Nico Jaye

A Love's Landscapes Story

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Love’s Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

PUNCH-DRUNK LOVE

By Nico Jaye

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love’s Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love’s Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you’d like to view the photo, please feel free to join the Goodreads M/M Romance Group and visit the discussion section: *Love’s Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers.** It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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M/M Romance Group Publication

PUNCH-DRUNK LOVE

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Photo Description

An artistic black-and-white photo. Although they face away from the camera, two handsome young men look over their shoulders at the viewer, their expressions reflecting surprise. They’re naked, their bodies muscular and toned. The man on the left is slightly taller, his wavy dark hair complemented by the other man’s short blond hair. The spacious training studio’s hardwood floor shines underneath their bare feet, and sporting goods, including numerous stationary strike bags, line the perimeter.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Umm, our entire kickboxing team just walked in on us. I think we’re OUT now.

Sincerely,

♡♥*Ang *Miss Directed**♥♡

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: sports, athlete, college, geeks/nerds, public activity, kickboxing, humorous, costumes, Vegas, lots of fluff

Word Count: 16,578

Author’s Note

A big thank you to the M/M Romance Group for hosting this awesome event. Thanks also to Ang for providing the inspiring letter and to Natasha for sharing her incredible talents in creating such a fun cover. This story is dedicated to all of the smuff lovers out there who like their fluff with a side of smut. ;) Thanks for reading!

PUNCH-DRUNK LOVE

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Chapter 1

Prep Work

"C'mon, Wallace, move your ass! You expect that crescent to cut it at the Summit?"

Oliver stood near the locker room entrance and wound tape around his knuckles with a quick, efficient motion. He watched Team SFE's coach for non-pros, Mr. Payne, hold up kick mitts for their women's welterweight fighter, Patsy Wallace, to take aim.

Holy crap, Payne is in a mood tonight.

Shaking his head and pulling on his gloves, Oliver turned towards one of the strike bags at the perimeter of the large and airy training space. With twilight edging in through the high windows, he stretched a little and shook out his shoulders before starting on some bag work. His lightweight gloves thudded against the strike bag, the noise both familiar and oddly comforting after the silence of being in the labs all day. His skin began to heat, sweat dampening his old Bay to Breakers tee, and he lost himself in the rhythmic contact made by his repeated jab-jab-cross combinations.

"Payne's bringing the pain tonight, huh?"

Oliver jumped a little.

Surprised to hear his earlier thoughts echoed in words, Oliver glanced over to see that Derek Vance had appeared, seemingly out of nowhere. Derek squared up with the bag next to him and began aiming punches at the target, his back to Oliver. Oliver cocked his head and returned his attention to his own bag. He wasn't sure if Derek's question required a response.

Mmmmm. Derek Vance.

Oliver snuck another glance at him. The team captain was a man of few words from what Oliver could tell. Since Oliver's elevation three months ago to black belt, a.k.a. competition-bound status at their San Francisco Elite training center, he'd seen Derek regularly at SFE's Advanced Sparring hours. Outside of Derek's team-captain-worthy encouragement on the mats, however, Oliver could probably count the number of actual conversations they'd had on one hand.

Or one finger, even.

However, that didn't prevent Oliver from appreciating Derek's achievements in the ring, where he'd been the runner-up in his weight class at last year's Amateur Kickboxing Pacific Summit, or from welcoming Derek's words of encouragement and patience when fulfilling his team captain duties.

It didn't keep Oliver from trying to sneak a peek at what he thought was a tongue ring that had glinted at him the few times Derek had been close enough for him to spot it.

And it definitely didn't stop him from admiring the tight, compact frame that belied the fluidity of motion Derek brought to the sport. Or the muscular ass attached to it.

Oliver coughed and shook his head to clear his thoughts. *Derek Vance is not into you—or guys, as far as you know*, he told himself sternly and turned back to complete his warm up. In fact, given the number of hours he spent at SFE, Derek Vance didn't seem to be into anyone, but then again, there was no way for Oliver to know it based on the mostly non-verbal interactions they'd had over the last three months.

Non-verbal interactions which consisted of warming up near each other occasionally and, one Saturday afternoon, lending Derek his phone charger.

Oliver had just finished with a series of uppercuts and was moving to the sidelines to jump rope when another comment issued from next to him.

"Heard you'd be at the Summit this year," Derek said quietly, not looking up from his crouch.

Oliver halted his movement and looked around. There was nobody within a five-foot radius, so…

That comment apparently was meant for him.

"Ah, yeah—" Oliver cleared his throat and swallowed past a sudden dryness. "I'm gonna be competing this year. Super middleweight," he added when Derek didn't say anything else.

"I know." Before Oliver had a chance to register that Derek somehow knew his weight class, Derek aimed a particularly hard strike at the bag. "Good luck," he said between punches.

"Yeah, you too," Oliver replied automatically. He furrowed his brow before continuing. "I mean, I guess we'll see each other there, though, right? And

we're flying out together with the team on Friday," he said, offering a hesitant smile.

Derek glanced over, and Oliver was caught off guard by the intensity in Derek's grey-green-golden eyes. He'd never seen them this close before, and honestly, he'd never seen anything like them, period.

"Together… right. Yeah, I guess we will," Derek said, his gaze flicking down to Oliver's smile. Derek swiped his forearm over his brow, his muscles flexing with the movement as he wiped away some of the sweat that caused his short blond hair to shine. "Guess we will," he repeated, his lip quirking up for a millisecond before he turned back to the strike bag and continued to deliver punches with deft precision.

Puzzled, Oliver tilted his head and watched him for another moment, his gaze picking up the breadth of Derek's shoulders and the light tan that disappeared behind the black cotton of his tank.

Derek Vance. Voluntarily talking to him.

Right.

As he pulled his gloves off and grabbed a jump rope, Oliver figured that, by the end of the Summit, he might need all five fingers to count the number of conversations they'd had, after all.

****

The next day found Oliver at his usual Thursday night off-campus haunt: Game Night at The Underground. While playing Words with Friends on his phone could help him scratch the itch, there really wasn't anything that could take the place of the clacking of real-life Scrabble tiles or the rub of pencil on paper as the points were tallied.

"Thirty-six," Oliver announced before grabbing four tiles from the bag. He grinned as he added them to his rack, looking at his J-E-W-E-L proudly. While he might be studying biochemistry, he did his best to hold his own against his more artsy, Southside-major friends.

"Nice one, Ollie." Amanda's curly brown hair bobbed in its haphazard topknot when she reached over to grab the scratchpad. She wrote in the number and tapped the pencil against her chin. "So, Vegas, huh?" she asked casually.

Oliver looked at the other two players. Jin was rearranging the tiles on his rack, and Kevin was looking at him expectantly. "Oh, me?" Oliver said, glancing back at Amanda and pointing at himself.

She rolled her eyes and sent him a fond look. "Yes, genius. The rest of us aren't going to Sin City tomorrow."

"But we could be," Kevin interjected, his eyes sparkling. "Just think," he said, gesturing grandly, "crazy-awesome seniors—that would be us—on a crazy-awesome road trip. We could get a crazy-awesome convertible and trail a scarf behind us like in *To Wong Foo…*, *Bridget Jones*, or really, take your pick of any of those diva movies. It would be so awesome."

"Uh, not to burst your bubble of awesome, Kev, but it's nine hours from Berkeley to Vegas," Amanda said dryly. She took a sip of her Sam Adams and cocked her head, sending him a pointed look.

"Not to mention it would cost a bajillion dollars to rent a convertible." Jin didn't even look up from where he was placing his S-O-L-I-D tiles onto the board.

"Yeah… and you also have that presentation in Psych 140 on Monday," Oliver said gently. He glanced at his tiles and shifted them around, trying to spell something that wasn't… what came to mind immediately. Looking up at the others, he continued, "Not that I wouldn't love to have you guys there, though. That's really sweet of you, Kev."

Kevin pouted a little and flopped back onto his armchair. "It's okay, guys, I'll somehow survive the disappointment. It's not like this is our *last year together* or anything," he said pointedly.

"It's not a bad idea, Kev. We just need to be a little more practical with the planning, m'kay?" Amanda waited for his acknowledgement with a raised brow.

"Fine," Kevin sighed, reaching forward to play T-H-I-E-F. "But we're gonna have Ollie scout things out while he's there!" he exclaimed, regaining his enthusiasm for the venture.

"Uhhh… me? Scout?" Oliver didn't know what to do, so, out of habit, he took his glasses off and cleaned them on the hem of his T-shirt. He wore them on schooldays when he wasn't training, and when he put the frames back on, three faces were turned his way, each showing varying degrees of excitement and speculation.

"Yesssss… recon," Jin said, his gaze showing interest for the first time. "And I'll look up the different conventions and stuff that go on down there. They have *huge* conventions in Vegas." He went back to fiddling with his tiles and mumbling under his breath about Comic Con and *Supernatural*.

Kevin's face lit up with excitement. "Oooh, this is gonna be awesome!"

"Just not the porn star convention, okay, Jin? I don't think I could handle that much silicone in one place," Amanda said with a shudder. She scanned her tiles quickly before spelling out S-P-A-R-K.

"Oh, ew." Kevin's choirboy features twisted in a grimace. "Yeah… no, not that one."

"But the Bellagio is supposed to have these great circulating art collections," Amanda said, picking up on the recon theme.

"And you've got to check out the gay clubs, Ollie. Pleeeease." Kevin batted his big brown eyes at Oliver.

"And the straight ones, too," Jin piped up.

"And anything in between!" Amanda's leering wink was practically cartoon-worthy.

Oliver watched them volley instructions back and forth, his head swimming. He finally broke into their excitement. "You guys know I'll be there for the Summit, right? The International Kickboxing Association's competition?" He looked around, his brows raised expectantly. "That's the reason I'm going, kiddos."

"Yeah, but… you can't kick butt *all* the time, can you, Ollie?" Kevin attempted another round of puppy-dog eyes.

"And if you're not gonna let loose here, then you should at least let loose in Vegas," Jin pointed out.

"But I don't need to let loose."

"But you *should*," Kevin encouraged.

"Ollie. Love." Amanda pinned him with her blue-eyed gaze. "I say this with the deepest abiding affection for you and your many nerderiffic ways. You have *got* to get out more."

Oliver frowned. "But I'm out right now. With you guys."

"We don't count!" She cleared her throat and collected herself. "Well, we do. But you're not gonna take us out to dinner at Rumson's or go home to have us meet your mom or even just bring us back to your apartment to spend the night with you—and that one drunken near-miss with Kevin is something of which we never speak, okay?"

They all nodded gravely.

"Good," she said with a pleased smile. "So what I'm saying is that you need to learn to live a little. Between school and your kickboxing, it's like you have zero time for anything else when I *know* that's not true. It's been five months since you and Abe broke up," she said, naming the business student with whom Oliver had shared an ill-fated relationship during the spring semester of junior year. "I think it's time for you to get back in the saddle," she finished with an uncharacteristically gentle smile.

"Yeah, Ols, saddle up!" Kevin grinned mischievously. "You know what they say—*save a horse, ride a cowboy*."

Jin groaned and threw a lemon wedge at Kevin, who deftly dodged it. "Really, Kevin? Really?"

Kevin's look was pure deviltry wrapped in cherubic dimples.

Amanda rolled her eyes at them both and turned to Oliver. "Just think about it, okay, Ollie? Y'know… finding someone to bat those pretty green eyes at might not be all that bad. And if the opportunity presents itself while you're there…" She shrugged lightly. "Live a little."

Oliver looked at the three of them. They'd been through a lot ever since finding each other as floormates at their dorm in freshman year. He knew Amanda could be stubborn and wickedly smart, but she also usually understood what was best for them even before they themselves could be aware of it.

In the end, he nodded.

Amanda smiled. "Good. Now it's your turn."

He stared at his tiles resolutely, willing them to spell anything other than the one word that came instantly to mind. Oliver fiddled with the B tile until he finally heaved a sigh.

"Okay, but… no comments." He eyed each of them.

They nodded, and Kevin even crossed his heart with a solemn expression on his face.

Oliver placed his tiles on the board, and the other three burst out laughing.

"I said no comments," Oliver reminded them, but he was grinning, too.

"I know, but… if this isn't a sign that you should live a little, I don't know what is." Amanda's tone was Sahara-dry as they all looked at the word Oliver had just played.

You really couldn’t blame him, though.

After all, B-L-O-W-J-O-B-S *was* worth ninety-two points.

****

Chapter 2

Fight Night

At SFO on Friday afternoon, accompanied by his team and coaches, Oliver boarded an airplane for the third time in his life, and, two hours later, found himself surrounded by noise, lights, shouting, more lights, and the faint smell of cigarette smoke. His eyes went wide when he saw the rows of slot machines that stood just outside their arrival gate.

Yup, definitely not in Kansas anymore, Toto.

As he made his way to the baggage claim area, he spotted a banner that greeted all visitors to McCarran Airport: *Remember—What Happens Here Stays Here.*

He shook his head at the antics suggested by such a slogan. A small grin snuck onto his face, though, and Oliver couldn't resist. He slid his phone out of his pocket to snap a picture and sent it to his friends.

> *To: Amanda J., Kevin W., Jin C.*
>
> *From: Oliver Reyes*
>
> *Attachments (1)*
>
> *"what happens here stays here" …unless you're doing recon? =)*

With a last look, Oliver tucked his phone away and hurried to catch up with the team. After grabbing his equipment bag from the carousel and hefting it onto his shoulder, he made his way outside into the autumn-warm air to join the SFE group. Oliver wasn't chatty by nature, but he made an effort when team veterans Izzy Leong and Patrick McGuiness approached him, the competition newbie, with welcoming smiles.

As they were ushered onto the hotel shuttle, he noticed that Derek hadn't taken his headphones off since boarding the plane.

****

Vegas was big.

Really freaking big.

Oliver thought that he'd become accustomed to city life after studying at Cal for the last few years. After all, Berkeley itself was a pretty sizeable town,

and San Francisco was gigantic compared to his speck-on-the-map hometown up in northern California.

When he was five and his family had moved from Portland, Oregon, to Crescent City on the far northern stretch of the California coastline, Oliver had known in the vague ways of childhood that things were somewhat different. He'd always stuck out a little in Crescent City with his slightly ethnic last name and his fascination with things that went pop and fizz. Life was pretty white bread up there—much more so than in Portland—and people weren't always that receptive of the "other", despite California's stereotypically hippy-dippy tendencies.

Adolescent boys certainly hadn't understood Oliver's otherness.

Luckily, karate provided a way to defend his preference for playing with his chemistry set over all other things. He'd much rather see potions bubble up and explode, with boy's best friend, Rafi, lying by his side, than spend the day riding bikes and camping out with his classmates. Karate wasn't so much about fighting other kids, though; it was more about giving him the confidence and knowledge that he could.

He sprouted at least three inches in the summer after eighth grade and another four over the course of freshman year, and the teasing stopped in high school. Even so, Oliver continued with karate because he enjoyed it, and, in junior year, he shifted his focus to its full-contact cousin, kickboxing. After joining a couple of clubs in high school, he found a solid group of friends in a handful of fellow science lovers who shared his passion, and, with a growing sense of confidence, he was lucky enough to enjoy a quiet, fanfare-less coming out to them and his family in his senior year.

Heading to a new city for college had been hard because he'd had to leave behind his family, his friends, and Rafi, but Cal was a top school for everything, including the sciences with which he'd always been so obsessed. The university had even sealed the deal with a small scholarship, making him an offer he couldn't refuse. College, especially a liberal one like UC Berkeley, had been an amazing opportunity to spread his wings.

However, college—even a crazy place like UC Berkeley—hadn't prepared him for the Strip.

The buildings were huge, their façades shiny and glistening with the reflection of the millions of lights that surrounded them. Their hotel was on the north end, and the slow cruise up the Strip was unbelievable. People flocked the

streets in the crisp autumn air, and everywhere he looked there was something new to see.

It was one thing to experience Las Vegas through a movie screen or television set; it was quite another to experience it in the flesh. Every tall building, every person, every attraction—they came together to present this incredible amalgamation of no-holds-barred, zero-accountability fun.

It was rather disappointing, then, to realize that everyone at SFE was all very much accountable for their time there.

Seeing the program for the IKA's Amateur Kickboxing Pacific Summit brought things into perspective, though. The two day event hosted at Treasure Island would begin early on Saturday morning, and Oliver felt a thrill to see the signs in the hotel that advertised the competition. After assigning rooms and having everyone drop their bags off upstairs, Coach Payne and Mr. Carney, the team's manager, hustled them through a quick dinner and distributed copies of the program.

"I'm gonna give Angie a call first and then head up." Terrence Lake, a super heavyweight fighter and his temporary roommate for the weekend, held up his phone with a quick smile. Terrence then turned away and began dialing his fiancée before Oliver could respond. Holding back a grin at seeing such besotted behavior from a man who looked like he could bench press a Volkswagen, Oliver shrugged easily and tapped the "up" button on the wall panel.

The elevator dinged, and he stepped inside. He'd just pushed the button for the twelfth floor when he heard a quick "Wait up!"

Holding the doors open by reflex, Oliver watched, brows raised, as Derek Vance jogged into the lacquered wood-lined space. His headphones were on again, and Derek gave him a sidelong glance as he pushed the tenth-floor button.

"Thanks," Derek said, his lips tipped up in a brief smile.

Oliver returned a shy smile of his own. "You're welcome."

As the elevator began to move, Derek returned his gaze to his iPhone, and Oliver—god help him—couldn't keep his own eyes off of Derek.

Derek's cropped blond hair looked soft, and his broad shoulders were evident even under his slouchy blue hoodie. He watched as Derek's lips moved with whatever he was listening to on his phone. In the hush of the elevator,

Oliver expected to hear at least a hint of music or a bass line, but instead, he heard nothing.

Curious, he leaned a little closer, only to jump back when Derek's eyes flicked up to watch him with raised brows.

His face burning, Oliver ran a flustered hand through his tousled brown hair and gestured vaguely in Derek's direction. "I—ah… I was just—" Oliver coughed and cleared his throat when his voice pitched into another octave. "Listening to anything good?"

Derek had peeled off his headphones, which were now curled around his neck. Oliver didn't know why, but a faint blush showed under Derek's tanned skin when he said, "It's—it's nothing." He fiddled with the iPhone and shut it off, but not before Oliver could hear a faint *estoy bien, gracias* filter through the headset.

Brow furrowing, Oliver opened his mouth to ask about that, but Derek was already stepping out of the elevator.

"See you tomorrow," Derek called over his shoulder.

"Yeah… see you."

Oliver looked at his reflection in the mirrored elevator doors when they slid shut.

Spanish? Why is he learning Spanish?

From what Oliver had gathered in his last couple of years at SFE, Derek Vance wasn't in school; instead, he worked odd jobs in construction around his training and competition schedule. In kickboxing, he was good—really good—and actually had sponsors as an amateur fighter. In fact, there were whispers around the training center that Derek would go pro any day now, which would make him one of SFE's youngest professional fighters at the age of twenty-three. Rumor had it this Summit could be the tipping point for that decision.

Which still did nothing to explain why he'd be listening to a Spanish lesson.

Unabashedly curious, Oliver exited the elevator on the twelfth floor and slowly made his way down the hall, its swirl-printed carpet subtly lit by the golden sconces lining the walls.

His mind wouldn't let go of Derek. Derek and his smooth, tanned skin. Derek and his thickly muscled arms. Derek and his blue hoodie. Derek and his Spanish lessons.

C'mon, Oliver, is your first freaking competition tomorrow or what?! Get a grip!

Shaking his head at his wandering thoughts, Oliver let himself into the room and was busy unpacking his shaving kit when Terrence entered. Oliver resolved to put Derek from his mind for the rest of the night.

He was successful.

Mostly.

Really, he managed to sleep at least seven hours that night, and with so much rest for the competition, he should be unstoppable.

****

He was definitely not unstoppable at the competition… unless his face stopping his opponent's right cross counted towards that definition.

Oliver's competitive debut had been exciting, but short-lived. While he had made it through the first round in his super middleweight division, Murray Spode had been his second round opponent. Spode was well-known in amateur circles and had soundly trounced him, leaving Oliver a blossoming shiner across his left cheekbone as a memento for his time in Las Vegas.

Oliver touched his cheek gingerly and winced. The artificially cool air in the convention center-slash-ballroom helped ease the sting, but the underlying throbbing hadn't ceased since his match yesterday. Thankfully, the Summit's full schedule had kept him busy and distracted with the many events that he attended throughout the weekend. As they'd progressed through the competition's matches, though, the number of SFE fighters still in contention had slowly dwindled down to one: Derek Vance in the light heavyweight championship match.

The air was buzzing around the spacious room, and everyone's focus was centered on the mats in the middle. Cordoned off by waist-high barriers, there was an elevated ring with blue and red pads that matched the colors of those found at SFE, and the two fighters, together with their trainers and support teams, waited at the sidelines.

The elegant cream-and-white ballroom with its large chandelier in the center set an unlikely stage for the physical athleticism on display that weekend, and the air buzzed as the room slowly filled to capacity. As Oliver made his way through the milling crowd, he spotted the black and orange SFE training jackets near Derek in the far corner.

A plastic barricade separated the spectators from the official ring, and at one corner, three judges sat at a long table. Nearby, SFE's coordinated uniforms and training jackets presented a united face at the front of Derek's corner. They were one of the largest teams there, competing in nine different events, and the fact that Oliver was a part of this exclusive group caused a spark of pride to flare inside him. His days in the lab doing his experiments were always so solitary that this type of team achievement brought fulfillment on a whole different level.

"Hey, rookie!" Izzy's voice rang out over the excited hum in the room. Her dark head, which was streaked with pink, popped up above the crowd, and she motioned him over.

"Hi guys." Oliver gave them all a small wave, then raked his hand through his hair out of habit. He did kinda feel like the fresh green newbie this weekend, despite his matching black and orange track jacket.

"Oh… that's quite a souvenir you have there." Izzy's button nose scrunched up when she spotted the bruise on his cheekbone.

Oliver chuckled. "You should see the other guy."

"I think I did when they handed him the title belt," Evan, one of their middleweight fighters, snickered.

Izzy elbowed Evan, who winced. "Don't be a jerkface, E."

"I don't see you collecting any belts, either, big man." Terrence's voice was deep and amused.

"Yeah, well, none of us have. Except Derek, maybe," Evan grumbled while rubbing his side.

Oliver looked up towards Derek and saw his intent expression. At the Summit they competed in their uniform's kickboxing trousers with the suit top optional to show level of experience, and the shirts indicated whether the kickboxer fought under full-contact or semi-contact rules. Derek was an experienced fighter and stood topless in his protective helmet and gloves, an orange stripe running down the side of his black silk-satin pants. They always trained in T-shirts or tanks, so this was Oliver's first time seeing Derek in fighting attire. He drank in the sight of Derek's sculpted torso, the skin over his pecs stretched smooth and tight.

Coach Payne was speaking to Derek in an uncharacteristically controlled voice, his movements focused and intense as he ran through a few last minute

tips. Derek nodded, and when Coach Payne released his shoulders to exit the ring, Derek glanced over at the SFE group, his gaze catching Oliver's.

Oliver's mouth fell open, and his mind blanked. Derek's brows lifted before he nodded briefly, and Oliver finally figured out how to move long enough to wave back in greeting.

He blushed when Derek smiled back at him.

"Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the International Kickboxing Association's championship match in the light heavyweight division!" The master of ceremonies' voice boomed over the PA, and Oliver shifted to look towards the center of the ring. "This afternoon's match for the light heavyweight title features two fierce competitors who have proven their mettle here at the IKA's Amateur Kickboxing Pacific Summit. From Team Seattle Sakurasaru, at six feet tall and weighing 174 pounds, please welcome West Donahue!"

The ballroom rang out with applause with an especially vocal group in green and white training jackets shouting loudly in the far corner. A tall, dark-haired man in green and white kickboxing pants stepped forward to stand at the side of the announcer.

"And from Team San Francisco Elite, at five feet ten inches tall and weighing 172 pounds, please welcome Derek Vance!"

With a grin on his face, Oliver clapped loudly alongside the rest of SFE's team. Izzy's cheers echoed in his ears, and Patrick let loose a piercing whistle. Derek joined his opponent and the emcee at the center of the mats, where a referee in black also now stood.

As the referee went through the rules with the two fighters, Oliver sized up Derek and his opponent. West Donahue might have the height advantage, but Oliver knew that Derek packed a sizable punch, his lower center of gravity making it harder for someone to knock him off his feet. Derek's muscles were impressive without being bulky, and his light heavyweight class—heavier than Oliver's despite his own six feet in height—was just testament to Derek's discipline and dedication towards honing his physical strength.

Derek and West tapped gloves in the middle of the ring and stepped back. The bell rang loudly, and Oliver held his breath.

The two fighters approached the center, shuffling their feet and shifting their weight. Derek threw the first punch, a solid jab-cross combination that

landed on West's torso, and Oliver finally remembered to breathe. West quickly countered with a side kick, which Derek parried. They circled each other, exchanging blows, bobbing and weaving with grace and skill.

They moved so quickly that Oliver could hardly keep track of the punches and kicks landed versus blocked. The first round went by in a blur, and by the end of the second round, it was clear the two men were evenly matched. The combination of Derek's strength and agility was countered by West's height and reach.

In the minute-long break before the final round, Izzy nudged him and leaned over. "He's looking pretty good up there, isn't he?"

Oliver glanced up at Derek, whose golden skin glistened with sweat. Unlike his opponent, though, Derek's chest wasn't heaving, his breathing still fairly even despite the exertion. Watching the rise and fall, Oliver was distracted for a moment before he cleared his throat and looked back at Izzy. "Yeah, he's looking pretty good. I mean—I think he might be winning."

Izzy raised her brows, but didn't say anything. "Yep, that's what I was thinking." Her lips quirked up, and she turned to her other side to say something to Patrick.

Before Oliver had a chance to question that half-smile on her face, the bell rang, signaling the beginning of the third round. As Derek and West approached each other for the last time, the audience collectively leaned forward, each person eager to get a closer view of this final bout.

The punches and kicks flew, arms raised for blocks and legs stabbing out to seek contact. Even though Derek took an uppercut to the chin early in the three-minute round, he didn't go down and recovered quickly enough to land an impressive semi-circular kick in the next exchange. His final blow, a cross-counter to the jaw in response to West's quick jab, hit its mark just as the bell rang for the last time.

The match was finished, and because there hadn't been a clear winner, it would be up to the judges to determine the winner. Derek and West stood in the center with the referee between them while the crowd murmured as they all awaited the judges' decision.

"It's gotta be Derek," Izzy muttered under her breath. "They'd be crazy if they didn't vote that way."

Oliver silently agreed, his gaze alternating between the judges' table and Derek, whose expression was carefully blank and stoic under the intense

scrutiny. He’d removed his mouth guard, and his lips were parted as he took in breaths, the lights of the chandelier shining off of his short blond hair.

Finally, a series of clicks and soft thuds indicated the PA system was once again live.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the announcer stated. “The winner of the International Kickboxing Association’s Amateur Kickboxing Pacific Summit’s light heavyweight division, by a unanimous decision, is your new champion, Derek Vance!”

At the announcement, the referee lifted Derek’s arm in the air, and the room burst into applause. Oliver clapped and yelled, catching Izzy when she flailed sideways into him. They laughed together with the team, all of them cheering loudly.

Oliver looked up at Derek, and his heart stuttered in his chest.

Derek, Mr. Carefully-Blank-and-Stoic, was grinning, two perfect dimples bracketing his wide smile.

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Chapter 3

In Which Tequila is Diablo

The SFE celebration of Derek's win was jubilant, and, after many congratulatory toasts had been made over an elaborate buffet dinner, their group migrated to a hotel room party at the MGM Grand. A couple of fighters from Los Angeles's Iron Fist Kickboxing were hosting, and the suite was lavish and loaded. Despite having the most reason of all of them to join the festivities, though, Derek had bowed out after dinner, making excuses of an appointment to see a longtime friend.

From his vantage point on the suite's deck, Oliver looked out at the twinkling lights of the Strip while nursing his second Tanqueray and tonic.

"You doing okay there, Oliver?"

Terrence's voice broke into his thoughts, and Oliver glanced up to see that he was the subject of a concerned gaze.

"Yeah, I'm fine, but I might head out soon." Oliver gestured vaguely with his drink, his movement encompassing the spacious suite, the deck with its heated private pool, and the partygoers scattered throughout. "This whole Kardashians setup isn't really my thing," he said with a wry twist of his lips.

Terrence laughed easily. "Kardashians, man? Really?"

Oliver blushed and mumbled, "Hey, it was a clue on Jeopardy…" He looked up to see Terrence grinning, and Oliver chuckled a little at himself. "Okay, okay, and my friend Amanda might have made me watch an episode or two. She says that with her allergies she doesn't get to eat junk, so she should be able to watch it."

Terrence snorted a laugh. "Well, you do what you wanna do, man. I'm just gonna give Angie a call and then hang out a little more," he said as he took his cell phone out of his pocket. "Hey, if you leave now, you might even be able to catch that Kardashians show on TV tonight," he said with a grin.

"Oh, shut it, Terrence," Oliver said, but it lacked heat and was accompanied by a reluctant smile.

Terrence laughed. "Shutting it! Except I gotta talk to Angie." Terrence lifted his phone to his ear and grinned his shit-eating grin.

"I'll catch you back at the room, then." Oliver gave him a quick wave before he finished off his drink and wandered back into the suite. After setting his glass down in the small bar area, he managed to slip out of the room unnoticed.

Oliver made his way through the blinking and jingling chaos of the casino floor and stepped out into the cool autumn air. He'd been indoors all day and now welcomed the opportunity to walk back towards the north end of the Strip. Even at a quarter to midnight on a Sunday, the streets teemed with people, and he was struck again by the dichotomy between seeing Vegas from afar and actually experiencing it.

A group of girls in silk leis and high heels teetered past him, one of them wearing a blinking tiara and a sash. Someone blew a whistle and called out, "Hottie alert!"

Oliver looked around, and a short Asian woman yelled, "That's you, babes!" He met her gaze, and she winked cheekily before her friends dragged her off. She blew him a smacking kiss, and their group giggled down the street in the direction of the elevated crosswalks.

He shook his head and grinned. For all he knew, she could be a third grade teacher or an investment banker, but here, she was just another Vegas goer who was out having a good time. Oliver turned up the block to begin his walk back to Treasure Island only to stop in his tracks at the sight of a bold sign on the sidewalk.

His brows shot up.

THIS WEEKEND ONLY! Halloween Hedonism at SPIN – The Strip's Only LGBT Club!

Doors open at 9PM!

His gaze followed the direction of the arrow to see a small two-story building tucked in between the MGM Grand and the casino next door. The cream stucco façade was pristine, revealing nothing of what could be found inside, while a silver and black sign lit up the word "SPIN" above the wide doorway. To the side, a few latecomers were lined up for entry.

Oliver found his feet moving of their own will. As he approached, he could hear a faint bass rhythm underlying a dance beat that came and went each time someone opened the doors. When he stood a few feet from the entrance, Oliver bit his lip, knowing it was decision time.

On the one hand, if the suite party wasn't really his thing, then SPIN might as well have been his attempt to colonize the moon with Barbie dolls. On the other hand, Kevin would die—or at the very least go spastic with glee—if Oliver were to do some of the requested "recon" there.

And you can't say the opportunity hasn't presented itself, said a voice in his head that sounded suspiciously like Amanda's. *Just go live a little.*

He nodded to himself slowly.

Right. How often am I in Vegas, anyway? I can just check it out.

Decision made, Oliver approached the line with a more confident step and took his place behind… a heavily-muscled man in a spandex police uniform. *What's that about?* Brow furrowed, Oliver reached out and, after a moment's hesitation, tapped him on the shoulder.

Oliver cleared his throat. "Excuse me?"

The dark-haired man turned around, and Oliver saw kind eyes behind a plain black half-mask. A friendly smile stood at odds with the menacing brow line that featured prominently on his face. "Yes?"

"Is there… is there some kind of dress code tonight?" Oliver returned an embarrassed smile, knowing that he sounded completely out of place, yet somehow, for some reason, not really caring at all.

Blame it on Vegas.

The "officer" chuckled. "Yeah, babe. Halloween, y'know?" He glanced at Oliver's jeans and black polo shirt. "Ah. Well, you *could* just wear that, but you'll probably be the only one. Costumes at SPIN are really popular, and guests dress to impress just on the regular Masquerade Nights. With Halloween, we're going all out!" He paused for a moment before leaning in. "Don't worry, though," he whispered conspiratorially. "They usually have some stuff you can buy at the door."

Oliver nodded, relieved. "Great. Thanks, man."

"C'mon, Jerry, let's head inside." A tall, red-haired man in a sexy jailbird costume—*who knew they made those?*—leaned over, his face hidden by a matching black domino. He gave Oliver a quick smile before tugging the handcuffs that were fastened around his and Jerry's wrists.

"Sorry, gotta go. See you on the dance floor!" Jerry flashed him a smile and followed his jailbird past the ropes.

Oliver moved forward to take their spot at the front of the line.

Jesus.

Sexy Jailbird. Spandex Cop.

Oliver swallowed thickly past a lump born of both excitement and trepidation.

What have I gotten myself into?

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Oliver adjusted the horn on his head and had second, third, and fourth thoughts about his plan to live a little his last night in Vegas.

Damn you, Amanda.

He took a fortifying gulp of his gin and tonic, then looked up to survey the room.

Because *crap*.

He was a fucking unicorn.

Repeat: he was a *fucking unicorn*.

Apparently arriving late to Masquerade Night meant the only costumes left for purchase were the ones nobody really wanted to wear. His options had been limited, to say the least. He could've been, in no particular order, a tree (complete with a pair of spandex briefs that caused a "branch" to protrude in the area of his dick), a Hugh Hefner-esque playboy (*ugh, seriously?*), or a Raggedy Ann doll (*yes, Ann, not even Andy*).

And while the Borat mankini *had* been less expensive, at least with the unicorn costume he could keep his pants on.

Oliver coughed and shifted a little where he stood. Because, while he was grateful to have kept his pants on, he had actually been convinced to lose his shirt.

Oliver's lips quirked up at the memory of the two women who had played dress up with him as their semi-willing victim. He'd never admit it, but their enthusiasm had been a little fun, actually.

He'd stepped up to the counter just inside the doors and paid his ten-dollar cover charge. After taking the crisp bill from him with her purple-polished fingers, the cashier, whose name tag read "Monique", had looked him up and

down, taking in his nondescript jeans and polo shirt with a gaze made even more feline by her cat’s eye contacts. Her dark skin was flawless, and a pair of furry cat ears peeked up from behind her heavy bangs.

“You gonna wear that inside, hon?” she’d asked, her expression doubtful, but her voice not unkind.

Oliver had bit his lip, shaking his head slowly as his gaze darted of its own accord to the sales booth that had caught his eye.

Monique perked up, her Cheshire cat grin completely appropriate for her attire.

“Ooooh, okay. Natasha! Hey, girl!” She leaned back to call out to the brunette woman in Minnie Mouse ears who was manning the booth next to hers. “A-plus prime comin’ at ya, darlin’.”

Natasha looked up from her phone screen and, upon seeing Oliver, immediately set it down on the counter. Her mouth formed an “O” of excitement, and she glanced at Monique before looking back at Oliver.

“Ooooh. This. This is gonna be *fun*,” she’d said, a gleam in her eye.

When she’d shown him his admittedly very limited choices, he’d taken a deep breath, squinted his eyes, and pointed at the plastic package with the picture of a shirtless man bearing a golden horn on his forehead. Natasha and Monique had shared a conspiring grin and set to work.

They’d even convinced him that his costume would only be complete if they drew a little “cutie mark”—whatever that meant—on him.

“Uh… where?”

“Your butt.”

“What?”

He’d jumped when Monique had grabbed his right ass cheek.

“Right there, hon.”

“Um, no. Nope. Not happening.”

He’d drawn the line at losing his pants, but after they’d pouted, he’d acquiesced to a little heart on his chest. The gleeful look in their eyes when they’d pulled two tubes of lipstick out of their makeup bags had been worth it.

So here he was, twenty minutes later: shirtless, glittery gold unicorn horn perched atop his head, pink-and-red heart on his pec, and a giant rainbow-

colored horse's tail attached to his rear via a belt loop on his jeans. The girls had even provided an iridescent white half-mask to go with the Masquerade Night theme.

Oliver sighed.

Sexy Jailbird and Spandex Cop were looking a hell of a lot more attractive as costumes right about now.

Of course, he'd made a beeline for the bar to acquire some liquid courage. It wasn't every day that he found himself shirtless among mixed—and, from some of the looks he was getting, interested—company.

Interested? In a six-foot-tall pony? Really?

Oliver shook his head and swallowed down the rest of his drink. With the glass in hand, he leaned back with his elbows on the bar counter to look out over his surroundings.

The air was surprisingly temperate, the slight coolness of the blowing AC mediating the heat generated by the bodies that were sweating and grinding on the dance floor to a hip-hop-infused electronic beat. The room was dark and large with a double-high ceiling and stairwells at each corner. At the top of the stairs was a balcony-like second story from which club goers could observe the dance floor. Dimly-lit hallways led off the main floor towards destinations unknown.

Oliver took it all in and made a decision.

Well, he was here. And after paying an extra twenty bucks to ensure he fit into the costumed theme, he was damn well gonna do his best to enjoy himself.

Only… he might need a little more Dutch courage first.

Oliver turned to face the counter and was about to signal the bartender when he felt a hand at his (bare!) waist.

"Dance with me."

The words were just audible over the hip house music, and, startled, he looked over and saw the owner of that low voice through the strobe lights and haze of the club.

A slightly shorter man whose face was hidden by a cowboy hat and a dark half-mask stood next to him, his hand still curved around Oliver's waist. Even this close, the dim lighting meant Oliver couldn't make out much of his features beyond a pair of shapely lips, but holy hell was his body stacked. Thick

muscles layered his shoulders, his biceps and arms toned and roped with obvious strength, and a brown leather vest covered his otherwise bare torso.

Oliver's mouth went slack with want.

He remembered the banner from the airport stating that what happened here stayed here.

That slogan? *It felt like a promise.*

Coughing, Oliver finally found his voice and, somewhere, some bravado.

"Um… drink first."

That sensual mouth quirked up at the corner. He licked his lips, and Oliver caught a flash of metal by the glow of the club's blinking lights. *Tongue ring. He has a tongue ring*, Oliver's libido shouted.

The masked stranger nodded and turned to get the bartender's attention, telling him, "Two shots of Cuervo."

Shit.

Tequila.

After a traumatizing experience during his sophomore year at Cal, Oliver had avoided the stuff because *tequila was Diablo.*

"Uh…"

His companion turned to him and tilted his head inquiringly.

Vegas, Ollie. Your last night here. If not now, then when?

Oliver swallowed down his protest. "Um, nothing." He gave a half-smile as the bartender plunked two overflowing shot glasses on the counter. "By the way, I'm Ol—"

"No names, Sparkles," the mystery man interrupted, his masked gaze flicking up to Oliver's glittery horn. "Otherwise, what's the point of the costume?"

"Right… Jesse James."

The cowboy smirked, but didn't correct him. He leaned in instead, whispering, "I hope what they say about horn size is true…"

Oliver's cheeks burned. He felt about twelve feet out of his depth, and the shivery feeling in his stomach was either excitement or terror. He hadn't decided which yet. As he took the salt shaker from the masked stranger, feeling

strong fingertips brush against his own and linger there, Oliver was inclined to think the former.

The tequila went down like battery acid, but the fuzzy, warm effect of it, combined with his evening of successive gin and tonics, was almost immediate. He wasn't sloppy by any measure; it wasn't as though he couldn't see straight or anything. Rather, the alcohol flowed through his body, leaving him just a tad bit… uninhibited.

When impatient hands tugged him towards the dance floor a moment later, Oliver followed that set of broad shoulders and shapely ass without a backwards glance.

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"Oh god… *fuck*."

Oliver cursed as he arched his neck, his head tipping back against the wall. They'd found their way down one of the numerous hallways that led off the second floor balcony area.

JJ (as in "Jesse James", as Oliver had come to think of his mysterious cowboy) murmured indistinctly against his pulse, the metal bar in his tongue scraping against Oliver's skin.

Okay, so perhaps Oliver was slightly more than just a "tad bit" uninhibited at that point.

But fuck it, he was in Vegas, and maybe their trip to the dance floor had just ended up being a five minute detour on their way to a dark corner upstairs. Sure, it was kinda slutty—*maybe just a little?*—but again, it was Vegas, and he was taking Sin City's slogan to heart. Besides, Oliver wasn't planning to see hot-stranger-in-the-cowboy-outfit ever again, and it wasn't like he was some blushing virgin saving his metaphorical maidenhead for a mythical unicorn.

He snorted at the thought when he remembered his costume.

Well, you know what I mean.

JJ glanced up at the sound, his glare evident even in the dim lighting and through the half-mask he wore.

Oliver looked down at him. JJ's features were masked under the costume and darkness, but the faint glow trickling around the corners of the never-ending hallway picked up a soft sheen off the smooth skin of his biceps. The cowboy hat had fallen back on its string, catching under his chin, and his hair—

lightish brown or maybe blond?—was shadowy in the darkness. JJ ground against him, his vest-covered torso and denim-clad hips pressing close, and Oliver groaned.

No matter. Oliver's eyes slid shut as he reached for JJ. *Whatever color it is, however he looks, it doesn't matter because he feels so goddamn incredible.*

Their lips met, and the kiss swiftly moved from caressing touches to sharp nips and wet tongues. It was Oliver's first encounter with a tongue ring, and so far he'd give it a ten out of ten, would recommend, would *definitely* bang. Oliver reached up to cup a strong jawline, stubble prickling his palms, while JJ's hands slid up his sides. Oliver gasped when JJ's thumbs rubbed teasing circles around his nipples.

"Sensitive?" There was a smile in that husky voice, and JJ didn't wait for a response. He ducked his head to lick at Oliver's right nipple while his fingertip continued to brush against the other. Oliver groaned, his hands sliding behind to sift through JJ's soft waves of hair.

JJ moved away and blew on the stiff, wet peak. A shiver ran down Oliver's spine at the same time the press of his cock against the seam of his jeans grew unbearable. Oliver arched his back, trying to get closer somehow, and JJ chuckled darkly, breaths puffing softly against Oliver's chest. His hands moved to grip Oliver's hips, pressing them back against the wall in an unexpected display of strength.

Oliver bit back a moan. *Fuck, that's hot.*

Tacitly obeying, Oliver stopped, even letting his masked cowboy move his arms so that Oliver's palms lay flat against the wall. Finally, JJ resumed his movement downwards. He licked a stripe down Oliver's side, coming to center to tickle his belly button with his tongue. When he followed Oliver's dark happy trail south and paused at the edge of his jeans, Oliver could only choke out a soft *"please."*

Oliver's breath grew ragged when JJ finally unbuttoned his fly. The touch of those strong fingers on his dick almost undid him, and he couldn't hold back a moan as JJ eased his now-hard cock up and out of Oliver's standard white briefs.

JJ's fingers curled around his length, and Oliver thrust into his fist, pleasure racing through him. He was just thinking, *handjobs, hell yeah—I'm so on board with that*, when the feel of moist, wet heat enveloped his cock, taking him by surprise.

He bit his lip to muffle his cry, but even in his distraction, the noise seemed loud in the deserted nook they'd found. The intense warmth spread, going down and down until it engulfed his cock whole, JJ's lips meeting his hand where it was wrapped around the base.

Fucking unbelievable.

Oliver watched as he slowly pulled off and felt the bar in JJ's tongue trail along the underside of his cock, leaving his erection cool with wetness in the open air. JJ daubed at the head softly, causing Oliver to gasp. After blowing lightly on the moist tip, JJ touched his tongue to Oliver's cockhead again, keeping it there to wiggle it under the foreskin that had pulled back, revealing a head whose shine was visible even in the low light of the hallway.

JJ kept one hand around the base while he sucked at the head, teasing with licks that were alternately delicate, then strong. Based on the harsh breaths that brushed against his sensitive cockhead and the movement of JJ's other arm, Oliver guessed JJ's right hand was busy stroking himself.

So incredibly hot.

Oliver's climax was growing inside of him, building up to an explosion. When JJ ducked his head to mouth at his balls, Oliver panted and curled his hands against the sturdy wall, the textured stucco rough against his fingertips. "I'm close," he warned.

In response, JJ bobbed up and down on his cockhead once more, his mouth utterly wicked as he swirled his tongue around the tip. At last, he stood up, the stroking hand at his open fly proving Oliver's suspicions correct.

Oliver whimpered at the loss of friction on his throbbing cock, but quickly found relief when JJ lined up his own erection against Oliver's. Oliver brought one hand forward to cover them both, and they stroked in unison.

"Fuck… *fuck*," JJ kept saying, the words punching out of him with each strong tug.

"Yes, yes, oh god," Oliver cried out, his eyes squeezing shut as he felt the pressure build.

In the darkness, Oliver could only feel, and JJ's cock was thick and solid under Oliver's palm. Their lengths slid along each other, slippery with precome and hot with friction and arousal.

"Jesus Christ, I'm gonna come," JJ whispered harshly, and he began to twist his wrist at the top of his strokes.

Oliver's head dropped back against the wall, mouth falling open on a gasp, the sensations overwhelming him until he couldn't stop tipping over the edge.

Oliver fell into his orgasm until he was suddenly floating, spilling all over their hands and his belly, his come striping hot streaks across his skin. With a shuddering breath, JJ groaned and came along with him, too.

His breathing still harsh, Oliver glanced between them and saw that, at the angle they had been stroking, it seemed both loads had ended up on Oliver's bare skin. He supposed, with a dazed practicality, that at least the cleanup would be easy. Oliver's lids fluttered shut, and he stifled a post-orgasmic giggle at how silly that must sound.

When something brushed against his pec, Oliver opened his eyes again to see JJ kissing the little "cutie mark" heart he'd forgotten the girls had drawn on him. A soft smile spread across Oliver's lips at the unexpectedly tender moment. JJ looked up and his own lips quirked into a smile, a dimple appearing at the corner of his mouth.

Oliver squinted in the darkness. *Something about that…*

But then JJ was unfurling their hands and stepping away. After zipping himself back into his jeans, he stripped off his vest and smoothed it gently over Oliver's abs and chest, cleaning off what he could of the come that clung there. JJ fastened up Oliver's pants, then tucked the vest under his arm and surveyed Oliver's bare skin.

Oliver was about to thank him, but JJ leaned in to kiss him on the lips, effectively silencing his words.

"Till next time," his cowboy murmured when he pulled back.

JJ turned and walked back down the hallway, the outline of his bare shoulders broad and muscular in the faint light.

Oliver tilted his head at the sight.

Really, is there something familiar about…

Oliver shook his head at himself.

No, no, it's impossible.

Between his earlier encounter with tequila, the fuzzy post-orgasmic high still wrapped around his brain, and the dim lighting in the hallway, it was clear that his mind was definitely playing tricks on him.

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Chapter 4

It's a Scientific Fact That Morning Afters Arrive Two Days Too Early

After the nonstop drinking at the celebration dinner, the suite party, and SPIN the night before, Oliver's Monday was, to say the least, rather painful, and that had nothing to do with the colorful bruise on his cheekbone. The day began with a perky "Good morning!" from the hotel front desk, and that wake-up call for the flight back to San Francisco arrived a millennium too soon.

When Oliver had rolled out of bed to stumble towards the shower, Terrence, who had just walked into the room with a towel draped around his neck, had given him an odd look. That swimming feeling in Oliver's head had been an unfortunately familiar experience for him.

Because tequila?

Tequila was *Diablo*.

With the help of his friends Water and Coffee, Oliver somehow made it through both the morning and the flight back. Upon turning on his phone again at SFO, he could only thank whatever miracle had made his Ethics in Science TA blast a class-wide email canceling his only discussion section that afternoon. While it didn't mean he could skip his training session at SFE on Monday evening, Oliver at least had a chance to rest when he got back to his apartment.

He would need that rest for the sparring session at SFE because Derek?

Derek was riding him *hard*.

"Oliver, c'mon, I know you can kick higher. C'mon, hit me!"

Derek's words of encouragement fueled a small fire in Oliver, and he made an effort to stay sharp. He'd never sparred with the team captain before, so when Derek had paired everyone off and left Oliver for himself, he'd been a little surprised… and intimidated.

He didn't want to screw up, but he also wasn't anywhere close to the top of his game that evening. To make things worse, it was obvious Derek was still in peak form even after having gone through a full set of competition matches within the last forty-eight hours.

There's only one way to explain it, Oliver's tired mind provided. *Superhuman.*

In the regulation-sized ring where the team captain typically sparred at the side of the room, they traded unevenly matched jabs and crosses, kicks and roundhouses, until Derek had him up against the ropes. Derek pressed into him for a moment longer than necessary, his breath ghosting against Oliver’s cheek. Oliver’s heart pounded, and the smell of honest sweat drifted towards him before Derek stepped back.

“Again.”

So they sparred again, and Oliver tried his damndest to keep up. By the end of the hour, Oliver felt like he’d done battle with an eighteen wheeler.

He managed to stay on his feet through a blissfully hot shower afterwards, agreeing to something when someone asked him a question through the frosted shower curtain. His brain wasn’t fully checked in today, which should really be known as the longest day in the history of ever, but it sounded vaguely like “womp-wuh-womp tonight?” He’d just ask about it when he got out.

The steam must’ve cleared away that reminder, though, because he was taken off guard when he pushed through the studio doors on his way out into the cool San Francisco air.

He’d just caught sight of Kevin, Amanda, and Jin, who were parked and waiting a few storefronts down in Kevin’s trusty old Toyota Corolla, when someone laid a hand on his shoulder.

“Hey, you coming with?”

A woman’s voice broke into his thoughts, and Oliver spun around to see Izzy, Derek, Patrick, and a few other SFE fighters spilling out of the glass double doors. They were all in casual dress, their gym bags slung over their shoulders.

“What?” Oliver asked, brow furrowing. Was there a team meeting he hadn’t heard about?

“Derek said you were joining us,” Terrence said. Next to him, Izzy nodded, her expression expectant.

Oliver stared at Derek, who returned an inscrutable look. “I… don’t remember that.”

Izzy huffed good-naturedly before explaining. “We were gonna grab drinks at the Star to celebrate Derek’s big win at the Summit,” she said, her head tilting in the direction of the bar down the street. A mischievous look flitted

across her face, and she grinned at him, nudging him with her hips. "C'mon, Oliver, you know you wanna. They have that retro jukebox, and something tells me those hips don't lie," she teased, putting her hands on his hips and wiggling them in time with hers.

Oliver flushed, his unruly thoughts turning to his spin on the dance floor just last night. Close by, he heard someone let out a strangled noise, and Oliver glanced at the group quizzically before turning back to Izzy.

"Sorry, guys," Oliver said, including them all in his response as he gently peeled her hands off his hips. Between sleep deprivation, the Diablo he'd encountered last night that went by the name of tequila, and the sparring workout with Derek that he'd just survived, he was running on fumes. Thank god he had an excuse to skip out on socializing tonight. "I already have plans with my friends," he said with an apologetic smile.

Izzy pouted. "Awww, you sure?"

"Yeah, sorry. Next time, okay?" he offered, meaning every word of it. After all, the invitation was appreciated, just not the timing.

"Alright, I'm holding you to that," Izzy said, wagging her finger at him.

Oliver smiled at her, trying to soften the rejection. "I wouldn't expect anything less."

They turned to part ways, the SFE group chatting and Oliver heading towards Kevin's blue Toyota, when he remembered something and turned around. "Oh! And congrats again, Derek."

Derek looked back and caught his gaze. His lips quirked up in a way that caused something to flip over in Oliver's stomach. "Thanks."

Oliver smiled and ducked his head. "Well, have fun. If the jukebox plays, then show 'em your moves," he joked, then panicked because what the hell did he think he was doing, kidding around with no-nonsense, Summit champion, and team captain Derek Vance?

Derek's gaze raked over Oliver. "It'd be easier with a partner," Derek said under his breath before looking back up with a half-smile on his face. "See you."

Oliver's eyes went wide. *What the…?* He was left speechless as Derek jogged over to catch up with the rest of the team, tossing one last glance over his shoulder at Oliver.

Brows inching upwards, Oliver wasn’t sure what to make of their exchange or if his fuzzy-brained-and-tired state simply had created the confusion. He shook his head at himself and trotted towards his friends, who apparently had witnessed the whole thing.

Amanda rolled down the passenger’s side window, and Oliver imagined the expressions on their faces were likely a match for his own.

“Hey, Ollie,” she called out from the passenger’s seat. Her grin fell away when she got a closer look at him. “Ohmigod, what happened to your eye?”

“Hey guys, sorry for the wait.” He entered through the rear passenger door and took his seat. “Oh this? Just a little souvenir from my competitive debut,” Oliver said ruefully as he touched his cheekbone.

“Poor Ollie,” Amanda said, the concern evident in her voice.

“Nah, it’s okay. Hardly feel it now.”

“Hey, no worries on the wait—we had plenty of entertainment,” Jin said from the spot next to him.

Kevin finally found his voice. “Uh, yeah,” he said, slowly turning around to face the backseat. “What was that guy…?”

Oliver shook his head. “I don’t even know.”

“But it looked like he…”

“Seriously, guys, I have no clue, and I’m kinda dead on my feet.”

Amanda leaned around to glance at him and clucked sympathetically. “Yeah, no more questions for Ollie. I’m gonna venture a guess that whatever you’ve got is gonna need a Double-Double and chocolate shake to set things right.”

“Destination, In-N-Out. I’m on it,” Kevin confirmed as he started up the car.

“You’re not feeling well? Did you catch something while you were in Vegas?” Jin asked, a concerned frown flitting across his face. “Man, that sucks balls.”

At the phrasing that unintentionally brought up a recent such memory, Oliver felt his cheeks burn. “What? No, I—I didn’t—I mean,” he stammered, trying to come up with a decent explanation. He hadn’t necessarily caught something… unless one counted the incredibly hot cowboy he’d somehow

managed to land. As he searched for another explanation, though, his mind unfortunately was not cooperating.

Amanda whipped her head around and pierced him with an assessing look. Her eyes went wide, and she crowed, "Ohhhh, I know what this is." Her expression was equal parts impossibly smug and salaciously gleeful.

Oliver groaned, half-afraid of what might come out of her mouth, yet knowing it was a freight train he would never be able to stop.

"What?" Kevin asked as he steered the car out of the Mission District and in the direction of Fisherman's Wharf.

"Don't answer that," Oliver told her in a half-hearted attempt to stop the train, anyway.

Amanda steamrolled over him, practically bouncing off the cloth upholstery. In fact, her seatbelt might have been the only thing preventing her from flying out of the open sunroof. "Ollie's not sick, he's just exhausted." She paused deliberately before continuing. "*Sex-exhausted*," she stage-whispered-slash-announced.

Kevin's squeal could probably be heard in Oregon. "Whaaaaat? I knew it! *I knew it!* Spill, Ols, every juicy detail. Did you or did you not save a horse and ride a cowboy?"

At the memory of his masked companion's costume, Oliver choked on thin air and then broke out into uncontrollable laughter.

There was a chorus of *what*, *huh*, and *c'mon, tell!*

They were pulling into a parking space a block away from the In-N-Out when Oliver finally recovered long enough to recount his unlikely tale.

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It seemed the answer to tequila was ten hours of sleep.

By late Tuesday morning, Oliver felt human again. He made it through his two lectures and lab section intact, and his senior thesis experiment was actually cooperating for the first time since he'd begun working on it at the beginning of the semester.

Unlike a lot of his peers, Oliver had no intention of going straight into medical school after college; instead, he was hoping to get hands-on experience in the field first. His project on gene therapy for the treatment of cancers was an

established enough topic already, but he planned to apply the approach to animals and, eventually, veterinary medicine.

Ever since the news of their dog Rafi's illness and untimely death had broken his heart in freshman year, Oliver had been driven to find a path to help in some way—any way—that he could. Cancer was a horrifying thief that had stolen Rafi from them far too soon, and it was only when his family was exploring the limited options for care that he had realized the sheer lack of research and data supporting cancer treatments for pets.

Oliver tried to stay active in the field on a personal level by volunteering and keeping current on the latest pet and veterinary news. With his soft spot for creatures big and small, he looked forward to his weekly play sessions with the critters at a local rescue shelter. He was on his way there Tuesday afternoon when he heard a friendly greeting.

"Hey, Oliver!"

He turned to see Izzy approaching him from down the street with a wide smile on her face. She looked sporty with her blue yoga pants, a white windbreaker, and a San Francisco Giants baseball cap pulled over her long pink-and-black ponytail.

"Izzy, hey! What's up?" He waited for her just outside the whitewashed entryway to Rufio's Rescue, which was decorated with orange and black streamers in honor of Halloween in two days' time.

She gave him a half-hug in greeting, then pulled back to tip her hat up a little. "Not much," she said, squinting into the sun with a smile. "Heading back to the BART station, that's all."

"Oh yeah, I didn't think this was your usual spot. What're you doing out here in Berkeley?"

"Just lunch with a friend," she said with a vague gesture behind her.

"Cool." He smiled and turned towards the entrance, putting his hand on the door. "Well, I'm gonna—"

"We missed you at the Star last night," Izzy said quickly.

Oliver stopped mid-push. "Really?" he asked, unaccountably flattered. He was the newbie on the team, after all, so to be included so easily as part of the group meant a lot to him. "Thanks, it looked like a lot of fun. I'm sorry I couldn't make it—I wasn't feeling all that great yesterday, actually."

“Awww, well, are you feeling any better?” Her gaze flicked to the bruise that had at least started to fade into a closer-to-skin-tone yellow.

Oliver smiled reassuringly. “Yeah, this thing doesn’t hurt anymore, and I’m feeling pretty great. Honestly, it was nothing a good night’s sleep couldn’t cure last night. I might even see about a rematch with Derek to try to redeem myself after our Monday session. Don’t want the team captain to think he’s carrying dead weight,” Oliver said with a small chuckle. He did his best to ignore the butterflies he had at the idea of actually approaching Derek.

Izzy’s mouth tipped up into a smile. “I’m sure he’d be happy to oblige.”

“Did you guys have fun last night?”

“It was so much fun,” she said, grinning. “Derek got us all a round of shots, and then we sang along to some old ’N Sync stuff on the jukebox.”

Oliver laughed because he couldn’t begin to imagine Derek singing along to cheesy boy band music. It just didn’t compute. “Well, I’d definitely love to see that. Next time you guys go out, I’ll be there, I promise.”

“You’d better—I haven’t forgotten!” Izzy said with a teasing scold. “You should come out with us tomorrow after sparring. We’re hitting up Halloween karaoke at the Star.”

“Aye, aye, ma’am,” Oliver said, giving her a small salute as he headed inside. “See you tomorrow!”

“Bye, Oliver!”

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Chapter 5

In It to Win It

"Better. Much better, Oliver," Derek said as they both straightened up after their latest series of exercises. They each faced a heavy kick bag at the perimeter of the training studio, Derek first demonstrating a move, which Oliver would then repeat. Derek swiped his forearm over his brow and smiled at him.

Oliver flushed from the compliment and the attention, pleased to have made a decent showing tonight. Sparring hour was over, and they'd taken off most of the protective gear worn for that session. However, Derek had asked him to stay afterwards to run through some of the moves on which Oliver had lost points on his Summit scoring sheet. Thus, with Coach Payne's blessing to stay late, they'd begun some punch and kick drills while everyone else had filed out.

"Hey, you guys coming to karaoke night?" Izzy called out from the entryway to the locker room. She had on jeans and a jacket already, her bag dangling over her shoulder.

"Nah, you go ahead," Derek said with a glance at Oliver. "We'll be there after."

Izzy shrugged. "Alrighty, suit yourself." She disappeared back down the long hallway that would lead out into the lobby. The sound of conversation was just audible until the group left the training center, and after that, there was just quiet.

For some reason, Oliver's pulse quickened when he realized they were well and truly alone. Derek was watching him with an enigmatic look, and Oliver felt unaccountably nervous all of a sudden.

Stop it. Stop. It. Nothing to be nervous about. Nothing.

"So, I heard about Monday's 'N Sync concert. Are you gonna be singing some Backstreet Boys tonight? Maybe a little One Direction?" Oliver asked with an uneasy chuckle as he rushed to fill the silence.

Derek's lips quirked up, and he stepped closer, slowly closing the distance. "I might be more of a Boyz II Men kind of guy."

"Oh?" Oliver's voice came out squeaky. "Stuff like 'Motownphilly' or 'Water Runs Dry'? Classic, man. Classic," Oliver said, nodding his head.

Derek cleared his throat and said in a low voice, "I was thinking more along the lines of 'Hey, Lover'." He started humming the chorus with a half-smile on his lips, and Oliver jolted when he remembered the lyrics about a "crush".

Shit.

Ugh. No, no, no. He can't know about my stupid crush. He can't. No, no, it's not possible.

When Derek didn't stop after a few notes, Oliver flushed fiery red and broke eye contact. "Quit horsing around," Oliver mumbled, moving to grab his towel from where it hung on one of the horizontal bars on the wall. He stood by the stacked mats and wiped the sweat off his brow.

"You should know I like horsing around. Especially with ponies," Derek said, his voice much closer than Oliver expected.

Ponies?

Um.

What the actual fuck?

Alarmed, Oliver made to turn around, but Derek pushed his body close, his torso flush against Oliver's back. Oliver tipped forward, bracing himself on his forearms against the stack of mats as Derek crowded him. "Except I kind of miss that colorful tail of yours," Derek whispered into his ear, a hand brushing against Oliver's waist.

Oliver's eyes went wide, and he flushed hot and cold. The heat of Derek's body lit up his skin at every point of contact.

No.

What?!

No.

Fuck.

No, it's impossible.

No. Fucking. Way.

I don't believe it.

He must have said that last one out loud because Derek spun him around, keeping Oliver in place with his palms on his shoulders. "What's there to believe?" Derek asked, his thumbs lightly caressing Oliver's skin.

Derek's lips quirked up into a smile, and Oliver stared.

Studying that mouth up close for this length of time, it… well, it might not have been so impossible to believe.

His breath hitched.

Holy shit.

Just this weekend that mouth had been wrapped around—

The thought cut off when Derek covered his lips with his own. *Jesus Christ, that confirms it.* Oliver's lids fluttered shut on a short moan. He wouldn't forget those lips or that tongue ring—*shit, the tongue ring, god it felt good*—any time this decade.

Oliver's body got on board a step ahead of his brain, and he pressed up against Derek. Without breaking the kiss, Derek shifted to grasp his waist, his thigh slipping between Oliver's legs. The friction caused Oliver to moan, and his head tipped back as he took in a shaky breath.

When Derek traced kisses along his jaw line, his hands sliding under Oliver's blue Cal T-shirt, Oliver finally found his train of thought.

"Wait, how did you—"

He stopped short when Derek lifted his head, the interruption bringing a glare to his face that was definitely familiar. That look spoke volumes.

Oliver coughed and nodded, mock business-like. "Right. Fuck now, talk later, got it."

The smirky little side smile that Derek gave him at those words almost made the embarrassment he felt at saying them worth it.

Almost.

And then Derek was peeling off his grey tank, then Oliver's own T-shirt, those strong hands coming up to trace lines across the muscles of his back, and Oliver stopped caring about what he'd said. Oliver returned the kiss, his lips slotting against Derek's like they were made for each other.

Derek pulled him close and shifted them sideways. With a sigh, Oliver went with the movement, lost in the tangle of their mouths and tongues, until his back hit the horizontal bars lining the far wall of the training center. He grunted softly at the touch of the cool wood against his back.

"What… what do you want to do?" Oliver asked, breathless. His hands smoothed over the warm skin of Derek's shoulders, and he watched Derek's

face, still incredulous that he was here in this moment with him. Those beautiful eyes were heavy-lidded with desire, the mosaic of colors nearly lost to the darkness of his pupils.

Derek gave him a look that made Oliver shiver. "I—" Derek started, his voice low, "I want to fuck you."

Oliver's brows shot up at the same time his cock went rock hard. "You—I—wow, okay, um," he stuttered. "God, my dick loves that idea, but we don't have…"

He trailed off when Derek unzipped the pocket on his nylon sweats to pull out a condom and a packet of lube.

"You… you just carry those around," Oliver choked out, fascinated.

"Since Sunday, yeah."

When Derek lifted a questioning brow, it was all Oliver could do to nod. He swallowed hard before saying, "Okay."

Derek's lips turned up in a breathtaking smile, his hands moving down Oliver's arms. "Good," Derek whispered into a kiss, his fingers lacing with Oliver's. His grip was firm, and Oliver watched wide-eyed as Derek lifted their arms above shoulder level, fitting Oliver's fingers around one of the horizontal bars near his head.

"So good," Derek repeated, dropping another kiss onto Oliver's parted lips. "Now you hold on," Derek instructed, smoothing his hands over Oliver's fingers, "for less talk, more *this*." He reached down and pushed beneath the waistband of Oliver's sweats, palming and rubbing his hard length through the press of his protective compression shorts.

Oliver thrust into the possessive hold, his heart racing when Derek moved to strip him of his pants and shorts. Oliver's dick was hard, suffocating inside the tight training gear, and the feel of the cool air in the kickboxing center signified freedom. Derek jacked him a few times, his palm cupping the foreskin around the head at the top of each pull, which had Oliver gasping by the time Derek removed his hand.

Derek hooked his thumbs into his waistband and quirked an eyebrow. "You like that?" he asked with a slight smirk as he pulled off his own sweats and a white athletic supporter. At least seven inches of thick, veiny cock bobbed free, the flared head angling in the direction of a circular dragon tattoo that rested on Derek's left hip.

Nodding, Oliver stared at Derek's cock. *Christ, that looks good.* Now that he could see Derek in the full light, he knew his dick was easily the biggest he'd seen in person in his limited experience.

A half-smile on his face, Derek took himself in hand and stroked, leaning forward to kiss Oliver deeply. His other palm curled around the back of Oliver's neck, his grip firm yet gentle. The metal bar piercing Derek's tongue slid across Oliver's lips, teasing him and exploring the depths of his mouth.

Swallowing hard, Oliver spoke up. "I—it's been a while for me."

Derek glanced at him, the soft expression on his face taking Oliver by surprise. "For me, too." He brushed his lips tenderly against Oliver's mouth. "We'll go slow."

After that, Oliver was lost to sensation.

Derek apparently hadn't forgotten the sensitivity of his nipples because he set his mouth to them, laving one, then the other, with touches that were maddeningly soft. The delicate licks drove Oliver wild, especially when the occasional touch of hard metal provided a solid counterpoint.

"Jesus, good… that's really good," Oliver hissed under his breath.

The teasing continued, alternating between the two stiff peaks, and Derek's gentle licks and occasional nips sent tiny zaps of fire down Oliver's veins, centering on his stiff cock. He squirmed, finding minimal relief in the brushes of Derek's skin against the smooth, wet head of his dick.

Derek had truly taken the idea of going slowly to heart, and it was only when Oliver let out a soft whine that he looked up.

Oliver swallowed thickly and had to clear his throat before saying, "If you keep that up, I might just come from that."

A spark of interest lit in Derek's lust-blown gaze at the same time he pulled back. "We'll explore that another time," he said, his voice rich with promise. He cast one more look at Oliver's nipples, which stood at attention now, pink and shiny.

Oliver's brows shot up, and his cock twitched with interest.

Jesus, stop. Don't come yet. Don't. Come. Yet.

With a half-smile, Derek dropped down to his knees, his hands braced on Oliver's hips. He shifted forward to press his lips to Oliver's skin, one light kiss on each side of his erect cock.

There was a beat of stillness, their breaths audible in the empty room. A shiver of anticipation tripped down Oliver's spine.

Finally, his cock was engulfed in a shockingly familiar wet heat, while Derek's hands curved around his ass, his fingers clutching Oliver's cheeks tightly. Oliver's back bowed, and he gripped the wooden bar harder, his body seeking more contact somewhere… *anywhere*.

God, the blowjob was even better than he remembered.

Or maybe that was because he could see his partner this time and fully appreciate Derek's golden skin and taut muscles, in addition to the sensations brought on by his incredibly talented mouth. Maybe it was because he now knew the man on his knees was, rather improbably, his crush Derek Vance, whose physical talents and quiet confidence he'd admired for quite some time.

Oliver shut his eyes, sighing as he felt that wonderful tongue ring brush along the underside of his cock.

Maybe it was just because this moment was pure magic.

With one last kiss to the tip, Derek pulled off and moved back. The crinkling sound of plastic made Oliver look down, and he watched as Derek broke the seal on the envelope of lube, then dribbled it on his fingers.

After setting the packet to the side, Derek placed his other hand gently on Oliver's hip and met his gaze with a wicked look. "Turn around," he said softly.

Oliver bit his lip and obeyed, turning to face the wall of wooden bars. His hands automatically found again the bar that he had been holding, which was still warm from the heat of his grip. He rested his forehead on his arms, his breath uneven, as he waited.

The tongue came as a surprise.

Oliver gasped when he felt Derek's hot breath against him. The hand on his hip moved behind him to hold his cheeks open, allowing Derek to lick a stripe up from the base of his balls and across his hole. Derek's tongue left behind a wet trail that caused goose bumps to prickle Oliver's skin.

Nobody had *ever* done that before, and holy hell it felt crazy.

The tip of Derek's tongue circled Oliver's rim, dipping inside a few times, before he moved back. Oliver could feel Derek's breath against his skin, the short puffs of air suggesting that Derek was just as aroused as he was. With a

last lick, Derek pulled away, his breathing harsh and ragged. Derek's fingers, warm and wet with lube, massaged his balls for a moment before sliding over to press softly at his hole. The touches were light, gentle, and they were driving Oliver insane.

Oliver sometimes fingered himself a little when he jerked off, so the first and, eventually, second digits weren't too out of the ordinary. The arousal humming through his veins from that incredible blowjob also might have distracted him.

The third finger, though, was entering into long-neglected waters.

When Derek began to press in lightly for the third time, Oliver hummed, the stretch somewhat foreign, but definitely not forgotten. Honestly, he'd bottomed only twice before, trying it for a brief period with Abe, who had then proclaimed that he preferred to keep that position for himself. Oliver hadn't minded either way as he'd found pleasure in both roles.

Derek smoothed a comforting hand over the small of Oliver's back. "Good?"

Oliver came back to the present, glancing over his shoulder and catching a look on Derek's face that left him breathless. The tip of Derek's finger slipped in to join the other two. "Ah, ahh… just… different," Oliver said, his voice husky. "Different-good, though. Yeah, definitely different-good." He sighed when he felt one of Derek's probing fingertips brush his prostate.

"You're different. Different-good," Derek said, his voice low. "That's what I like about you." He punctuated his words with a lingering bite to Oliver's rounded left cheek.

Oliver ducked his head, grinning into the skin on his arm, secretly thrilled by the unexpected confession. God, he wanted to talk about feelings, too, but right now, he wanted to get fucked even more.

"You know what I like about you? What I like the most right now?" Oliver asked teasingly. His breath caught when Derek slowly flexed his fingers, the movement stretching him gently… deliciously.

"Hrm?"

"Your dick. So put it in me."

Derek growled under his breath as he stood, swatting Oliver's ass on his way up. "Such a brat," he said, his harsh words belying the affectionate tone of

his voice. Oliver felt Derek’s fingers slip out of him and, shortly thereafter, heard the ripping of the foil condom wrapper. Oliver’s cock was hard, leaking precome, and he couldn’t get a hand on it.

Moments later, Derek’s body bore down on his, his chest hot against Oliver’s back. Oliver shuddered when Derek lined up his cock against his ass.

“‘Put it in me,’ you say, you greedy boy,” Derek whispered into his ear. “Is this what you’re so hungry for, Oliver?”

With those words, Derek pressed forward, the head of his cock meeting initial resistance until it slipped in to breach Oliver’s hole. Oliver grunted, and Derek pushed in slowly, not stopping until his hips met the smooth skin of Oliver’s ass. Derek’s groan was nearly as loud as the gasp that came out of Oliver’s mouth once he was in to the hilt.

Derek?

God.

Derek felt phenomenal.

Oliver moaned into his forearm, and his eyes squeezed shut as he tried to process the myriad of sensations, the feeling of Derek inside him making his body soar. He forgot about his desperation for a hand on his cock because honestly?

Derek might make him come just from this.

With his hands on Oliver’s hips, Derek began a slow slide-thrust rhythm, the movement achingly drawn out.

Jesus. Is he trying to kill me? Fuck going slow. I want it fast, and I want it now.

“Forget what I said about slow. Please, oh god, just forget that part and go fast now,” Oliver pleaded when it seemed like Derek would be content to stay like this, pressed together but barely moving, forever. Between the blowjob, the fingering, the *licking*, and everything else that had led up to this moment, Oliver felt like he’d been waiting for his orgasm for ages.

Derek’s hands traced patterns up and down his ribs before coming forward to skim across his chest and brace his shoulders. He didn’t say anything, but he huffed a breath, his response evident in his body’s next movements. Derek thrust his hips faster and deeper, arms tightening across Oliver’s chest to hold him in place.

"Yes, oh god, yes," Oliver said, his mouth parting on a harsh gasp.

"You like that, Oliver?"

"Yes, oh god, I do, I really do."

"What do you like?" Derek asked, his fingers digging into Oliver's shoulders.

"You. God, I like you and your dick," Oliver said. His eyes fluttered shut as the sensations built to a frenzy. "Fuck."

Derek's hand wrapped around Oliver's cock, jacking him with a firm grip and twisting at the tip in the way that Oliver loved, and that was it.

He was done.

Oliver cried out as he spilled over Derek's fingers, his orgasm pulsing through his body. The pleasure hit him in waves, his back arching and his hips jerking.

"Jesus," Derek whispered from behind him. His thrusts turned erratic before he stilled completely.

Derek climaxed with a moan, and Oliver thought he heard his name issue forth on a whispered breath. Derek's fingers tightened around Oliver's dick while the arm across his chest squeezed him close. With a sigh, Derek rested his forehead on Oliver's back for a moment, brushing his lips against the sweat-kissed skin there.

As they came down to earth, Derek pulled Oliver's hands off the bar and gathered him close, his chest to Oliver's back, their bodies still connected as one.

Derek turned Oliver's face towards his and looked into his eyes. Those lips—now so incredibly familiar in more ways than one—quirked up into a smile. He tweaked Oliver's nipple gently, causing him to gasp. "I can't wait to explore these with you, too," Derek said with a wicked gleam in his eyes.

Oliver blushed, and Derek grinned before leaning in for a kiss.

Even more encounters with Derek?

He was definitely on board with that.

****

After carefully pulling out and gathering the trash a moment later, Derek headed towards the garbage can in the corner, revealing his bare backside for the first time. Oliver couldn't suppress a small burst of laughter.

Derek tossed everything into the wastebasket and shot him an affectionate look. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," Oliver managed, gasping. "You—you just—"

Derek moved closer, watching him with a slight smile. "I what?"

Oliver took a deep breath and blurted it out.

"You have a *cutie mark*."

Derek's brows shot up. "A what?"

"A cutie mark."

"Uhhh…" Derek looked even more confused.

Oliver swallowed down his next chuckle. He motioned for Derek to turn around and gestured towards Derek's right ass cheek. Or, more specifically, the little bird wrapped in fire that was tattooed at the crest of it. "That," he said, meeting Derek's gaze and pointing, "is a cutie mark."

Derek covered it with his hand and turned back around with a look that suggested he was questioning Oliver's sanity. "I'm still not clear on what that is, but it's actually—"

"Oh. My. God."

They both froze.

Oliver blanched, and Derek looked stunned.

When a loud cough echoed in the room, they whipped their heads around in unison.

Oh shit oh shit oh shit oh shit oh shit.

Izzy stood at the entrance to the locker room with Patrick, Terrence, Evan, Patsy, and the rest of the SFE competition team.

They stared at each other, and Oliver felt particularly naked—even more so than simply because he wasn't wearing any clothes.

He had no idea what to expect.

It was silent for a long moment until finally Izzy spoke.

"You owe me ten dollars," she said to Patrick.

What?

Derek recovered faster than Oliver and stepped to the side, blocking Oliver from sight. He cleared his throat and spoke loudly, seemingly uncaring of the fact that he, too, was stark naked.

"Oliver and I are both adults, and what happened here was after hours. If you have a problem with either one of us, speak now."

Another moment ticked by, and Izzy coughed gently.

"No problem on our end, nosiree," she said loudly. "All we have to say is it's about damn time." Izzy arched her brow at them and held Derek's gaze. She then turned around and clapped her hands. "All right, folks, let's leave the lovebirds alone—looks like they won't be joining us for karaoke night, after all," she said wryly, ushering everyone out of the training room. "C'mon, let's head back to the Star and get plastered so we can all try to drown our embarrassment over what we just walked in on."

Her words trailed off as the group moved farther down the hallway towards the exit.

Oliver stared after them for a moment, only startling when Derek cleared his throat.

He looked at Derek, who was watching him closely. "Are you okay?" Derek asked, his tone gentle.

"I—What was that about?"

Derek sighed, then met his gaze with an apologetic look. "Well, in case it wasn't clear, Sparkles, I think both of us are *out* now."

Oliver blinked rapidly, processing the information. "I… that's… surprisingly, that's okay with me, considering how they took it right now. It's not like I'm in the closet or anything—I just didn't think there was any reason you guys would need to know."

He thought for a moment, remembering the "fuck now, talk later" promise. *Well, it seems like later is now.* Oliver glanced up at Derek and took a deep breath. "But what I want to know is, I… at the club, how did—"

Derek cut him off, seeming to anticipate the question. "You started training at this club three years ago, and I've been following your progress ever since," Derek admitted, his lips curved in a rueful smile. "I couldn't wait until you got to competition level so that you'd finally be training… with me. And when I saw you at the club—"

"Wait, that's what I want to know. How did you even know it was me?"

An unlikely blush stained Derek's cheeks, and he cleared his throat. "When my friend Joey told me where he was celebrating his birthday, I figured I'd show up just to make an appearance, then cut out. But that all changed when I saw you." Derek stepped closer until he was right in front of him and traced his finger over a scattering of moles on the curve of Oliver's right shoulder. His hand skimmed down Oliver's arm, stopping to outline a turtle-shaped birthmark near his elbow. Derek's lips tilted up at one corner as he explained, "I'd recognize these anywhere, even five hundred miles away and under a black light."

Oliver's eyes widened. "So… you knew right away?"

"One hundred percent." Derek met his gaze, the expression on his face determined. "And as soon as I saw you, I knew I finally had a chance with you."

Oliver needed a minute to digest that. He drifted backwards, completely blown away, until he could finally slump against the stack of mats where their clothes lay scattered. He'd had no idea his crush was even a possibility, let alone…

"Wow. Okay, um. Wow." They watched each other for a beat. Holy shit, now that it looked like he might actually get to keep Derek—and that Derek had been watching him with just as much interest all this time—Oliver was at a loss for what to do next. "This is just a lot to take in."

After a moment, Derek glanced around the studio and strode over, comfortable in his nudity.

Jesus, his flawless, toned, and impeccable nudity. That could be mine.

With a cough, Oliver tried to restrain his ogling.

"Maybe it'd be easier to take in over a drink and a bite to eat?" Derek asked, wearing nothing but a soft smile. He offered Oliver his hand.

Oliver stared at that open palm, then looked up into Derek's familiar face. He looked like happiness, hope, and a future, all rolled into one. An answering smile spread across Oliver's lips, and he slipped his hand into Derek's.

"You asking me out, cowboy?" Oliver teased him as Derek helped him up. He straightened by Derek's side and gave him a playful nudge with his elbow.

"Yeah," Derek said with a small smile, returning the nudge. He bent down to gather their clothes together before turning back to Oliver. A warmth

blossomed under Oliver’s skin when Derek grabbed his hand again and laced their fingers together. They made their way towards the locker room, hitting the lights on their way out.

Derek cleared his throat. “And if we happen to end up getting naked afterwards, then I wouldn’t be opposed to that, either.” Derek shot him a cocky grin, and Oliver rolled his eyes.

He couldn’t find fault with the statement, though, because, after a late supper and cocktails at Little Owl, that’s exactly what they did.

And that’s exactly what they continued to do for many Pacific Summits to come.

The End

Author Bio

Nico Jaye is a fan of all things HEA and has dragged her romance collection along for her moves from San Francisco to Los Angeles to Chicago to New York and back. She thinks reading is awesome and loves that she can hang out night after night with crinoline-wearing debutantes, brawny firemen in suspenders, and werewolf shifters with Scottish brogues. An overall feline enthusiast, Nico enjoys sharing cat pics and gifs and welcomes readers to find her online so that they can squee over the kitties together.

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If you'd like to read more by Nico Jaye, then please feel free to check out her website for online freebies and additional info about other publications. Happy reading!

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