and kissed Stuart’s chin before staring into his eyes. “You are going to be sooo fucking horny by the time we go to bed tomorrow night.” He grinned.

He finally unclipped Stuart and they headed to the bathroom to clean up.

But he made Stuart keep his cuffs and collar on. On weeknights, Brandon usually didn’t require them to wear them to bed, even though he and Jeff loved wearing them.

As Stuart cuddled in Brandon’s arms he inhaled, loving the scent of him and missing having Jeff there, his additional scent, the three of them usually covered in each other by the time they collapsed after making love.

“Thank you, Sir,” he whispered.

“You’re welcome, boy, but for what?”

“For giving me a forever family where I feel like I belong.”

Brandon’s arms tightened around him, his voice sounding choked when

he finally spoke again. “If you think I’m about to let either one of you go, think again. I love you both. I wish I could marry both of you. So we’re going to leave the marrying discussion alone for a while. Ed will work up a trust for us, and other paperwork, that will legally give us what we need to protect us.”

And like that, Stuart was able to happily fall asleep in his Sir’s arms.

Chapter Seven

Calvin went with Sylvie early the next morning to pick up the truck while Iris and Jeff worked in the house. They returned with coffee and bagels for everyone and as they stood at the kitchen counter, Sylvie looked around.

“It feels weird being here now. Like once I’d decided to leave, it didn’t feel like home anymore. It’s never really felt like ‘mine,’ even though it was supposed to be for me.”

“Well, when you get back to Florida, remember that you’re welcome to stay with us as long as you need to,” Iris said. “We meant it. We already emptied the guest room for you.”

“Thanks. I’m hoping I won’t need to be there longer than a couple of weeks. I have to be careful with my money until I’m getting paid again. And thanks for hooking me up with that friend of yours for a job. Thank god Florida has reciprocity with Connecticut. I already got my Florida license a couple of months ago, knowing I was going to do this. I told Morse it was because the only guy we had in our office licensed to sell real estate in Florida had moved on. And that was true. Made sense, since I’m from Florida, to get the license.”

“Um, aren’t we in New Hampshire?” Jeff asked. “What’s that have to do with Connecticut?”

Sylvie finally smiled, one of the few times he’d seen her smile since their arrival. “I’m licensed here, in Massachusetts, Vermont, Maine, Rhode Island, Florida...and Connecticut.”

“Um...wow, but why?”

“We deal a lot with people across state lines. Some of the people in our office are also licensed in New York and New Jersey. I’m not, because we had plenty who were, and I wasn’t planning on going off on my own.”

“Did you tell any of them that you’re leaving?” Iris asked.

She shook her head. “Couldn’t risk it accidentally getting back to Morse. I hate to just walk away from my job without notice, but I know they’ll understand. They all dislike Morse. I told them I was taking this weekend off to get a bunch of chores done I’ve been putting off around the house. I haven’t taken a full weekend off in months.”

“At least you’ve got a plan,” Jeff said. “And if you need help moving

again when you get your own place, let me know. I can round up extra help.”

“Thank you. I’m just so thankful to be getting out of here.” She looked around again. All weekend, she’d borne a sort of shell-shocked air. “Looking back, I can’t believe it took me this long to make the break. Except this was his first out-of-town trip in months where I knew he couldn’t return early. The others have been close by. Close enough I knew he might come home for the night. And sometimes he did. Being across the country with a girlfriend to bang, and non-refundable tickets his company bought for him, he’s been too busy to do so much as text me.”

* * * *

Everything went quickly from that point on. They all waited to take showers until after the truck was loaded and they were ready to leave.

And after they all helped carefully check the dogs for ticks one last time.

They pulled out of Sylvie’s driveway well ahead of schedule, with Jeff driving the truck and Calvin riding shotgun, a few minutes after four thirty Saturday afternoon. They drove as long as they could, stopped for the night, and drove all day Sunday. It was after midnight early Monday morning when they arrived at Iris and Calvin’s house.

Instead of unloading the truck that time of night, Jeff went home to sleep, and would rejoin them in the morning to finish.

It was after one in the morning when he quietly unlocked the front door and crept in. Instead of disturbing Brandon and Stuart, he went to his bedroom, stripped, and face-planted onto his bed.

That was the last thing he knew before he had a *great* dream about Stuart sucking his cock.

Except in the dream, when he reached down between his legs to slide his fingers through Stuart’s hair and then tightly fist it, he *really* felt Stuart’s hair.

Jeff’s eyes popped open. Lifting his head, he spotted Stuart between his legs, Jeff’s cock in his mouth all the way to the root.

“Yoo sthuck in lath night,” he mumbled around Jeff’s cock.

“Yes, I snuck in. I didn’t want to wake you guys.” He stroked Stuart’s brown hair. “Is Emma gone already?”

“Yeth.”

“Where’s Sir?”

“Thower.”

“You going to get in trouble by being in here?”

“No. Sthaid I could. Sthaid to sthave energy for him for wader.”

Jeff smiled. Stuart did have a knack for being able to talk with his mouth full. It always amused him and Brandon when he did, too.

“Then go to town, buddy.” He buried his hands in Stuart’s hair and started rocking his hips against Stuart’s face.

The man had an amazing mouth. Even though Stuart had never been with a guy before the three of them first met, he hadn’t wasted any time catching up and learning.

Cock worship was one of Stuart’s favorite things, and Brandon and Jeff were happy to be on the receiving end of his skills. After several days away from the men he loved, it was nice being able to finally blow some built-up tension.

Stuart worked his way lower, swirling his tongue around Jeff’s balls, back up his shaft, lingering around the head and tracing the ridge before enveloping it with his lips and slowly sucking him deep again.

Heaven...

“Missed you,” Jeff whispered. Stuart’s soft sigh in response lightly hummed through Jeff’s cock.

It didn’t take long for Stuart to build him up to a really good, hard orgasm. When Jeff felt himself get close, he tightened his grip on Stuart’s head and started fucking his mouth, Stuart holding on for the ride at that point. Jeff exploded, Stuart also moaning as he eagerly swallowed every hot drop Jeff pumped down his throat.

Finally, sated, his grip on Stuart’s head relaxed as the man wrapped his arms around Jeff’s legs.

He still held Jeff’s spent cock in his mouth.

Jeff stroked Stuart’s hair. “Come up here and cuddle.”

Stuart wasted no time climbing up the bed, where he kissed Jeff. “Missed you.”

“Missed you, too, buddy.”

“Everything go okay?”

“Just a long drive. I have to go back to Iris and Calvin’s this morning and help unload. Stuff that’s staying there at the house, then to the storage unit to unload everything else there.” While Jeff talked, one of Stuart’s hands drifted

down to cup Jeff's balls.

"I'm so glad you're home. It was weird without you here. Even Emma said that."

"How'd the swim meet go?"

"Great. She got three firsts and a third in her events."

"Aw, I missed it."

"We taped it for you."

"Thanks." Stuart's fingers had stopped roaming, but seemed to be going over the same territory, as if...exploring. And he had an odd look on his face. "I don't think I can get it up again that soon, babe. And you need to get to work."

"No, I felt something."

Jeff was almost sure his heart skipped a beat, his mind immediately going to the worst-case scenario. "What?"

"Like a bump." Stuart turned on the lamp next to the bed and turned around, pushing Jeff's thighs apart and—

"Shit, it's a tick!"

"What?" Jeff wasn't sure exactly how he got from the bed into the hall bathroom. He was reasonably sure it might have involved levitation, but he wouldn't swear to it. "Shit shit *shit*!"

Sure enough, with one foot hiked up on the counter, and holding his sac out of the way, he could see the little fucker.

Stuart had followed him to the bathroom. "Get it off me!" Jeff shrieked.

"Okay, hold still."

Brandon, hair wet and a towel wrapped around his hips, appeared in the doorway. "What's going on?"

"We have a ball tick," Stuart said as he knelt under Jeff.

"If that's some sort of code for a new fetish, you both have to run it past me first. You realize that, right?"

"No, Sir," Jeff said. "I literally have a tick on my balls." He winced as Stuart pulled it free. "Did you get the whole thing? Is the head there?"

Brandon leaned in to look at it with Stuart. "I'd make a joke about just the tip, but that'd be gross."

"It's all there," Stuart said.

"Flush it," Brandon told him.

Jeff reached for rubbing alcohol and cotton balls and winced as he

swabbed the whole area, liberally dousing it. "Please tell me I don't have any others hiding up there." He suppressed a shudder of revulsion.

Brandon arched an eyebrow. "Aaannnd on *that* note, I'm going to go get dressed. Please make sure you wash and dry your clothes that went with you on the hottest setting possible to kill any stragglers." He leaned in and kissed Jeff.

"Good point, Sir."

"And welcome home, boy. We missed you."

"Thanks. Missed you, too, Sir."

Stuart helped him search, and Jeff was glad he had no reason to feel embarrassed by leaning over and spreading his ass cheeks wide for Stuart to get a good look.

"Well, at least Sir makes us shave," Stuart said. "Be glad for that. This makes it easier."

"I am. Believe me."

After a thorough search, Stuart declared him tick free.

"Well, since I'm wide awake now," Jeff said, "I'll grab a shower with you."

He pinned Stuart against the shower wall by the throat and jacked him off, just to be fair.

After all, finding a tick after a blow job was sort of above and beyond the call of duty, so to speak. Still, now Jeff couldn't help but notice every random sensation on his skin that remotely resembled something creepy-crawly.

As they dried off after, Jeff pulled him in for a hug. "Thanks, buddy. Sorry for the unintended hitchhiker."

"How'd you get a tick?"

"Probably from Sylvie's dogs. Her backyard was full of them and they ended up on the dogs. I helped her bathe and dip them when she found them. I must have picked it up then."

"Remind me I need to mow the backyard tonight."

"Oh, her grass was way higher in the back. She had other priorities, like packing."

"Is she going to be okay? Will he come after her?"

"I think she's safe. She doesn't think he'll follow her here, and all she cared about were her dogs and the furniture. Besides, he doesn't know where she is now. She and Iris were making bets on how long it'd take him to move

one of his girlfriends into the house now that she's gone."

"What an asshole."

"Yep. Sounds like a real charmer...not."

While Stuart went to get dressed, Jeff pulled on briefs and a pair of shorts—after checking them carefully for ticks even though they came from his dresser—and headed for the kitchen.

Brandon stood at the counter, sipping his coffee and going through his work phone, probably checking his e-mail.

"Good morning, Sir."

Brandon set down the coffee and the phone and pulled him in for a kiss. "I take it you're now tick-free?"

"I hope so."

"Did you like the wake-up surprise?"

He smiled. "Very much, Sir. Thank you."

"He rode me ragged last weekend. I was happy to turn him loose on you." He released Jeff after patting him on the ass. "I definitely need your help keeping him worn out."

"Glad to know I was missed."

"Greatly."

Stuart joined them, now dressed for work.

"Are you all done now?" Brandon asked Jeff. "Or is there more unloading to do?"

"More unloading. I'll head over there soon, now that I'm awake."

"Emma and Grace want to cook dinner for you tonight. They feel bad you missed our feast Saturday night. They're stopping for groceries on the way home."

"Aww. That's sweet." He rested his head on Brandon's shoulder. "Thank you, Sir."

"For what?"

"For everything. For this. For us. The three of us. And Emma."

"Remember that during our collaring ceremony this weekend." Brandon wore what Jeff had dubbed his "evil Dom grin."

Stuart perked up, looking nervous. "Sir?"

Brandon waggled his eyebrows. "No hints. You'll just have to wait."

"Yes, Sir," they echoed.

Brandon sipped his coffee. "Ah, stereo. How I missed it."

Chapter Eight

Over the next several days, as Jeff returned to his usual routine—still obsessively checking himself for ticks—he realized something.

I'm about to be collared.

Not just him, but Stuart, too.

It wasn't only a matter of them belonging to Brandon. He and Stuart were more than simply property to the man. Brandon loved them and belonged to them as much as they loved and belonged to him.

Emotionally, this was every bit as binding to all of them as a wedding. Ed was working on the legal paperwork they'd need, and maybe one day one of them would marry Brandon.

In Jeff's mind, he didn't care. The paperwork would give them legal protections. Taxes might be a little iffy, but Scrye had already given them some free advice, and they'd be taking everything to him when it was time to file together as a "household."

Friday morning, Jeff was in the master bathroom when Stuart walked in. Jeff had one foot up on the counter and his balls held to the side as he tried to get a look under them in the mirror.

"Does that look red to you?" Jeff asked him.

"Your balls?"

"Where you found the tick. Is there a bulls-eye?"

Stuart turned his head and leaned in. "It doesn't look red-red. It looks like it's pink because you keep rubbing it. I think it's healed over though."

"I put rubbing alcohol on it again this morning."

"Ow. I don't see a mark there anymore."

"Are you sure?"

"If you're that worried, go to the doctor and have them check out your balls."

He put his foot down. "I don't want to blow a copay for that."

"I'll blow you. Besides, that's *my* job." Stuart wore a playful smile, but Jeff was serious. Apparently Stuart realized that, because his smile faded. "I mean, it looks like it's pink because you're freaked out over ticks and keep rubbing it. But that little bump where the tick was is gone." He pulled Jeff in for a kiss.

Brandon walked in with his coffee. “Is he still worried about ticks?”

“Yes,” Stuart said.

Brandon set his coffee down. “Go see the doctor if you’re worried.”

“I’m going to look weird if I go have a doctor look at my balls when there’s nothing wrong with them.”

Stuart snorted. “You look weird standing with one foot on the counter and trying to stare at them in the mirror. What happens if you slip and fall? Explain that to the ambulance crew. ‘How’d you fall, Mr. Ortiz? Oh, I was staring at my junk in the mirror.’”

Brandon laughed. “Sorry, but that *is* funny.”

Jeff glared at them.

* * * *

Brandon got it, that Jeff was concerned. Probably because he’d found another tick—this one dead—in his dirty clothes when he’d gone through them on Monday.

If Stuart had picked a tick off Brandon’s balls, he’d be acting the same as Jeff, most likely.

“Buddy, seriously, if you’re that worried, make a doctor appointment. But rubbing the spot is only going to keep making it pink.”

Jeff finally blew out a long breath. “I’m overreacting, aren’t I?”

Brandon shook his head. “No—”

“Yes,” Stuart said at the same time.

They stared at each other, Brandon arching an eyebrow at Stuart, who ducked behind Jeff while still holding on to him.

“You’re squicked out,” Brandon said. “But either go see the doctor, or try to quit freaking out.” He pointed at Stuart. “And no messing with his mind, either.”

“Aww.” Stuart’s devilish smile made the outer edges of his green eyes crinkle.

“Tomorrow is our collaring.” Brandon held his arms open to them for a group hug. He kissed Jeff, then Stuart. “Let’s not forget *that*.”

Eventually, he wanted to get wedding bands for all three of them to wear. Once they’d been collared to him for a few months, to let things settle in.

“What time does Em leave for Grace’s?” Jeff asked.

“Not until afternoon. But the good news is you can run around naked Sunday morning before she comes home.”

“It’s going to be weird when she goes to college,” Stuart said. “It won’t feel the same around here.”

Brandon nibbled the side of his neck. “Yeah, it’ll be a lot more naked. Expect to wear very few clothes.”

Stuart smiled. “Maybe I can get used to that.”

* * * *

Stuart didn’t want to rush Emma out of the house Saturday, but he couldn’t wait for her to leave. Once her car was out of sight, he closed the front blinds and started stripping right there.

Brandon, who’d been in the kitchen, started laughing. “Not wasting any time, are you, boy?”

“No, Sir.”

Jeff emerged from the master bedroom. “She’s gone?”

“Yep.”

Jeff pulled off his shirt and started working on his shorts.

“Glad to see my ‘no clothes’ rule will be adhered to so strictly,” Brandon teased.

Stuart couldn’t wait to get to the club that night. “We don’t get enough naked time, Sir.”

Brandon crooked a finger at them and they both hurried into the kitchen and dropped to their knees in front of him, where he rested his hands on their heads.

“You’re both sure you’re good with doing this tonight?”

Stuart and Jeff both eagerly nodded. “Yes, Sir,” they echoed in unison.

Brandon smiled. “I *love* stereo.”

Last night, Brandon had gone over his list of new protocols with them. Obviously, not exposing Emma or Grace to their dynamic always took precedent. That didn’t change. But there were some new, subtle things that Brandon would expect out of them...and punish them for if they failed to adhere to them.

He always walked through a door first, which one of them would get and hold for him, unless he specifically told them to go ahead. They would open

and hold car doors for him. When the three of them were together, especially at a fetish event, Jeff would walk to his right and just behind him, unless Brandon was holding his hand. Stuart would follow immediately behind. They would always serve him his food and beverage first. When out to eat, Brandon would order for them, and one of them would pull his chair out for him, and he would always sit first.

A few other, low-key things.

Then there were more formal rules. When Emma wasn't home and they didn't have guests, they were to be naked and collared at all times. Cuffs optional if Emma was expected home soon. At night, behind their locked bedroom door, they would wear cuffs and collar. At a fetish event, they would wear their leather collars.

They were to address him as "Master" when alone or with kinky friends, and "Sir" at all other times.

While it'd been a sort of "joking" rule before, now it was an iron-clad law that neither man was allowed to come without permission.

Then there were the more vanilla things. Such as Monday afternoon at lunch, they were going to meet at the bank and open their joint household account.

And Brandon was going to add both men to Emma's school records as emergency contacts.

Next week, they'd be going to Ed's office to sign paperwork, medical powers of attorney, a trust, and other items he was putting together for them.

This was...this was *real*.

Brandon wanted them for *life*, and he was ready to prove it.

Stuart had never been happier. He'd damn sure never felt as content as he did now. This felt like he was where he belonged.

Tonight, they were going out to eat at Sigalo's with everyone before going to the club for their collaring ceremony. When they were ready to leave the house, Brandon handed Stuart his toybag.

"Take that, please. Stow it in the trunk."

He nervously shouldered it. "Yes, Sir."

Then Brandon handed his keys to Jeff. "You drive. My car. Stuart in the back seat."

Jeff opened the passenger door for Brandon and held it while he got in. As Stuart was coming back from stowing the bag, Jeff kissed him, a wide,

happy grin on his face before he climbed behind the wheel.

He couldn't help it—he felt the same way.

Giddy.

Happy.

Free.

* * * *

Jeff struggled not to feel nervous. He didn't want to let Brandon down. Not that Brandon was putting pressure on him—he was doing that all on his own.

Brandon, for his part, usually acted very laid-back. He wanted their relationship to work, to thrive and grow between the three of them. While in some ways Jeff would have loved a couple of crazy, really strict rules on the kinky side, he got why Brandon was being conservative.

Because being crazy all the time wasn't possible.

Maybe once Emma left home for college they could add some crazy kinky stuff to the rulebook. For now, they needed to be sustainable protocols.

Brandon did not like setting them up to fail. Went out of his way to avoid that, especially for Stuart.

Another reason Jeff was madly in love with the man.

Stuart would beat himself up needlessly over any perceived fault on his part, thanks to his stupid family of origin. Jeff and Brandon had engaged in several private talks on this matter, on ways to set Stuart up to succeed, to bolster his self-esteem and confidence.

That was how Jeff knew Brandon was the man he was meant to give his heart and submission to for life.

He was completely unlike most other Dominants he'd ever been involved with.

At Sigalo's, Stuart beat Jeff out of the car to open Brandon's door for him, the friendly competition not going unnoticed by Brandon. He kissed Stuart, then Jeff.

"Five points to Gryffindor for effort," he teased.

Another reason Jeff knew this would work for life—Brandon didn't take himself or what they did so seriously that he forgot to have fun in the process.

They walked in, Jeff getting the door this time and well aware that Stuart

was carefully staying exactly where Brandon had told him to walk during their discussions about this.

It was absolutely adorable.

When they reached the group table, Brandon caught Jeff's hand, and reached for Stuart's, pulling them both next to him as their friends stood and welcomed them.

They ended up seated next to Landry, Cris, and Bob, who were once again without Tilly.

Across the table, Tony smiled and clinked his fork against his water glass to get everyone's attention. Then he smiled and held his glass up in a toast. "I think pretty much everyone here has heard the story about how these three first met." He glanced down the table. "Backhanded thanks go to Ken, too, who redeemed himself."

Ken held up his hands. "Hey, best thing to ever happen to me, too. I traded up after I dumped her ass." Everyone laughed as he patted the shoulder of the woman with him.

"I wanted to be the first to officially congratulate the three of you," Tony continued with a smile. "Accidental beginnings notwithstanding, it's great to see what the three of you have now."

Everyone joined them in the toast, clinking glasses all the way around.

After their orders had been taken, Brandon ordering for Jeff and Stuart after finding out what they wanted, Loren rose and walked around the table to talk with Brandon for a moment away from the table.

While they were gone, Stuart leaned in to Jeff. "Guess me getting catfished wasn't such a bad thing after all, huh?"

Jeff kissed him. "Best damn thing to happen to all three of us, in my opinion."

Chapter Nine

With his back turned to the table, and standing far enough away Jeff and Stuart couldn't hear, Brandon passed Loren the two small velvet pouches, one red and one blue, holding the men's necklaces so she could slip them in her purse.

"You okay?" she asked.

He laughed. "Nervous as hell."

"That's normal. This is a big step for you guys."

"Wish I could legally marry both of them."

"Well, Ed's really good. He learned from the best, after all."

"Huh?"

"Kaden, his partner. It was Kaden who originally came up with all the legal gymnastics they use now for poly groups. He did a lot of research into it when a triad came to him looking for protection for them for their baby. He spent hundreds of his own hours working on the research pro bono. Kind of set the gold standard."

Melancholy clouded her features. "Too bad he didn't get to use it very long himself with Leah, and Seth. That was another reason he was so interested in it, because he'd planned to use it himself one day. Unfortunately, time ran out for him."

She forced a smile. "Sorry. I always get a little extra verklempt at a collaring for a poly group. And I have that printed copy of the e-mail you sent me about what you wanted to say, in case you need it."

"Thanks again for doing this for us."

"I'm happy to do it. It brings me joy." Now her smile looked genuine. "Sort of *my* kink."

Brandon was actually glad Jeff was driving tonight. Nervous didn't begin to describe how he felt right now.

He was pledging to these two guys to love them forever, to take care of them—to not fuck up their lives.

Both of them.

This was a big.

Fucking.

Deal.

Maybe vanilla people who didn't understand the level of commitment this took would discount it as meaningless. Not like they were married, right?

To Brandon, this was every bit as serious—and more—as marriage.

It blew him away that Jeff and Stuart loved and trusted him enough to do this with him.

He desperately didn't want to let them down.

At the club, once Stuart retrieved the implement bag from the trunk, Brandon took it from him and led the way inside, where he paid for their entry fees tonight, not giving them a chance to argue about it. Usually they paid for their own entry, and they took turns paying when they went out to eat together.

Tonight, he would take care of *his* boys in the only ways he could.

They weren't going to waste any time with this. Immediately inside the dungeon, he stopped his boys and personally buckled their leather collars around their necks. After dropping his bag next to the bench he wanted to use following the ceremony and getting set up, he led Stuart and Jeff over to the corner near the social area where they'd hold the ceremony.

Tonight, Cali was manning a camera, taking pics for them without getting anyone else in the shots except Loren, who didn't care.

Once it was time to get started, and they had a good crowd gathered to watch, Brandon shook his hands to try to ease his nerves before snapping his fingers and pointing at the floor next to him.

As one, Jeff and Stuart knelt.

His boys.

Loren got started, her journal and the two pouches in her hand. "We're gathered here tonight to celebrate these three men coming together to publicly declare their commitment to each other—"

"And to the loony bin," Gilo playfully snarked from nearby. Tonight, he wore a suit and tie, while his wife, Abbey, stood by in a beautiful corset and skirt, and with a leash attached to the leather collar around her neck.

The other end held by Gilo.

Loren dropped him a wink and picked up where she left off before her deliberate setup for Gilo's aside. "They're more than friends, more than Dominant and submissives—they're a family. Because our laws don't exactly keep up with how fast we've evolved as a culture, and aren't flexible enough to allow these three men to legally marry, they've chosen to come here

tonight, where their journey together literally began, to publicly declare their love.” She nodded to Brandon.

Brandon took a deep breath and stared down at Jeff and Stuart.

“I knew from the first night we met that there was something special when the three of us were together. I’d never felt anything like that before. I’d never felt like my soul had come home before. I swore to myself I’d be careful, and I’d make sure I didn’t repeat any mistakes from previous relationships.

“At any time, you two could have looked at me and my life and my personal situation and decided it was too much trouble. That I brought drama into your lives that you didn’t need. Not only did you love me, you opened your hearts to accepting my daughter as your daughter. She wasn’t an inconvenience to you—she was family.”

He blinked his tears back, aware that Loren was ready with the crib sheet and hoping he wouldn’t have to resort to using it.

“I can’t promise you days full of hard kink. I can’t even promise you that life won’t get in the way of this part of our lives. But I can promise you that I love you, and everything I do with and for you starts with that love. I’m not saying life will be perfect. What I’m saying is that I will give you and our relationship everything I can, and I will never give up on either of you when life gets hard.

“Until now, we’ve called ourselves Dominant and submissives. What I wish we legally could call ourselves is husbands. In my heart, you *are* my husbands. Today, I want to make a lifetime commitment to you both, as a Master, to you as my slaves, that everything I do for us will be for *us*.”

He focused on Jeff. “My toppy Alpha boy. You like to take multiple roles, including taking care of our entire family. You’re a calm, steady rock. When you come home and we’re together, I feel like I can relax and let go of the rest of the world for a while, because I know you’re ready to catch me.”

Then he smiled down at Stuart. “And my sweet subby beta boy. Eager and willing and full of so much energy. I’m not too proud to admit I need Jeff around to help keep you worn out.” A ripple of soft laughter flowed through the group. “Always making me smile, and always teaching me, even as you show me the joy in learning.

“The two of you, together, have become my world, a world I don’t want to be a part of if you two aren’t by my side. My sweet slaves. Before

everyone here, I promise to love, cherish, protect, and always honor you as your Master. I will never punish in anger, and I will always remember to praise. I want you to succeed, because if you fail, it means *I've failed you.*”

He reached for the first bag from Loren, the blue one, and removed the necklace. “Jeff, this is the collar I bought specifically for you. I will never force you to be with me, because I only want you if you’re willing to be with me. I want you to be my Alpha slave, belong to me, for the rest of our lives together. But you have to ask for that, before everyone here. You have to tell me what you want.”

* * * *

Jeff gave up trying to hide his tears. Brandon had warned them he would give them each a chance to speak, and they were free to say what they wanted when that time came, but that they’d also know there would be one thing expected of them.

Now he struggled to remember everything he’d wanted to make sure he said.

Jeff nodded. “Yes, Master. I want to be your slave, for life. I want to be owned by you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you, and with Stuart. I promise to serve you with honor, I promise to give you my love and my trust. I promise that I will give you my service and my obedience. I want your word to be my law, and I have faith in you and our family. I love you, and I love Stuart, and want this to be our forever.”

Brandon leaned in and fastened the necklace around Jeff’s neck, cupping his hand around the back of Jeff’s neck and kissing him, slowly, sweetly, deeply. It stiffened his cock in his jeans and he knew whatever Brandon had in store for them later would likely be well worth waiting through the horniness he felt now.

“I love you so much,” Brandon whispered to him.

“I love you, too, Master.”

Brandon straightened again and took the other bag, removing an identical necklace and staring down at Stuart.

“Stuart, this is a collar I bought for you and you alone. I will never force you to be with me. I need to know you’re willing to be with me. I want you to be my beta slave, belong to me, cared for by me, and by Jeff, for the rest of

our lives together. But you have to ask for it, before everyone here. If you want that, you have to tell me.”

* * * *

Stuart was about two breaths from a full-on emotional meltdown. He hoped they were almost done, because he was about to transform into a silly, sobbing snot monster.

Of the happy kind.

“I love you, Master. I want to belong to you, and to him. I want to be with you both. I’ve never been happier than I am with the two of you. I love you and I’ll do anything to make this work. I want to serve you, and for the three of us spend our lives together. Please make me your slave. It’s all I want to be.”

Stuart realized he was holding his breath when Brandon leaned in and fastened the necklace around his neck. Then, as he had with Jeff, he cupped his hand around the back of Stuart’s neck and kissed him.

“I love you, boy. Love you so much.”

“I love you, too, Master.”

Brandon held his hands out to both of them to help them stand, pulling them in for a group hug. As they stood there, their arms wrapped around each other, the crowd applauded.

“And that’s how you do it,” Loren said. “Congratulations, guys.”

People stepped forward to give their congratulations once the guys ended their embrace.

With that part over, Brandon led them over to the bench he’d prepped, a smile on his face. “We’ll do the rest at home, but you both need to take cane strokes from me now. A reminder of what can happen, and who owns you.” He circled a finger at them. “Jeff first, pants down. You don’t have to count them if you don’t want to. Stuart, you get to be at the head of the bench while I do it.”

Just like on the first night they’d played together, the night they’d met.

Jeff quickly got into position, feet on the floor and leaning over the bench, his bare ass exposed. Brandon hooked the fingers of his left hand around the leather collar. In his right hand, his most severe cane.

Stuart knelt so Jeff’s head rested on his shoulder, his arms around Jeff’s

shoulders and Jeff's around him.

"You need to ask for them. Ready?" Brandon asked.

"Ready, Master," Jeff said. "Please give them to me."

Jeff's head jerked up at the first impact, a sharp breath escaping him before he lowered his head to Stuart's shoulder again. "One, Master..."

They didn't know how many Brandon was going to give. They were hard, they were definitely painful, but Stuart didn't miss that Brandon took his time, giving Jeff plenty of time to process between impacts. Brandon stopped at twenty. Then he walked around the bench and leaned in to kiss Jeff's forehead.

"My good boy. Take a moment, then get dressed and switch positions with Stuart."

"Yes, Master." Jeff's voice sounded slurred, subpacey.

Much like Stuart knew he'd be sounding shortly.

It took Jeff a couple of minutes to find his footing. When it was Stuart on the bench, his pants down around his knees and his bare ass exposed, he noticed one thing.

He wasn't scared.

He knew it'd hurt, and he *wanted* it to hurt. Because he knew Brandon liked to take them to the edge, to surf it, to coast along it before bringing them safely back again.

Brandon would never knowingly *harm* them. Ever.

With Stuart now positioned on the bench exactly the way Jeff had been before, Jeff got into position in front of him and pressed a kiss against Stuart's lips.

"You can do this, buddy. You got this."

Brandon's hand gripped his collar. "If you're ready, I need you to ask me for them."

Stuart took a deep breath. "Please, Master. I want to take them."

The first felt like a slice of fire across his flesh, and it was only Jeff's gentle restraint keeping him from rising up.

"Breathe, baby," Jeff whispered. "Count for me."

"One, Master," Stuart said, his voice trembling.

"Good boy," Jeff whispered, driving Stuart hard and deep into subpace.

Not all of them were that hard. A few were barely painful, and Brandon spaced the harder ones out. By the time Brandon finished, Stuart was horny

and hard and yet wanted to do nothing more than curl up with these two men.

Once he was standing and had fastened his jeans, Brandon handed the cane to Jeff and started unfastening his own jeans.

"I won't make you do something I'm not prepared to do myself. You can each give me twenty, if you want. Or as many as you feel you want to give me less than that. And if you want to give me the full twenty each, that's fine." He reached in and cradled Stuart's cheek. "You *have* to give me at least five."

* * * *

Stuart blanched. "I-I don't know if I can, Master."

Brandon cupped Stuart's face in both hands and stared down at him. "You pledged to serve me, correct?"

"Yes, Master."

"I'm ordering you to do something. By doing it, are you not serving me?"

"Yes, Master."

"Jeff can help you, if you need him to, but you still have to do it."

Stuart nodded.

Brandon pulled his jeans down, ignoring the sudden, curious silence that fell over the observers as he leaned over the bench.

Wasn't often a Master bared his ass to his slaves.

"Jeff first," Brandon said as he settled into the same position his slaves had just occupied.

Stuart knelt in front of him and Brandon smiled as he pulled his sweet boy in for a long, deep kiss.

Behind him, Jeff rested his left hand on Brandon's lower back before he laid the cane across his ass cheeks. "Ready, Master?"

"Mm hmm."

He was glad he'd been kissing Stuart to muffle the sounds of him crying out in pain, because Jeff didn't pull any punches for the first five strokes. For the rest—a full twenty—Jeff went easier on him, about the same Brandon had given him.

That whole time, Brandon kissed Stuart and kept a hand buried in the other man's hair to hold him in place.

When Jeff walked up to switch places with him, at first Brandon wasn't

sure Stuart would move.

Finally, Stuart took the cane from Jeff and stood.

“Did you want help?” Jeff asked.

He shook his head. “No, thank you. I have to do this.”

Jeff knelt in front of Brandon, staring into his eyes. “You’re a sneaky bastard, Master.” He smiled.

“What?” But it was a *who, me?* tone.

“Trying to show him what he can do better than trying to just pep-talk him.”

Brandon only gave him a sly smile in response.

“R-ready, Master?”

He wrapped his arms around Jeff. “Give them to me, boy. Don’t hold back.”

The first stroke wasn’t very hard at all. The second was harder.

The third?

Wow.

His cock was screaming, also attuned to pain, usually meaning that someone was getting laid damned soon.

Stuart lasted for fifteen strokes, far more than Brandon had honestly expected him to be able to deliver. When Stuart finished, Brandon immediately disengaged from Jeff, turned, and pulled Stuart to him for a long, deep kiss.

“Thank you, boy,” Brandon told him.

“A-are you okay?”

He grinned. “I am, but I know two slaves I need to get home so I can fuck into a blissful sleep tonight.”

Stuart grinned, still subspacey. “Yes, Sir!”

* * * *

Stuart watched as Brandon got the bench cleaned off and put their equipment away. Then he grabbed a couple of fleece throws from the rack and they took up a corner on the MMA mats in the new section. They weren’t currently in use, and it allowed them to cuddle in their own puppy pile to relax.

Brandon sat with his back against the wall while Jeff and Stuart each lay

with their heads in his lap, curled around Brandon's legs and each other, their fingers laced with his.

"Are we good, boys?"

Stuart stared up at him, Brandon's blue eyes looking even darker tonight in that light. "We're great, Master."

Jeff turned his head so he could kiss Stuart. "I think we have a subpacey boy, Master."

"I think you're right."

Stuart wouldn't disagree. "Life is perfect," he said, closing his eyes and deeply inhaling Brandon's scent. Their clothes soap, and Brandon's body wash.

Him.

Perfectly him.

This was perfection.

They were perfection.

Chapter Ten

When they returned home from the club, Brandon stopped them inside the front door after he'd locked it and snapped his fingers.

His boys both smiled and started stripping without needing any other order.

Brandon's cock, which had settled down a little on the ride home, perked right up again.

He handed the bag of implements, which also held their leather collars, to Jeff. "Good boys. Cuffs and collars, go take care of business real fast, and meet me back out here."

As they hurried down the hall, Brandon watched their cane-striped asses hustle all the way.

His own smile widened. *Damn, they're cute.*

And they're all mine.

He was sitting on the couch, music playing on the stereo, when they returned. When he pointed at the floor in front of him, they dropped to their knees, eagerly staring up at him, awaiting his orders.

It almost felt like having an all-you-can-eat buffet at his disposal. He wasn't even sure where he wanted to start first.

Leaning forward, he ran his fingers through their hair, tugging on them to lean in and rest their heads against his legs, Jeff on his left and Stuart on his right.

"My very good boys," he said, keeping his voice soft. "I love you both so much, you have no idea." Brandon wanted to stretch this moment out, make it last.

Pretend for a little while that the world began and ended right here, with them.

Maybe for some Doms they were all about the leather and pain, heavy bondage and sadism.

Not him.

Sure, he absolutely was a sadist, but first and foremost he was a human who loved these two trusting men. He wasn't about ensuring obedience at all costs. They had to *want* to obey him.

That meant putting in effort on his part.

It was every bit as much about times like this, quiet times together, where they could let go to him and he could focus totally on them.

Long in the future, it would be moments like *this* that sustained their relationship, not a quick spanking or hard fuck. Sometimes, Jeff and Stuart liked it when Brandon dropped into what they'd dubbed "dark Dom" mode, where he tied them tightly, caned them viciously, and used them hard in every hole.

Sometimes, they loved to cuddle with him in a pile in bed, watching TV or even just touching, resting, talking.

In other words, like everyone else on the planet, their needs varied.

"Is there anything we need to talk about tonight before we do anything? Any last-minute modifications or questions or concerns?"

"No, Master," they both said, their faces still pressed against his legs, nuzzling against his denim jeans.

They both sounded like they were dropping hard into subspace again.

"Last weekend, while Stuart and I were alone, he asked me for something. Would you like to tell Jeff what you asked for?"

Brandon didn't make him lift his head. "I asked Master to start training me for DP."

Jeff lifted his head and lunged, kissing Stuart, hard, and cranking Brandon's cock up to 11.

"Fuck," Jeff whispered. "I can't wait for that. That is going to be sooo fucking hot!"

The sight of his two boys practically fucking in front of him was almost too much for Brandon to handle. He was afraid if he shifted position wrong he'd cream his jeans right there. "Ahem."

Jeff realized what he'd done, released Stuart, and returned to where he'd been kneeling. "Sorry, Master."

The chuckle escaped him. "I'll let it go this time. That was adorable. So here's the plan. Jeff, you're in charge of helping our beta boy, since you've been through the process. Same rules as for you, if at any time it's too much, he can safeword. If he changes his mind, that's it, no more. We'll take as long as we need to work him up to the biggest butt plug before we fuck him. During that process, feel free to wind him up as much as you need to during training sessions, but if you want to make him come, or make yourself come in the process, you need to get permission from me first."

Jeff grinned. "Thank you, Master." He eyed Stuart like a hungry shark eyeing a gimpy seal.

"That means," Brandon said to Stuart, "that he might come home from work, drag you into the bedroom, and fuck you before plugging you. Or he might decide to fuck you with a dildo to loosen your sweet ass before he puts a plug in it. He might bend you over and stuff you and make you go to work wearing one. Through all of that, you might be made to stay horny until one or both of us decides to let you come. Any or all of the above options might be in play at any given time. Understand?"

"Yes, Master." From the way Stuart's rigid cock was twitching, Brandon knew Stuart wouldn't have any complaints about that regimen at all.

"Good boy." He suspected his plan for tonight might surprise both of them. "Wait here while I get what we need. You two can kiss while I'm gone, but stay kneeling, hands remain on your knees."

He headed to their bedroom, where earlier he'd prepped everything and left it in the linen closet in the master bath so he wouldn't have to go hunting for it now. After using the bathroom, he grabbed the items and returned to the living room, still dressed.

Stuart and Jeff were busy tickling each other's tonsils, but their hands remained on their knees, as ordered. Both of them sported hard cocks, and in his jeans, his own throbbed in response.

After draping the sheet over the sofa, he turned to them. "Get me naked, boys. Take your time and have fun playing while you do. Don't make me come yet, though."

Jumping to their feet with identical smiles, they got his shoes and socks off him first, then started working on his shirt buttons. Brandon closed his eyes, enjoying the feel of their hands stroking his flesh, their warm mouths kissing him, their tongues licking and flicking, teeth nibbling. At one point he thought he might blow his load when they both started sucking his nipples at the same time while Jeff palmed his bulge through his jeans and Stuart humped himself against Brandon's hip.

Once they finally had him naked, he grabbed the jelly cock ring and wrapped it around his cock and balls, the taint tab deliciously pressing against him. He hadn't come that morning and thought they might be able to get two out of him tonight, if they worked really hard at it.

Then he held up one of the sheath plugs and a tube of lube. "Have fun

getting this inside me. Try not to make me come in the process.”

Jeff took it from him as Brandon sat on the couch, leaning back, heels on the edge of the seat and thighs spread wide. The toy was wider than either of the men’s cocks, but Brandon had taken toys and butt plugs as large or larger before.

Just not recently.

He’d enjoyed being the fucker inside one of the toys plenty of times, but had yet to experience one being inserted in him and fucked. They had a thick knot near the base, made to help keep it in place while the bottom got well pounded.

Stuart and Jeff dropped to their knees in front of him again. Two gloved, lube-covered hands pressed fingers against his ass, two mouths worked up and down his cock and balls as the men eagerly loosened him in preparation for the toy.

Brandon closed his eyes and lay back, loving this. Not just the physical sensation but knowing these two men were so eager to please him that this was the only place in the world they wanted to be right now.

All for him.

They took turns sucking his cock as they added fingers and slowly fucked his ass with them, until about ten minutes later they had the toy firmly inserted inside him. Then they stripped off the gloves and awaited his next order.

Eenie, meenie, meinie...moe.

“Stuart, get a condom on me and lube your ass.” While he did that, Brandon pulled Jeff in for a long, deep kiss. Holding him in place with the D-ring on the front of his collar, Brandon sucked on his tongue, a hard, crushing kiss that left Jeff softly moaning with need and pre-cum leaking from the end of his cock.

Once he and Stuart were ready, Brandon released Jeff and reached behind him to grab the back of the couch over his head. “Stuart, ride my cock, buddy, but don’t you dare come. Jeff, you get in there and fuck my ass. Take all the time you want to drop a load in there.”

Jeff’s smile lit the room. “Really, Master?”

“Pound me hard. I want to feel it in my next life.”

Stuart leaned in for a deep kiss as he straddled Brandon and worked his cock up his ass. Meanwhile, Jeff climbed off the couch, stood between

Brandon's legs, and lifted them, spreading them wide before sliding his cock into the toy.

"Oh, *fuck* yeah." Brandon moaned against Stuart's mouth. Brandon wasn't sure, even with the cock ring, how long he was going to be able to hold his climax back. It felt overwhelmingly intense, Stuart's tight ass fisting Brandon's cock as he bounced on it, along with the toy pressing against his button while Jeff pounded his ass.

Stuart reached up and laced fingers with him, squeezing, holding on as he rode Brandon's cock, still kissing him. Brandon loved couch fucking in various permutations. One night, he'd sat there, letting them take turns riding his cock, Jeff first then Stuart. While one rode, the other sucked that one. Brandon had managed to hold his orgasm until Stuart came, but it'd been close.

But couch fucking was rare, just like pool fucking, saved for those occasions when Emma wasn't expected home.

I'm going to need slipcovers for the furniture after she goes off to college.

Brandon expected there'd be plenty of fucking on every horizontal surface in the house once that happened.

He flipped his hands over, now holding Stuart's and squeezing hard as the climax erupted and pleasure coursed through his body. "Yes!" He finally reached up and pulled Stuart against him, holding him still while Jeff still happily fucked Brandon's ass.

Jeff grinned. "Oh, you gave me permission to fuck you, Master, and that's what I'm going to do." He was currently long-stroking him, taking his time, interspersed with hard, pounding strokes that rocked him against the couch.

Between them, Brandon felt Stuart's hard cock pressed against his stomach. "Hang tight, baby," Brandon told him. "You'll get your turn in a minute."

Stuart happily snuggled his head against Brandon's shoulder. "Thank you, Master."

Meanwhile, Brandon felt Stuart flexing his ass, squeezing his spent cock inside him.

Sneaky boy.

Stuart also started playing with Brandon's nipples, teasing them with his

fingers, adding to the pleasure. By the time Jeff finally built up his orgasm and let loose in the toy inside him, Brandon was hard again, thanks in no small part, he was sure, to the cock ring.

Stuart moved out of the way and quickly used one of the wipes to clean Brandon up before putting a fresh condom on him. "Make sure Jeff's ass is nice and lubed," Brandon ordered.

Brandon didn't know how they did it so fast, but soon it was Jeff impaled on Brandon's cock and Stuart happily plowing away at Brandon's ass.

Jeff smiled down at him. "Hello, Master."

"You have fun?"

"Absolutely. I love it when you let us fuck you."

"Well, you've got the tougher job this time. You get to ride me until I bust a nut again."

"I can do that." Jeff's sneaky grin widened and he started a slow bump and grind against Brandon, picking up Stuart's rhythm and amplifying the pleasure.

"That's my good boy." He grabbed him by the hair and pulled him in for a hard kiss. "We get done, the two of you are going to get down there together and get your tongues inside that toy."

Jeff's eyes drooped, subspace fully achieved. "Thank you, Master."

Stuart had found his stride, long, hard thrusts that pressed against Brandon's sweet spot with every stroke and drove him closer toward building up a second load.

"Tomorrow morning before breakfast, we're going to have morning spankings," Brandon said, "and then I'm going to watch you stuff Stuart's ass with a butt plug. If you two want to nut, you're going to have to work together to blow me and earn it."

Actually, as good as this was feeling right now, he was giving serious thought to working himself up to letting them DP him at least once.

It took a couple more minutes, but Stuart managed to hold on long enough for Brandon to get over a second time before blowing his own load inside the toy. After a moment, Jeff slid off him and the two of them playfully jostled for position between Brandon's legs, making him laugh.

They were like a couple of puppies.

Finally, Brandon called them back up, kissing them. "Collars off. Pool time."

While the men scampered through the kitchen and out the back door, Brandon detoured via their bathroom to clean himself up first and get rid of the toy and cock ring. A few minutes later, the three of them were floating on their backs together in the pool and staring up at the stars, holding hands with each other, Brandon in the middle.

“So...how was that?” Brandon asked.

“Excellent, Master,” Jeff said.

“Ditto,” Stuart said.

“I’m sorry I can’t do...more. Marry both of you.”

Stuart and Jeff both stood. “Honestly?” Stuart said. “This is more than I ever hoped for in my life. Please don’t apologize. You love us, and you’ve turned us into a family when you could have told me to go fuck myself that first night we met.”

“It wasn’t your fault you got catfished.”

“Seriously, Brandon,” Jeff said, invoking their one evergreen rule of using his name when someone wanted a deep discussion. “We’re *happy*. I know *I’m* happy. You *are* my husband, and Stuart’s my husband. Look at Iris’ friend, what she went through. A damned piece of paper from the government doesn’t guarantee a happily ever after for someone.”

Brandon stood so they could form their group hug. “Don’t ever let me screw *us* up. Please. Promise me.”

“I promise,” they echoed, then laughter.

It bounced off the lanai, filling the space, bringing a smile to Brandon’s face.

“I love you two so fucking much, you have no idea.”

Chapter Eleven

When Emma returned Sunday afternoon, Brandon immediately noticed she didn't look happy the way an overnight with Grace usually left her.

He followed her to her bedroom, Stuart and Jeff on his heels. "What's wrong?"

"I made the mistake of answering Mom's phone call this morning." She turned and plopped down on her bed. "I agreed to go to her place next weekend. Spend Friday night, maybe Saturday night."

"You don't look happy about that."

"I'm not, but she sounded so sad on the phone, I couldn't say no." She stared at her hands, which lay in her lap. "I don't think she deliberately guilt-tripped me, but that's what it felt like."

Before Jeff and Stuart could step away, Brandon reached for their hands, pulling their arms around him. He wanted them here, too. They were family.

His family.

He wanted them stepping into more of a dad role with Emma, and this was the perfect kind of situation to break them in with.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. Do you want me to call her and talk to her?"

"No. It'll only delay the inevitable."

Brandon wasn't going to interfere, except the next morning, while on his way to work, Tracey called him.

Sighing, he answered. "Yeah?"

"Hey. It's me."

He choked back the snark trying to break free. "Yeah?"

"Did Emma tell you I called her yesterday?"

"Yes, she did."

"Is it okay if she visits?"

Brandon felt like slamming her, except Tracey's voice bore no hint of irritation. He could have easily pointed out to her that the time to ask that question would have been *before* she'd called Emma.

But he took the high road. "You are her mother. We didn't have any scheduled plans, and she doesn't have a swim meet Saturday. If I'd had a problem with it, I would have called you yesterday when she told me."

He left out the fact that the overnight would give him, Stuart, and Jeff

some naked time at home.

“Okay. Thank you.” He hated that she sounded beaten down, but then he reminded himself she was totally the one at fault for her relationship status with Emma. “Can I ask a favor?”

This was pushing it, but again he forced himself to go high. “It depends. What did you need?”

“I really miss her. I want to spend time with her. Could you please nudge her to come this weekend if she talks about canceling?”

He wanted to laugh in her face and tell her she was on her own, except an image flashed to mind, of the night he’d sat her down, after several months of him gently backing off all their BDSM stuff and he’d pretty much stopped sleeping with her.

The night he’d confessed to her that he was gay and that they needed to talk about getting divorced.

The tears in her eyes that had spilled down her face as she’d tried to beg him to change his mind, pleading that she’d do anything to keep their marriage intact.

Begging him not to leave her.

Offering to do anything, including letting him go sleep with men, if he wanted to. If only he’d stay married to her.

When Brandon and Tracey had been together, they’d delved into the milder end of BDSM. She’d enjoyed him taking charge in bed and elsewhere to a certain extent, but for him, he’d realized it was the only way he could have sex with her. They really hadn’t done anything “kinky” beyond a blindfold and some light restraints during sex. Nothing formal, like he had with Jeff and Stuart. He had naturally fallen into the dominant role in their vanilla relationship, though, Tracey deferring to him most of the time without hesitation.

As he’d finally forced himself to admit the truth he’d avoided all along about his sexuality, he had started slowly untangling himself from her and their marriage.

He didn’t think Pat was kinky or a Dominant, more a domineering asshole, although Brandon had never had that discussion with Tracey.

It wasn’t exactly a conversation he felt he should have with her about Pat. Once he’d made the decision to divorce her, the only way he got to have in Tracey’s personal life fell within that Venn diagram intersection between

whoever Tracey was with and how they interacted with Emma. Without a college education, Tracey had always struggled against her low self-esteem in her family. She'd been the only one of her four siblings who hadn't gone to college, born to parents who both had doctorates.

And neither they nor their parents had let her forget it.

They might have all been smart, but they were also assholes.

She worked for a grocery store chain as one of their office managers, having worked her way up from checkout clerk. She'd met Pat through his job, because the restaurant he worked at was in the same parking lot of the grocery store where she worked. She'd eaten lunch there on a regular basis.

Tracey was sweet, but in all honesty, she wasn't very ambitious. Which was fine in the beginning of their relationship. But as Brandon had grown and matured during their marriage, strived to improve himself while she hadn't, it'd been one more wedge between them.

In fact, as his career had advanced and he'd told Tracey he wanted to get his college degree, she'd actively begged him not to, claimed that they couldn't afford it, that it would take too much time, that he didn't need one.

At the time, he didn't understand why she'd felt like that, or why when he'd suggested a couple of years earlier that they could put her through at least community college, she'd shot down the idea fast and hard and refused to discuss it.

As he'd finally learned, he couldn't save the world. He damn sure couldn't save someone who had no interest in being saved. He suspected the fact that Pat was fourteen years older than himself had played a large part in Tracey attaching herself to him so quickly and clinging tightly. She'd falsely equated "older" with "safety."

Brandon hated to admit it, but Emma was way smarter than her mother.

She still awaited his answer. "Sure. I won't force—"

"No. No, I don't want that. I just..." She sighed again. "She finally re-added me on Facebook last week, and I saw the pictures she's been posting. Of the stuff she's doing. How happy she looks in the pictures with the three of you, or over at Grace's. She's never looked happy like that in the pictures with us. I want to make things right with her."

This was a new development. He knew Emma had unfriended her mom after the cruise incident, but she hadn't mentioned re-friending her.

Tracey continued. "I know she's happy living with you. I want to try to

repair my family on this end. I've done the best I can with what I have."

And whose fault is that?

But he didn't say it. He didn't remind Tracey that he'd wanted to try to send her to college while they were together, to better herself, if for no other reason than to allow her to ascend the corporate ladder there at the grocery chain, at least, instead of her watching people with two-year degrees and less time there get promoted over her. Which would mean she wouldn't feel dependent upon Pat's income to survive.

"I'll try. I can't promise more than that. But if she doesn't feel you're putting in effort, nothing I say to her will matter." Brandon had pulled over into a shopping center parking lot so he could park and talk and focus.

"I know. I'm going to try to go to that Wednesday afternoon practice meet in a couple of weeks. I already put in to take the afternoon off."

It was two weeks from that Wednesday. "I won't be there. I have to be out of town at an annual meeting up at corporate, but Jeff or Stuart will be."

She went quiet for a moment. "I...looked at some old pictures of us the other day."

He didn't know where she was going with this, but he wished she'd hurry up and get there. "Yes?"

Another long pause. "I can see the difference in you, too, now," she quietly admitted. "I can see your smile is so much more...real. Except in pictures when Em was a baby, you never really smiled like you do now that you're with them. Not even in our wedding pictures."

He struggled to shove aside the tight feeling in his gut. "Like I said, I'm really sorry I put you through that. I never meant to hurt you, but we have Emma. I'll never regret us having her."

"I know. I...I wish you nothing but the best with them, Bran. Sometimes I wonder if I made a mistake marrying Pat so fast. Maybe I should have held off. But it's done, and he's my husband, and it is what it is."

Phone in his right hand, he rested his left elbow on his door and rubbed at his forehead, trying to stave away the start of a tension headache. "I don't know what you want me to say."

"Did you really love me?"

More guilt, and the last stop-gap that would likely always prevent him from being a total asshole to her. "I loved you the best I could, honey. I was young and dumb and scared of things I thought about myself. You are a

wonderful woman, and you were a great wife. It was *not* your fault that I had to divorce you. It wasn't fair to you for me to keep lying about who I was. When we got married, I thought I had to live up to my family's standards. Be a good son, marry a good woman, have good kids, the end. You know my family. If it hadn't been for Emma, they probably would have disowned me when I came out and told them I was divorcing you."

Another long, uncomfortable pause. "I know."

"But I couldn't keep lying, to you or to myself. And I didn't want to raise my daughter while I was living a lie. I also wanted you to have a chance to find someone right for you. Who could love you better than I could."

He could barely hear her next question. "Are you really happy?"

"I am. I want you to be happy, too. I really, truly do. I know we've had our head-butting moments, but I've always wanted you to be happy. I've never wished you ill."

His heart broke as she couldn't disguise the sound of her crying. "I'm sorry I dragged you through court. Pat—no. I can't blame him. I let him make decisions I shouldn't have followed through with. But I gave in because it was easier."

It escaped him before he could stop it. "And the cruise?"

"I was trying to keep the peace with Pat. He ordered me not to tell her or you what it was ahead of time."

Brandon struggled to rein in his anger. "This goes both ways," he said. "You *have* to put Emma first. That's what I've *always* done, even when it wasn't easy or convenient."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"I'm not the one you owe an apology to. If you have this kind of honest conversation with Em, you might be able to have a good breakthrough with her."

"Okay."

He closed his eyes, still rubbing at his forehead. "Are you okay?"

He wasn't sure she was going to answer, at first. "I don't know. I have to go. Thank you for talking to me."

When he looked, the call had ended.

Shit.

He dug out the small bottle of ibuprofen he kept in his laptop case and swallowed two with coffee from his travel mug before getting back on the

road to work.

* * * *

Monday night, after they settled into bed, Stuart and Jeff listened as Brandon told them about his phone conversation with Tracey that morning. Tonight Brandon was in the middle, both of them spooning against him as he talked, their hands on his stomach, fingers laced with his.

“Wow,” Jeff said.

Brandon nodded. “Yeah.”

“I wondered why you sounded off when you got home,” Jeff said.

“I didn’t want to talk about this in front of Em.”

“Is there anything we can do for Em?” Stu asked.

“Please try to be extra patient with her this week and remember what she’s going through with her mom. You saw how growly she was tonight.”

That was an understatement. Before dinner, Stuart thought he’d said or done something to hurt her feelings, until she’d suddenly wrapped her arms around him and mumbled an apology before retreating to her bedroom to finish her homework.

“Yeah,” Stuart said. “I’m glad it’s nothing we did.”

“No,” Brandon said, “nothing we did. I felt really bad for Tracey this morning. Sounds like she’s finally seen the light and realizes she’s headed the wrong way down a one-way tunnel, and it’s her own fault the train is bearing down on her.”

“Wow, that’s an image,” Jeff said.

“It fits, though. And she was right about something.”

“What?” Stu asked.

“I’m happier now, with the two of you, than I’ve ever been, except when Emma was born. I was thinking maybe after Em’s summer classes end, we can all take a family trip over to Disney or someplace for a weekend. Just the four of us.”

“Five,” Stuart said. “Don’t forget Grace.”

Brandon snorted. “True. Five. Our bonus kid.”

“I’d like that,” Jeff said. “I think it’d be fun.”

“Our family,” Stuart said.

Brandon squeezed his hand. “Our family.”

Chapter Twelve

Brandon stopped in Emma's doorway late Friday afternoon and watched as she packed her overnight bag. Jeff had arrived home a little before Brandon did, but Stuart wasn't home yet, still elbows-deep inside an emergency repair with another guy from work.

He didn't miss that Emma wasn't taking much. "I really appreciate you doing this, sweetheart."

"Sure," she muttered.

During the week, Jeff and Stu had gently helped back Brandon about keeping Em focused on going tonight. "Your mom loves you."

"She has a funny way of showing it. She's not like you."

Don't blow this up. Be the adult. "Your mom and I are two totally different people, honey. Completely different personalities, and as we both grew up, we grew apart. That's part of the reason why we got divorced. It wasn't just because I finally came out. That was the final straw in a long string of differences between us."

It wasn't that simple, but it was a good enough answer.

"Pat is an asshole, Dad, and you can punish me for calling him that. I don't care." She finally turned. "Plus the Goober is supposed to be there this weekend. I'll stay there tonight, but I'm *not* staying tomorrow night. I won't spend the night in the house with him. I might not stay later than tomorrow morning, if Pat crawls up my butt."

He stepped into the room. "Again, I *really* appreciate you doing this. I know you don't believe me, but one day you might thank me for making you do this."

She glared at him.

"I didn't say one day *soon*. One day, when you can look back on all of this with some perspective and time. Maybe after you have kids of your own, if you do."

She snorted. Not the first time she'd made that reaction concerning the topic of kids, but he also knew how life could throw curveballs. Sure, she hadn't started dating yet, but she was only sixteen, she was hyper-focused on both academics and swimming, and she had an active social life with her friends. She'd be applying to colleges and for scholarships in the next couple

of months.

He'd take the win and be happy he hadn't had to put a beatdown on some poor boy who was stupid enough to think he could waltz through Brandon's front door and slide a hand down Emma's pants.

Not to mention he had Jeff and Stuart as backups.

"Have bail prepared in case I smack the Goober," she darkly snarked.

"Prison orange isn't your color, sweetheart." That finally earned him a smirk. "Hey, at least I can still make you laugh."

She walked over and hugged him. "I love you, Dad. I do love Mom, but that doesn't mean I have to like her or Pat. Especially Pat. Life's too short for me to force myself to spend time with her."

"It's more complicated than that."

She cocked her head as she looked at him. "Not really, no. She chose Pat over me. If she hadn't sided with him so many times, especially in the Goober's favor while walking all over me, maybe I'd feel different. There's a double-standard. She's more worried about losing Pat, or about what Pat thinks, or what Pat's parents think, than she is about what's best for me. That's on *her*."

"What if you hadn't liked Jeff and Stuart?"

"I love both of them. I think they're great."

"But what if you hadn't? Or, what if you hadn't wanted me to date both of them. Would it be fair to ask me not to be with them?"

"That's different."

"Not really."

She settled onto the bed. "It's *totally* different. Not liking Pat has everything to do with the fact that he's a jerk. Or him making me redo washing the dishes *three* times one night. More than once."

She held up three fingers. "*Three*, Dad. I think in the years since you left Mom, you might have made me rewash three *dishes* total. Or he tells me to make my bed when my bed *was* made, and I go in and find he's yanked all the sheets and stuff off and told me it wasn't done right."

Brandon clamped down on his anger, wondering if Tracey had played him during their phone conversation. "What else has he done?"

"It's not just what he's done, it's what Mom *hasn't* done. She hasn't stood up for me. Can I be mouthy? Yeah, I'll own that. But that was only because I got tired of being accused of doing stuff I didn't do, or he punished

me arbitrarily. I don't even think the Goober can *spell* arbitrarily, much less knows what it means."

He couldn't help it—it slipped out. "I'm not sure Pat does, either."

She held a hand out. "*Thank* you. *That's* what *I've* been saying."

"Is it possible your mom doesn't know about all of that?"

"No! Because twice during dish rewashing episodes, she was standing right there and didn't say anything. Another time, she walked down the hall when he was ripping me a new one for how my bed was made. She knows *exactly* what he's done, and this isn't stuff that used to happen before she married him, either."

She shook her head. "If Mom was strict on me, okay, fine, I can deal with that if she's consistent, like you are. But she's not, and she'd let Pat go changing things just to suit him. He keeps moving the goalpost just to screw with me. Early on, I once did what you'd suggested about making the bed. I asked him, okay, *show* me how you want it done. He did. I did it *exactly* that way, and he *still* dinged me for it. Yet the Goober can just pull his blanket up and say, done, and he skates. Double standard."

Brandon had heard hints of stuff like this going on, but he'd gone out of his way to walk a fine line between righteous indignation and trying to suggest ways for Emma to get along with her stepfather, plus trying to stay out of parenting Emma while she was in their home.

This, however, was far worse than he'd thought.

He sat on the end of the bed. "If you don't want to go this weekend, I'll call your mom and tell her. Everything you just told me, and tell her if she doesn't like it, she can take me to court."

Emma wouldn't look at him, at first. He let the silence lie between them while she worked it out in her head.

"I just want," she quietly said, "for her to stand up for *me* for a change, instead of standing up for Pat. I *get* it, she's insecure. She's scared of losing him and going through another massive change in her life. That doesn't mean she should sacrifice me or my emotional health for her own comfort."

"That wasn't an answer, sweetheart."

"I'll go. But don't be shocked if I'm back tonight." A playful smile filled her face. "Keep your phone ringer on. If I do bail tonight, I'll call before I come home to warn you guys."

Emma had always been wise beyond her years.

“Honest question—do you *really* like Jeff and Stuart?”

“Yes, because they’re great. I *love* them, seriously. They *are* my step-dads. I *tell* people they’re my step-dads, and I just call Pat Pat. They’re not like Pat. And they defer to you. You’re in charge, you’re the final authority. They don’t try to step in and pretend to be my parents, but I know I can count on them as if they were. I don’t expect them to be my best friends or anything, but...”

She seemed to need another moment to think about how to phrase it. “I can *count* on them,” she repeated. “I know that if I was ever in a situation where you weren’t there, I could call either one of them, before I even called Mom, and they’d be there and have my back for me. Like Jeff and my tire. Or even big things.”

She scooted closer to him. “I’ve *never* been able to count on Pat. Ever. After Mom married him, I even tried to ask him for help with my homework, to try to do something with him, and he blew me off. But if the Goober needs help wiping his ass? Oh, Pat’s all up in that to help him and kiss Goober’s ass. Trying to score brownie points with him.”

Another long, quiet moment. “I think he’s trying to get full custody of Goober so he doesn’t have to pay his ex child support anymore. I heard him talking to Mom about it.”

“I thought he did have full custody?”

“No, Goober’s been going to his mom’s house a couple of days a week. Pat hasn’t dragged her back into court yet, and apparently she threatens him if he doesn’t pay.”

Wow. He pondered his response and made a mental note to chew Tracey out for them having those kinds of conversations around Emma. “I’m sorry you have to deal with all of that.”

“Yeah, well, it’s another reason I love living with you. It’s drama-free here. My stomach doesn’t tighten in the bad way anymore when I’m coming home like it used to when I was going to Mom’s. You’re in charge, what you say goes, and I never hear Jeff and Stu trying to change your mind about stuff when it comes to me. I know that whatever your rules are, they will stick to those and not try to make new ones, or move the goalposts.”

Brandon hoped his face hadn’t turned red. It sure felt like he was blushing.

She’d hit way too close to the truth. They’d explained to her the men’s

use of “Sir” as them just being polite and respectful, although he suspected Emma hadn’t totally bought that excuse.

“We have a...dynamic that works for us,” he said. “They defer to me. Part of them moving in was them agreeing that I’m your father, and this is *my* house, and they’re subject to the rules of my house the same way you are. And that while I hoped they’d come to love you as a daughter, you are *my* daughter, and what *I* say is law.”

She snorted. “Sure, Dad.” She stood to finish packing.

“What?”

“Nothing.” But she wore an evil smile.

“No, what? Say it.”

She leveled a gaze at him. “I might be a kid, but I’m not a *child*.”

“What?”

“Do you *really* want me to say it?”

“Say *what*?”

She rolled her eyes and went back to packing. “*Duh*. You *own* them. They’re like a couple of puppies, and you’re the pack Alpha.”

Oh, shit.

His face felt supernova hot now. He tried to think of a comeback to that, something that wouldn’t violate his personal credo to never lie to her, while remaining age-appropriate for the situation.

“You don’t have to say anything, Dad. It’s okay. I think it’s cute. Mostly because you look happier than I’ve seen you look in years. You were never this happy with Mom.”

Her expression turned sad. “That’s another thing I hate about all of this. Pat doesn’t make her happy. He doesn’t even make her feel secure. He was a...a life vest. She grabbed it and put it on, but she’s still bobbing around in the ocean and floundering. She might not be drowning, but she’s dang sure not ‘safe.’”

* * * *

Jeff hadn’t meant to eavesdrop, but with Emma’s door standing wide open, and him in the kitchen, he’d been able to hear every word.

He wondered if Brandon’s face was as red as he knew his own was.

Puppies to the pack Alpha was the perfect way to explain the dynamic

they had in a vanilla-friendly way.

He was still digesting the fact that Emma loved him and Stuart like step-dads.

He'd never had that kind of relationship with a kid before. Not even as an uncle, since Iris didn't have kids.

I have a kid. I have a daughter.

Oh, shit, I have a daughter!

Accepting that Brandon was a package deal was a no-brainer to Jeff. He wouldn't have respected the man—and probably wouldn't still be with him—had Brandon *not* put Emma first in his life.

That was one of the things Jeff loved about him, what a good father he was.

Jeff desperately didn't want to screw up things between him and Emma, either. Because when he examined his feelings for her, he loved her like a daughter, even though he hadn't *really* thought about it before now.

He finally realized he still stood there, holding the mug of water in his hand. He put it in the microwave to nuke it. He wanted to make himself another mug of ginger tea, since the one he'd drunk when he got home helped him feel a little better. Ever since Monday, it felt like he was trying to come down with a bug, so he'd upped his vitamin C intake and was hopefully going to get ahead of it before it turned into a full-blown cold or something.

I probably picked up something from the trip, or from someone at work.

He hated flying. Every time he did, he ended up with a cold or the flu or some other bug a week or so later.

Looks like my bad luck's still holding there.

When Emma and Brandon emerged from her room, she left her overnight bag on the couch and walked into the kitchen, where she gave Jeff a hug.

"Will you hug Stuart for me?"

"Sure, kiddo. When will you be home?"

"Probably early tomorrow evening. Before dinner."

"Want to grill burgers tomorrow night?"

She stepped away, a smile on her face. "Sure, that sounds great."

"Make sure to check your tires."

"I will." She frowned. "Are you feeling okay? You've been out of it the past couple of days."

He shrugged. "Tired and achy. I think I picked up something on the trip

and it's just now starting to hit me.”

She poked him in the stomach. “Vitamin C.”

He shot her a salute. “Already doing that, ma’am.”

Behind her, Jeff thought Brandon was going to wet himself trying to stifle his snort of amusement.

Emma, however, nodded. “Good.” She hugged him again. “Take care of yourself. Can’t have any of my dads getting sick.”

“I will.”

Brandon walked her out. Jeff was still staring after them when the microwave went off. As he pulled the mug out and dunked the teabag, he let it start to sink in that he was now a “dad.”

Chapter Thirteen

Late Saturday morning, Brandon was enjoying lounging on the lanai, naked, watching Stuart and Jeff taking care of the pool.

Naked, natch.

They'd started the morning with spankings, followed by vigorous fucking, breakfast, and now—chores.

Jimmy Buffett blasted from the Bluetooth speaker connected to Brandon's phone. All he needed to complete that picture-perfect afternoon would be a pitcher of margaritas and a pot of peel-and-eat shrimp.

Mmm, shrimp.

That wasn't a half-bad idea. Maybe he should make a run to the grocery store and buy them a few pounds of shrimp for dinner to go with the burgers.

He was giving serious thought to doing just that when his phone rang. When he saw it was Emma calling, he answered before remembering that the speaker was hooked to his phone, and had a built-in mic.

Both Jeff and Stuart straightened, watching and now listening when she started speaking immediately. "Dad? Are you there?"

"Yeah, honey. What's up?"

"Dad, Mom and Pat won't let me leave." In the background, he heard muffled yelling.

"What do you mean they won't let you leave?"

"I mean Pat parked behind my car and won't move it. Corey and Pat's parents are going to be here this afternoon, and I told them I was leaving. Before I could get back outside with my stuff, Pat had moved his car and blocked me in. He said I'm not going anywhere. Then he tried to grab my phone. I ran and locked myself in the bedroom."

Jeff and Stuart dropped the scrubber and dip net and bolted for the house. Brandon was now up and moving, too, and figured out how to disconnect the Bluetooth speaker.

"We're on our way, sweetheart."

"Do you want me to call 911?"

"Has he laid a hand on you?"

"Not yet. I blocked my bedroom door with a chair. He keeps pounding on it and yelling but I think he's too stupid to know how to jimmy the lock from

the outside.”

“We’ll be right there. Stay on the phone with me.”

By the time he made it to his bedroom, Jeff and Stuart were already emerging from their respective rooms, half-dressed and frantically pulling on clothes, phones, keys, and wallets in their hands.

Brandon wasn’t far behind them. “What did your mom do while this was happening?” He piled into his car after handing Stuart the keys to drive, and Jeff climbed into the back seat.

“She just stood there and didn’t say anything, like she usually does—*OH MY GOD, SHUT THE HELL UP, YOU ASSHOLE!*”

Brandon was glad he was on the phone with her and not right next to her when she screamed that or he would have been even deafer.

“Honey, are you ready to leave when we get there?”

“You better believe I am.”

Brandon didn’t want to call the police, but if forced to, he would. He knew Tracey didn’t need additional grief in her life and hoped to solve this without calling the cops.

While it wasn’t the first option on his list, it still made the top two.

They pulled up in front of the house and Brandon directed Stuart to park on the street, not in the driveway. He didn’t want to give Pat any additional ammunition.

When he raced up the front walk, Tracey opened the door. “She’s not going home with you, Brandon. She doesn’t want to.” Her face looked beet red, her tell for a lie.

All the goodwill he’d had for her that week vanished. “Bullshit, Tracey. I’m on the phone with her right now. Do I need to have her hang up and call 911 for you kidnapping her?”

Her eyes widened. “I am *not* kidnapping my own daughter!”

“I have signed paperwork from you agreeing that she’s living with me full-time. You have thirty seconds to let her out and move Pat’s car, or I will have a yard full of deputies here.”

“You can take the car, but you’re not taking her.”

From inside the house, Brandon now heard Pat screaming at Emma to hang up her cell phone, echoed through his own phone.

He looked at Stuart. “Call 911. Now.” He spoke into the phone. “Honey? Hang up and start videotaping this.”

“Oh, I’m already videotaping all of this, Dad. I have Grace’s old cell phone. She loaned it to me, just in case. I’ve got everything on video from when he moved his car and started yelling at me.”

“Good girl.”

He was aware of Jeff walking back down to the street while Stuart was on the phone with the 911 dispatcher.

Brandon looked at Tracey, whose face had grown so red he wasn’t sure she might not be close to stroking out.

“You can still bring this to a peaceful conclusion,” he told her, dropping into Dom tone with her. “*Go* get Pat’s keys and move his car. *Now*. That car is in *my* name, and you have *no* right to hold Emma here.”

“You can take your car, but Emma stays. We’re going to t-take you to court and get custody back.” She didn’t even look like she believed it.

A suspicion hit him, from the way she looked, to the tone of her voice, and how she kept nervously glancing back, as if looking for Pat. Now he was honestly more worried about her well-being than he was Emma’s at that exact moment.

“She’s sixteen, Tracey. This is *not* the battle you want to fight. Do you have *any* idea how hard I had to pressure her to come visit you this weekend? I practically had to order her. Now I owe my daughter an apology, because I told her that one day she’d thank me for making her try to rebuild a relationship with you.”

Tracey started crying, her voice dropping to a whisper. “*Please*, Brandon, just go! He’s already mad! I’ll try to sneak her out of here when he’s in the bathroom or something.”

He stepped forward and held the phone against his chest so Emma couldn’t hear this part. “Did Pat hit you?” he whispered, protective fury washing through him. He might not agree with how she’d lived her life, but she was still his daughter’s mother.

More tears, but she shook her head. “Just...*please!*” she whispered. “I’m trying to calm him down, but he won’t listen!”

“If you’re in danger, you can come with us.” In the distance, he heard sirens approaching.

Maybe he hadn’t read the situation with her and Pat throughout the years as accurately as he thought he had.

“I can’t leave. It’s my home.”

“You *can* leave. We can keep you safe—”

Pat stormed into the living room, ripping the door out of Tracey’s hand and pushing her out of the way to step on to the porch.

“Get out of here. Emma’s staying, and that’s that. We’re done screwing around with you and your bullshit.”

Behind him, Tracey’s tears still flowed, a silent plea on her face.

Glancing around, Brandon realized he didn’t see Jeff, but now a marked sheriff’s cruiser was approaching.

“Move your car, Pat. That car is in my name. If you don’t, I’m going to have you arrested for grand theft auto.”

When Pat shoved his keys at Tracey, Brandon wanted to grab them and make Pat eat them, but the uniformed deputy pulling up along the curb would make that an ill-chosen option. Brandon stepped down and off the porch while Tracey got Pat’s car moved, and Brandon handed his keys to Stuart to move Emma’s car out of their driveway and to the street.

Another sheriff’s cruiser rolled up, followed by a third. As the deputies were trying to get the story, Pat screaming and ranting and jabbing his fingers at Brandon, Brandon struggled to keep his calm while talking to the deputy.

That’s when he realized the call with Emma had ended.

Shit.

“So that’s *your* car, sir?” the deputy asked, pointing to where it was now parked at the curb.

“It’s in my name, yes. It’s my daughter’s. She’s sixteen, and she’s inside, and her stepfather won’t let her leave.”

“But *you* have primary custody of your daughter?”

“Yes. She lives with me and was here for a voluntary visit. She didn’t have to come visit, it’s not court-mandated. And now they won’t let her leave.”

The deputy pointed to Pat and Tracey, who’d returned to the porch after moving Pat’s car. “Ma’am, sir, I need you to please step down here and talk to me for a moment.”

They did, the deputy pulling them off to the side.

That gave Brandon another chance to look around for Jeff.

Nowhere to be seen.

What the hell?

* * * *

Jeff slowly retreated down the driveway while Tracey's attention was focused on Brandon. Walking down the sidewalk and past where they'd parked, he saw there wasn't a fence or gate around the backyard.

Ignoring the ripple of pain in his back, he ducked down behind the cars and skirted up the driveway, along the side of the house, and around the back. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out which room was Emma's from the sound of Pat screaming and Emma yelling back at him.

In the distance, he heard sirens and knew this was cutting it close. Lightly tapping on the window, he wasn't sure she'd heard him at first when the blinds jerked open, and she grinned at him from the other side. He held a finger to his lips and she nodded as she opened the window, yanking on the two tabs on the bottom of the screen to pull it out of the frame, dropping it outside.

"Bags," he whispered, motioning for them.

She grabbed her stuff and passed it through, then he helped her climb out. Pat had stopped yelling at her door, but now Jeff could hear him ranting from the front of the house.

She threw her arms around him in a crushing hug. "Oh, my god! I'm so glad to see you!"

"Me, too, kiddo, but let's get you out of here first. Then we can celebrate."

With her safely out, he had her pull the window down before telling her how to replace the screen, so he could keep his prints off of it.

No use opening a door for Pat to try to claim he broke into their house.

"You okay?" he whispered. "He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"I'm fine. Sooo much better now that you guys are here. Where's Dad?"

"He's up front. He doesn't know I did this. I snuck away. Come on." He winced as he shouldered her overnight bag while she grabbed the backpack she used as a purse.

Jeff followed his original path, and, at the edge of the house, peeked around to see that the deputies were in fact there. He motioned for her to follow him. The way everyone was standing, Pat, Tracey, Stuart, and Brandon's backs were to them.

"Ma'am," one deputy was saying, "I'm sorry, but she's sixteen, this is

her father, and she lives with him. Unless you have a court order saying she's required to be here today, you cannot prevent her from leaving, daughter or not. You will have to contact your attorney to file for a modified custody agreement if you want to change that."

"Ahem," Jeff said.

Brandon turned around, and if it hadn't been for the shitty situation, the smile Brandon gave Jeff would have made Jeff's cock hard right there.

"Em!"

She ran over to hug Brandon while Pat let out an enraged roar and started toward her.

As Tracey yelled for Pat to stop, two of the deputies stepped in and immediately took him down, handcuffing him.

"If you don't settle down right now, sir, we're going to arrest you."

"They broke into my house and took her! That's kidnapping!"

"Actually," Jeff said, "she climbed out her bedroom window. *She* broke out. I didn't break in. I only helped her climb out so she didn't break her neck or a leg in the process."

"Pat, *please*, let her go!" Tracey begged.

"No! I told my mom and dad she'd be here tonight for dinner! Let me up!"

"Sir," the second deputy said, "either you calm down *right* now, or we're going to arrest you. Final warning."

Tracey was being held back by the third deputy. "Pat, just *stop* it. Let her go. She doesn't want to be here. We can't afford a lawyer or bail money. *Please* calm down!"

Whether it was the real threat of jail, or a reminder of their financial situation, Pat finally did stop struggling against the officers.

The third deputy finally released Tracey. She waved her hand toward the cars. "Just go. Just take her and go. This is not how this weekend was supposed to happen, and I'm sorry."

Brandon, who after hugging Emma had refused to take his arm from around her shoulders, sent a death glare toward Tracey. "I'll be calling my attorney immediately and asking for an injunction against you. This shit's inexcusable. She came here in good faith. You promised her Corey wouldn't be here, and you *lied* to her and tried to hold her hostage."

Tracey hugged herself. "I'm sorry. Em, I love you, and I'm so, so sorry. I

—”

“Don’t you dare fucking apologize to her!” Pat screamed.

“I love you. Please, go.”

The third deputy seemed to be taking in the situation. “Did you want to press charges, sir?” he asked Brandon.

Brandon deferred to Emma. “It’s your call, sweetheart.”

She glared at Pat. “No, but only because if he loses his job, it means Mom can’t pay her bills. And I don’t want Mom to suffer because he’s an idiot. She’s suffering enough being married to him. I hate you, you jerk. I wish my mother had never met you.”

Then, in a move that made Jeff prouder than he could have ever told her, Emma walked over to her mom and hugged her before she rejoined Brandon.

Brandon led Emma to her car, holding the passenger door open for her before walking around to the driver’s side, where Jeff handed him her overnight bag. Then Jeff joined Stuart, who drove Brandon’s car, and they pulled out.

Chapter Fourteen

Emma wasn't crying.

Brandon hated that he'd basically set Emma up for this while thinking he was being a "responsible" parent and doing the "right" thing, even though it'd gone against his better instincts.

Never again would he second-guess himself when it came to Emma.

Plus, he now simultaneously hated and pitied Tracey, but it didn't change the fact that Tracey had, in fact, put her husband over her daughter's well-being.

Again.

That also pissed him off, because even though Tracey hadn't meant to, she'd used his guilt against him and it had backfired to hit Emma square on.

"Start from the top, sweetheart."

He wasn't sure if Emma's lack of tears was a good thing or not.

He mentally reminded himself to make sure he and Stuart gave Jeff a well-deserved blow job later that night for his quick and sneaky thinking to rescue her.

It was still a couple of minutes before she spoke. "I know I shouldn't hate Mom, but I sooo hate her right now."

"I don't blame you. That's a very valid feeling."

"Last night, I thought I'd be here through dinner, that Corey wouldn't be here until late tonight. I was going to text you about that today once I knew for sure. This morning, Mom started off kind of being vague about things. Then Pat comes in—which was weird that he had the day off today, but whatever—and asks her what time his parents and the Goober were supposed to get there this afternoon.

"That's when she got that 'oh, crap' look she gets and her face turned red, like it always does. Especially when it's something I know is Pat's idea and she doesn't really want to go along with it, but she gives in anyway."

He nodded but didn't interrupt.

"I stared at her and said well, I guess one less for dinner would mean more leftovers for them, and I turned around and went back to my room to pack. When I came out, I saw through the living room windows he'd moved his car behind mine. Then Pat got in my way and asked where I thought I was

going. I told him I was going home, and to move his car. He told me no, I wasn't, and I said watch me. Get this—I guess his parents wanted to talk to me about sending me and Corey to some special summer camp or something. One their church puts on. They wanted to 'invest in my spiritual future.'”

“Okay.” Brandon had to interject. “Besides the fact that you have *no* interest in their religion, you're in summer AP classes, and have swim practice?”

“*Thank* you! That's exactly what I told him. He said I should forget about college because I would never make it. That the AP classes I was taking were a waste of time. And that as far as swimming went, that was stupid, and a waste of money, and I'd never get a scholarship from doing it, anyway. That he was tired of them having to spend money on me being on swim team.”

“He did, did he?” Brandon growled, struggling not to turn the car around and go beat the crap out of the guy. Pat and Tracey hadn't contributed anything to Emma's swim expenses and coaches' fees in the whole time she'd been living with him full-time.

But he hadn't told Emma that, because he'd easily been able to absorb the cost with Jeff and Stuart contributing to household expenses every month.

“Yeah. I told him he had until the count of three to go move his car before I called you, and he dared me to call you. I was already filming with Grace's old phone. He started to reach for my phone, and I told him if he laid a hand on me I'd tell the cops all about how he molested me. Which made him freeze long enough for me to go lock myself in my room. And that's when I called you.”

He winced. “So you have yourself on tape threatening to make a false allegation against him?”

“Yeeeeeaaah, see, *that* part I didn't think through. I wanted to buy myself a couple of seconds to get away from him.”

“Well, that was quick thinking on your part.”

“Yeah.” She fell quiet for a moment. “Is it weird that I both feel sorry for Mom and hate her at the same time?”

“No, it's human.”

“I could tell this wasn't her idea, that Pat was pushing it. But she didn't fight him, either, and she should have. After this morning, I'm pretty sure she's scared of him.”

“I'm sorry I talked you into going, sweetheart.”

“Are you really calling your attorney?”

“When we get home, yes. I want to know what to do next.”

“As long as she’s with Pat, I’m not going to go visit her. She can come see me at my swim meets, or she can come visit me at our house—without Pat—when you or one of the guys are home.”

“That’s probably wise.” He’d tried to be a neutral parental ally for Tracey before this bullshit.

Not anymore.

No amount of guilt he felt could tip the scales back toward Tracey after today’s stunt. Not as long as she chose to stay with Pat.

Emma stared out the windshield. “I *just*...I still *cannot* understand how she can let him push her around like that! Why isn’t she putting me first when Pat’s obviously an idiot? Why does she stay with him?”

“Sometimes,” he said, “people don’t feel they have any worth. Then they hitch their wagon to someone else so they can fill that void within them.”

She stared at him, jaw gaping. “So she chooses *Pat*? I mean, come *on*, Dad. I could have found her a better guy by randomly right-swiping in a dating app or something.”

He held a hand out for a fist bump.

“Use this as a lesson when you decide to start dating,” he said. “Never go for a guy who doesn’t value you and lift you up.”

She turned back to the window. “Yeah,” she muttered. “Sure.”

* * * *

Brandon imagined, from the sound of Ed’s exasperated sigh, that the lawyer was probably pinching the bridge of his nose. “You’re kidding. *Please* tell me you’re kidding.”

“I wish I was,” Brandon said. “I watched the video Emma shot, and it’s all there.”

“Oh, boy. Well, we can file an emergency motion terminating Tracey’s visitation at their house, terminating any unsupervised visitation, and a contempt order for refusing to let Emma leave.”

“Do you think it’ll be granted?”

“Very likely, under the circumstances. Judges don’t like it when one parent has a pattern of behavior like Tracey’s exhibited. And we’ll tell the

court about Emma's concerns about the step-brother's behavior. Even more reason for a finding in your favor. We can strong-arm Tracey into giving in by threatening to put her paying you child support back on the table, as well."

This pissed Brandon off for a number of reasons, including the fact it meant money he could be putting into working on the house, or into savings for covering Emma's future college costs, would have to be paid to Ed.

"Do it. And go for child support. If she agrees to sign the modified agreement without forcing us to a hearing, take child support off."

"Atta boy. Now *that's* what I'm talking about. On Monday, I'll e-mail you the preliminary text of the order to look over before I file it."

"Thanks. I'm tempted to call her and chew her out."

"Who, your ex?"

"Yeah."

"Yeah? Well, fight the temptation, and Dom or not, that's a friggin' order to you from the guy you pay for his professional opinion on things like this. From this point on, you let *me* handle *all* communications with her. At least until we get the signed court order."

When Brandon ended the call, he emerged from his bedroom. Emma, Jeff, and Stuart stood in the kitchen, discussing dinner preparations.

It never failed to strike him how much like a "normal" family it felt having everyone home. Far more "normal" than he'd felt growing up, or even while he was married to Tracey.

Emma never had clashes with Jeff and Stuart.

They all looked up at his return. "Ed will get the ball rolling Monday," he told them.

"Thanks, Dad," Emma said.

He draped an arm around her shoulder. "I'm sorry I made you go visit her."

"Don't you dare apologize for them. And you didn't make me go."

"I'm just telling you how I feel."

"Well, I don't ever plan on setting eyes on Pat again, so don't feel guilty. He doesn't get any more chances with me. Maybe this will be enough to wake Mom up."

"Your mom's doing the best she knows how."

"Stop making excuses for her. You're fine. You didn't turn me against her. She did that all on her own. She didn't need any help from you—she had

Pat to do that for her.”

* * * *

Stuart kept his mouth shut. After the afternoon’s events, he had nothing nice to say about Tracey.

No way could he even attempt to be the slightest bit impartial. Not after what he’d seen and heard.

As far as he was concerned, Brandon was showing remarkable restraint. Had Brandon taken a swing at Pat earlier, Stuart would have been jumping in right behind him.

Jeff would have been bailing them both out of jail, but totes worth it to wipe the smarmy look off Pat’s face.

On the other hand, he didn’t feel he should jump in and mouth off about Tracey and Pat in front of Emma. Alone with Jeff and Brandon? Sure, but technically, Emma wasn’t his daughter, even though he was growing more every day to love her as one.

If it were up to him, Tracey would never see Emma again, unless Emma made the decision to see her.

And Pat would be *under* a jail somewhere, not in it, for trying to keep Emma there against her will.

Brandon hugged Emma. “So did we decide what’s for dinner tonight?”

Jeff ran a hand through his short blond hair. “We’re thinking about calling in a pizza instead of grilling burgers.”

“That works for me,” Brandon said. “Don’t forget the cheesy bread.”

Emma yawned. “I’m going to grab a shower and call Grace. I’ve got some homework I can do.”

“You all right?” Brandon asked her.

“I will be.” She pulled away from Brandon and hugged Jeff, then Stuart, then back to Jeff once more. “Thanks again, guys. I know I can always count on you to have my back.”

Stuart stared after her as she walked out. He kept his voice low. “I know what happened sucked, but hearing that was worth it.”

Jeff fist-bumped with him.

A handsome smirk curled Brandon’s lips. “Just remember this moment when I need you two to have my back when she acts out or starts dating.

United front.”

“Absolutely,” he and Jeff said in unison.

Chapter Fifteen

Monday morning, Brandon was working on a migraine as he drove to work. He knew Ed would be calling him today at some point to go over the paperwork. Already, Brandon wanted to call Tracey and bitch her out over this, for playing him that day on the phone when he'd actually felt *sorry* for her.

Then he remembered the look on her face Saturday.

She was not a willing participant in what happened.

Still, it didn't exonerate her. She was responsible for what happened in her household the way he was responsible for what happened in his, and Tracey was failing their daughter.

I need to let Ed handle it.

He could tell Jeff and Stuart wanted to unload on Tracey as well, and he didn't blame them. All day Sunday, they'd been extra attentive to Emma, doing stuff with her, helping her with dinner in the kitchen, trying to cheer her up and make her laugh.

This wasn't just impacting him and his daughter—it was impacting his husbands' lives, too. He could roll with the punches just fine, but when it came to protecting the people he loved, he wouldn't hesitate to flatten someone else in the process.

By the time he got home that night, he was fighting what was starting to feel like a full-blown migraine and felt ready to collapse. Stuart, Emma, and Grace were in the kitchen getting dinner ready when he arrived.

"Wow, Sir, you don't look good," Stuart said when Brandon walked into the kitchen to take some ibuprofen.

"Headache. I think I'm going to go lie down for a little while before dinner."

"Jeff's in there now. He's not feeling good."

"Sick?"

"He thinks he's coming down with something."

"Terrific."

He walked down the hall, a little surprised to find the room completely dark and quiet when he opened the door. Jeff usually liked to nap with a TV on.

Quietly closing the door behind him, Brandon headed for the bathroom to grab a shower when one of the bedside lamps switched on. "Master?"

He turned, his own headache momentarily forgotten when he got a look at Jeff. "Hey, are you okay?"

"Everything hurts. I think I picked up something from the trip."

"That was two weeks ago, buddy."

It was nearly ninety out, and yes, they had the AC running, but Jeff was bundled under a blanket. Brandon leaned in and touched Jeff's forehead with the back of his hand, but he didn't feel feverish.

"One of the guys at work, his kids are sick. He had to miss today because they couldn't go to day camp and his wife had to work. Maybe I caught it from him."

"Did you take your temperature?"

"No, but I took some ibuprofen when I got home."

Brandon found the digital thermometer he used for Emma and took his temp. It was 99.8, so not necessarily a fever, unless the ibuprofen he'd taken earlier had already helped lower it.

"We'll keep checking that."

"Do you want me to sleep in the other bedroom tonight so I don't get you sick?"

"No, buddy. If you've got it, we've likely already got it."

Brandon took a shower, starting it on cool at first and holding his head under the spray, hoping to help pop his headache. If Jeff was down, he wanted to be able to help care for him. He got these tension headaches sometimes, usually after a massive blow up with Tracey.

No shocker there, then.

He hadn't had one this bad in a while, though.

He felt a little better after that. When he left the bathroom, Jeff was asleep again. So instead he turned off the lamp and returned to the kitchen.

"Better?" Stuart asked.

"A little. We'll see how he is in the morning. I might make him go to a walk-in clinic or something. Grace, I think after dinner you should probably go home. The two of you might want to hang out at your house the next couple of days. And make sure you're washing your hands, too."

"Yes, Pop." She and Em exchanged a glance.

"Well, the last thing you two need is to get sick."

Jeff didn't even wake up to eat dinner. But Tuesday morning, while Brandon had planned to order him to go get checked out, Jeff's fever seemed to have broken overnight and he claimed to be feeling better.

Emma had already left for her morning swim practice, and Brandon and Stuart stared at Jeff in the kitchen.

"You sure?" Brandon asked.

"Yeah. Maybe it was a delayed reaction to the stress of Saturday or something." He shrugged. "I'll live. Oh, did the attorney get with you yesterday?"

"Yeah. He's already working on it. More money to throw at Tracey's poor life choices." He sipped his coffee.

Stuart nodded. "Yesterday, before you both got home, and while Emma was out of the room, Grace told me Emma is *pissed*. I mean, massively pissed."

"She hugged Tracey when we left," Brandon said.

"Yeah, but now that she's had time to think about it, she's ready to cut her mom totally off. Emma unfriended her again on Facebook, which Grace said really made Emma upset. She feels like she started to trust her again and got smacked upside the head for it."

"I know how she feels. Sorry life's a little crazy right now."

Stuart smiled. "It's still a way better life than I had before I met you, so I'm happy."

Brandon set his coffee mug aside and pulled the men in for their group hug. "I guess unless she goes to Grace's overnight, we're back to no naked weekends."

"There's going to be a private party at Cali's house in a couple of weeks," Stuart said. "We RSVP'd as maybes."

"Isn't that going to be the weekend after I'm out of town, though?"

"Oh. Shoot."

He ruffled both their hair. "You two can still go and have fun. I'll stay home with Em." He smiled. "Jeff's in charge."

Jeff wagged his eyebrows at Stuart. "Oooh, baby. Are you in trouble now?"

"Don't break our beta before I get home, though. But, yeah, feel free to RSVP as going."

On his way to work, Brandon's cell rang. He almost answered it without

looking, but fortunately spotted the caller ID before he did.

Pat.

He sent it to voice mail, his good mood immediately ruined. No way in hell would he talk to that sonofabitch.

At the next light, he thumbed the voice mail alert and put it in speaker mode.

"Listen to me, you better not be thinking about taking us back to court. You do that, we'll be telling everyone you're a pervert, and living with two guys, and you'll lose custody of Emma. Your little fuckboys will lose their jobs, too. So you might as well hand her over to us now and this can stay quiet."

Stunned, he played it again before the first giggles broke free. He had to pull over, he started laughing so hard. So hard he could barely save the voice mail as an audio file to e-mail it to Ed.

Then he texted him. *Check your e-mail. I'll wait.*

Ed called him about a minute later. "You have *got* to be fucking shitting me."

"No!" Brandon snorted. "I take it that's the stench of desperation I smell?"

"Most likely. I told her attorney last night that we were going to drag her ass back to court for full child support if she didn't sign the modification. What the hell does he think he's going to achieve?"

"I don't know, but I told my VP months ago I was living with Stu and Jeff. He and his husband and their wife weren't shocked at all."

Ed snorted. "Seriously?"

"Yeah. He's based out of Atlanta, but I've known that for a couple of years. He doesn't make a big deal about it. Most people don't know. And both Jeff's boss and Stuart's boss know about us and don't care. In fact, Stuart's boss is Walter's ex-father-in-law. You know, Walt and Holly?"

"No shit! Kimbra's father?"

"Yeah. He knows some of Walt's friends are poly and he doesn't care."

"Kimbra's an attorney. Damned good one. We've worked together before." Ed laughed. "So I get to add attempted extortion to the list of things we're going to nail his balls to the wall for. Nice."

“Part of me feels sorry for Tracey.”

“Don’t you dare, Brandon.”

“I said part. Not a very large part, either, but I think she’s backed herself into a corner and ended up with an abusive asshat.”

“Yeah? Well, people in hell want cold water, too. Doesn’t mean it’s your job to take care of them.”

“I didn’t say it was. But she’s the mother of my child.”

“Don’t you go soft on me.”

“I’m not. I just wish she’d grow a pair of her own and leave the asshole. This is only hurting Emma.”

“If people like her got smart, people like me wouldn’t have as many billable hours to charge.”

“True.”

Brandon opted to keep this to himself though, for now. When he got off the phone, he continued on to work.

Except...throughout the day, he grew more uneasy. He’d be going out of town in less than a week, and Tracey knew that.

In fact, she might have told Pat that.

Scratch that, he had to assume she’d told Pat that.

I’ll wait until we go to bed to tell them. I don’t need Emma hearing this and freaking out.

* * * *

Jeff stared at the fuse box for a minute, confused, trying to remember what he’d been about to do.

Dammit.

Maybe he wasn’t feeling as good as he thought he was. He’d been taking ibuprofen all day, and the aches and pains weren’t as bad, but he still didn’t feel...right.

At lunch he stopped by the store and grabbed some Gatorade to keep himself hydrated, and by the time he returned home that afternoon he almost felt back to normal. A little achy still, but not a fraction as bad as he had felt the night before.

Except now Brandon seemed to not feel well.

Shit. Hope I didn’t give it to him.

Once they'd said good-night to Emma and had turned in for the night, Brandon finally confessed and told them about the voice mail from Pat.

Jeff wanted to drive over there and punch the fucker. "Is there anything we can do?"

"Don't talk about this in front of Emma, for starters. But I'll call Ed and ask if there's any other paperwork we need to have in place before I go out of town, in case Tracey tries some sort of bullshit."

"I've got to tell you, Brandon," Stuart said, breaking protocols, "I'm finding it hard to be civil to Tracey if I'm ever forced to be around her again. I cannot guarantee you I won't yell at her."

"I won't blame you, but please try not to do it around Emma."

"I'll try. But I won't promise more than that."

Brandon kissed him. "Thank you. Hopefully she won't be at the swim meet next week. Now I wish I hadn't told her about that."

"It's a public place. If they try any bullshit, we'll have plenty of witnesses."

"Hell," Jeff said, "we'll have Grace. That girl is like a one-person wrecking team. I still can't believe she thought to give Emma her old cell phone to film with."

"Let's just hope they never take one of Tilly's supervillain training courses when they're older," Brandon joked.

Chapter Sixteen

Sunday night, Brandon stared at the bed, trying to figure if there was anything he'd forgotten before he started packing. He hated having to check a bag, but being in Indianapolis from early Monday morning until Friday night meant he wouldn't be able to fit everything into a carryon. He had to go to the corporate offices for annual meetings all the district managers attended. Before now, Emma usually stayed with Tracey.

Now, she'd be there with Stuart and Jeff.

Stuart walked in. "Need any help packing, Master?"

"No, I've got it." He pulled Stuart in for a hug and kissed him. "You two behave while I'm gone." He smiled. "No masturbating this week. I won't forbid you from sex, but you have to make each other come. Jeff's in charge while I'm gone. I want you to be a good boy for him." He smacked Stuart's butt through his shorts. "Maybe let him work you up to the next size butt plug."

Stuart's DP training was still ongoing, but slower than anticipated, in fits and starts without as much Emma-free time as they'd thought they'd have.

"Yes, Master." He rested his head against Brandon's chest. "Is Emma really okay being here with the two of us?"

"Why wouldn't she be?"

"I just wanted to make sure. I don't want to do anything to rock the boat."

"She loves you both. Don't forget about Wednesday."

"I already told work I need to leave early. So did Jeff. We'll film it and be there in case Tracey shows up to start trouble." He let Brandon go so he could finish packing. "Can I ask something?"

"Of course."

"Have you noticed Jeff still acts like he's not feeling good?"

Brandon started to say no when he really thought about it. "Come to think of it, yeah."

"And he's been tired a lot lately."

Shit. "When I get back, we'll talk to him about it and ask him to schedule a check-up. Pay attention while I'm gone and see how he is."

* * * *

“Yes, Master.” Stuart was more nervous about Jeff’s health than he was about Emma. Grace had already informed the men that she *would* be coming over every day to help Emma around the house and to make sure the men were eating good meals while Brandon was gone.

She was almost like a little Domme in training or something.

She’ll make some subby guy happy when she’s older and discovers boys.

Early tomorrow morning, he’d be driving Brandon to the airport and then heading straight to work. He had a key and was now helping his boss train a new electrician they’d hired.

How’d I go from the new guy to being one of the old-timers?

He didn’t know, but it felt damned good.

A family who loved him, a job he was good at and enjoyed, working for a fair and pleasant boss...

Some days he wondered when the other shoe would drop, except going on a year now since the three of them had first met, and life was only getting better.

Monday morning, even though Brandon told Stuart he didn’t have to go in with him, he still walked Brandon into the airport and all the way until they had to say good-bye at the security checkpoint.

Brandon hugged him tightly. “Be a good boy for Jeff while I’m gone, okay? Take good care of him and Emma for me.”

“I will, Sir.”

Monday and Tuesday nights were more than a little lonely without Brandon there between them. Stuart could tell Jeff wasn’t feeling well and didn’t pressure him to do anything, either, even though Monday night Jeff pinned him down to the bed and jacked him off, and then Tuesday night he held Stuart down in a sixty-nine and fucked Stuart’s face, driving him deep into subspace, before sucking a load from him.

Yet it was like Jeff was...putting more of an effort into it than Stuart thought he should.

Almost like Jeff was trying to prove he was feeling okay despite Stuart’s instincts telling him something was really wrong.

Wednesday afternoon, Jeff and Stuart rode to the pool together. Emma and Grace were just getting out of Emma’s car when the men pulled in.

Emma had her swim gear bag slung over her shoulder and Grace was in her ever-present floppy hat and sunglasses. They waited for them at the front entrance, giving them hugs when they walked up.

“Thanks for coming, guys,” Emma said.

“We wouldn’t miss this,” Jeff said

“I have to go change and get ready.”

“We’ll see you out there,” Jeff said.

There were already some parents there. As Grace and the men debated where to sit to keep her most out of the late-day sun, Stuart was looking at the bleachers when Jeff turned.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Jeff muttered.

Stuart turned, saw where he was looking, and then spotted what Jeff was looking at.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

Jeff arched an eyebrow at him. “I already said that.”

“I was agreeing with you.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Grace darkly muttered.

They both turned to her, and she shrugged. “Everyone else was saying it.”

Tracey was walking toward them. Alone, thank goodness.

She hesitated, then approached. “Hi.”

Stuart and Jeff both crossed their arms over their chests. “Hello,” they said in unison.

Stuart would later swear that Grace growled under her breath when she crossed her arms, but she didn’t actually say anything.

Stuart let Jeff handle Tracey. If he did it, he was likely to tell her to go fuck the fuckity fucking hell off, and to mightily fuck herself while in the process.

She looked around. “Where’s Brandon?”

“Work trip,” they said, again in unison. Jeff glanced down at him and Stuart decided to also let him handle the talking.

Tracey relaxed a little. “Oh. That’s right. Okay. I just wanted to watch.”

Jeff nodded. “Free country.”

Tracey’s face turned dark red, which Brandon had told them was one of her tells. “I’m really sorry about what happened. That was not my idea, I swear.”

“Doesn’t really matter whose idea it was,” Jeff said. “Still a shitty thing to do.”

Grace growled again, louder that time.

“Where’s Emma?” Tracey asked.

“Locker room,” Jeff said. “Changing.”

She offered them a hesitant smile. “Do you mind if I sit with you?”

Stuart was tempted to say yes, they fucking minded, but Jeff apparently anticipated that and reached out with a hand gripping Stuart’s shoulder to keep him quiet. “Sure, that’s fine.”

Jeff reached out with his other hand and grabbed Grace’s shoulder when she let out a sound that was definitely a growl.

“We’re adults,” Jeff said. “We can get along for Emma’s sake.”

They found seats in the small bleachers, where Stuart thought they should be able to get good video of Emma regardless of what lane she swam in, while still making sure vampire Grace didn’t get sunburned.

Stuart didn’t know about Jeff, but he didn’t feel much like making small talk with Tracey, who’d fortunately ended up sitting on Jeff’s far side.

Fine by Stuart, because he damn sure didn’t want to make small talk with her.

Grace had ended up sitting next to Stuart, on the opposite end of them from Tracey. Probably for the best.

He wasn’t altogether sure Grace might not be a biter.

In fact, Stuart had started texting with Brandon, letting him know what was going on, when he heard Jeff swear at the same time Tracey said, “Oh, no.”

When Stuart looked up, he spotted a smug-looking Pat approaching them, trailed by a bored-looking Corey.

“What the *hell*, Tracey?” Jeff said.

Stuart had to give her credit, she was either genuinely mortified or had the look and voice down pat to pretend. “I *swear*, I didn’t tell them to come! I specifically told Pat *not* to come!”

“No offense,” Jeff said, “but you can go sit with them somewhere else.”

“Damn right,” Grace said.

Stuart disguised his laughter with a coughing fit.

Tracey reluctantly got up and walked down to meet them. There, she dragged Pat down the pool deck, farther away from Corey, and appeared to

be letting him have it.

Stuart watched, the schadenfreude thick enough to eat with a fork. “Well? You think she planned it?”

“She looks and sounds pissed off.” Jeff pulled out his phone and started recording. “This way Brandon can see.”

“I wish he was here.”

“So do I, but we have to adult like big boys.”

“Don’t worry,” Grace said, “you’ve got me. I can take ’em. As long as you promise to post my bail.”

Stuart nudged Jeff in the side with his elbow.

* * * *

Jeff stopped filming them once they settled down. When Emma emerged from the building a few minutes later, her hair braided and swim bag over her shoulder, Grace quickly scooted out of the bleachers and hurried the long way around the pool deck, so as to avoid where Tracey and Pat were sitting, to talk to her. Emma whirled around, the anger on her face evident even from where Jeff and Stuart sat.

“I’m glad she’s not pissed at us,” Stuart muttered.

“Yeah.”

Once Grace had delivered the message, she took the long way around again to return to them.

“She’s *not* happy,” Grace said.

“We could tell,” Jeff said.

Emma dumped her bag along the fence, near where the other kids put theirs, and dug her goggles and swim cap out. Then she quickly jumped into one of the practice lanes to warm up.

Jeff tried to focus only on Emma and what she was doing and not keep looking over at where he kept catching Pat glaring at them.

Grace smiled, waved, and stuck her tongue out at them before Jeff tapped her on the shoulder and shook his head at her.

“Hey, I didn’t flip them a bird,” she muttered.

She might have been a tiny girl for her age, but she made up for it in spark and spirit, for sure.

The next time Jeff glanced over at them, just before he started filming

Emma's first event, he noticed Corey wasn't sitting with them. He finally spotted him wandering around the pool deck, over to the far side where the different swim teams had set up, where he got turned around by one of the coaches and sent back to the bleachers.

Little shit.

From what Emma had told them about his behavior, he was definitely one toe over the line away from his first perp walk.

He tried not to focus on that, or the fact that his headache had returned today, along with the body aches. He'd managed to hide how he felt from Stuart the past couple of nights, but if this was that bug returning, he might have to break down and go to the doctor. He didn't want to be sick, especially not when Brandon was out of town and depending on him to take care of things in his absence.

Maybe Pat wouldn't cause trouble for them or for Emma. The longer the man sat there and kept his mouth shut, the more relieved Jeff felt.

By the time the event ended nearly two hours later, it was close to dark and Jeff was glad he and Stuart had ridden together and there were plenty of leftovers at home for them to eat without having to cook or take Emma and Grace out to eat after the meet.

He felt like utter shit.

Emma had grabbed her bag and was heading toward the building when Pat called out to one of the staffers talking to a coach. "Hey, grab her. She stole my son's phone."

Jeff and Stuart looked at each other in shock, but Grace apparently had the reflexes of a vampire to go with her exploding in the sun capabilities. She immediately ran over and thrust herself into the fray before the men could get there.

"What the hell? Are you on drugs? Em wouldn't touch his phone with a damned hazmat suit on."

Tracey looked shocked. "Pat, what are you talking about?"

Emma also looked torn between shocked and horrified. "What?"

Jeff sympathized with the staffer and the coach, who both looked confused as hell. "What are you talking about?"

"My son said she stole his phone, and—"

Emma shoved her bag at the staffer. "Here, search it. I haven't touched his damn phone. My phone's in there. It has a Hello Kitty case."

The staffer held the bag but didn't unzip it. "Um—"

"I'm her stepfather," Pat said. "I demand you look."

Tracey tried to derail whatever the hell this was. "Pat, I'm her mother, and I don't know what the hell is going on, or what you think Emma did, but she would never take Corey's phone!"

"Didn't she break that one?"

"Yeah, after he tried to film her. Frankly, I don't blame her now."

"You're her mother, ma'am?" the staffer asked.

"Yes."

The staffer handed her the bag. By now there was an interested gathering starting to pay attention to what was going on. Kids, parents, and coaches.

Tracey unzipped the bag. "Pat, I don't know what the hell your—" She froze, her face falling.

"What'd you find?" he crowed.

She pulled out two phones—one with a Hello Kitty case.

One without.

Emma's eyes widened. "I did *not* put that in my bag!"

"A-ha!" Pat shrieked. He turned on Jeff and Stuart. "She's going home with us, and you tell Brandon he drops that stupid court motion, or I'm calling the sheriff's office and having Emma arrested for theft!"

"*What?*" pretty much everyone else, including Tracey, said.

Jeff had started filming this insanity with his cell phone after Pat first got the staffer's attention. He was trying to figure out something to say when someone's voice roared out over the din, silencing everyone.

Stuart.

When everyone was staring at him, he pointed up, at the overhang above the bleachers. "Emma hasn't seen Corey in weeks. And she hasn't left the pool deck since Corey arrived. There's an easy solution—we'll pull the security camera footage."

They all looked up. Jeff counted at least six cameras at first glance, and knew that since there were kids using this facility that they probably had many more they couldn't see around the pool deck.

Pat's face turned red. "Bullshit. I'm *not* waiting around for that! She obviously stole his phone, and—"

"Pat, shut the hell up," Tracey said, shoving Corey's phone at him. "No one's calling the damn sheriff, and I know damn well Emma did *not* steal his

phone.” She returned Emma’s bag to her and turned on the staffer. “How do we pull the video footage? Let’s end this nonsense right now. I know my daughter is innocent.”

Still looking confused and stunned, the staffer seemed to be taking them all in. “This way. We’ll talk to the facility manager.”

Pat blustered and protested the entire time, but it only took ten minutes for the facility manager to run the tape back on the camera that best caught the angle where Emma’s bag had been sitting and find clear footage. Corey had walked around the deck during an event when everyone had been focused on the swimmers, a relay, and did something to Emma’s bag. He’d also had his phone in his hand before bending over the bag...

And then he didn’t when he stood and walked away.

Pat turned on Corey. “You lied to me!”

“But Dad, you *told* me to—”

“*Shut* up! Let’s go! Tracey, come on.”

She crossed her arms over her chest. “No, you go. *Now*. Before *I* call the sheriff’s office on you for trying to smear my daughter’s reputation and threatening to file a false report.”

Pat stormed out, dragging Corey by the arm. During this whole time, Grace had stood next to Emma, her arm around Emma’s shoulders. Poor Emma hadn’t even been able to change out of her swimsuit yet, not wanting to leave so she could see her exoneration. Grace had kept herself positioned between Emma and everyone else, and Jeff knew there probably wasn’t a more loyal friend in the world than that girl.

Meanwhile, Emma had stood, arms tightly crossed over her chest and her mouth set in a hard, thin line.

Tracey turned to her. “Honey, I’m—”

Grace held a hand out to her, palm forward, a death glare on her face.

When Jeff tried to intercede, Emma turned and stormed out, followed by Grace like a pale, glowing, glowering, growling shadow.

Tracey stared down at the floor for a moment. Jeff was still filming and wondered how much memory his phone had left.

“I’m sorry,” she softly said. “I...” Apparently sensing she didn’t have any sympathy there, she turned and left.

The facility manager stared after her. “Well, that wasn’t the weirdest reason we needed the CCTV system, but I’m glad it ended well for Emma.”

Jeff slowly shook his head. “Thanks, but it’s not exactly ended well at all.”

* * * *

Brandon had all but booked a red-eye home to Florida when Stuart called him back.

“What is going on?” Brandon screamed at him.

“Master, it’s okay. It’s handled. We reviewed the CCTV tape. It shows Corey put his phone in her bag. Emma’s clear. Tracey and Pat and Corey are gone. Emma’s changing now.”

Brandon closed his eyes and fell back against the mattress. “Jesus fucking Christ, what the *hell* did Tracey think she was going to do?”

“See, that’s just it. I don’t think this was Tracey. I think this was all Pat. He and Corey showed up after she did, and Jeff filmed that, too. She seemed to be yelling at him for coming. I honestly think she didn’t know this was going to happen.”

“Forgive me if I don’t believe her.”

“I’m serious. You know I am no fan of hers, but she was defending Emma.”

“She was?”

“Yes.”

“But she left, right?”

“They’re all gone. We’re waiting for Emma and Grace to come out of the locker room. Jeff doesn’t want to leave yet. One of us might drive her car if she’s too upset.”

Brandon breathed a sigh of relief. Of *course* his boys were on the job and watching out for Emma and Grace. “Thank you. I can book a flight and—”

“No, please don’t. It’s okay. Call your attorney and let him know as soon as we get home we’ll upload everything to Dropbox for him.”

“Okay.” Brandon rubbed at his temple. “Are you sure she’s okay? Em?”

“I’ll know when I talk to her. She’s upset. I’m not sure there’s a name for the level of angry she is right now. Her and Grace both. I honestly thought Grace was going to hit Pat there for a moment.”

“*Our* Grace? Explodes in too much sunlight Grace?”

“She *growled*, earlier, Bran. I swear she did. Multiple times. She might

need a muzzle. Or a rabies shot, or something.”

Brandon chuckled. “She is pretty loyal to Em. God help the boy that crosses her and breaks Em’s heart. We might not get a chance at him if Grace gets to him first.”

“I’m not sure that you might be right about that.”

Chapter Seventeen

Jeff nervously waited for the girls to emerge. He was first going to make sure Em was okay to drive, and then they were going to follow them home. Grace was supposed to spend the night anyway, since they had summer classes tomorrow and Emma wouldn't have practice tomorrow morning.

When they emerged, Emma headed straight to them and, without a word, wrapped her arms around both of them, burying her face against Stuart's chest, where she burst into tears.

Jeff and Grace held both of them while she cried, and that pretty much answered Jeff's question for him.

"Stuart, why don't you drive Emma's car, okay? They can ride with you. I don't want her driving this upset. Have her call Brandon while you drive home."

Emma sniffed and pulled her keys out of the side pocket of her bag and handed them to him.

Jeff kissed the top of her head. "Stuart talked to Brandon already and got him calmed down. He's going to call the attorney and let him know."

"I don't care that she's my mother, I'm *done*. I don't want to see her again. I *hate* her."

"I know, sweetheart. Let's let the attorney handle it. That's why we pay him."

Well, technically Brandon paid him. If necessary, Jeff would move for him and Stuart to take over Brandon's monthly share of household expenses for him and Emma so that Brandon could put it toward legal fees. Or directly chip in for legal fees, if he needed help.

Whatever it took to keep their family together.

They got the girls home and while Emma took a shower, Stuart helped Grace get the leftovers ready while Jeff uploaded the video from his phone to Dropbox for Ed and Brandon.

When Emma emerged, she wore an oversized T-shirt over leggings, her damp hair long and loose and her expression dour.

She looked...aged.

And angry.

Jeff didn't try to get her to talk. None of them felt like talking.

It was Emma who eventually broke the silence as they were finishing.

"I hope Dad puts her in jail for this."

Stuart started to say something, but Jeff reached out and touched his shoulder. Tonight, Jeff had sat in Brandon's seat, Stuart where Jeff usually sat.

"Honey," Jeff said, "let your dad handle it. Don't call her. If she calls you, don't talk to her. Not until the attorney tells us what to do."

Grace set her fork down. "Can I just say there is something fundamentally wrong with a dude who is his age and worked for the same place for so long and is only an assistant manager? How stupid is he, really?"

"Stupid enough to not realize there'd be multiple cameras covering every square inch of the public areas of that facility," Stuart snarked.

That cracked them all up, including Emma, Jeff was relieved to see.

By the time they fell into bed that night, Stuart wasn't feeling very romantic either. "Can we just cuddle tonight?"

He pulled him into his arms. "Yeah. That sounds good. Real good."

At least the distraction had taken all of Stu's focus off him and how he felt. He'd stop by the drugstore tomorrow and pick up more vitamins. All this stress couldn't be helping, that was for sure.

* * * *

Brandon had never been so happy to get home as he was when he walked out of the airport gate area Friday night to find Jeff, Stuart, and Emma awaiting him.

Stuart and Jeff waited while Brandon first pulled Emma in for a long, strong hug, holding her, relief on his face.

"I'm sorry I wasn't here, honey."

"You don't owe me an apology," she said. "And Jeff and Stuart had it under control."

They spent the weekend together as a family, going over to Myakka River State Park for canoeing and hiking, trying to think about anything but what had happened on Wednesday.

Ed was working on it on his end, and had been assured by Tracey's mortified attorney that he hadn't been aware of what was going on, and he would talk to her and tell her—and Pat—to knock it the hell off.

The four of them had just sat down to eat dinner Monday night when the doorbell rang. Brandon was certain the confusion on everyone else's faces likely matched his own as he got up to answer it.

He peeked through the viewfinder to see Tracey standing there.

Just Tracey.

Inwardly groaning, he opened the door, but not the screen door. "Yes?"

"Hi." She glanced down, then up again, but no red flush in her cheeks. "Can I come in for a minute?"

"Why? Give me a reason I shouldn't slam the door in your face."

She took a deep breath. When she spoke, her voice sounded quiet, sad. "I just left my lawyer's office. I'm filing for divorce tomorrow."

He opened the screen door for her, aware of Emma now standing in the doorway to the dining room.

"What is *she* doing here?" He hated hearing the blatant venom in his daughter's voice, but Tracey deserved it.

"Hear her out, honey." He closed the front door behind her.

"I wanted to tell you that I'm divorcing Pat."

Emma crossed her arms over her chest. "Uh huh. Sure."

"Em," Brandon said. "Be polite."

"Why should I, Dad? After what happened? The shit tried to get me arrested, him and Corey both. That could have screwed up me getting a scholarship. Why, because he's a stupid, insecure jerk? She brought those two assholes into my life and they're determined to ruin it. Thank god Jeff and Stuart were there, and Stuart thought about checking the security camera footage."

"That's why I'm finally standing up to him," Tracey said, not moving from where she stood by the front door. "I realized I've made excuses for him for too long. I can't look at myself in the mirror any longer and stay married to him. Not when he's damaged my relationship with you."

Emma snorted but didn't reply.

Jeff and Stuart appeared in the dining room doorway, flanking Emma.

Tracey clasped her hands together. "The lease on the house comes due next month. I already called the landlord and told him I'm not renewing. I'm on the lease, not Pat. If Pat wants to stay there, that's up to him, but I know he can't afford the house on his own. I'll be moving out. I'm going to rent a room from a friend of mine from work for now, Ruth. Her daughter just left

for college out of state, and she said I can stay with her at least a year. She could use the extra help with her budget, and it's not a bad house. Closer to work now."

"Does Pat know any of this?" Brandon asked.

"He will when he gets served papers at work tomorrow. Well, not the moving part. When he comes home from work tomorrow, he'll find out about that, because my stuff will be gone. I've got several friends coming over to help me move in the morning. If he stays in the house, he'll need to buy new furniture, because pretty much everything is mine."

Jeff laughed. "That's savage as fuck," he said.

"I know it's petty," Tracey said, "but after everything he's done, I don't care."

"So why are you here *now*?" Emma asked.

"I know an apology isn't enough, but I'm really sorry for everything that happened. I don't have any excuse except I was scared I couldn't make it on my own. That's not a good excuse, though, and I know it. I hope one day you can forgive me and let me be a part of your life again. I know you're angry right now, and I don't expect that to change anytime soon. I deserve it."

Brandon didn't speak, letting the tension build between mother and daughter. It'd have to be Emma or Tracey who made the next move. He couldn't do this for them. Not after he'd encouraged Emma to give Tracey a chance and it had backfired in a horrendous way.

He was done being a buffer. Tracey would have to step up to be the mother Emma needed. Emma wasn't a child, and he couldn't protect her from her mother's bad decisions.

It was his job as a responsible father to teach Emma to protect herself.

Emma did not look convinced. She kept her arms crossed over her chest. "How can I believe anything you say after the past couple of years? Especially after what happened at the swim meet? Or Pat not letting me leave your house?"

"I know, sweetheart. I don't expect you to trust me now. I hope I can work to regain it, one day."

Emma continued to stare at her for another long, uncomfortable moment. "No contact with him once the divorce is done?"

"I promise. Everything goes through my attorney."

"I'm *really* mad at you."

“I understand.”

“I’ve never *not* trusted Dad, or Jeff and Stuart. Do you know that? I have more trust in Dad’s husbands, who I’ve only known for about a *year*, than I do in *you*. They’re my dads. Pat never was. He never even *tried* to be.”

Both Jeff and Stuart visibly puffed up a little in pride over that statement. Sometimes it still took him by surprise, in good ways, when Emma referred to Jeff and Stuart as his husbands or her dads.

“I know, sweetheart,” Tracey said. “I understand. I don’t blame you. I deserve that, too.”

“Do you have any idea not only how much it hurt to know you picked Pat over me, but how *humiliated* I was over his stupid stunt at the pool?”

Tracey nodded.

“It’s not like I didn’t try to get along with him. He’s supposed to be an adult and can’t act like one. I consider myself free of any blame here.”

“I know, sweetheart,” Tracey said. “You were right.”

Brandon crossed his arms over his chest and waited to see what else Emma might blast her with, but his daughter surprised him. “If you want to eat dinner with us,” Emma finally said, “there’s enough.”

Brandon didn’t know who was more shocked by that invitation, Tracey or himself.

To her credit, Tracey looked to him first, to see if it was okay.

Brandon shrugged. “We can set another place at the table.” He looked at Jeff and Stuart and gave them a silent head tip to go do it.

“Okay. Thank you. I appreciate that.”

When Tracey left about an hour later, Brandon was convinced she’d definitely changed, but he wasn’t sure Emma was.

It was not his job to convince Emma how to feel about her, either. Not anymore.

When the three men went to bed, Jeff said it first.

“Do we believe her?”

“Tracey?”

“Yeah.”

Brandon sighed, staring up at the ceiling. “I think so, but I’m not going to tell Em that and risk being wrong. For now, Tracey needs to rebuild trust with all of us. If she follows through what she says she’s doing, then maybe.”

“I still can’t believe Grace growled at the pool that night,” Stuart said.

Jeff snorted. “I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t been standing right there and heard it myself.”

“Talk about being savage as fuck,” Stuart joked. “She’s a little stealth savage.”

Brandon, in the middle, held up both fists for bumps from them, which they returned.

Chapter Eighteen

The next Sunday morning, Jeff and Emma were out in the garage working on the Edsel, since she didn't have swimming practice. She was supposed to go out to a movie with Grace later that afternoon, but for now she wanted to help him with the car.

"I'm not complaining that you're helping," Jeff said, "But I'm genuinely curious. Why are you so interested in the Edsel?"

She shrugged. "It's a cool car. Maybe some people think it's ugly, but I like it. It's got character."

"Fair enough. This is nothing like you fixing Pat's car that time, is it?"

Emma grinned, and the evilly playful twinkle in her eyes reminded him so much of Brandon. "That was sort of to prove a point to Pat, but mostly just to piss him off."

"How did you fixing his car piss him off?"

"Because he couldn't fix his car, and a girl did."

He tried to let the subject go and couldn't. "Have you talked to your mom since she stopped by?"

"She e-mailed me. Sent me a copy of the divorce filing. And pictures of the place she's living now. And her new address." Emma paused for a moment. "I guess she really did file and move out. It happened."

Jeff knew that much because Tracey had texted her new address to Brandon the other day, and Jeff had gone online himself to look up the divorce filing.

She'd really gone through with it.

Emma didn't appear to have much else to say on the topic right now, though. She helped Jeff with the wiring, small enough she was actually able to climb into the engine compartment to do a lot of it with his guidance.

Today, that was a good thing, because his body hurt like hell all over in bad ways, and his head felt fuzzy, his mind having trouble staying on task. Like he was coming down with the flu and a migraine and had a really bad hangover despite not drinking anything, all at the same time.

I've got to go to the doctor and get checked out.

He realized Emma had spoken. "Huh? Sorry, what?"

She stared up at him from the engine compartment, a curious furrow in

her brow. “Do you feel okay?”

Like her father, Emma was a caretaker by nature. He didn’t think her job, as “the kid,” should be to worry about him and his health. So he’d mostly kept quiet around her about how bad he’d been feeling lately.

“I’m okay. Just a headache. Why?”

“You don’t look okay.” She climbed out of the engine compartment and stared at him. “Smile.”

“What?”

“Please, do it. Smile.”

“Why?”

She glared at him. “Just smile for me, Jeff.”

He did. “Happy?”

Her eyes widened. “Dad!” she screamed, running for the door to the house.

“Em? What’s wrong?” Jeff tried to follow her and somehow tripped over his own goddamned feet and went sprawling. But when he tried to get up, his feet didn’t seem to remember how to perform that maneuver. Combined with the joint pain, and the headache, he felt like he could just curl up and die and that might not be a bad option.

Emma returned, grabbing him. “No, don’t move. Lay back.” She grabbed a fender cover and tucked it under his head, making him lie back.

Brandon burst through the garage door. “What—fuck!”

“What’s wrong?” Jeff asked, but he realized his voice sounded weird, slurred.

“Call 911, Dad. Tell them suspected stroke. Hurry.”

Brandon disappeared back into the house as Jeff looked up at her. “Stroke?”

“Shh, it’s okay. Just stay calm.”

He reached up to touch the right side of his face and realized it felt...odd. Droopy. Sort of numb. Like it wasn’t responding to commands.

Stuart exploded through the garage doorway. “What’s wrong?” He dropped to his knees next to them, his eyes widening.

Brandon returned, his cell phone pressed to his ear, “They’re on the way.” He knelt next to Jeff. “Em, go get his wallet from the dresser in his room, please, and mine from my bedroom.”

“On it.” She jumped up and bolted into the house.

“Stuart, go to the street to flag them down when they arrive.”

“Yes, Sir.” He raced to go do it.

Jeff stared up at Brandon, trying to focus on his blue eyes and not the panic flowing through him.

“Stay calm, buddy,” Brandon told him. “EMS is on its way.”

Emma returned with the wallets and Brandon pocketed both of them. “You and Stuart follow us to the hospital in my car. I’ll ride with him in the ambulance. Bring a phone charger for me, okay?”

“Yeah, sure.” She ran to go change and get her purse.

Barely a minute later, they heard sirens approaching in the distance.

“I’m scared, Master,” Jeff whispered.

“Shh, stay calm. This is going to be okay.” He refocused on the phone. “Yes, the ambulance just arrived. Thank you.” He ended the call as they pulled up in front of the house.

Minutes later, they had him loaded on a gurney and were racing to Proctor-Collins Medical Center, with Stuart and Emma following close behind.

And Jeff wondered if he was even going to be alive by the end of the day.

* * * *

Stuart grabbed Brandon’s keys because his car was the easiest to get out anyway. After he and Emma locked the house, they followed only a minute or two behind the ambulance.

He struggled to stay strong for her and knew he was failing.

“We called 911 fast,” she said. “They can do a lot for this.”

“We don’t even know for sure it’s a stroke,” Stuart said. “It could be the flu or something. He hasn’t been feeling well the past couple of weeks.”

She nodded, but he suspected Emma was doing a lot better than he was right then.

“How scared were you when they airlifted you off that boat that time?” he asked.

“I wasn’t scared then,” she quietly said. “I actually felt a little guilty for making the nurse think I was sicker than I was. I didn’t realize they were going to call in a *helicopter*. But it got my point across.”

“How are you so calm right now?”

“We had first-aid training in Girl Scouts,” she said. “Plus I took the lifeguard training class at the pool last summer. If you panic, you can die. Whether it’s someone drowning, or because you’re lost in the woods, or it’s a medical emergency. People who don’t panic have a better chance of survival.”

“Is that how you recognized the signs of stroke?”

“Yeah. FAST. Face, arm, speech, time. I heard his voice start to sound funny, which is what made me start paying attention. Then I didn’t get past the drooping face after I made him smile.”

It only took them a couple of minutes to be reunited with Jeff and Brandon once they reached the ER.

When Brandon had suggested calling Jeff’s family, Jeff had begged him to hold off until they knew something. The more time that passed, the more things doctors ruled out, and the more certain they seemed that whatever this was, it was serious, but probably not fatal, and likely not a stroke.

By late that afternoon, after a CT scan, MRI, and other tests, the doctors had ruled out a stroke in favor of Bell’s palsy...except they didn’t know what was triggering it, and it didn’t explain his other symptoms.

But convinced he wasn’t in immediate danger of dying, they admitted him to a regular room while they waited for more test results to come back.

Meanwhile, the drooping had eased a little, although it was still noticeable.

When Brandon tried to suggest Stuart could take Emma home so she wasn’t stuck waiting there, both of them nixed that decision.

“I’m not leaving, Dad. Not until we know what’s going on.”

Stuart nodded. “What she said.”

Brandon arched an eyebrow at him, but Stuart would take the strokes later for defying him, if there were any.

Finally, Brandon relented. “Okay.”

* * * *

Stuart, Brandon, and Emma took up vigil in Jeff’s room while waiting for the doctor to come talk to them. Brandon noticed that Emma didn’t want to leave Jeff’s side, her expression somber but sometimes breaking into tears, just to catch herself almost immediately.

Jeff's face still drooped somewhat on the one side, but with the MRI negative for anything like a stroke, tumor, or vascular problem, all they could do now was wait for test results.

When the doctor walked in, carrying a laptop, he was accompanied by a woman dressed in scrubs. "Mr. Ortiz?"

Jeff held up his right hand.

The doctor set the laptop on the rolling table on the bed and stuck his hand out to shake with him. "Dr. Galbreiten. I wanted to discuss something from the admission notes in your file before we go any further. You mentioned you've been feeling bad ever since you returned home from your trip a couple of weeks ago. Where did you go, exactly, and when? It wasn't overseas, was it?"

Brandon's heart squeezed as Jeff had to lick his lips before he could speak. While his face wasn't as droopy, it still seemed like his mouth didn't want to work exactly right.

"New Hampshire." He pointed at Brandon and motioned for him to continue for him.

"He went to help his sister move a friend of hers four weeks ago. She left her abusive husband and moved here to Florida."

The doctor noted something on the laptop. "So you weren't hunting, hiking, camping, any outdoor activities like that?"

Jeff shook his head.

"Why?" Brandon asked.

"Well, what I'm seeing could easily be explained by Lyme disease, but if he wasn't outdoors—"

Stuart gasped. "The tick!" He stared at the doctor. "There was a tick I found on his—" He stared at Emma. "Um..."

Brandon saved him. "Jeff had a tick in his groin region. It was discovered upon him returning home, so was attached for at least twenty-four hours, best guess. Maybe longer. His sister's friend lived in a house in a rural area. She was battling ticks on her dogs. Jeff helped her bathe and dip them."

The doctor started nodding. "Any kind of rash after you found the tick?"

"Just some redness in the area, but we never saw a bulls-eye pattern," Brandon said, "so we didn't think about it. We thought the redness was from him obsessively going over it with rubbing alcohol and checking the area constantly. You think this is Lyme disease?"

“I’m almost sure of it now. Not everyone gets the bulls-eye rash, and some people never have a rash at all. If the tests don’t show Lyme, we’re still going to proceed like it is until we figure out something else. It also explains the Bell’s palsy, and your pain and neurological symptoms.

“So, good news, bad news. Bad news is, the tests might not show it’s Lyme. They’re still somewhat unreliable. But the good news is, if this *is* Lyme, which is my primary suspect, now we have a plan of attack. I’m going to go ahead and order some meds to start via his IV, order more tests, and I want to monitor him for at least a day or so before we talk about letting him go home, in case it isn’t Lyme. By then we should have all his preliminary blood work back.”

Jeff looked like he’d rather do anything but spend more time there, but Brandon took the decision out of his hands. “Whatever needs to happen,” Brandon said.

Emma cleared her throat. “So is he going to be okay?” she asked the doctor.

“Hopefully, depending on how he responds to the medication.”

“But he’s not...*dying*, right?”

Now the doctor smiled. “Probably not today, and likely not any time soon.”

She finally relaxed, slumping back in her chair, a hand covering her mouth as she obviously struggled not to burst into relieved tears. Stuart leaned in to hug her.

The woman with the doctor was his PA. When he finished making notes in the laptop, he handed it to her and she headed out with it.

“I’m not going to lie and tell you there’s a magic bullet for treating this,” the doctor said. “Every patient is different. Some respond well and immediately to medication. Some don’t.”

“And if he doesn’t?” Stuart asked before Brandon could.

“Well, worst-case, we could be looking at chronic pain and some other symptoms long-term, but I don’t want to get into that right now. Way too soon for that discussion. And you said you’re an auto mechanic, correct?”

Jeff nodded.

The doctor shrugged. “Sometimes, it’s difficult for us to tell what’s a ‘normal’ ache and pain versus one linked to Lyme. There are other symptoms, too. We’ll make sure you get a checklist so you can watch out for

them. But this isn't cancer or a stroke or an aneurysm or anything like that. We can hopefully knock it back with medication. Right now, that puts us in wait and see mode."

Once the doctor left, Brandon forced a smile. "Well, guess that's one way to scare the crap out of us, buddy."

"Sorry, Master."

Brandon nearly burst out laughing at how Jeff and Stuart both froze in horror and stared at Emma.

"Guys, it's okay," Brandon said. "Don't panic."

"This is another of those things like Kyle's parents, huh?" she asked, the ghost of a smile finally curving her lips.

"Yeah," Brandon admitted.

She held up her hands, but her smile widened. "It's okay, Dad. Don't ask, don't tell."

* * * *

Now reassured that Jeff wasn't in any immediate danger, and after waiting until Jeff had called his sister and his parents to tell them what was going on, Brandon was finally able to convince Emma it was safe to go home. She had to be up early the next morning for swim practice and the last couple of days of her summer classes.

Trying to convince Stuart to come home would prove more difficult. He didn't want to leave Jeff alone, even though Jeff assured him he'd be fine.

Brandon didn't have the heart to order him to leave, either.

Not when he also wanted to stay with Jeff. He sent Emma on ahead to the car with the keys to await them.

Once it was safe, Jeff rolled his eyes. "Hey, I'm not an invalid, okay? I can get up and move around by myself, or call for help from a nurse. I'm hoping whatever they're going to pump into me knocks me out for the night. Seriously, go home with Master. Please?"

Stuart looked heartbroken. Brandon knew if Stuart started crying, he might, too. Stuart leaned in and kissed Jeff. "It's going to be lonely without you in bed with us."

"You'll survive, buddy. Give Master extra snuggles for me."

Brandon stepped in to kiss him. "You sure?"

“I’m sure. Look, you both have to work tomorrow. Don’t call off because of me. I’m sure Emma will be over here as soon as she’s out of school. I doubt they’ll let me go home that soon anyway. If they do, she can drive me. If not, come visit me after work.”

“Do you want us to call Leah or June and have them call people to come stay with you?”

“No. *Please*, seriously. You heard the doctor—I’m *not* dying. I don’t want that much attention on me. I feel like shit and don’t want anyone but you guys and the girls around me right now. Just bring me my tablet and some clean clothes tomorrow.”

Finally, after one last round of hugs and kisses, they made their way down to Brandon’s car, Brandon keeping an arm draped around Stuart’s shoulders the whole way, the shorter man tightly snuggled against him.

“I wish we could do more to help him,” Stuart said as they walked toward Brandon’s car.

“I know. Me, too.” He hated feeling helpless. He despised it, whether it was over something Emma was going through, or something one of his boys was going through.

Although this was the worst they’d had to go through, the scare with the tree falling on Jeff’s old house notwithstanding.

Emma quietly rode in the back seat, not talking on the way home as Brandon drove.

“He’s going to be okay, honey,” he said to her.

“I hate leaving him there alone.”

“He’s an adult. If he’d wanted one of us to stay with him, he knows all he had to do was say so. Hey, you did good. Thank god you were out there with him and we got him to the hospital fast.”

“Yeah, I guess.” She stared out the window.

“Did you tell Grace?”

“I’ve been texting with her. She wants to come visit him tomorrow, if he’s still in there.”

“See? That’s perfect. You guys can drive there after school.”

Later, he knocked on her door when she’d retreated to her room after dinner. They’d called Jeff and checked in with him, and he’d eaten a little for dinner and was going to go to sleep early, the strong medicines they were pumping into him via IV making him feel woozy.

“You all right, sweetheart?”

“Yeah.”

“He’s going to be okay.”

“I know.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

She let out a snort of aggravation he knew too well. “I feel guilty.”

“Why?”

“For getting airlifted off the boat that time. I’m mad that I feel guilty I worried Mom. And then you, when you found out the way you did.”

He studied her for a moment. “Oookaaay. That’s great personal growth, honey, but not sure I’m tracking.”

Another snort. “I’m feeling that I no longer hold the moral high ground. That even though I was pissed off, I should have just stuck to my original plan to take the meds, hide them from Goober, and knuckle under.”

He leaned against her doorway, arms crossed. “That’s sort of water under the bridge, by the better part of a year. It’s just now hitting your conscience?”

It took her a moment to respond, and when she spoke, her voice sounded quiet, subdued. “I was *really* scared when I made him smile and saw his face drooping.”

She set her phone aside, focused on him. “I know I’ve said I love him and Stuart, and I meant it. Like I love Grace’s mom and dad. But that was the first time I realized I *love-love* them, like I love you. Never loved Pat like this, that’s for sure. I was...scared. *Really* scared that maybe he was going to die. I was scared that one of my *dads* was going to die right there in front of me.”

He walked over and sat next to her. “That’s good though, right? I mean, not the possibly dying part. The how much you love them part.”

She met his gaze. “How sad is it that, right now, I think I love Jeff and Stuart more than I love Mom? Does that make me a horrible person?”

He sighed, finally connecting the dots. Pulling her in for a hug, he rested his chin on top of her head. “No, sweetheart. That doesn’t make you horrible. It makes you human.”

Chapter Nineteen

Jeff spent two nights in the hospital, being pumped full of IV drugs and having more blood drawn and tests run.

It was his first hospital stay, and as he'd heard, it was anything but restful. He felt more exhausted when they'd let him go than when he'd been rushed there via ambulance on Sunday.

When he was discharged early Tuesday afternoon, Emma and Grace were there visiting him, and Emma went over everything with the nurses, including the medication schedule, before bundling him up in her car.

He didn't even try to adult or argue with her. She and Grace seemed to be doing a pretty good job on his behalf, and he was too tired and hurt too much to engage adulting mode. All he wanted to do was go home and sleep in his own bed and not be awakened every few minutes to have his vitals taken, blood drawn, or new medications added to his IV pump.

He was being discharged with several prescriptions to take, and a recommendation for a strong probiotic to help keep his gut from getting overrun due to the medicines, and with a follow-up appointment for next week. He'd already called work and taken the rest of the week off, with notification that he'd likely need more time after that. Right now, he knew he couldn't even drive as horrible as he felt, much less turn wrenches for eight to ten hours. The worst of the pain had eased a little, and his face was almost completely back to normal, so that was progress.

Still, he felt like shit. Some of the medication he was on upset his stomach. Deep joint pain, fatigue, and mental fuzziness left him feeling like a shell of himself.

On their way home, Emma stopped by the drugstore to get his prescriptions filled and to get the over-the-counter supplements, including making him buy a pill caddy to organize everything.

He knew giving in was far easier than trying to convince her otherwise. She was her father's daughter.

And he loved her for it.

At home, Emma and Grace practically smothered him with attention before he retreated to the master bedroom on the totally real pretense of napping, until Stuart got home and was able to gently intercede for him and

help get dinner ready and distract Emma and Grace.

Except Jeff didn't feel like eating, even though they'd made his favorite meatloaf for him. Then Brandon arrived, fortunately. He helped further divert Emma and Grace until Emma had to take her home after dinner, giving Jeff some breathing room.

"I love them," he told Brandon, "but *damn*. Em makes you look lazy by comparison."

Brandon arched an eyebrow at him. "How so?"

"I mean...intense. Honestly? The first few boys she brings home? We're going to be keeping her from kicking *their* asses, not the other way around."

Brandon climbed into bed with him, gently cuddling him close. "Is there anything I can do for you?"

Jeff closed his eyes as he rested his head against Brandon's chest. "Go back in time and forbid me from going to help Iris and Sylvie, please?"

Brandon kissed the top of his head. "Yeah, sorry. I thought I was being a good guy by letting you go."

"Me, too." He hated feeling like this. *Haaated* it. Weak and wimpy, and like his life was out of control in the bad ways. "Sorry I didn't go through our greeting when you got home, Master." They had two different ones, a vanilla one they could do if Emma and Grace were around, and a formal one if the men were alone.

"Hey, no. You don't feel good. I specifically told you guys that's a rule, that if you're sick, it's a default exemption." Brandon cupped Jeff's cheek. "I know you love what we do, but I love you guys. That means your health and well-being come first."

* * * *

Brandon knew Jeff felt horrible, but having a definitive diagnosis and plan of treatment didn't make Brandon feel any less helpless.

His boy felt bad.

And he couldn't *fix* it for him.

Even worse, Stuart had quickly whispered a briefing to Brandon upon his arrival, outside of earshot of the girls or Jeff, to update him about Jeff's mindset.

"You're staying home from work for the rest of the week. Right?"

It wasn't a question, even though he'd phrased it as such. While he'd told Jeff and Stuart that he wouldn't interfere with their work, if Jeff didn't take care of himself, Brandon reserved the right to step in and put his foot down.

"Probably next week, too, depending on how I'm doing."

Brandon relaxed a little. "Good boy."

Jeff's body relaxed against his. "I'm sorry, Master."

"Stop apologizing. You have nothing to feel sorry for."

Stuart appeared in the bedroom doorway. "Is he still apologizing?"

"Yep."

Stuart joined them in bed, stretching out behind Jeff, trying to be careful not to jostle him. "I warned you I'd rat you out to Master if you didn't knock that shit off."

"You need to spend the next several days resting and taking it easy," Brandon said. "You scared the hell out of us. Let the medicine work, and give your body a chance to heal. That is an order."

"I guess I'm outnumbered, huh?"

"Uh, *yeah*," Brandon told him. "And that's before you figure in Em and Grace. Because even though school's back in session in a few weeks, you can bet they'll be happy to stick around here and keep an eye on you for me if I ask them to."

He stroked the back of Jeff's head, his blond hair, trying to be gentle, not wanting to hurt him. "We love you. Your only job right now is to try to get better."

"What if I don't get better?" he quietly asked. "They said there's a chance I might not. That some people don't improve."

"*Stop* it. Stressing out won't help. The doctors told you it takes weeks, sometimes, to see a drastic improvement. Right?"

"I can't afford to be out of work for weeks."

"You can if I tell you to. Right now, all I want you to do is heal."

"I can't take weeks off from work."

Brandon shifted position so he could cradle Jeff's face in his hands. "Who's my good boy?" he quietly asked.

Jeff's sweet hazel eyes stared up at him. "Me, Master," he softly said.

"We *love* you. All that matters is you getting better. My orders to you, right now, are to stop worrying about finances. We'll figure that part out. If one of us got diagnosed with cancer, would you be worried about us working,

or worried about our health first?”

Jeff closed his eyes, pulling Stuart’s arm around him, nuzzling his lips against Brandon’s palm. “Health, Master,” he quietly said.

“Listen, you stubborn Alpha sub,” Stuart gently teased. “I’m not a Top, but I might go toppy on you if you don’t listen to him.”

“Uncle,” Jeff said. Then a sad sigh escaped him. “I don’t even have the energy to argue with you.”

“Can we get you something to eat?” Stuart asked. “Soup? Anything?”

“I drank some Gatorade earlier. I just don’t have much appetite. The medicine is upsetting my stomach.”

“All the more reason you need to eat something,” Brandon said. “Just a few bites. Please?”

“Maybe some mashed potatoes. No gravy.”

Stuart practically levitated off the bed to go get it for him. Meanwhile, Brandon carefully shifted again, cradling Jeff against him in the crook of his arm so he could feather his lips over his forehead. “I’m sorry the meds make you feel crappy.”

“Let’s just hope they work. The next step is them sticking another line in me, a medicine port, I think they called it, and feeding me more IV drugs. I definitely won’t be able to work if they have to do that.”

“*Stop*. We’ll be okay. I was paying the bills here before you two moved in. With me and Stuart working, we’ll be okay. Worst-case, you have to stop working, and we file for disability for you. It’s not like we’ll lose the house or anything.”

“That’s not comforting, Brandon.”

“It’s realistic. This is *not* the end of the world. This could have been so much worse than it was.”

“Again, not comforting.”

He pressed a long, gentle kiss to the center of his forehead. “I don’t expect you to see the upside to any of this right now. But do you trust me?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then trust me when I tell you that this isn’t a problem for us. Our first concern is your health.”

* * * *

The next morning, Jeff lay in bed long after Brandon and Stuart had left for work. They'd put him in the middle so they wouldn't have to climb over him and risk hurting him when their alarms went off.

Every part of Jeff's body ached. He really didn't want to get up, even to take his meds. He knew it'd hurt.

The bad kind of pain that left him physically wrecked, not the good kind of pain that left him charged up and frisky.

Finally, he dragged himself out to the kitchen. Stuart had left him a note propped next to the pill caddy Emma had painstakingly set up for him yesterday afternoon.

TAKE THEM. Emma and Grace will be here later this morning after her swim training. Let them take care of you. Love you :)

Jeff poured himself a glass of water, opened the pill caddy compartment to get the meds out, and started swallowing pills and capsules one at a time. He'd planned on cooking dinner for everyone tonight, but the way he felt right now, he wasn't sure if he'd have the strength to do more than make it out to the couch to take a nap by the time he finished taking his meds.

I hate my body.

He was thirty-eight and felt like a goddamned old man. Going back to work would be a *real* fucking bitch if the medication didn't kick in and start making a massive difference in the next couple of days.

If the doctors would even clear him to go back to work.

Or if Brandon and Stuart would let him go back to work.

Except, right now, he felt worthless, like he was a mooch by not contributing to their household expenses. He didn't care that Brandon and Stuart had told him not to worry about that.

He worried about it.

Jeff ended up back in bed after he forced himself to eat a small bowl of cereal. As he dozed, he was aware of Emma and Grace coming home at some point before noon. Emma sent him a text to see if he needed anything, but he assured her all he wanted to do was sleep, and that he'd try to eat a little soup for dinner later.

He turned up the TV, which he'd left on all morning, so he wouldn't be able to hear them.

About an hour later, he realized he was overdue to take his afternoon meds. Forcing himself up and out of bed, he paused at the sliders on his way

to the bathroom. They looked out onto the lanai and there had been a few nights where the three of them had snuck out there to skinny dip or fool around in the pool after Emma had gone to bed. Normally, they left the blinds closed if they weren't home, even though they had window tint to help repel afternoon sunlight and heat. Today, he'd cracked them open earlier to give him enough light to see by without having to leave a lamp on.

At first, he wasn't processing what he was seeing beside the pool. Emma and Grace were out there—not unusual. Grace's parents didn't have a pool.

The girls were stretched out on the lanai deck at the edge of the pool, in a shady spot, side by side on beach towels.

Kissing.

And not innocent little affectionate, friendly kind of pecks, either.

They were *snogging*.

And that was Grace's hand up the bottom of Emma's—

Whoa.

Not even bothering to pull the vertical blinds out of the way first, he unlocked and yanked the sliders open. “A-hem.”

Parent mode: fully engaged.

Emma startled and rolled back, losing her balance and ending up in the pool with a splash.

Jeff managed to get the blinds out of his way and step outside without tripping over them and face-planting onto the concrete lanai deck.

“Both of you, inside. Kitchen. *Now.*”

Chapter Twenty

After making it to the bathroom, Jeff headed to the kitchen where the girls stood waiting on him. Then he'd taken his meds, wincing as he swallowed a pill or capsule at a time. All while Emma and Grace silently watched, wrapped in towels and both red-faced and looking guilty. Medicine now taken, Jeff leaned against the kitchen counter, feeling weak and shaky.

At some point, sooner rather than later, he'd have to call Brandon and tell him about this.

Neither girl had spoken yet—a first, if there ever was one.

He finally broke the silence. “Anything you'd like to tell me, Em?”

Her face reddened even more. “Not really,” she muttered.

“If I'd caught you out there doing the same thing with a boy, we'd be having this *exact* same conversation, so you might as well talk. I'm not the enemy here.”

He wasn't so out of it that he didn't know what he'd seen.

Two kids making out, hot and heavy, Grace well on her way to sliding into home, so to speak, at the rate they'd been going.

“Are you going to tell my parents?” Grace asked.

“That's Brandon's call, but I kind of think we have to, don't you?” He had a thought. “Unless you think your parents are going to give you a hassle for being gay?”

“I'm *not* gay,” Grace said.

He arched an eyebrow at her. “I'm *not* stupid.”

“I'm bi, but I identify as queer.” Grace tipped her head toward Em. “She's gay.”

Emma remained unusually quiet.

Save me from genius-level teens. “That still leaves the unanswered question—of all people, why didn't you feel you could tell *us*? I get not telling Tracey and Pat. But the three of us are *gay*. *Openly* gay. Not just gay, but we're openly polyamorous. You should have known we wouldn't have a problem with you two dating. Considering you're both extremely smart kids, you can't claim ignorance as an excuse. *Why* didn't you tell us before now? Were you that worried about your mom?”

He left out listing the men's other dynamic, because the girls didn't need

to know anything about that beyond what they already did.

He also felt more than a little hurt, personally, that they hadn't felt they could confide in them.

The girls exchanged a guilty look...and everything suddenly fell into place.

"*Oh.*" He crossed his arms over his chest and tried not to let anger seep in. "This isn't because of your mom, or because of us. This is because you *knew* we wouldn't let you guys sleep in the same bedroom like you have been, much less spend all that unsupervised alone time together."

Grace finally nodded while Em studied her own feet.

But a few odd, stray things that he'd never thought much about before finally fell into completely new contexts. Comments Em or Grace had made, or unusual reactions to things the men had said in the past that now made total sense. Things like comments about dating boys.

"Exactly how long have you two been an item?"

Another guilty look exchanged. "Over a year," Emma finally mumbled, not looking at him.

Jeff fully recognized that there was a societal double-standard. Two unrelated boys spending as much intimate time together as they had would instantly be labeled gay, regardless of whether or not they were.

Two girls?

Besties, natch. Nary a second thought given, much less suspicions about their sexuality.

Jeff himself was proof of that. The fact that it honestly had not crossed his mind to think the girls were romantically involved with each other made him feel like an utter idiot.

Jeff finally had to sit down. The room was starting to spin a little in an uncomfortable way he could no longer ignore. He pulled out one of the barstools at the breakfast counter and perched on it, heavily leaning against the counter for support.

"Okay. So here's what we're going to do. You two are going to go shower and get dressed. Separately, thank you very much. Grace, you can use the bathroom at the far end of the hall. Once you're done, you can sit in the living room and watch TV or something. Maybe that horse has long left the barn, but until your father gives us a ruling to the contrary, I'm erring on the side of caution. While you do that, I'm going to call him—"

“Why?” Now Emma was looking at him. “Why do we have to tell him anything? If we promise not to do it again—”

He laughed. “Okay, honey? I might *seem* old to you, and I am more than old enough to be your father, but I was a teenaged boy. I was fooling around with girls back then, so let’s end that conversation *right* there. I *have* to hand this off to your father. If you were a little older, I’d sit you down for a talk and then look the other way. But you’re only sixteen. He might decide this is okay, but I *cannot* make that decision for him, no matter how much I love you. Stu and I promised we’d never be like Pat. That means we defer to your father. *His* word is law in this house.”

She finally nodded. “Okay.”

“Do you think we’re in trouble?” Grace asked him.

“Trouble? That I can’t answer. I think he’s going to be as hurt as I am that you didn’t tell us the truth sooner, and that you’ve been lying to us and sneaking around behind our backs. Breaking our trust like that is pretty hurtful.”

That silenced them for a moment.

Emma spoke first. “Hurt?”

“Uh, *yeah*. Hurt. My feelings are *hurt*. I thought you understood you could come to us about anything. Instead, you played an end game to sneak around behind our backs. I’d be genuinely shocked if Brandon and Stuart don’t feel at least a little hurt, too, when they find out.”

Her gaze dropped again. “We weren’t trying to hurt your feelings.” Grace draped her arm around Emma, and another piece of the puzzle suddenly fitted itself into place.

In their relationship, Grace was in charge.

“Look, I *get* it. You’re kids. Smart kids, but you’re still *kids*. Which is the whole *point* to having rules and boundaries. You might think you’re grown up, but so did we when we were your age.”

“I don’t understand the big deal,” Em muttered. “Not like we can get pregnant with each other.”

“That’s *not* the point, and you damn well know it, or you wouldn’t have *lied* to us all this time.” He hoped he was even making sense, because he was feeling crappier by the minute. “The point is you *lied* to us to skirt around rules you don’t even know if your father will put into place or not. In this case, an omission is absolutely a lie. You broke our trust in you both. There’s

no gay ‘get out of trouble free’ card for this situation just because one of you isn’t in possession of a cisgendered heterosexual penis.”

He realized what he’d said as soon as he saw Grace desperately trying not to laugh.

“It’s...fine. It’s okay to laugh. I know I’m loopy on meds right now.”

“What if it’s a gay fake penis?” Grace snarked.

He rolled his eyes, able to chuckle despite how crappy he felt and the situation in general. He sat up and waved them in for hugs. “Go get showered and changed while I call your father.”

“Are you going to tell my parents?” Grace asked again after they’d both hugged him and stepped away.

“That’s up to Brandon, but if it’s up to me, yes. Unless or until he specifically tells me I can make those kinds of decisions, I default everything to him.”

Once he’d heard them retreat to their own bathrooms, he headed to the master bedroom and closed the door to make the call.

Brandon answered on the second ring. “Hey, buddy. How you feeling?”

“We need to talk, Brandon. It’s important.”

“Is everything okay?”

“It’s about Emma and Grace. Before you freak out, they’re safe, it’s not anything like that. But we need to talk. *Now.*”

“Okay. Hold on, let me get back to my office.” While he traveled to different stores, his main office was located at one there in Sarasota, where Jeff knew he was today.

Brandon pulled the phone away from his ear and Jeff heard him excuse himself. It sounded like he was walking—jogging, actually—and a moment later Jeff heard a door close and other ambient sounds disappear on Brandon’s end.

“What’s going on?” Brandon asked, in full-on Dom tone now.

Jeff gave Brandon the quick run-down and...waited.

“Shit,” he muttered. “Really?”

“Yes, Master. I’m sorry to bother you at work about this, but—”

“No, you made the right decision.” He let out a heavy-sounding sigh. “I thought I could trust them to always be honest with us. At least about big stuff.”

“Any orders?”

"I'll be home in about thirty minutes. Have you taken your meds today like you're supposed to?"

Brandon had changed gears so quickly Jeff had to think for a moment. "Uh, yes, Master. What?"

"You sound like hell."

"I feel like hell. I need to drag my pillow out there and curl up on the couch to chaperone them, I suppose."

"No, it's okay if you're feeling bad. Go back to bed."

"I'd actually prefer to chaperone them until you get home."

"They were *really*..." Brandon seemed at an uncharacteristic loss for words. "There was *no* mistaking what they were doing, huh?"

"I'm not *that* delirious, Bran. They thought I was asleep and were out by the pool. Grace was definitely rounding third base and heading home."

"*Okay*, okay. I believe you. I don't need sock puppets."

Finally, something that shook his unflappable Dom's composure.

Although Jeff couldn't blame him. He wished there was eye bleach he could use to wipe the image from his mind. The one constant most children and parents universally shared was a desire to never see the other in a sexual situation.

"And can I please sit through your conversation with them?" Jeff asked.

"Sure, but why?"

"Because I told them they hurt my feelings. And they did. I know we agreed to always defer to you, but..." He sighed. "They're my kids, too. I love them. I want to be a parent to them. Well, to Em. Grace is like a bonus kid we don't have to pay for."

Another long moment passed before Brandon spoke. When he did, his voice sounded choked with emotion. "Do you know how much I fucking love you right now, boy?"

"What'd I say?"

"Just...you're perfect. Yes, of course you can be part of the conversation. It affects you, too."

"What about Stu?"

Another sad sigh from Brandon. "Yeah. I don't know if he'll be able to come home, but I'll call him while I'm heading that way to let him know, at least."

When Jeff got off the phone, he grabbed his pillow, then a second one

from the bed, and headed out to the couch, part of a large and comfy sectional unit. The girls would still have another section of the couch and two comfy chairs to occupy, even with him stretched out.

He grabbed the TV remote and curled up on the couch, closing his eyes for a moment. He startled awake to the feel of Brandon's lips kissing his forehead, his Dom kneeling in front of him, a worried look on his face.

He'd never even heard him come in.

"Holy shit," Jeff muttered, looking around. "I didn't realize I fell asleep."

Grace and Em sat next to each other on the smaller sofa section.

They were dressed, their hair damp, and they looked guilty.

"Are you okay?" Brandon asked him.

"Yes, Mas—I mean, yeah, I'm fine. Sir." He mentally swore and didn't miss the slight quirk at the edges of Brandon's lips.

Instead of sitting at the far end of the couch Jeff occupied, or in one of the chairs, Brandon sat right there on the floor next to Jeff and reached up to lace fingers with him with his right hand.

For a long, quiet, uncomfortable moment, Brandon stared at the girls, who finally started staring at their hands.

Jeff had to hand it to him, Brandon had mastered the art of discomfoting quiet as an effective tool.

But could the girls ever repair what they'd efficiently razed to the ground?

Chapter Twenty-One

Brandon wasn't sure if he wanted to kill the girls—metaphorically, of course—or give them a pass and let their guilt eat at them.

Jeff had made an excellent point on the phone. They had slaughtered Brandon's trust in them with this lie.

Series of lies.

Not just slaughtered his trust in them, but shaken to the very bedrock foundation his trust in himself as a father.

What *else* didn't he know? He'd thought he was pretty good at keeping tabs on his daughter. Had she been lying to him about other things?

Okay, this can't be allowed to go unchallenged, at the very least.

He leaned against the couch and motioned to them with his left hand. "Start talking."

They exchanged a guilty glance.

"We're sorry, Dad," Em quietly said.

"Not good enough."

"Really sorry," Grace softly added.

He slowly shook his head. "How are we *ever* supposed to trust you after this? That's the sad thing, here. I'm not upset at you two for being gay and dating. I'm not even upset at you two getting caught fooling around, because you're teenagers. Duh. I'm upset that until less than an hour ago, I would have sworn to anyone that I could trust the two of you not to lie to us, and here I find out you've been telling us a *lot* of lies. For how long now?"

Em's face reddened. "Over a year, sir," she softly said.

Lowercase S, of course.

"Over...a...*year*." He let the silence hang between them for a long, uncomfortable moment. "A *year*. What else have you lied about?"

Em shook her head. "Just...about us."

"Are you drinking?"

Both girls shook their heads.

"Drugs?"

"No," they said.

"Smoking?"

"No, Dad." Emma brushed tears from her eyes. "We...we weren't telling

anyone about us and it was easier to not update you.”

“Because then you could fool around behind our backs.”

Finally, they both nodded.

“Have there been times you told me you were somewhere and you weren’t?”

“No,” Em quietly said, her breath hitching. “We knew if we came here and we were alone that we’d have privacy. I never lied about where we were.”

“Just about what you were doing.”

She gave him a little nod.

He let another long, guilty silence enfold them. No, he couldn’t let them skate on this. They were smart. Damned smart. If he didn’t slam home empathy to them now, the lesson that trust shattered couldn’t be taped back together in an instant, he was failing in his duties as a father.

“School starts up again in a couple of weeks. No more overnights until then. Future overnights, you sleep in separate rooms, until you’re both seventeen. We catch you sneaking around when you think we’re asleep, the overnights will totally end while you live under my roof. When you’re here together, the bedroom door stays open if you’re both in there. I’m not stupid enough to try to forbid you two from messing around before you’re both seventeen, but expect that, until that time, you’re going to get an annoying amount of oversight that you never dreamed of before. When we know you’re alone together, I will be calling and texting and if I don’t get immediate replies from you, those alone times will also end until you’re seventeen. Ditto if Stu and Jeff call or text. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, sir,” Em said.

“I’m not doing this to be an asshole. I’m doing this because breaking trust has consequences. Here’s what *kills* me, honey. Had you two come to *me*, at least, when you first got together, were *honest* with me, and told me what was going on? I would have sat you two down for a real-world talk about the facts of life for gay folks, and I would have been willing to... overlook some things. Give you some privacy. Because I was a kid. And it’s not like you two can get each other pregnant.”

“That’s what *I* said,” Em mumbled.

“Oh, you did *not* just say that to me,” Brandon snapped. “Because that is *not* what this is about, and I know *damn* well you’re smarter than that,

Emma.”

He glared at her until she finally looked down again. “Sorry, sir.”

“*Thank* you.” He took a long, deep breath to rein in his anger. “And just because you can’t get pregnant with each other doesn’t mean you’re immune to STIs. Here’s what also kills me. Em, you complain you can’t trust your mom. Or Pat. Or Corey. Yet...” He held out his left hand, indicating the obvious. “Want to tell me how this is any different?”

Tears rolled down her cheeks now, and Grace’s, but he fought the urge to swoop in and comfort them.

They didn’t accidentally finish off dessert during snack time and tried to hide it.

They’d *lied*, repeatedly, for over a year.

Knowingly, and with the purpose to skirt around what they’d known damn well would have been rules and boundaries put into place to address it.

“Also, for the next four weeks, Emma, once one of us is home, you hand off your phone until morning on weekdays, and we’ll hold it the entire time you’re home on weekends. And we *will* be monitoring your phone. Whether it’s me, Jeff, or Stu. You just lost electronic privacy for the next four weeks. No texting through the computer either, or e-mailing each other, and no Facebook. Your laptop stays on the kitchen counter, or on the dining room table. It does not go in your room. If you need to talk about a school assignment, you will come get me and I will give you my phone to call her while you are right there with me. Yes, that’s mean of me, but you need to understand how seriously I take this.”

“Yes, sir.”

“No messaging apps, either, trying to backdoor contact, or I’ll block Grace’s number from our cell account, forbid you from talking to her or seeing her outside of school for four *weeks*, plus you’ll end up with a cheap flip phone that can’t text. Understand me?”

“*Whoa*,” Jeff murmured next to him. Brandon knew the girls couldn’t hear Jeff, and it was more a comment of shock than it was trying to get Brandon to slow up.

Brandon gently squeezed his hand but didn’t take his focus from the girls. Four weeks might as well be forever to them at their age, and considering he had never issued punishments like this to Emma before, he strongly suspected she wasn’t going to try to slip around him this time out of

fear of him following through and doing exactly what he said.

“Remember how you ripped me a new one that night when you met Stuart and you thought I was cheating on Jeff because you didn’t stop to talk to me first?”

Emma nodded.

From the surprised glance Grace gave to Em, he realized maybe she hadn’t heard that story.

“At any point in this past year-plus time did you stop to think that lying to us was a bad idea?”

Em nodded.

“But it didn’t stop you.”

She shook her head.

“Are we clear on these rules? Because I do not want to find out in a few weeks or months you’re trying to find a loophole.”

“We’re clear, sir.”

“Do you agree you should be punished for breaking our trust like this?”

More tears. “Yes, sir.”

He focused on Grace. “You try to help her get around these new rules, and you’ll make things worse for both of you. Understand?”

“Yes, Pop. I’m sorry.”

“So am I. I love you like a daughter. But you’re not my daughter, and I can’t guarantee what your parents are going to give you in terms of punishment. Due to you both knowingly lying to us, I’m not going to go to bat for you for leniency, either. I doubt your parents are going to have a problem with you being gay and dating Emma. I strongly suspect they’re going to be just as angry about the lying as I am. I do promise that, if I’m wrong, and they hassle you about being gay, we will—”

“Queer, not—”

“*Whatever!*” he said. “Again, you’re smart enough to not parse things right now. I don’t care what label you choose for yourself or where you place yourself on the rainbow. I seriously do not. That’s a moot point because you’re born the way you are. As a father, I am *pissed off* that the two of you broke our trust. *That* is the focus, here. You’re not being punished for being gay. You’re being punished for deliberately lying to us to avoid rules.”

“Sorry, Pop.”

He stared at them for a long, sad moment. “I’m not just hurt and angry,

I'm disappointed in both of you. I love both of you. That's why I'm coming down on you so hard about this, so you understand how serious it is."

He looked at Jeff. "Anything to add?"

"No, I had my say earlier."

Brandon returned his focus to the girls and tipped his head toward the kitchen. "Go get dinner started, please. I'll drive you both over to Grace's later so we can talk to her parents."

The girls got up and headed for the kitchen, then reversed course and each leaned in to hug Brandon, then Jeff.

"Sorry, Dad." Emma sniffled. "Love you."

"Love you, too."

Grace leaned in next. "Love you, Pop."

"Love you, too, kiddo."

Once they were in the kitchen, Brandon focused on Jeff, who stared at him from where he still lay on the couch. Keeping his voice low, Brandon leaned in. "Do you think you'll feel like going with us tonight?"

"I'd like to, but probably not. I hurt too much right now, and my stomach's all screwed up. Maybe take Stu with you."

Brandon hated *this*, too, that he couldn't wave a hand and *fix* Jeff's health troubles. He touched his forehead to Jeff's, nuzzling noses with him. "Okay. Love you, boy."

"Love you, too, Master."

* * * *

By the time Stuart got home, he'd received the gist of the situation from Jeff via text. Dinner was ready when he arrived, so he went straight to eating and would take his shower after.

"When did you want to leave?" he asked Brandon.

"Pretty soon. I have a feeling we might be talking for a while, and I don't want to wait until late to do it."

The girls exchanged a guilty look but didn't speak.

"And you owe Stuart an apology, too," Brandon told them. "You lied to me, to Jeff, and to Stuart."

"Sorry, Stuart," they echoed.

He struggled not to lose it in front of them. "Thank you."

Brandon reached over and patted his arm. "If you want to say something to them about this, go ahead. Jeff got to already."

He met Brandon's blue gaze. "That's freaking spooky when you read my mind like that."

A handsome smile quirked his lips. "It's a blessing and a curse. Seriously, you're part of this family."

Stuart laid down his fork and thought about it for a moment. "You know my family has pretty much disowned me, so you guys *are* my family. I know I'm more like a big brother than a dad, in your eyes, but I do love you like you're my daughters. Em, it really hurts that after all we've been through, backing you up with your mom more than once, that you lied to me. To all of us."

He tried to blink back the tears but still felt them prickling his eyes. "I came from a family where I was *afraid* to come out. *Literally* afraid for my safety, especially from my oldest brother. So afraid that I decided to leave the *state* so I could live my life the way I wanted. This is anything but that kind of family. This family is the polar opposite of my birth family. And it's freaking disrespectful, especially to your dad, to keep a secret like that when he's worked so hard on your behalf and you *know* he won't disown you for it, because he's gay, too. You don't understand how lucky you are to have a parent who truly *gets* it."

He glanced at Brandon, who nodded that he could keep going.

"I know you moving in with your dad full-time happened really fast after we met him. Even from the beginning, he flat-out told me and Jeff that you were his priority and always would be, and if we couldn't accept that, we didn't need to go any farther. He even told us there were times he met guys before us, but they weren't thrilled about him having a kid, so he passed. He put *you* first. Always. There's nothing but love in his heart for you as a parent. Unconditional love."

Now he really was crying. "I can't begin to tell you what that feels like, because I don't have it from my parents. I don't know what it's like. But I have it from Brandon and Jeff. So instead of lying and trying to get around the rules, you should consider yourself lucky. Excuse me."

Overwhelmed, he had to retreat to the master bath. There, he stood over the sink, quietly crying.

It startled him when he felt a hand touch his shoulder. Brandon and Jeff

both stood there, then enveloped him, their arms around him as he cried.

“Shh, it’s okay,” Brandon whispered. “We’ve got you, boy. You’re all ours, and we love you.”

“I’m sorry, Sir. I didn’t realize how hard that would trigger me.”

“It’s okay, buddy,” Jeff assured him. “We know you’ve been holding that back.”

“Let it out,” Brandon gently said. “Don’t hold on to that. That’s why we’re here.”

Once he’d finally gotten himself under control, he sent them back out to finish dinner while he blew his nose and washed his face.

Staring at himself in the mirror, Stuart realized he didn’t even look like himself anymore. The tight, deep lines in his forehead and around the outside of his eyes had eased. He caught himself frequently smiling in a way he never remembered doing while growing up.

He had stopped feeling jumpy when someone called his name, worried that he was going to be yelled at or teased.

He had learned that, at home, he never had to be tense, on guard, careful about what he said.

He could speak his mind without worrying about being ridiculed, or worse.

He could be *him*.

No, Emma and Grace had *no* idea what it was like to grow up in a house where you had to stay deeply closeted not because it might prove inconvenient to your available time spent with your SO by admitting the truth, but because of legit fear for personal safety.

At the very least, fear of being kicked out and ostracized.

He headed back to the dining room and when he appeared, Emma, then Grace, stood and hugged him.

“I’m really sorry, Stu,” Emma said. “I never thought about it like that.”

“Me, either,” Grace said.

“After you get your shower,” Brandon said to Stuart, “and they get the kitchen cleaned up, you and I will take them to Grace’s and talk to her parents.”

“Not Jeff?”

“I don’t feel good enough, buddy.” He’d barely eaten anything, including the chicken soup they’d heated for him.

“Should you be alone?” Stuart asked.

“I’m going to take a shower and go to bed. I’ll be okay. These meds are doing a number on me, but I guess I don’t have an alternative if I want to beat this.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Stuart had finished his dinner and was watching Jeff, who did little more than drag his spoon through his bowl of soup rather than eating.

It was painful to watch, which made him feel guilty since he knew how much legit pain Jeff was in.

By the time Jeff finally excused himself, he'd finished maybe a third of the soup, and a few bites of dinner. Stuart followed him to the master bathroom and stepped into the shower with him, holding him under the spray.

Jeff stood three inches taller than his own five nine, but right now, the other man almost felt frail in his arms. Stuart wished he could do more, fix this for him, make him feel better.

He rested his face in Jeff's hair. "Sorry I can't make this better."

"It's okay. It is what it is. Nothing I can do about it except hang on and hope the meds help."

The two of them had a different bond than they each did with Brandon. They'd lived together for a couple of months as roommates not long after meeting Brandon. Stuart had moved into Jeff's house. They weren't sexual with each other before the first night the three of them had been together, but after that night, Brandon had let them have sex together, since his schedule with Emma meant he had limited time with them.

In some ways, Jeff was like a Dom to Stuart.

But more importantly, Jeff was his friend, and his lover. His partner for life.

His husband.

Stuart's heart ached to see him in so much pain.

"Are you sure you don't want me to stay behind with you?"

"Yeah. I got to speak my piece earlier. The girls know how I feel. Go with Brandon. I seriously doubt Bill and Faith will be jerks about the girls coming out, but just in case, he might need your help."

"Okay."

The girls were quiet in the back seat as Brandon drove them all, in his car, over to Grace's house. Stuart didn't know how much trouble the girls would be in once Bill and Faith learned the story, but he was prepared for any option.

It went...pretty much the way it had at their house. Bill and Faith admitted they would have been a little more lenient about the overnights and alone time, but they liked Brandon's style and imposed the same punishments on Grace.

And, just like in their house, the issue wasn't that the girls were dating.

The issue was that they'd lied about it.

"I'm really disappointed in you two," Bill said. "I've always felt a little superior to my brother, because his two boys run around and get in trouble all the time, and here we thought you were way better than that."

"Sorry," she mumbled.

"No, this isn't a sorry and get out of it. No trying to renegotiate your punishment on this one, either. What Brandon said—you try to skirt around the rules and find a loophole, you're going to wish you hadn't."

They sent Grace to her room and Emma to wait out in the car.

"Thanks for talking to us," Faith said. "I..." She covered her mouth, and Stuart realized she was laughing. "I'm an idiot. I never thought about them dating. Sheesh."

"Well, we don't have to worry about a boy getting her pregnant," Bill said, and the couple high-fived.

"She's bi," Brandon reminded them. "If they break up, you might have to worry."

He pointed to himself and his wife. "We met in *middle* school," he said. "Been together since we were dating in *ninth* grade." He smiled. "My parents have been married nearly forty years, and hers over thirty. Long-term relationships are in our blood. Might as well get used to seeing a lot of us, because we'll probably end up in-laws."

Brandon smiled. "At least we'll have good barbecue at the wedding."

Bill grinned. "Damn straight!"

* * * *

When they returned home, Brandon sent Emma to her room. Her phone had been confiscated and would sit in their room overnight.

But since Bill and Faith had confiscated Grace's, chances were there wouldn't be any trouble.

The girls could still ride together to and from school, but Brandon would

be using a tracking app on Emma's phone to verify where she was driving and keep tabs on the timeframe. With Jeff out of work, he'd take point on that for now.

"Are you really going to keep the restrictions up the whole time?" Jeff asked him.

"Yep. She needs to learn this now. I can't let her skate. I won't do her any favors if I do that."

"I'm glad they weren't upset about them dating," Stuart said. "That could have been really bad."

Brandon and Jeff held him. "I know, buddy. It's okay. Not everyone's an asshole."

* * * *

Jeff returned to work two weeks after he was released from the hospital. He had seen some improvement while on the medications, but...he wasn't "better."

The problem was, he knew he had to work and try a course of the oral meds. If he had the PICC line for IV meds—which was what the doctor wanted to do—he wasn't going to be able to work. Not as a mechanic. They'd warned him there was a chance of him getting it infected, especially with the hot summer, being sweaty, or pulling it loose, catching it on something while working on a car, or getting it messed up from oil, solvents, or other chemicals he frequently came into contact with in his job.

Maybe if he worked doing something else, or in an office somewhere, sure. But not with that job.

So he slogged along and did his best to try to get through it.

Four weeks after his collapse, Jeff stood in the garage that Sunday afternoon and stared at the Edsel. There were still so many things he wanted to do to it—*should* be doing to it—and yet what had been a fun, relaxing hobby before now felt like a chore. He hadn't touched it since the day he and Emma had been working on it.

He'd opened the large door and spotted Emma pulling into the driveway, Grace in the passenger seat. Her parents were going to be at a lunch, followed by an evening social event, for Bill's work. Her parents had gotten the okay from Brandon to send her there, since the girls had completely adhered to

their restrictions so far, and would pick her up on their way home later. The girls walked in through the open garage door.

“Hey,” Emma said. “Whatcha doin’?”

He sighed. “Not enough.”

“You need to take it easy. The doctor warned you about that.”

“I *have* been taking it easy and I still feel like crud.”

“Can we help, at least?”

He had to think for a moment to realize what she’d asked. “Help me work on the Edsel?”

“Yeah. I’d like to learn more about it. We kind of got interrupted the last time.” But her playful smirk told the true tale.

She wanted to keep an eye on him when he was supposed to be resting.

“I’d like to learn more, too,” Grace said.

He nodded. “Sure. Okay.”

“Let us go dump our stuff and change clothes and we’ll be right back out.” They headed inside and he stood there for a moment, staring after them.

Lately, not only was he in a lot of pain despite the medications, but he noticed he was having trouble keeping his mind on track. Especially after a day at work. He sometimes had trouble making his hands or feet work the way he wanted them to.

He was always exhausted, woke up feeling that way, even after a full night’s sleep.

It didn’t feel like he was getting better. He felt like he wasn’t in control of his life any longer.

And it sucked. Big time.

He’d always prided himself on pulling his own weight, and now it felt like he was barely functioning.

This is no way to live.

What truly scared him was if the worst-case scenario happened and the Lyme settled in for long-term suffering. He knew he shouldn’t play Google MD, but he couldn’t help but do research about this fiend that had taken over his life.

And it terrified him.

Because, so far, he wasn’t getting better, and some of his symptoms, like brain fog, were getting worse.

When the girls returned, Grace wearing some of Emma’s old grubby

clothes, Emma took charge. “We need to finish that wiring harness, don’t we?” She pointed at it.

He nodded. “Yeah.”

Without asking, she started climbing into the engine compartment. Suddenly, it felt like he wasn’t even needed. Not only did Emma remember what they’d been working on that day, she seemed to be a step ahead of him.

Grace didn’t have much experience with tools, but with Emma and Jeff coaching her, she proved a quick study.

By the time they finished an hour later, the wiring harness was rerouted and he’d taken them out for a test drive around the block in it.

“This is sooo cool,” Grace said from the backseat. “I love this car!”

“We should start taking it to car shows,” Emma said. “I’d go with you.”

“Me, too,” Grace echoed.

Jeff pulled back into the driveway, easing it into the garage. “Maybe we can look into that. I don’t know when I’m going to be able to finish it at this rate.”

“Can we help you do something else?” Grace asked.

He shrugged. “Picking up tools, I guess.”

When they finished helping him do that, they started to head inside, but Emma stopped and turned to him when she realized he wasn’t following them. “Why don’t you go rest?”

“I will in a little while. I feel like I’ve been doing nothing but resting and it’s not helping.”

* * * *

In the dining room, Brandon was on his laptop and going over reports for work when Grace and Emma walked in. Emma tapped him on the shoulder and motioned for him to follow her and Grace out to the lanai.

There, she kept her voice low. “Jeff’s not getting better. Have you seen how bad he is? When we came in, he was just standing there in the garage staring at the Edsel. Like he’d forgotten what he was going to do.”

Brandon felt torn between not wanting her to have to parent the adults in her life, and grateful she was as observant as she was. Especially since he’d suspected Jeff was putting on a good front for them in the evenings, trying to pretend he wasn’t having as much trouble as he really was.

“Thanks, honey. I’ll talk to Stuart and figure out what to do. Let me know if you see anything else.”

Once the girls had returned to the house, Stuart stepped through the sliders from the master bedroom. “What’s going on? What was that about?”

Brandon told him.

“So what now?” Stuart asked.

Brandon ran a hand through his hair. “I don’t know.”

And that frustrated him most of all, that he couldn’t take care of his guy, the one thing Brandon had promised he would always do.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Stuart was glad he'd beat Jeff home on Monday. Grace and Emma had gone over to Tracey's after school to spend time with her and eat dinner there. It allowed him some alone time with Brandon.

To talk.

He found him cleaning the pool filter in the backyard.

"Hey. Didn't hear your truck." Brandon sat up to get a kiss from him.

"Can we talk, Brandon?"

He frowned. "This sounds serious."

"It...is."

"Are you all right?"

"No." He settled on the ground next to Brandon. "I want you to marry Jeff."

Brandon's blue gaze intently studied him for a long moment. "Why?"

"Because Jeff's going to have to stop working. You and I both know that, even if he's refusing to see it. He might get 'better' at some point in the future, but right now, he's barely functioning. It's been four weeks. The extra stress on him isn't helping, it's just making him worse, and he won't get the IV line he needs for the meds because of working. You have good health insurance. Better than I do. You marry him and put him on your insurance. That way..." He took a deep breath. "That way you can order him to stop working."

"I promised you guys I'd never interfere with your jobs. That was one of our ironclad rules when we first started dating."

"I know, but he's not facing reality. You heard what Emma said. Jeff's in denial about his condition. He's not getting better. He's getting worse, and it's not only hurting him physically, it's killing him mentally and emotionally. Order him to marry you and stay home. Tell him he can be a stay-at-home house elf for us or something. I'd rather we lose his income so he can focus on taking care of his health. You know I'm right. If he does finally get better, he can go back to work. Or order him to ask for a different job or something, anything."

Stuart didn't interrupt Brandon while he pondered all of that. "You'd *really* be okay with me marrying him?"

“Absolutely. Especially in a case like this.” He reached for Brandon’s hand and held it in both of his. “It’s *killing* me seeing how much pain he’s in every day. We’re losing him. He comes home, sleeps. Forces himself out of bed every morning. Even on his days off he can barely function. He’s in a *lot* of bad pain. *Please?* I love both of you, but I can’t stand seeing him do this to himself.”

Brandon pulled him in for a hug. “You’re a good boy, you know that?”

Stuart melted against him. “I didn’t do this to hear that, but thank you, Master.”

“I know.” Brandon stroked his hair, not releasing him from their embrace. “But I wanted you to hear that.” He finally sat back, cupping Stuart’s face with his hands and giving him a kiss. “We are the two luckiest guys in the world to have you as our husband.”

His heart skipped a beat. “Husband?” Sure, he knew Brandon had felt that way, but it was still nice to hear.

“So what if it can’t be on a piece of paper? That’s how I feel about you both. You’re my husbands. This is way more than Master and slave stuff to me. I’m here for life. I wouldn’t have moved you in that night the tree fell on Jeff’s place, Emma’s orders or not, had I not felt ready to spend the rest of my life with both of you. And I wouldn’t have collared you, either.”

“Thank you, Master.”

Brandon let out a sad sigh. “Let’s do this tonight before Emma gets home. I’d rather she not be here, because I know Jeff’s not going to react well to this.”

“Agreed.”

* * * *

Jeff gave serious thought to calling Brandon, Stuart, or even Emma, to come pick him up from work.

He hurt *that* bad.

How am I going to keep doing this?

The doctor told him they couldn’t give him an estimate of if, or when, the pain would ease up. That it was possible he might be in some level of pain for the rest of his life.

That if he didn’t give in and let them try an IV port for the meds he might

not improve at all.

But if he didn't work, he couldn't pay for his health insurance, which was paying for his medications and his doctor visits.

If he didn't have the IV medicine, it was likely he might never beat the disease attacking his body. Unless he was somehow lucky enough, after a couple of years of fighting for it, to qualify for disability.

This fucking sucks.

After sitting there for ten minutes, he finally decided to go for it. Taking it easy and driving below the speed limit, he carefully worked his way home. Took him twenty minutes longer than it usually would, even with the traffic being light.

Brandon's car and Stuart's truck sat parked in the driveway when he pulled in, but Emma wasn't home yet.

Maybe that's for the best.

He hated her seeing him like this, because she would always go into mother hen mode. She was a *kid*. She shouldn't have to parent him. She already had one fuck-up as a parent, although to Tracey's credit, she had turned things around by divorcing Pat.

Still, it was his job to help take care of Emma.

Em shouldn't be responsible for taking care of *him*.

When he walked in, he smelled something delicious. He didn't even have time to call out he was home before Stuart swooped in from somewhere to gently hug him. "Welcome home."

"Hey." That was something else he hated, how Stuart and Brandon now treated him like he was fragile. "Dinner smells good."

"Pot roast. You've got time to take a shower."

Brandon emerged from the master bedroom, looking like he'd just had a shower. "Hey. Thought I heard you. How you feeling?"

Lying was forbidden, but he didn't want to tell them the truth. "I'm vertical." The men followed him to the master bedroom, where he started stripping.

"We need to have a talk," Brandon said, catching Jeff's hands and making him look at him. "Stuart and I have already decided this, so it *will* happen. I'm going to marry you."

Brandon could have slapped him in the face and it wouldn't have stunned him more. "What?"

“Marry. You and me.”

He sank to the end of the bed. “Why?”

Brandon, still holding Jeff’s hands, knelt in front of him. “Because you need to go on my insurance.”

“I have insurance through work.”

“Correction—you will *have* to go on my insurance because you’re going to quit working because you’re going to get the IV drugs.”

“You’re serious?”

“We both are. The only other option you have is to ask that they transfer you into something other than being a service tech so you can get the IV port. If there’s even an available option. Like service writer. Or sales.”

“I’m not a salesman. I’d suck at that. And I don’t know if there’s any openings for a service writer.”

“Fine. Then you’ll stop working and focus on getting better. Your job will be doing as much as you comfortably can around here and healing. When you reach a point you can go back to work, and the doctors clear you to go back to work, then we’ll discuss it.”

Jeff wanted to feel happy about this, but he couldn’t. If anything, it made him feel worse. “I won’t be pulling my weight around here financially.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Stuart said. “You killing yourself trying to work doesn’t help us, either. Especially if you push yourself to the point you’re back in the hospital again. Nobody wants that. We love you, and we want you with us for life. That means you have to take care of yourself and let us help take care of you.”

“This sucks.”

“Would you be feeling like this if it was cancer?” Brandon asked. “What if it was me in your position? Or Stuart? How would you feel?”

“That’s different.”

“No, it’s *not*,” both men said in unison. “It’s no different,” Brandon continued. “You’re just stubborn.”

“We get it,” Stuart said. “But what you aren’t getting is we love you and are worried about you.”

“Emma ratted you out,” Brandon said. “She saw how bad you were doing out in the garage when she and Grace were helping you with the Edsel.”

* * * *

Brandon stood and walked over to his dresser. They each had an “off-limits” drawer in their respective dressers, where, unless someone had permission to go into it for some reason, no one snooped. This was for privacy, and Brandon had always honored that.

A couple of weeks ago, he’d tucked away a jeweler’s box in his.

It was this box he now retrieved before he returned to the men. Then he pointed at Stuart, and the bed, to sit next to Jeff.

Once Stuart did, Brandon again dropped to one knee before them, opening the box. Inside, the three matching wedding bands he’d purchased for them. He’d planned to schedule a weekend alone for them and “propose” to them then, maybe take them over to the beach and do it there.

This was before he’d realized they’d have to do something more permanent for Jeff.

He took Stuart’s out first and slipped it onto his left ring finger. “My sweet beta boy, I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I know you won’t have the piece of paper, but will you still marry me?”

Blinking back tears, Stuart eagerly nodded. “Yes, Master!”

Then Brandon took out Jeff’s ring and slipped it on his left ring finger. “I promised when I collared you both that I would take care of you. Right now, the best way I can take care of you is to legally marry you and put you on my insurance, because you have to stop working and focus on healing. I love you, and want to spend the rest of our lives together. Please marry me.”

Tears rolled down Jeff’s cheeks. “Yes, Master.”

He rose and kissed Stuart first, then Jeff, before sitting on the end of the bed on Jeff’s other side. Then he and Stuart hugged him. “You’re a stubborn, proud guy. We get it, you want to pull your weight. But what you forget is we *need* you. You healthy and safe and healing is what we need, not you killing yourself. Didn’t you agree to be mine?”

Jeff sniffled. “Yeah.”

“Okay, then. What we want—what *I* want as your Master—is for you to stay home. Deal?”

Jeff nodded. “Deal.”

Brandon palmed Jeff’s cheek and made him look him in the eyes. “For life. I meant it. For better and worse, sickness and health, all of that.”

He rested his forehead against Brandon’s. “I almost called one of you to

come get me today when I left work. I wasn't sure I could even drive."

"Dammit," Stuart said. "Why the hell didn't you call us?"

But Brandon got it. He slowly rocked Jeff as the man started sobbing in his arms. "I hate feeling like this. I feel useless and weak." Stuart pressed himself along Jeff's back.

"Cry it out, buddy," Brandon said. "That's why we're here. This is why you gave yourself to me, remember? I can't fix this, but I can take care of you. Both of us can. I need you to give them notice tomorrow. Forget transferring to a different position. We'll get the license in the morning before I go to work, and get married this weekend. I'm sure Loren will do it for us. And you're officially under orders from this point forward to not hide how you're feeling from us. If you need help, you must ask. Otherwise, I'll cane Stuart's ass for it."

"Hey," Stuart joked, but he didn't safeword.

It did, however, have the effect Brandon hoped and pulled a snotty, ragged laugh from Jeff. "Yes, Master. Thank you."

"Thank *him*? Hell, thank *me*. It's my ass on the line now." When Stuart lifted his head from where he'd been pressed along Jeff's back, he wore a playful smile.

Chapter Twenty-Four

This wasn't exactly the wedding day Jeff had envisioned for himself, but he'd take it.

Still, he couldn't help but feel a little guilty that Brandon and Stuart had decided he should be the one Brandon married simply because of his stupid body.

Warring with that, the infinite love he felt for both of them for deciding based on that, *because* they loved him and cared about him. Selfless, both of them. He knew he could never do enough to show them how much he loved both of them for it.

They were having it there at the house for both expenses and logistics. Nothing fancy, but when Emma had taken over the arrangements with help from Tracey, Grace, Faith, Loren, June, Cali, and others, none of the three men had the heart to stop them, much less get in their way.

For now, Jeff stood in "his" bedroom, staring at the mirror over the dresser. There wasn't a theme so much as there was a mood, casual vibe, the men all wearing matching button-up short-sleeved shirts with classic cars emblazoned on them, and khaki shorts.

He'd heard rumors about the decorations and cake having a similar theme, but since all three of them had been banned from the lanai and backyard since that morning, he didn't know for sure.

Someone tapped on his bedroom door. "Come in."

Emma peeked in, smiling. "Ready?"

"Yeah. Why'd I have to hide, again?"

She opened the door wider. "Because you're the bride, *duh*."

"How'd I become the bride?"

She planted her hands on her hips and tipped her head exactly the way Brandon did. "Are you *seriously* going to tell Dad *he's* the bride?"

"Fair enough. Let's do this."

His parents, Iris and Calvin, and Sylvie were all there, too. Iris and Sylvie especially had felt horrible when they'd learned about his Lyme disease diagnosis, but he didn't blame them for him contracting the disease.

Shit happened.

Sometimes, bad shit happened to good people, or while trying to do a

good deed for someone.

He'd have enough struggles trying to overcome this without adding extra mental baggage that had no place in his life.

Jeff knew the guest list was around thirty-five people, but on their lanai it felt like more than that. Next week they were going to have a kinky reception at Cali, Max, and Sean's house, and had invited people to that who couldn't be here today, or whom they'd excluded from today for the sake of space and trying to keep it simple.

Brandon had told them to keep their rings on. Now that they were on, he only wanted them taken off for work, and then they could wear them on their day collar around their neck.

Well, Stuart could. Jeff wouldn't have much reason to remove his for a while, unless he was working on the Edsel or something.

They stood together, Brandon in the middle, Stuart on his right, and Jeff on his left, both men holding hands with Brandon and each other.

Loren smiled. "I hear we're dispensing with the ring exchange portion of the ceremony?"

Brandon nodded. "Efficiency." The smell of whatever Bill was grilling wafted through the air, making stomachs growl. "And I'm hungry."

"I've had a special request," Loren said before looking past the men. "Who gives these men away?"

Emma and Grace stood behind them, their arms around each other's waists. "We do," they echoed, grinning.

"Well, and Jeff's parents," Emma added, pointing to them. His dad smiled and waved, cracking Jeff up.

Jeff tipped his head over onto Brandon's shoulder as Loren spoke, his mind drifting. Tracey and Faith were taking video for them, and Cali was once again manning a camera, so he could watch it all later.

Never in his life had he dreamed he'd be this happy in a relationship. Especially with two men.

He'd hoped to one day get married, but then when they'd formed their triad he'd let that slip to the side, knowing it was the structure, not the title, that was important.

This was real. This was life.

This was happening to him, with the men he loved.

He perked up when she reached the important part. "Do you, Stuart, take

Brandon and Jeff as your husbands, to love, honor, and obey, as long as you all shall live?”

Stuart was crying, but the beaming smile on his face completed the story. “I do.”

“Do you, Jeff, take Brandon and Stuart as your husbands, to love, honor, and obey, as long as you all shall live?”

He nodded. “I do.”

“Do you, Brandon, take Jeff and Stuart as your husbands, to love, honor, and cherish, as long as you all shall live?”

Despite everything they’d been through, this seemed the most at peace Brandon had looked since they’d met. His blue eyes seemed lit from within, glowing. “I do.”

“Then by the power vested in me by the State of Florida, I pronounce you married.”

As everyone cheered, Brandon first kissed Stuart, then leaned in to kiss him, finishing with nuzzling his nose.

A sneaky, playful smile curled the sadist’s lips. “No getting away from us now,” Brandon said.

“Just don’t give Dobby a sock, and you’ll be fine.”

* * * *

Even though only Brandon and Jeff were signing the marriage certificate as the betrothed, Brandon had Stuart sign as one of the witnesses. In that way, at least, he was on the form.

Stuart genuinely didn’t *care*.

He had a ring on his hand and two men in his bed every night.

He had a *family*.

He’d stopped worrying about the people in Iowa who shared genetics and a last name with him. He’d had to block his oldest brother on Facebook because Stuart had stopped censoring himself there and had been posting pics of the three of them as a family, along with Emma, Grace, and Tracey.

He had far more friends than family on the site, and while he knew a couple of family members had unfriended him, the rest stayed quiet.

Zero.

Fucks.

Given.

They sat Jeff in a chair in the shade, near a fan so he wouldn't get overheated. Brandon let Stuart fix Jeff's lunch plate for him, making sure Jeff was drinking enough water, and keeping track of when he was due for his next round of meds.

If this was what happiness felt like, then yeah, he was blissful.

Calvin teased Brandon. "Gee, thanks. Now Iris is gonna want me to marry her."

She lightly smacked his upper arm with the back of her hand. "Says *you*. I'm fine the way things are."

"Are you now?"

"Yeah." But a little look passed between them, both of them smiling at each other.

Stuart wondered what that was about.

Today's event wasn't going to be long, or late. Everyone knew about Jeff's health issues, and no one wanted to stress him. After the cake was cut and served, all three men playfully poking frosting-covered fingers at each other, the clean-up eventually started.

Iris and Calvin pulled Jeff aside to talk to him alone for a moment, leaving Brandon and Stuart to shrug at each other.

Then when Jeff smiled and hugged her, long and hard, and then Calvin, Stuart tipped his head to the side, confused. "Congratulating him?" he said to Brandon.

"Nooo, but I have a suspicion."

Jeff was still smiling when they stepped over to their parents and talked to them, too.

Jeff's mom let out a happy squeal and nearly tackled Iris into the pool, except Calvin was able to grab their arms and pull them back in time.

"Baby," Stuart and Brandon echoed in stereo.

Jeff finally let out a happy *whoop* and turned to Brandon and Stuart. "We're gonna be uncles!"

Stuart held his hand out to Brandon for a fist bump.

"Nailed it," they echoed.

Chapter Twenty-Five

With Emma volunteering to spend the night at Grace's house—sleeping in the guest room—to give them alone time, the men were able to relax once the clean-up finished and all the guests had left. Jeff and Stuart both stripped and donned their leather collars only—per Brandon's order—and knelt in front of where he sat on the couch.

Brandon had specifically told Jeff he didn't have to kneel, but Jeff had wanted to. They put a throw pillow down to cushion his knees.

He already had an appointment for Monday morning to get a PICC line inserted so they could start the IV drugs.

Brandon and Stuart had both taken the day off so they could go with him, drive him, and find out all the information they needed to know about his care.

While they'd been stripping, Brandon had tossed a sheet over the couch and prepared a few things they'd need. He reached out and caught the D-rings on the front of their collars and hooked a finger through each one, pulling them in for a kiss, Stuart first, then Jeff.

"My sweet boys," he softly said. Then he nuzzled Stuart's forehead. "Sorry I can't legally marry you, too."

"It's okay, Master. I'm happy with this. I know none of us are going anywhere. I can quit worrying about him so much now."

"I propose a change to our household arrangement, however," Brandon said. "Since Jeff got to marry me, I think it's only fair Stuart is now designated our Alpha sub."

The two of them exchanged a glance, and in unison said, "Red."

"Oookaay," Brandon said, a little taken aback. "Explain. Stuart first."

"I still want him to be able to Top me when you say so, and I'm not toppy, Master."

"That wouldn't change. But since Jeff's going to be our stay-at-home slave now, and he married me, I wanted you to have a little something special."

"Oh."

"Was that your only objection?"

"Um, actually, yeah." Stuart smiled. "So it's just a title change?"

“Right.” He looked at Jeff. “Explain.”

“Um...green, Master?”

Brandon snorted. “You’re killing me, Smalls.”

Jeff grinned. “Well, I know he’s not toppy. That would have made him miserable, Master.”

“So you’re okay with the title change?”

“I’m even okay with some other things changing, as long as Stuart’s okay with them. I don’t mind being the resident house elf for both of you.”

“Please don’t give Dobby clothes, Master,” Stuart joked. “We’ll lose him.”

“Well, I know where he’d wear the sock.” Brandon grinned.

Jeff couldn’t help but laugh. “Are we going to devolve into kinky book fandom, or are we going to fuck, Master?”

Brandon’s grin widened. “The two are not mutually exclusive acts. You’re forgetting, I *am* a sadist.”

“No, Master,” Jeff said. “There’s absolutely no way I’d ever forget *that*.”

“So, Stuart, how’s your ass, boy?” Brandon asked.

“Full, Master.”

That morning, before the festivities had gotten into full swing, Brandon and Jeff had a lot of fun working the last butt plug into Stuart, the biggest one, with orders for him to wear it all day. Jeff had done the honors while Stuart had been bent over the bathroom counter, and Brandon had knelt in front of him, sucking on his cock just enough to keep him horny and distracted and to make the process easier on him.

But not enough to make him come.

Brandon had a plan, and that plan was for him and Jeff to finally make their little beta boy’s DP wish come true today, bare, marking him as theirs for life.

He also knew Jeff’s fatigue and pain levels might put an end to fun for him before they had a chance to really get started, so Brandon planned to do this now. They could cuddle and snuggle and work up to round two, at least for him and Stuart, later on.

Brandon stood. “Strip me, boys.”

It didn’t take long, because all he was wearing were shorts and the shirt. But the two men had fun kissing his body, exploring with mouths and fingers as they bared his flesh, worshipping his cock and balls together, until

Brandon worried he was going to explode.

“Okay,” he gasped. “Jeff, on the couch.” Brandon pulled a glove onto his right hand and squirted a generous amount of lube onto it, slicking Jeff’s hard cock with it.

“Stuart, stand in front of him and bend over, hands on the back of the couch.”

He did. Brandon removed the butt plug from him, tossing it onto a towel on the floor. Then he squirted more lube onto his fingers and easily slid four inside Stuart’s loose ass, making him moan.

“Can I lick his cock, Master?” Jeff asked. “He’s dripping spoooge all over me.”

“Sure, but don’t make him come.”

Another, louder moan erupted from Stuart almost immediately.

* * * *

Stuart closed his eyes and held on to the back of the couch. Jeff slid down onto the floor and was using the tip of his tongue to tease his slit, sucking up pre-cum from Stuart’s cock. Meanwhile, it felt like Brandon practically had his whole hand up Stuart’s ass.

And it felt great.

Maybe I should ask him about fisting.

Brandon’s fingers scissored inside him, finding and teasing his button, reminding him of their first night together when the two men had blown the top of his head off in a good way when they’d claimed his body.

All theirs.

Once he was satisfied, Brandon pulled his hand from Stuart’s ass and stripped the glove off, inside out, and dropped it next to the butt plug.

“Okay, back on the couch, Jeff.”

The teasing lips and tongue disappeared. Stuart met Jeff’s hazel gaze as he settled onto the couch and reached up to play with Stuart’s nipples.

“Mount up, boy,” Brandon ordered. “Get beta’s cock in you.”

Stuart straddled Jeff’s lap, Jeff reaching under him to hold his rigid cock straight and aiming for Stuart’s ass.

Bare.

They’d fucked bare before, but they didn’t do it very often. Tonight, he

knew, Brandon wanted them to claim his body in one more first. As Jeff's cock easily slid deep inside him, they both moaned. Stuart leaned in and kissed him, hard, moaning again when Jeff's hands settled on Stuart's ass and squeezed, digging in, a bite of the good kind of pain to help him hold back his orgasm.

"Yeah," Brandon hoarsely said. "That's fucking gorgeous. I love watching my two boys together like this." He knelt behind Stuart and planted one hand between Stuart's shoulder blades, pushing him forward. "Hold still a minute."

He felt the head of Brandon's cock pressing against his rim and against Jeff's cock already lodged inside him. "Jack his cock for him a little," Brandon ordered. "Don't get him off."

As his ass stretched, Stuart's whine of discomfort became a moan of pleasure when Jeff's hand encircled his cock and squeezed, slow-stroking him.

Pressure built, then a sudden give as the two cocks slipped into position and Brandon easily fucked his all the way into Stuart's ass.

Now all three of them moaned. "Holy fuck," Brandon hoarsely said. "I hope this feels as good to you as it does to me."

Stuart could barely breathe, much less speak. He hadn't been given permission to come yet and didn't want to disobey Brandon.

But...*damn*.

Jeff's hand stilled. "Jesus Christ, that's good," Jeff said. "I know he's got to be loving this. Now it makes me want to shove that plug in my ass and get loosened up again."

"Maybe tomorrow morning." Brandon wrapped his arms around Stuart and pulled him back, against his body. "Say something, Alpha."

"Th-thank you, Master!"

The men laughed. "I think you broke his brain, Master," Jeff teased.

"I'm sure we did. If it feels so good, Alpha, you can come. Start fucking yourself on our cocks, baby. You come first."

Stuart clenched and unclenched his ass around them a few times, wanting to savor this, make it last. He knew he wouldn't be able to hold out long once he started moving.

Jeff grabbed Stuart's hands and placed them on his own shoulders. "Hold on to me and fuck me, baby."

Stuart forced his eyes to focus on Jeff's, his handsome smile.
"This...*fuck*."

"I warned you it was intense."

"*Fuck!*"

Brandon nibbled the back of his neck. "Guess I'm going to have to let my boys work on my ass so I can try this, too, if it's that much fun."

Stuart tipped his head back and kissed him, slowly rising up a few inches before settling onto their cocks again, grinding against them.

Fuck.

Brandon reached around and played with Stuart's nipples. "I bet you can come without us touching your cock now. Bet that sweet ass feels really full with his cock jammed against your button, hmm?"

"Uh huh!" Stuart took another stroke, his eyes rolling back in his head. He'd loved the increasingly large butt plugs, especially when he had to wear one for a while. They'd left him with a perpetual hard-on and eager to test his limits.

This was...

Fuck.

"Ride our cocks, boy," Brandon ordered. "You don't nut soon, I'm not going to be able to hold back, and then you'll spend the night in a chastity cage."

That got him moving. If Brandon had a torture Stuart genuinely did not like, even though he'd take it, it was *that*.

Because he invariably ended up hard with the cage strapped on him, and that hurt.

Which made him horny.

Which made him hard.

It was a perpetual cycle of being horny and hard and hurting that didn't end. And the last time, both of them had fucked him while he wore the cage, and he'd actually come while they were doing it, a weird sort of unfulfilling orgasm that had both felt good and left him even more frustrated on the other end of it.

Stuart fucked himself, Brandon tugging and pinching his nipples while Jeff's hands on Stuart's hips urged him faster, harder. Before long, he was bouncing on their cocks, a long, rolling moan of pleasure escaping him.

"That's it, boy," Brandon said. "Get over the hump. You can do it."

It hit hard, fast, and nearly took his breath away. His cock jerked, ropes of cum actually hitting Jeff in the chest as both men urged him on and started moving, too. Brandon first, then Jeff came, the three of them finally falling still in a sweaty, panting heap.

Brandon kissed the back of his neck. "How was that, baby?"

Stuart, unable to speak, held up a fist to them. Both men chuckled and fist-bumped him from either side.

Brandon started to untangle himself from the top of the pile. "Okay, pool time, then cuddles, then whatever we feel like after that." He nipped the nape of Stuart's neck. "Love you, boy."

"Love you, too, Master."

He leaned in and kissed Jeff. "Love you."

Jeff smiled, looking sated and tired. "Love you, too, Master. Both of you."

Chapter Twenty-Six

“How do I look?” Emma stood there in her tux, her cummerbund the same shade of lavender as Grace’s dress.

Brandon smiled. “You look beautiful, honey.”

“You’re gorgeous,” Tracey said.

“I’m so nervous!” Emma hadn’t put on any makeup, had decided not to wear any tonight. Not that she usually wore a lot. With swimming, she rarely did. “Why am I so nervous?”

“Because you’re human,” Jeff told her.

They were actually going to take the Edsel to the fall homecoming dance, Emma driving. First, the adults were going to follow her to Grace’s in Brandon’s car so they could get pictures of the girls together...and so Brandon was certain Emma wouldn’t have any trouble driving the Edsel. In case she did, he’d had his car detailed and she could drive it instead.

Jeff had spent the past couple of weekends working with Emma, coaching her on driving the Edsel with the unusual transmission setup, and the car was in excellent condition.

After most of the past several months spent with the IV port in, his doctors had finally removed it and switched him back to oral medication. He wasn’t back to his old self.

He’d been warned he might never be.

At least there’d been some improvement. He still got fatigued easily, sometimes had problems focusing on the task at hand, and frequently suffered pain if he overdid it.

Going back to work as a mechanic was not recommended, not that Brandon and Stuart would have let him.

Brandon had told Jeff if he wanted to go to college and get a degree, he’d let him do that, but he was not to work in a job that would physically tax him.

Which also ruled out the idea of him going back to work for his dad hanging drywall. Not that he wanted to do that in the first place.

The only thing they would let him do, mechanically, was spend time at Brooke’s shop doing things he could work on sitting at a bench and staying clean, like old carburetors. Not just because of his port, but because they were also worried about his health.

But that wasn't for money, despite her offering to pay him. It was a way to get him out of the house for a few hours a week and keep him from feeling totally useless.

And Brooke had found her own toppy side and put her foot down when he'd offered to do more strenuous stuff, because Brandon had stopped by early on and talked to her in person, explaining Jeff's medical condition.

Despite his irritation at his situation, Jeff knew he was damned lucky.

The luckiest man in the world. Because he had the two best husbands in the world.

* * * *

In the driveway at Grace's parents, the girls stood in front of the Edsel. Emma struck a pose, holding Grace close, her arm around Grace. Grace practically draped herself over Emma and both of them looked heartbreakingly beautiful to Stuart.

He thought about how he'd skipped his own proms and homecoming dances, not wanting to get shot down by a girl and also not wanting to face pressures from one if he did get a yes. For his parents, he used the excuse he didn't want to spend the money, and with money so tight for them, they hadn't argued the point.

He wished he could have stood in front of their ride for the night, him and the guy he'd crushed hard on back then, a football player. Unrequited, of course, because he'd never dared even hint at his feelings.

The girls took turns getting pictures with all the parents—including Jeff and Stuart—in various permutations before finally heading off to the dance.

Brandon, Jeff, Stuart, and Tracey headed back to the house so Tracey could get her car. "What're your plans for tonight?" Brandon asked her.

"Quiet night at home. I'm enjoying the peace."

"No plans to move yet?"

"No, Ruth said she's fine with me living there. It's allowing me to save some money."

"Did they finally get Pat evicted from the house?"

She frowned. "He's in jail."

"What?" they all asked.

"Yeah, sorry. I just found out yesterday and didn't want to say anything

around Emma. As of last week. He called and left a threatening voice mail on the landlord's phone. Cops arrested him for making the threat. The landlord changed the locks and cleared out his stuff."

"Where's Corey?"

"Back with his mom. Probably where the kid needs to be. And she's got him into counseling. Don't know if it'll help or not, but hopefully it will."

When they returned to Brandon's, she hugged the men before heading home. As they watched her drive off, Stuart shook his head. "I cannot believe we're friends with her now."

"I know, right?" Brandon said. "Not after what we went through. But I'm glad we are."

"Me, too," Jeff and Stuart echoed.

"Nice. Stereo."

She ate dinner with them a couple of nights a week. While Emma didn't go there to spend the night, she did go out to eat with her mom, or go over there for the evening before returning home.

Grace hadn't bitten her either.

Yet.

They headed inside. Brandon no sooner had the door closed and locked behind him than the men were stripping.

He sighed, smiling. "Such good boys. My very good boys."

This wasn't the only thing in life...but it sure made it a lot easier to survive taking the punches life sometimes threw at them.

And how he loved these two men.

Completely.

THE END

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