



# *Complicated*

*J.J. Cassidy*



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# Love Has No Boundaries

*An M/M Romance series*

## COMPLICATED

**By J.J. Cassidy**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

### What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

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 they 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 Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, 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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## Photo Description

Two men, both with short, dark hair, lie together on a striped sofa or daybed. The one on the bottom, acting as a pillow and a living mattress, embraces the other man with what seems to be easy affection. The man on top sprawls face down, his head tucked into the space between his lover's neck and shoulder, hiding his face from view.

## Story Letter

Dear Author,

*I don't actually have any plot pre-reqs. (That's not to say the plot isn't important, though. I don't want something that's complete PWP or Excuse Plot. I'd like something that has a rather light tone overall, but still has depth and something meaningful to it. Elements of darkness are okay and, in fact, may even be encouraged, as my profile would attest to. I just don't want it to turn out to be a darkfic.)*

*I just want adorable cat-shifter-kitty-petting/cuddling. Maybe the shifter retains some cat-like characteristics even when human/in his human form. It doesn't necessarily have to be a housecat. It could be a big cat of some sort. Just, you know, with petting and cuddling and adorableness (in human and cat forms if you can fit it). And maybe some playing with the tail (not tail sex. just playing with the tail).*

*If you want to include an anthropomorphic/half-and-half form or something visually similar to the Loveless (kind of) cat-people of some sorts (the latter would actually be preferable), that would be okay too ^^*

Sincerely,

Ayanna

## Story Info

**Genre:** paranormal

**Tags:** feline shifters, other species, family drama, geeks, pets, piercing, mechanic/blue collar

**Word count:** 51,152

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## CHAPTER ONE

*May, 2023*

Reiner's car started making funny noises after he turned off the Interstate, and the noises got stranger and louder once he hit the first hill. He gripped the wheel a little tighter and pushed at it, as if that was going to help. He really didn't know shit about cars, even if they did have little computers inside them. He knew where to put the fuel; and when the oil light came on, he took the car over to whatever oil-changing place was nearby and let them deal with it. At the moment, nothing was lit up on the dashboard, and the temperature thingy was—oh shit. It shouldn't be *that* high, should it?

He crested the hill, and something splashed under the car—that couldn't be good—and steam billowed out from under the hood. Definitely not good. Gritting his teeth, he slipped the gearshift into neutral and let the car coast down the road, hoping like hell it wouldn't—damn. With a cough and a rattle, the engine died. Reiner hauled on the wheel to keep the car headed for the shoulder, and wondered how the hell anybody drove without power steering.

The car coasted to a stop a mile later, as far off to the right as Reiner could manage without putting it in the drainage ditch. He checked the navigation app on his phone, and there were still thirty-five long miles between him and Stone Mountain. He could leave everything, lock the car and start walking, which would take about three hours.

Or he could take advantage of technology.

He had the number for Stone Mountain Security saved to his Contacts, so he hit dial and waited. Three rings, and a crisp female voice said, "Stone Mountain."



“Um, my name is Reiner Martin. Mr. DaSilva hired me? I was on my way to you, and my car... died.”

“I know who you are, Mr. Martin. Do you have any idea where you are right now?”

He checked his phone. “I can give the latitude and longitude, if that helps. Oh—I’m about thirty-five miles southeast.”

“Very good. I’m going to transfer you to the garage. Give your information to Mr. Forester or Mr. DaSilva, and they’ll send a flatbed to pick you up. If the call gets dropped—” She gave him the number for the garage, repeated it so he could write it on his hand. The line went silent for one second, two, three... and maybe he should hang up and just dial the garage directly?

“Mr. Martin?” Reiner twitched when a deep male voice vibrated in his ear. “I hear you’re stranded.”

“Yeah.” Reiner shivered, not quite sure why. “I don’t know what happened—there was a lot of steam, and it just *stopped*. I’m about thirty-five miles southeast, according to my GPS.”

“I have a pretty good idea where you are. Give us about forty minutes or so. Don’t wander off.” The male on the other end disconnected, and Reiner hunched his shoulders to make the hairs along his spine go down.

He hit the window button twice before it even occurred to him why it didn’t work. His mother always said Reiner was hopeless with anything other than computers. Growling at himself under his breath, he got out of the car before it turned into an oven and baked his brain any further. The North Carolina mid-May sun had enough oomph to make standing on the side of the road uncomfortable, so he hopped the ditch and sat down under a tree.

It would be all too easy to fall asleep, so he played Sudoku on his phone for fifteen minutes—he checked—and had to stop when the battery warning flashed on the screen. Bad enough he’d had to call for help before he even started his new job, a dead phone might make Blais DaSilva rethink hiring him. Then again, the DaSilvas—or more accurately, Stone Mountain—paid for Reiner’s college degree. Degrees, plural. Bachelor’s and master’s. Plus a

stipend for books, money for rent, and an allowance for food; all told, they'd laid out more money than Reiner or his family would ever be able to repay.

Not one car passed him, not in either direction. The only things out this way were Stone Mountain State Park and the small community of the same name, and he figured May was early for the park to be crowded with visitors. Or so he'd read on the Internet. The only *other* thing out here was the main office for Stone Mountain Security. He had no idea what to expect, no clue where he was going to live, was absolutely clueless about everything except that he had a job with a fat salary right out of grad school. In his chosen field, too.

He'd taken a few days after graduation and headed home, cleaned out his stuff from the cramped bedroom he'd shared with his two younger brothers. Not that there was much left, just some books he'd forgotten about and the clothes he kept there for when he did come home. The last time had been Winter Break, which hadn't been much of a break at all; he spent the entire week ripping out two broken windows and installing new ones, and then trolling the Internet for a good used washer to replace the ancient one leaking all over the utility room before it rotted the floor clean through. His older sister was pregnant, so they needed a reliable washer—and god only knew his useless brothers wouldn't stir themselves to help. He did make them do most of the heavy lifting, since they had a truck and he didn't.

He hadn't planned on sending money home, but after these last few days... he couldn't bring himself to be that selfish. Granted, he wouldn't have stayed at home much longer anyway; most of his male cousins were gone, spread out to wherever they could find work. Females stayed put, males drifted around—that's how things worked. For his species, anyway. Eventually, males settled somewhere when they got older, sometimes near the females they'd fathered offspring on, sometimes not. Mostly not. Absentee fathers were the rule, not the exception.

Reiner gave in and dozed a little, figuring it was so damn quiet, he'd hear a tow truck coming from a long ways off. Birds, bugs, bunnies—that was all he detected when he let his mind open up and drift. The bugs were tiny noises he

heard more than sensed, and the birds were little blips of static to the part of him that noticed potential prey. The rabbits were bigger blips, and he knew they were close to the ground without knowing *how* he knew. You practiced, and learned to tell the difference between rabbits and deer and sheep and cows and humans. Not that humans were ever more than just bigger pools of static energy—their brains and his weren't compatible that way.

And over there, right on the edge of his range, he touched something bigger, a dog or a coyote, maybe, and—

Reiner bolted awake, heart hammering high in his chest, frozen in place under the tree. *Don't run, don't run, don't run*—his skin itched and burned, adrenaline fueling the urge to shift because four legs were faster than two and oh god, what *was* that?

He tried to focus, tamp down the instinctive need to put more space between him and whatever-the-fuck was coming his way. *Water*, that's what it felt like, a never-ending waterfall, a roaring curtain that would flatten anything that tried to get through. And with it, near it, a flickering wall of restless movement that took longer to put a name to in his head. Bamboo, or something like it, a dense stand of vertical... trunks? Stalks? His breathing slowed; the wall of bamboo was a hell of a lot less scary than the water for some reason. His own kind; but he'd never sensed anyone from that kind of distance.

Less than a minute later he heard a big diesel engine, and sun winked off chrome far down the road. Reiner got up, brushing off his jeans and willing his hands and his knees to not shake. By the time he crossed the ditch and reached the gravel shoulder, the truck was slowing, swinging wide to make a U-turn. It was a flatbed, not a tow truck, and the driver got it turned around in two moves, a neat trick on the narrow road. The flatbed pulled ahead of his poor dead Toyota and stopped, engine idling.

The driver's door opened, and Reiner didn't even know he'd backed up until the Toyota's fender hit his thighs. He should be embarrassed, but his other half wanted to put as much space between him and the other male as possible. Big, over six feet, and moving with loose-hipped grace despite a

slight limp *and* despite being twice Reiner's age, easy. And oh fuck, were his eyes *blue*? Reiner almost bolted then and there, except another male stepped in between them, projecting *calm* like their lives depended on it. They probably did.

"Dad?" The slightly smaller male kept his eyes—a perfectly normal hazel—pinned to Reiner's, holding him in place. "Could you dial it down? You're scaring the fuck out of him." Silently, he added, *I knew I should've done this myself*, his mental voice laced with rueful amusement.

Reiner blinked. That voice rubbed up against every hot spot he had; not-too-deep and a little hoarse, smoky Southern honey with a touch of sand. It also completely distracted him from the death on two legs watching him from less than ten feet away.

"Reiner, right?" The hazel eyes never blinked, and Reiner could see green flecks close to the pupils. "It would really help if you could maybe breathe a little?" The male smiled, and his pupils dilated, sending a trickle of heat through Reiner's frozen body. "I'm Trey. And I don't know if you'll get the reference, but this is definitely a *come with me if you want to live* moment, understand?"

"Don't be dramatic." The big male's voice sounded like gravel sliding out of a truck in the middle of the night, and Reiner flinched. He couldn't help it. The other male huffed when Trey flipped a hand at him, and growled, "I'm fine."

Trey raised his dark eyebrows, still looking at Reiner. "That's what you always say, right before things go to hell."

The male Reiner assumed was Trey's father—and how weird was that?—laughed, and the tension bleeding off him in waves ramped down to a less-than-ball-shriveling level. "All right," he rumbled, nodding at Reiner. "Let's try this again. I'm Aidan, and I promise not to hurt you if you stay out of my way while we get your car on the flatbed."

"Oh yeah," Trey drawled. "That's so much better. Don't mind him," he said to Reiner. "He's actually pretty safe out in public." He ducked the cuff

Aidan aimed at his head and grinned, showing a lot of white teeth. “Just, you know, do what he said. Stay out of his way.”

Reiner grinned back, helpless not to in the face of Trey’s laid-back confidence. “I can do that.” He crossed the road to avoid backing up in front of Aidan, and ambled around to the front of the flatbed, out of sight for the moment. He’d never seen one of his kind with blue eyes before, or that tall. Reiner was only a hair over five ten, and he was the tallest of his brothers and his male cousins.

Aidan and Trey worked together easily, Aidan working the controls to tip the bed up and drop it to ground level, and Trey walking up the bed to unhook the winch cable. Trey was also the one who got down under Reiner’s car to attach the tow hook, and Reiner definitely appreciated the view. Long legs, long torso, nice ass—he caught a ripple of amusement from both Trey and Aidan, and tried to firm up his mental shields. Not something he was good at, and he was out of practice.

“If you need anything out of the car, say so now,” Trey called out. Reiner shook his head, after patting his pocket to make sure he had his phone, and Trey gave Aidan a thumbs-up. As the flatbed screeched and groaned, Trey came up next to Reiner. He wasn’t as tall as Reiner thought, maybe he had an inch of height advantage, but he had broader shoulders and hips—not to mention the nice ass.

Trey’s mouth quirked, and he tilted his head, radiating good humor. “You’re not so bad yourself. So... rumor is, you’re the new head geek for that fancy computer on the second floor.”

“The new server, yeah.” Reiner tried to wrap his head around the idea that Trey had just flirted with him. Or had he?

The muscled shoulders rose in a shrug, straining the dark blue T-shirt. “Once you hit town, I figure there’ll be a line. Best take advantage of seeing you first.”

Reiner growled without thinking. “Do you mind? Back home, that’s real rude.”

“Then you should get your shields up. And I’d suggest you do it right quick, like before we reach Stone Mountain.” Trey waved a hand at the road ahead of the truck. “‘Cause ’tween the DaSilvas and the Foresters? They’ll eat you alive.”

The truck rocked as the bed settled back in the horizontal position with the Toyota on top, and chains rattled as Aidan fastened them down to the back of the bed. Trey walked away shaking his head, and ran the controls while Aidan checked to make sure the Toyota was secure front and back. Without saying a word, Aidan climbed into the driver’s side of the cab, and Trey yanked open the other door.

“You sit on the outside,” he told Reiner, and got in.

The truck cab was already warm, and with three males crammed in the seat, it got warmer fast, even with the windows down. Trey was solid muscle over hard bones, and Reiner scrunched up against the door to avoid too much contact.

*Give it up*, Trey told him, and bumped him in the shoulder. *Relax*.

Reiner took a deep breath, inhaling the tang of sweat off all three of them and the overwhelming black peppercorn scent of male jaguars. Laid over that were their individual scents, and it took him a couple seconds to sort out who was who. Aidan smelled like smoke and apples, an oddly pleasant combination, and Trey reminded him of birch roots, or maybe sassafras—Reiner recognized that from smelling it all the time at home.

Trey turned his head, and his breath tickled Reiner’s cheek. He inhaled, and let it out on a faint purr. “Orange peel,” he whispered, and ran his nose behind Reiner’s ear. “Nice.” And then, in a totally different voice, “Get your damn shields up.”

Reiner huffed, and moved as far from Trey as possible. “Fuck off.”

Aidan rumbled, nearly a growl, and Trey patted his knee. “We’ll play nice.” He leaned the other way, against Aidan, giving Reiner more room. Fifteen minutes passed, and the throaty vibration of the diesel engine put Reiner in a doze.

“Your settlement is pretty small, isn’t it?”

“Whuh?” Reiner jerked awake, half from the words out loud and half from the light brush of Aidan’s mind on his. He rubbed his eyes and sat up straight. “Yes, sir. There’s twenty of us all together, now that I’m gone.” When Aidan sent him a wave of approval tinged with slight humor for the *yes sir*, Reiner added, “My mother and her three sisters, my grandmother and her sister—she has two daughters—plus my sister and two female cousins. Other than me, my mother has two other sons. Then there’s my two uncles, and five male cousins.”

“So what did you do about—” Trey grunted, probably because Aidan elbowed him. Even Reiner felt it.

“I asked,” Aidan said smoothly, “because Stone Mountain has a much larger population, and it may be a bit... *startling*, if you’re not used to it.”

“I know that everyone who works for SMS lives locally, so, a hundred?” Reiner made a guess based on what he’d seen on the company website, not that it gave out a whole lot.

Trey coughed, and Aidan leaned forward to glance around him at Reiner. “A bit more than that. Three hundred eighty-something.”

*Three...* Reiner had trouble breathing for a few heartbeats. “But you’re only—”

“A hundred miles from the Tuscarora Preserve?” Aidan said dryly. “We’re well aware of that.”

Reiner shivered, the hair on his neck rising. The Preserve was the monster in the closet, the thing under the bed, home of the Pax Program—his species biggest enemy.

Growing up, Pax had been the ultimate parental threat: *If you keep that up, I’ll sell you to Pax—don’t think I won’t.* And it worked, because Pax was real, an honest-to-goodness government agency—entity? whatever—and Pax would, without a doubt, pay good cash money for a jaguar child, even a badly behaved one.

Way before Reiner was born, in the 1950s, an accident on a foggy road landed sixteen members of his species in a human hospital—where they disappeared. And not long after that, a dozen more males—all members of the US Army—also disappeared. Within a year, the US government built a secure facility on what used to be national parkland, and the Pax Program was born, named for a Mayan month associated with a jaguar god.

It took years for his species to piece together what happened, their worst nightmare come to life; five hundred years of hiding what they were wiped out by a truck and some too-curious doctors. Still, when Pax didn't immediately start sweeping the country looking for them, life slowly went back to normal. The jaguars justified not trying to free their captive cousins by adopting a *few-versus-many* viewpoint: the Pax jaguars kept the rest of them safe.

Around 1970—still way before Reiner was born—the United States government stunned the world by unveiling their newest weapon: teams of soldiers paired with jaguars, the perfect jungle fighting force. No mention was made of the big cats being anything other than what they appeared—highly intelligent, highly trained animals—and Reiner's species breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Before driving down here, Reiner had thought about how much it would bother him to live this close to the Preserve, a hundred miles from scientists who'd love to have some fresh genetic material to play with. He'd heard stories—

Aidan's sigh had a touch of a growl under it. "I'm sure you have," he said in that same dry tone. "And some of them are probably true."

It occurred to Reiner that Aidan's clipped, precise diction didn't match up at all with the grease-stained jeans and the dark green work shirt. And his accent was odd, nothing like Trey's Southern drawl. On the heels of that, he remembered two males from Colorado who'd come courting his female cousins, and the stories *they'd* told.

"Some of them are pretty crazy," Reiner ventured. "Like the one about Pax trying to turn humans into one of us."



“They did.” Aidan shrugged, hands flexing on the steering wheel. “Or tried to, anyway. More than once. They developed their own type of gene therapy years ahead of civilian scientists.”

Aidan and Trey shared a look, and it was Trey’s turn to sigh. Aidan shook his head and glanced over at Reiner. “I was one of their experiments. One that worked, out of maybe two dozen spectacular failures.”

“It’s not a secret,” Trey said. “The blue eyes are kind of a dead giveaway, you know?”

Reiner tried, he really did, but couldn’t get past *I was one of their experiments*. “But you’re not human.” His voice came out higher than normal.

“I was born human.” The one blue eye Reiner could see crinkled at the corner, and Aidan’s mouth twitched up. “That was the next question, right?” He huffed at Reiner’s mumble of agreement, and Trey rubbed his shoulder into Aidan, breathing out on a purr. Aidan downshifted through a sweeping turn, and when he spoke again, the growl from earlier was back. “Yes, it was gene therapy, and no, it wasn’t done with my full knowledge and consent. Twenty years, and the US military still swears I misread the fine print.”

Reiner blinked and breathed, trying to process. The first thing that wanted to come out was, “That is so fucked up,” followed by, “Why did it work with you?”

Aidan laughed, surprising Reiner no end. “Totally fucked up, yes. And the short explanation is that I was a close genetic match to begin with.”

Trey nudged Reiner with his elbow. “Welcome to Stone Mountain and the DaSilva-Foresters. The family motto is *Sumus contortum*.”

“I don’t get it.” Reiner shook his head “Is that Latin?”

“Bad Latin,” Aidan said, back to sounding dryly amused. “Family joke. Translated, it’s *we’re complicated*.”

Another sweeping turn, and now Trey growled at Reiner. “Get ready.”

Oh...*fuck*. Reiner had no words for the sensation of—literally—hundreds of minds prickling the edge of his. Not static, oh no—*awareness*, an enormous

web of it, mind after mind after mind, like a living parabolic antenna nestled in Middle of Nowhere, North Carolina. He shuddered at the *wrongness* of it, and only heard his whimper after the fact.

“It’s all right.” Trey murmured the words into Reiner’s ear. He turned in the seat and his left hand—broad, warm palm and blunt fingers—slid around Reiner’s wrist and up his forearm, rough fingertips stroking the smoother skin on the underside. Reiner shuddered for an entirely different reason as Trey pressed closer, tucking his right shoulder behind Reiner and breathing in along his neck. “Not wrong.” His lips tickled, they were so close. “Sort of an early warning system. And...” He sighed, a gust of humid air. “Let me in, Reiner. Or you’ll have one motherfucker of a headache in a few hours.”

“Very smooth,” Aidan said under his breath.

The idea of Trey flirting with him right in front of Trey’s father had Reiner contorting in the seat to put space between them. Back home, while nobody thought anything of what males got up to with one another, doing stuff where anybody could see just wasn’t done. And yeah, he’d spent enough time around humans to be sensitive about being seen with another male in public. Western Pennsylvania still wasn’t that progressive a place, not even in 2023.

He lost his train of thought when Trey leaned in again. “Come on,” Trey said, lowering his voice. “Give me thirty seconds and I’ll fix ’em.”

“Fix what? I’m *fine*.” Reiner met Trey’s eyes and then couldn’t look away. Mistake.

“Your shields suck.” Trey’s eyelids drooped and his mouth curved. “It won’t hurt. I promise. Thirty seconds.”

Reiner couldn’t resist. “That’s not really much of a recommendation.”

“Very funny. You have *seen* jaguar sex, haven’t you?”

Reiner’s neck flushed because, no, he hadn’t. Not on four legs, or two. Sure, he understood the general idea—his uncles had explained things when he was still young enough for sex to be theoretical. As for females... no. That’s why males left home—every female there was related somehow and off-limits.

And there were no females of his species at the Penn State Erie campus—no males either—so he'd gotten very proficient with both hands. Sometimes at the same time. The stuff he'd done back home with his cousins to blow off steam didn't count—that wasn't sex, that was just... fooling around.

Trey's eyes widened and he licked his lips. "So..."

Somebody's cell phone whistled, and Aidan pulled his out from somewhere and handed it to Trey. "Check that."

"It's Papi. He says the doctor called, and your appointment is set for tomorrow, not Monday."

"*Goddammit*. Fuck." It sounded like Aidan growled between clenched teeth. "Tell him we're almost back."

The road leveled out while Trey typed the reply, and Reiner got his first look at the town of Stone Mountain. There wasn't much: a diner, a good-sized package store and two other non-descript buildings on one side of the road, and a shit-load of trees on the other. When they got closer, he realized the trees were a screen for a huge stone-and-glass building, all of it a kind of bronzy-greenish-gray. *That* must be Stone Mountain Security. His new workplace.

They rolled past the driveway for SMS, past all the trees, past another, smaller driveway or road. After that, a two-story stucco building had a sign for "Major Repair," and maybe a dozen yards beyond that Reiner now saw an older three-story wooden building with a wraparound porch, all of it painted white with green trim. Aidan made a left across the opposite lane and pulled up in front of Major Repair. One double bay was open, with a black, sleek, low-slung, four-door something parked in front of the closed doors to the other bay. It was a Porsche—Reiner recognized the badge on the hood.

Aidan shut off the truck and got out, and Trey nudged Reiner. "Out. I'll find somebody to help you with your shields later."

"They're fine," Reiner snapped, sliding to the ground with Trey right behind him.

“Maybe around humans, or back home, but not here, all right? Every little thing that pops into your head is right there, up front, and you’re just gonna piss everybody off bein’ all loud like that.” Trey huffed, shaking his head. Out in the sun, his short, dark hair lit up with copper sparks, and his eyes were more burnished gold than hazel.

An older male got out of the Porsche, unfolding until he was almost as tall as Aidan. He wore a charcoal-gray suit that even Reiner knew for custom-tailored and expensive as hell. His almost-black hair had a fashionably shaggy look, falling to collar length in perfect layers. He took his sunglasses off and tossed them in the car, followed by his jacket, revealing a pale pink dress shirt that hugged the lines of his lean torso. The only thing out of place was the crumpled, loosened silk tie.

Aidan stopped less than an arm’s length away from him, hands on hips, head tilted to one side. Reiner couldn’t see his face, but caught a hint of equal parts annoyance and affection from both of them.

“*Cálmate, querido,*” the suit said, the Spanish rolling off his tongue like it had been born there.

Well. Now Reiner knew who *he* was: Blais DaSilva. Head honcho and front man for Stone Mountain Security, and former private soldier with the company’s military arm, Arrowhead. The male who had laid out one hundred and sixty thousand dollars, give or take a few thousand, to put Reiner through school. He stepped closer to get a better look.

Blais tilted his head to mirror Aidan. “It’s better this way. You’ll have the whole weekend to recover. They scheduled the procedure for nine a.m., so we’ll leave in a couple of hours and head down to Fayetteville, stay the night. Come back Saturday or Sunday, depending on how you feel.” His mouth curved in a wicked smile. “Flat on your back for days, *querido. Que triste.*”

Aidan snorted, and rubbed the back of his neck. “I’d better go change.”

Blais dangled a set of keys, pulling his hand back when Aidan reached for them. “I need to talk to my new geek here. You go change and do the daddy thing and I’ll meet you up there. You do know Emery’s coming, too,” he

added, gliding sideways as Aidan snatched for the keys, keeping them out of reach.

Aidan huffed and walked away, back over to Trey. “Take care of them for me,” he rumbled. He ran a hand over Trey’s short hair, and pulled him into a hug. “Be careful. And don’t worry about the shop—you hear?” When he let go of Trey, Aidan nodded at Reiner, and his blue eyes now had a gold corona around each pupil. “Don’t let him push you around, all right?”

“Yes sir,” Reiner said automatically, relaxing a fraction when Aidan’s nod was followed by a warm wash of approval.

When he got near Blais again, Aidan didn’t try for the keys—he grabbed Blais’s tie instead, yanking him forward. His teeth flashed, and then he kissed Blais, right there in the open where anybody could see him—they—do it. Wide-open mouths, and enough force to make the muscles in Aidan’s neck and shoulders tense. They parted with every appearance of reluctance, and Aidan made a show of twirling the keys around his index finger. “You are so easy.”

Blais raised one dark eyebrow, eyes fixed on Aidan’s mouth. “What would be the point of playing hard to get?” He reached over and cupped the bulge in Aidan’s jeans for a second, thumb stroking across. “Good luck driving.”

Aidan brushed past him to get in the open driver’s door, trailing his left hand across Blais as he went. He did something Reiner couldn’t see, something that made Blais inhale sharply. “Good luck thinking.” He handed the sunglasses and jacket out to Blais before he closed the door, the engine of the over-sized Porsche purring as he drove away.

Blais put the sunglasses on top of his head and slung the jacket over his right arm. His eyes were pale, bright hazel, and he studied Reiner for a split second, unsmiling. “Reiner Martin. Nice to finally meet you.” He held out a hand when he got close enough, and Reiner shook it automatically.

Then Reiner held very, *very* still, painfully aware of the predator gazing at him from inches away. Blais only had an inch of height on him, and maybe twenty pounds, but he also had at least twenty years and a... a... there wasn’t

a word for it. Reiner wanted to bow his head, avoid eye contact, and maybe get as far from Blais as possible, all at the same time.

“You’re as bad as Dad, scaring the crap out of him,” Trey said. He bumped Reiner gently with his hip as he said it, and his light tone was oddly reassuring.

“Just making things clear.” Blais let go of Reiner’s hand, his mental aura washed with feral good humor. If Aidan was water, and Trey a thicket of bamboo, Blais was stone, a dizzying wall of granite or something like it. Impervious and solid, and if he tried, he could crush Reiner with no effort.

God, didn’t anybody here have normal mental shields?

Blais studied Reiner, unblinking. “Define normal. What works just fine in a small group is an epic fail when you put nearly four hundred of us in one place.” The hint of a Spanish accent disappeared, replaced by the same honey-and-sand as Trey’s voice. Blais slung the jacket over his shoulder, keeping one finger hooked in the collar, and the predator receded a little. “Trey will help you get your shields straightened out over the weekend. You don’t need to report to Personnel until Monday morning—do that whether I’m back by then or not. We have a furnished room for you down the road; it’s yours until we work out permanent housing.” His mouth quirked. “Stop at the reception desk tomorrow morning—there’ll be an envelope for you with a debit card and some forms to fill out. If you’re planning on sending part of your pay home every month, we can handle that for you automatically. Anything else you need to know before Monday, ask Trey.”

Reiner nodded, and tried to keep all his thoughts to himself for once. Blais nodded at Trey. “You’re playing *loco parentis* for the weekend.” His mouth twisted and Reiner understood that was some kind of joke. “Stay at the house, all right? We’re leaving as soon as Aidan is ready.” He growled softly, and just like that, the predator was back. “Be careful, yes?”

“*Sí, Papi*,” Trey said, confusing the absolute shit out of Reiner. He and Blais hugged, and Blais ran his hand over Trey’s hair as he brushed noses with him.

“I’ll see you on Monday,” Blais told Reiner. “Enjoy your weekend.” To Trey, he added, “Make sure he has what he needs.” Trey grunted, almost a laugh, and Blais gave him a sharp look. Then he smirked, shaking his head. “Play nice.” With that, he walked off, sliding his sunglasses back over his eyes.

Reiner really, truly, needed to sit. Everybody he knew had a “scary boss” story, he’d interned under a couple of winners. Blais... oh god. Thank fuck Reiner wouldn’t have to work directly with him or this would be impossible.

Trey laid a warm hand on Reiner’s shoulder, right at the curve of his neck, and squeezed. He rocked into Reiner, chest bumping Reiner’s upper back, and exhaled a purr into Reiner’s ear. At the same time, he blanketed Reiner’s mind with an image—full color, surround-sound, even scent: *Sunlight filtering down through green leaves, a faint breeze, rich, funky leaf mold cool under his paws. Forest life rustling and twittering everywhere. Warm air moving past his whiskers, carrying a hundred fascinating scents, and warmer sun on his back. And then Trey, warmer even than that, next to him, fur gliding on fur. Shoulders rubbing, then a long slide; Trey coming around to nuzzle his ear, a fast swipe of a tongue along his jaw, into his ear—*

Reiner spun away, uncomfortably—startlingly—aroused, and not just a little. “That’s... not... what I...” *want*, should have been the next word, but he couldn’t say it. Trey stared at him, no expression at all on his face, and whatever he felt tucked out of sight behind his screen of bamboo.

Finally, Trey sighed, and Reiner caught a whiff of regret. “Let’s get your car on the ground and I’ll take you over to the Inn.” Trey stepped back, eyes lingering on Reiner’s face, before he spun and headed for the flatbed.

Reiner got out of the way, leaning on the warm painted concrete wall of the garage while Trey worked the controls on the flatbed. He honestly didn’t understand what was going on here between them. He had a mirror. He looked like a lot of males of his species: thick dark hair, average build, faint year-round tan. Straight nose, not particularly narrow—most of them could pass for a half dozen nationalities with no problem. His green eyes with the gold flecks

were courtesy of his father, according to his mother, most Martins had them. Trey, on the other hand, looked like...

Well for one thing, he didn't look like Aidan, which made Reiner curious about the "dad" thing. If anything, Trey looked like Blais—they had the same eyes and hair—and he'd called Blais "papi". Same build; shoulders not much wider than his hips, although both of them were too lean to be considered stocky. Trey just sort of oozed *power*, but not the indefinable thing Blais had. This was more physical, and fuck him if it wasn't attractive as hell.

Reiner's unfortunate Toyota Camry rolled onto the blacktopped apron in front of the garage, still dripping fluids from underneath, and Trey finished unhooking it. Reiner took the opportunity to watch Trey some more, still not sure if he understood where the flirting was coming from. He didn't have much experience either way. Wasn't much sense in flirting with his cousins—they were more a case of convenience than actual preference. And humans were right out, for males, anyway. Past a certain point, your body twigged to the lack of proper pheromones and lost interest. Most males tried, at least once, just in case it turned out biology had handed them a free pass. He'd heard some horror stories—funny, but still awful—like the one about...

Trey's sigh had a lot of growl in it as he stripped off his work gloves, tossing them back in the truck cab through the open window. "You wanna get your stuff?" he asked, voice flat.

"How far is it to where I'm staying?" Reiner pulled his bulging messenger bag out of the front passenger seat, and opened the back door to grab the biggest duffel.

Trey opened the other back door and hoisted the other two duffels onto his shoulders. "That way. Forty feet." He jerked his chin at the road, toward the older building Reiner had seen. "Let's go."

"What's your last name?" Reiner asked, as their eyes met over the roof of the car.

"DaSilva." Trey came around the front of the Toyota, carrying both duffels like they weighed nothing.



Reiner blocked him, blurting the first question that made it through the dozen or so crowding his head. “So why did you call Aidan ‘Dad’ before?” He held his ground when Trey glared.

“We gonna play twenty questions?” Trey dropped the duffels and put his hands on his hips. “Fine. Because he raised me. Anybody in town will be more than happy to tell you the story. My mother dumped me here with Blais—my biological father—when I was three. I got handed around a lot for a couple of years—Blais had his own shit to deal with—and then Aidan and his wife took me in. Raised me with their own. So, yeah, I call him ‘Dad’. Have since I was five or six.”

“Wife?” That one word stuck out. Their species did not, as a rule, get married. And Aidan and Blais were—obviously—lovers.

“Yup. Legal and everything.” Trey narrowed his eyes, and his mouth curled. “They would have included Blais, too, but human law frowns on that sort of thing.” He laughed at whatever he saw on Reiner’s face. “That fit your idea of the perverse DaSilvas a little better?”

“I didn’t say anything,” Reiner protested. True, he had thought it.

“Yeah, but you thought it. Everybody does. Didn’t stop your mother and your uncle from asking for money, did it? So what did Blais lay out for your fancy degrees? Two hundred grand?”

“Not that much.” In the face of Trey’s sneer, Reiner’s lip curled in a silent snarl. “And I’m here, right? The deal was I come work for SMS after I graduated, so I did. And my family can’t—couldn’t—afford the tuition. Bet he paid for yours.”

“I didn’t go to college.” Trey picked up one duffel and slung the strap over his shoulder. “And I didn’t finish high school.” He hefted the other duffel. “Much as I’d like to finish answering all your questions, I need to get you settled and get over to day care in a little while.”

“Day care?” God, he sounded like a total dumbass. Reiner flushed when Trey raised his eyebrows and shook his head. Trey started walking, and Reiner stretched his legs to keep pace.

“You heard the part about Aidan and Blais heading to Fayetteville. And Emery—Aidan’s wife—too. So I need to pick up their two youngest at day care and stay with them until they get back. And no, I don’t have any offspring. I get stuck taking care of the DaSilva-Forester horde too much to want any of my own right now.”

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## CHAPTER TWO

Trey really, truly, and sincerely wished he'd taken those thirty seconds and tweaked Reiner's goddamn shields. Not that Reiner was *loud*, but it was like having somebody muttering over in a corner—hard *not* to listen. For a geek, this guy had one disorganized head. Or maybe that came with the territory? Trey rolled his shoulders. The idea of being that... *open* made him itchy. Then again, he grew up with the DaSilva-Forester horde, and around them you learned early on that the best offense was a good defense. Literally.

Maybe that's what he should do: take Reiner up to the house and let one of them handle it. They were way better at stuff like that than him. *Right*. Probably not going to happen, not now. God, he'd thought he was better at flirting than this. Granted, he'd never tried doing it where Aidan could hear or see. Trey hadn't figured on Aidan throwing him off so badly—it was a little embarrassing.

Trey also wished he had an excuse for Reiner to walk ahead of him; he'd like a better look at Reiner's butt, thanks. And his back. He didn't know what it was; but, damn, he wanted some more time around Reiner to figure it out. Reiner hung back during the walk over to the Stone Mountain Inn, and Trey could hear him taking it all in—the restaurant and bakery on the ground floor, with all the good smells from both kitchens. There were furnished rooms to let on the other two floors, up an outside stairway. Not to humans—they'd have to drive all the way to Wilkesboro to find a hotel.

Trey walked along the porch, past everything, to the office door on the side, with Reiner trailing a few feet behind. Caroline, who ran the place with her sister, Joanna, and her cousin, Billy, came out before Trey reached the door, radiating vague distress. “We thought y’all didn’t need the room until Monday.”

Of course they did. Trey did *not* sigh, did *not* growl, just slipped the straps off his shoulders and let the duffels down. “S’all right. We can make do till then. Everything okay?” He sent her a wave of reassurance, accompanied by a slow blink.

Caroline launched into an explanation—the roof leaked over the winter so that room needed repairs, they hadn't finished painting, the new mattress was being delivered on Monday—and Trey nodded and let her go through the list.

“Don't worry about it,” he told her once she wound down. “We'll come back on Monday, maybe Tuesday, all right?”

“Thank you, Trey.” Caroline gave Reiner a fast once-over. “You must be Reiner.” She said it funny, *Ray-ner*, and Trey wondered if *he'd* gotten it wrong.

Reiner nodded. “Nice to meet you. And it's Reiner, rhymes with *finer*.” He waved a hand when she got flustered. “Don't worry, everybody does it.”

“Are you related to Bella Chase?” Caroline asked, eyes narrowing, and Trey almost laughed at the resigned look on Reiner's face.

“Yes, ma'am. She's my grandmother.”

Caroline hummed thoughtfully, probably already making a list of compatible bloodlines. By tonight, most of the town would know exactly who Reiner was and was not related to, and in what degree.

Just to mess with her—because Blais would've given her grief about the room, and Trey had let her off easy—he said, “Maybe we'll all come by for dinner over the weekend.” And made sure she knew who he meant by *we*. She stiffened a little, and he smiled, a quick flash of teeth. Him and the horde at the Inn for dinner? That would be interesting. “See you then.” He hefted the bags again, and headed back for the garage.

They made it about twenty feet before Reiner said anything. “Now what?” His brain had gone quiet, or maybe Trey was getting used to the constant nattering of competing thoughts.

“You can stay at my place. I'm gonna be staying at my parents' house for the weekend, anyway, so it's no big deal. Monday we'll get you settled over at the Inn. There's not much else vacant right now, so until somebody relocates, that's what's available. Maybe... I don't know, maybe come fall a few males will head out and a place will open up.”

“You sure?” Reiner didn’t look at him, eyes on the ground. He’d managed a half-assed kind of mind-barrier; the equivalent of one of those flimsy wooden fences with the pointy pickets. Trey could get past it with zero effort, if he wanted to. Made him wonder how Reiner’s family managed, if they were all so... he didn’t know what to call it. Oblivious? Did they all just practice selective mind-deafness? What a pain in the ass that would be.

And oddly, now that he couldn’t see what was going on in Reiner’s head, Trey wanted to know what he was thinking. “Unless you wanna sleep in your car?”

Reiner snorted. “That’s okay. Where... where do you live, exactly?”

Trey stopped at the foot of the staircase running up the side of the garage. “Up here.” He led the way, and popped the door with his shoulder—no matter what he did, it always stuck.

Reiner walked past Trey into the center of the room, and the pleased surprise on his face both warmed and annoyed Trey equally. True, he was proud of the place—he’d done the renovations himself, a winter of wood shavings and plaster dust up his nose plus countless trips to home improvement stores. Not to mention the hours he’d spent re-doing the stuff he messed up the first time. Engines he knew, taping and plastering not so much.

Trey dropped the duffels and rolled his shoulders. “There’s two bedrooms, but only one bed. Bathroom in between, everything else?” He waved a hand. “Right here.”

“This is *really* nice.” Reiner smiled, his green eyes with the faint gold starburst around the pupils wide and warm when they met Trey’s. He put down the messenger bag and the duffel with twin thumps. “And I totally appreciate you doing this.” He breathed out, a funny, sharp sigh, and tilted his head off to one side. “I don’t know if—could I take you for lunch? Dinner? To say thank you?”

*You could take me to bed* was the very first thing that popped into Trey’s head, because, yeah, he’d been thinking that from the first moment, at the side of the road. Or if not the bed, the sofa would do just fine. Or the floor. Or the

wall, for that matter. He just wanted a taste of that skin, wanted to know what kinds of noises...

Reiner stared at him, lips parted, and the scent of sweat and—*oh yes thank you*—arousal thickened the air. “I don’t get it,” he said, after a pause that went on way too long. And then his eyes flicked over to the big blue-and-white-striped sofa and he licked his lips, frowning a little.

“I want you,” Trey said, going for broke, and getting a startled inhale from Reiner. “If you’re not interested, that’s okay, just... say so, and I’ll back off.”

The frown returned, and Reiner wrinkled his nose a little. “It’s not that I’m... *not* interested. It’s just... I feel a little off balance. I’m not saying no, okay?” His smile struck Trey as kind of shy, and charmed the absolute shit out of him. Damn.

Trey took one step forward, not to do anything—well, maybe—and his phone vibrated, playing “Born to be Wild” loud and clear from inside his pocket. He fished it out and read the text. “Shit.” He closed his eyes and indulged in a low growl. “Look, I gotta go. Help yourself to whatever’s in the fridge, or the diner’s good, too. They’re open twenty-four seven. Use the TV, Wi-Fi—um—*crap*. I’ll come by later and get you set up, okay? I swear.” He backed out the door during that rapid-fire speech, closing it behind him, and bounded down the stairs, Reiner’s bewilderment following him the whole way.

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*I want you.*

Reiner closed his eyes. Opened them. Stared at the door. He didn’t think he fucked that up too badly—he wanted to be honest, and Trey knew he was turned on, so lying about it would have been pointless. And would have sent the wrong message. On top of that, he wasn’t good at lying. To his own species, anyway; humans were easy to fool. Look sincere, don’t blink a lot, steady eye contact, and don’t fidget. Easy.

He’d just gotten here, though. Wasn’t even unpacked. And when you got right down to it, Trey was the boss’s son—cliché, much? Then again... *We’re*

*complicated*. Right. He hated complicated, outside of code, and even then he preferred simple—less chance to fuck things up.

Speaking of which—Reiner grunted in annoyance and pulled out his cellphone. He swiped the screen, selected HOME, and waited.

“Hello?” His mother *never* checked Caller ID.

“It’s Reiner. I made it here. Mostly.”

His mother’s sigh was loud even through the phone. “The car?”

“Yeah. Right outside of town.” To avoid the *I-told-you-so* lecture, he changed the subject. “I met Blais DaSilva, for about a minute. And his son—”

“Simon? The lawyer?”

Reiner raised his eyebrows. Trey had a brother? “No. Trey.”

That bought him two seconds of silence. Then: “You be careful around them, Reiner. All those DaSilvas are twisted inside. I wish... well, don’t let them pull you into anything stupid. If you need to quit, that’s just fine. Just come home. There was all those companies looking to hire you, you’d find another job quick.”

Sure. And then he’d spend how many years paying back the hundred and sixty grand? Not like his family offered to mortgage their land to pay for his education, had they? Not even part of it. He’d had this argument already, more than once, and as he’d pointed out then, his mother and uncles should have objected to him working for Blais DaSilva before they went and asked for the tuition money.

“I hear you, Mom. I bet I can transfer to the California office if things get too strange here.” Reiner regretted the twinge of homesickness that prompted him to make this call—he should have just emailed. Or texted. “I’ve gotta unpack now, and get something to eat. I’ll call again when I get settled. Say hi to everybody and let them know I made it here okay.”

“I will. Talk to you soon.” His mother disconnected, and Reiner pressed the heel of his hand to his forehead. Wonderful, now he had a headache. His stomach gurgled, and that reminded him of how long it had been since he ate

anything. A burger and fries somewhere in West Virginia, around noon... he looked up, and the clock over the sink told him it was nearly five. He needed food.

He opened the tallest cabinet door, one that went almost from floor to ceiling, and found a compact washer and dryer stacked on top of one another, with storage on top. The narrower tall cabinet next to it had boxes of cereal, and staples like coffee and sugar, but nothing he wanted to eat, and the cabinets over the sink held dishes and mugs.

The refrigerator door bristled with notes and magnets. The magnet for the local middle school caught his eye—the school's sports teams were called the Jaguars. Coincidence? He didn't think so, and the idea of... *exposure* like that made the hair on his spine stand up. There was also a magnet for the garage, and one for the package store, and a sheet from a brochure listing the hours and opening dates for Stone Mountain State Park. Next to that, a printout outlined the dates for the local hunting season. Reiner shivered, and opened the refrigerator door.

He picked out a beer, a local microbrew by the unfamiliar label, the leftover half of a roasted chicken, and something dark green and leafy with garlic and oil. Taking a guess, he stuck the green leafy stuff in the microwave, and put the rest on the table. The kitchen area only had four drawers, and he found a knife and fork without much trouble.

He also found a gun. A handgun, matte black, and he'd watched enough TV and movies to recognize extra ammunition clips. Five of them. He had no idea how many bullets were in each one, but five clips seemed... excessive. He shut the drawer, the gulf between where he'd grown up in western Pennsylvania and Stone Mountain yawning wider by the second.

He took his beer and his food over to the table. The denim jacket on the back of one chair told him where Trey usually sat—facing the door. That, combined with the gun, seemed ominous somehow. Wasn't that where you were supposed to sit to prevent someone surprising you? Or shooting you in the back?



Reiner sat in the other chair, and drank half the beer in one long swallow because his mouth had gone bone-dry. His uncles had rifles, although Reiner didn't recall them ever using them. Hunting rifles, in a metal locker in the pantry, right next to the washer, with a big combination lock on the hasp. No handguns, though, and certainly not in the kitchen drawers.

He stuffed a piece of chicken in his mouth and chewed, barely tasting it. He'd known going into this about Stone Mountain's ties to Arrowhead. Their military contracts brought in millions every year, money that got used for everything from supporting females and their offspring—keeping them off the social services radar—to paying tuition. His species had lawyers of their own now, and doctors, and dentists, plus almost a dozen certified midwives; layers of safety that wouldn't exist without the DaSilvas.

Reiner finished his beer and got up for a second one. He'd heard the stories all his life; how DaSilva arrogance revealed their existence in the first place—although no one ever said exactly how that happened—how the DaSilvas bullied and coerced other families into working for them, into organizing their small businesses into corporations, establishing a network of communication—all in the name of *safety*. Some families, like the Chases and the Woodwards, resisted; they kept to themselves and had minimal contact with the rest of their species.

Reiner took in Trey's bright, clean apartment—the warm pale-yellow color on the walls, and the gleaming bamboo floor—nothing fancy, but so far removed from the aging, cheap, pre-fab house he'd grown up in that it wasn't funny. Maybe the DaSilvas *were* arrogant, but they had money to pay for college educations and midwives. How was that bad?

He'd finished all the food by this time, and realized he hadn't tasted any of it. He'd wanted out and away from his own settlement his entire life. His mother thought it was the usual male itchy feet, and never understood his love for computers and the elegance of programming—and the need for a college education to do anything useful with that love.

And now here he was, with a Bachelor's degree *and* a Master's, the first male in his family to finish high school, much less go to college. He got up

and put the dirty plate and containers in the dishwasher—his mother would sneer, but he'd bet she wouldn't turn down owning one—and took out a third beer. On second thought... he put it back, thinking he'd rather take a shower before drinking any more.

He dragged both duffels closer to the bedrooms, away from the door, and found a pair of sweats and a T-shirt without too much digging. The first room he looked in had no bed, just a freestanding wooden closet, some half-empty bookshelves, and a plain wooden desk with an idling laptop. Reiner checked out the wireless modem next to it, shaking his head at the index card taped to the desk with Trey's Wi-Fi password written in block letters.

Trey's bedroom smelled like him, sassafras roots and black pepper with a faint overlay of musk, and was reassuringly lived-in. The blankets and top sheet trailed off the queen-size bed onto the floor, and laundry filled the wicker basket in the corner, the overflow piled next to it. A skylight let the early evening sun suffuse the room with gold, and a breeze riffled the sheer white curtains on both big windows.

He could actually see himself sleeping in here, in this bright, pleasant room. On impulse, he decided to make the bed and straighten up a bit. He could even do the laundry as a thank you. He pulled the blankets the rest of the way off, and tweaked the top sheet into place, re-tucking the bottom corners. He picked one pillow off the floor, and lifted the other one, revealing a large, shiny knife.

What the fuck? Seriously. Who slept with a knife under their damn pillow? That was just... no. He picked it up and put it on the low dresser next to the bed. A gun in the kitchen drawer, a knife in the bed—god, what next? Grenades in the medicine cabinet? C4 under the toilet tank lid? Trey worked in a garage—why did he need this shit?

On cue, somebody knocked on the door, and then Trey said, "Hey, Reiner?" A moment later he filled the bedroom doorway. "Oh," he said. "I forgot about that—sorry." Trey must've showered, because he smelled of minty, herb-y soap, and he had on different clothes, a thin, clingy pair of blue sweats, a faded gray T-shirt, and flip-flops.

“You sleep with a knife. And there’s a gun in the kitchen. In a drawer.” Reiner thought he sounded pretty calm.

“Yeah, I do. There is.” Trey tilted his head, studying Reiner. “Habit, I guess. Look, I wanted to apologize for running out of here like that earlier. The twins have been monsters at day care lately, and I needed to get them out of there. Did you eat?”

“I found stuff in the fridge. What do you mean, ‘habit’?”

Trey shrugged. “I was with Arrowhead for two and a half... three years.”

“You were a *mercenary*?” Reiner should have had that third beer.

“Yeah.” Trey’s mouth quirked. “Um, that would be private military contractor, thank you very much. I kinda had no choice, you know?” Trey leaned his shoulder against the doorframe. “Do you want to go over to the diner for pie and coffee?”

Reiner laced his hands on top of his head, not sure if he was aggravated or charmed. Trey’s admiring perusal tipped the scales further to *charmed*, and Reiner shook his head. “I don’t understand being so casual about it.”

“Coffee and pie?” Trey asked, widening his eyes, a faint smile curving his lips.

Reiner resisted the urge to smile in response. “The gun. The... military thing. I don’t even think I’ve seen a handgun before this, not for real.”

“We *are* predators.” Trey slouched a little in the doorway, eyebrows rising. “That’s what we do best. Half the males here”—he waved a hand to indicate the town, such as it was—“have worked for Arrowhead.” He shrugged. “Most of us sucked at school, anyway.”

“That’s such bullshit,” Reiner growled. “The whole *males can’t finish school* thing is bullshit. They can, they just need to control themselves a little better.” How many times had he heard this same stupid speech? Adolescent males were too touchy, too prone to violence, to make it through high school, so they dropped out, did physical labor for a few years until their hormones leveled off, maybe got their GED at some point. “It’s an *excuse*. My cousins

could have finished high school, they just took the easy way out.” Not to mention his two idiot brothers.

Trey straightened up, the bamboo thicket in his head acquiring an ominous darkness. “That what you think? That it’s *easier*?” He glided closer to Reiner, no humor on his face or in his eyes at all. “I started taking valerian the beginning of sophomore year. For the bus ride. Because being stuck in an enclosed space with thirty or so humans was more than I could handle. It wasn’t enough, so I tried to buy some Ritalin off a couple of kids. That... didn’t go so well.” He smiled grimly. “*Papi*—Blais—figured out about the drugs right away, and yanked me out of school. To make a long story short, he shipped me off to Mexico, to my grandfather.” He paused, like Reiner should have a clue who that was, and when Reiner didn’t say anything, Trey continued. “*Abuelo* runs Arrowhead. Him and his partner. I stayed with them until late last year, then I came back home.”

He took a deep breath, and Reiner caught the edge of a thought that left him tasting burnt coffee and the sourness of wet ashes, both things together translating into a sort of wistful regret. Trey took a step back. “My cell number is on the fridge, call me if you need anything, or can’t find something. I’ll be at the shop tomorrow morning around eight thirty to open up. If you go out, don’t worry about locking the door—nobody does.”

He turned around, and Reiner finally figured out what he wanted to say. “I wasn’t saying no—to the pie and coffee.”

That was how they ended up at the diner twenty minutes later, after Reiner took the fastest shower ever.

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Trey ordered cherry pie and Reiner picked apple, and it turned out they both took their coffee the same way, black with sugar. Reiner commented on the pie, Trey asked why he didn’t get it with vanilla ice cream... and once they started talking, they didn’t stop, not for two hours. The diner was mostly empty—it was a Thursday night, after all—and for all Trey knew or cared, it

was just them. After the second cup of coffee, Trey paid the check, pointing out that he had done the inviting.

“Like a date?” Reiner teased, and Trey immediately thought of all the things *date* implied. For humans, at least. Not that this was a date, in that sense, except... Reiner had spent a lot more time around humans than Trey ever had, so maybe Trey should just go with it.

“Yeah. If you want.” Trey slid out of the booth, wishing he’d worn jeans. The thin sweats weren’t hiding anything. He held the door for Reiner, manners that Aidan had reinforced from day one, and Reiner gave him a strange look.

“You were serious about the date thing, huh?”

*No* would be the wrong answer, so he just shrugged and bumped his shoulder into Reiner’s, trying to keep this light. “My dad drilled us all on human-style polite stuff. Living here, it’s not so big a deal, but we go to Winston-Salem and Greensboro all the time. Makes us stand out less.”

“Makes sense.”

They fell into step easily, brushing against each other as they went, Trey very aware of the body heat barely an inch away. He walked with Reiner all the way to the garage, around to the stairs, wondering if he should try and follow him up. Reiner paused, hand on the railing, before facing Trey. His mouth turned up in a one-sided smile, showing a hint of teeth in a silent laugh. “I had a very lovely time, thank you,” he said, pitching his voice up half an octave. His eyes caught the light from across the street, and gold flashed deep inside his pupils.

Trey stepped in, close enough to make it clear he was half-hard and rising fast. “I don’t want a female,” he said quietly. “I want *this*.” He rolled his hips, rubbed himself on a muscled thigh. Reiner inhaled, and Trey settled both hands on his waist, lining them up. He breathed in along Reiner’s neck, shoulder to ear, then went back down and repeated the motion with his tongue.

Oh fuck, that was good. Reiner had used Trey’s soap, and smelling it on his skin tripped a whole bank of switches. Trey palmed Reiner’s lower back, pulling him closer until their cocks mashed together. Reiner grunted, almost a

groan, and let go of the railing to grab Trey's hip with one hand, pushing him back. His other got busy between them, a fast twitch and a nudge until they both pointed up. That was *much* better, and Trey nipped along Reiner's jawline while they humped slowly, trying things out.

Reiner was the one to initiate the kiss, angling his head and capturing Trey's mouth. His tongue slid inside, accompanied by a low-frequency groan that ran right down through Trey and lodged in his balls. They couldn't get any closer, but Trey tried anyway, grinding his hard-on into Reiner's belly and grabbing his ass.

Reiner broke their kiss, muttering, biting at Trey's chin. "Up..."

*Upstairs?* Trey asked, not sure why Reiner shuddered. *Yes.*

Trey tried to bite Reiner's ass on the way up the stairs, and stumbled out of his flip-flops when Reiner smacked his head and hissed at him. They staggered through the door, and Trey shoved it closed with one foot. Reiner watched him, unblinking, a small smile playing over his mouth.

Trey slid his bare foot on the wood floor, anticipation making the hairs on his neck prickle. There was nothing he liked better than some seriously rough play—except maybe the sex afterwards. He didn't even care which one of them got to do the roughing up; it was all good. Another gliding step to the right, mirrored by Reiner. Trey breathed out and did it again, half a step, both of them angling closer now. His smile grew when he caught a fleeting impression of ears going sideways, and Reiner tensed, thighs bunching. Trey led with his shoulder, catching Reiner in his center of mass and taking both of them to the floor.

Trey twisted so he hit first, and damn, the rug wasn't much of a cushion. He went with the motion, rolling until Reiner landed on top again. Trey surged up, intending a kiss, and Reiner surprised him by falling sideways. Trey lunged after him, intent on that kiss, and ended up facedown with Reiner straddling his thighs. Trey pulled his knees in, tilting his ass up, growling happily when a hard dick pushed right along his crack. Reiner bit his shoulder, not as hard as Trey would have liked, but still good. His own dick protested

the angle and being pressed into the floor, so Trey shoved with both hands up onto all fours.

Reiner took it further, hooked an arm around Trey's throat and dragged him onto his knees, humping Trey's ass and growling in his ear. "Too many clothes."

There was an easy fix for that. Trey reached for the hem of his shirt, and Reiner let him go long enough for both of them to get naked from the waist up. Trey sucked in air as Reiner flattened his hands on Trey's abs, and arched into the touch, his whole body bowing as he welcomed those curious fingers on his skin. Reiner bit his neck again when he reached Trey's chest, and went still when he discovered the tiny barbells through both nipples.

For one awful second, the backwash of surprise seemed a whole lot like distaste, or maybe repelled fascination—Trey wasn't sure. Then he got a crystal clear image of himself, on his knees, bent back onto the sofa while Reiner licked up Trey's stomach on his way to those shiny, silvery balls.

*Yes. God, yes.*

Reiner shoved him in the direction of the sofa, hooking a hand into the back of Trey's sweats and pulling them down. Trey crawled out of them as he went, knee-walking until he had his back to the sofa. He straightened up, and it was his turn to freeze at the sight of an entirely naked Reiner, on his feet. Lots of lean muscle on a narrow frame, with just enough bulk in his shoulders and thighs to be interesting. He had more body hair than Trey, which was kind of a turn-on, actually, a dark, silky arrow from his navel to his very, *very* nice cock, and the same fine, black hair coated his balls.

Trey palmed his dick, pressing it to his belly because it ached—god, did it ever—and maybe he should take the edge off so he could enjoy the next part without the throb in his balls and low down in his belly as a distraction.

"Only if I can watch." Reiner licked his lips, the gold in his eyes making the green brighter, spring leaves glowing through an early morning fog on the mountain... and Trey suddenly, desperately, needed to know what Reiner

would look like when he shifted, what color his eyes would be then. *Later*, he promised, and his other half submerged, grumbling.

Trey wrapped his fingers around his own erection and squeezed, groaning softly. “Or I could suck you while I get off.”

Reiner’s body clearly approved of that plan, and Trey swallowed a rush of saliva as Reiner’s foreskin slid back to expose his wet crown. He closed his eyes as the scent overwhelmed him, salt and *male*, the heady combination his body recognized as simply *desire*; and he opened his mouth and leaned toward the source, a plaintive whine escaping.

Reiner jerked against Trey’s lips at the first touch, and two hands settled on Trey’s skull, not holding him or urging—not yet—just *there*, another point of contact. Trey inhaled, relaxing his tongue, dizzy when the pheromones hit his palate and his body’s goal narrowed and focused. Reiner filled his mouth, soft skin over iron, over rock; the musk and the salt making Trey greedy for more. He wrapped his hand even more firmly around himself and tugged, squeezing almost enough to hurt, and did it again, swallowing Reiner to the back of his throat at the same time.

Reiner moaned, fingers flexing, and on the next downward stroke, Trey changed his grip on his own cock, a little less foreskin, now back up, and... *fuck*.

His instinctive reaction was to bite down, and his eyes nearly rolled up in his head trying not to do just that. He tried it again, hips bucking helplessly as the tiny barbs around the underside of his glans caught the leading edge of his fingers, whining around the cock filling his mouth at the indescribable, gut-twisting, perfect pleasure. Trey used his free hand to hold Reiner steady so he could lick all around the underside of Reiner’s cock-head, deliberately flicking the barbs there, and enjoying the way they dragged on his tongue.

Reiner sounded like he was hyperventilating, and his hands squeezed Trey’s skull. His mind gave off nothing but white noise, overloading, and Trey fed him everything he felt, all of it, and Reiner’s hips stuttered as he groaned, wordlessly begging for more. So Trey sucked him in, all the way to the back



of his tongue before he backed off, wrapping his fingers around the shaft and squeezing, sliding on spit. He tightened his lips and used his teeth to scrape the barbs at the same time he wriggled his tongue in the slit.

Short fingernails bit into his scalp, and Reiner groaned so deeply Trey felt the vibration on his lips. He managed one more tug on his own dick, enough to tip him over; mind blanking as his entire body clenched, struggling to breathe through his own orgasm as Reiner pumped into his throat.

He pulled off when Reiner's knees wobbled, and gave him a shove toward the sofa. Reiner went down like a felled tree, then rolled onto his back with a pained hiss. Trey made it to his feet and laid down on top of him, careful about where he put his knees. He tucked his face into the crook of Reiner's neck and sighed, shivering happily at the slow body rush from another noseful of pheromones.

Round two, coming right up.

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## CHAPTER THREE

Reiner woke up to sun-warmth on his back and an aching head. He pushed upright and sat on the edge of the unfamiliar—and empty—bed, rubbing his hands over his hair and wanting coffee in the worst way. He also needed to piss, and drew a complete blank about where the hell the bathroom was. Yawning, he shuffled to the bedroom door and, yup, tile and porcelain one room over.

A damp towel hung on the back of the door, not the one he'd used earlier last night, so Trey must've showered before he left. Actually, showering would be a wonderful idea; his skin itched with sweat and come. Once he finished, he found a pair of sweatpants and went to make coffee.

The coffeemaker was already set up, all he had to do was press the button and wait. Propped against a big stoneware mug on the counter was a piece of paper with a phone number and "Trey" in neat all-caps. He'd sort of expected Trey to be here, especially after they'd collapsed into bed around two, two-thirty and curled up together.

He hummed to himself, rubbing a hand down his abs to counter the ripple of gooseflesh. They'd gone for hours, first on the floor, then the sofa, then the floor again. Not as long as with a female in season—or so Reiner had heard—but definitely longer than a human male could manage. The running joke was that their species could have sex more than one hundred times in twenty-four hours... but only for fifteen seconds at a time. Do the math, and it only added up to maybe thirty minutes, total. Not all that impressive.

The way he understood it, with two males, relying solely on friction meant it took longer to come, although the recovery time was still almost immediate. One of the advantages of not relying entirely on hydraulics—Reiner had watched some human porn in college, enough to appreciate his own biological quirks.

Now that he thought about it, he was kind of surprised that Trey let him take the lead the way he had. Sure, Reiner was used to being the aggressor with his cousins, but Trey—god, he'd expected it to be the other way around.

Not that Trey had been all passive. That trick Trey had, using his tongue—and his teeth—on the barbs? That was heart-attack-territory good. And he knew how to use his teeth. Oh yeah.

A thundering, thumping, ratcheting from downstairs made him jump, and vibrated the mug on the counter. It happened again, and he realized it must be the garage doors of the shop rolling up. He looked around for a clock, and saw it was almost eight thirty. Crap. He wanted to be over at SMS by nine so he didn't look like a complete slacker. No time for coffee, then.

He wasted ten minutes trying to find a pair of chinos that weren't hopelessly wrinkled before settling on one of his nicer pairs of jeans. A long-sleeved polo shirt, his good sneakers, and he was ready to go. Wallet, cellphone, keys—no, didn't need those—he bolted out the door and down the stairs.

“Hey.” Trey stepped out from inside the dark interior of the garage, squinting at Reiner. “What's the rush?”

*Trey, neck arched, elbows on the floor so he could press up to meet Reiner's mouth. He hissed when Reiner teased and bit his nipples, exploring the barbells with his tongue and teeth, and—*

Reiner reminded himself to breathe. “I didn't hear you leave.” Oh, nice—how lame was that?

Trey ducked his head and shrugged, watching Reiner with eyes that had a lot of gold in them. “I had to get back. I promised Eva I'd only be a few hours, and...” He shrugged again, mouth curving in a smile. Reiner had a very clear image of that mouth sucking him in down to the root, and his jeans shrank to just this side of uncomfortable. Trey raised his head, pupils wide even in the sun. “I would've liked to wake up with you, all warm in the sun and all.” He swallowed, and his smile changed, went almost shy. “We were gonna go out in the woods tonight, hunt something, spend the night. Would you like to come with us? We usually have a pretty good time.”

Reiner blinked. *We?*

Trey nodded. “Me, Eva, Sophie and Ethan, Marcus, Dean, and Eliza. We’ll head out around five thirty and come back tomorrow morning. I’d really like it if you’d come with us.”

Reiner said, “Okay,” responding more to the almost-but-not-quite yearning coloring Trey’s thoughts. Hunt what? He’d never gone after anything bigger than a turkey.

“Great.” Trey closed the distance between them, and before Reiner knew what he was going to do, Trey kissed him. Nothing crazy, a simple brush of lips, but Reiner’s entire body heated. Trey laughed as he withdrew, not teasing or anything, a happy sound. He rubbed his nose on Reiner’s cheek and backed away, eyes alight and a slight flush on his cheekbones. “See you later,” he promised, and disappeared into the garage.

Reiner walked down the road, trying to get his body under control. He didn’t quite get why Trey got him so hot and bothered; it wasn’t like Reiner hadn’t done any of this before. Well, not all of it. None of his cousins were pierced anywhere, and damn, those barbells were fun to play with.

Reiner huffed. *Not* helping.

Up close, the SMS building was huge, and looked like it grew out of the surrounding earth; the bronze-green glass and matching stone blending into the greenery around it. He went through a huge wooden door in a metal frame into a tiled lobby with a reception desk at the far end. The area was dim and cool, and his steps slowed as he noticed the carvings on the walls. No, not carvings, the designs were painted. Were they?

“Cool, huh?” The male who’d spoken grinned when Reiner twitched. “Sorry. I did the same thing. It’s wallpaper.” He was shorter than Reiner by at least three inches, and wiry, with longish dark blond hair and green eyes. He stuck out a hand. “Gus Black. It’s really August, but nobody ever calls me that.”

“Reiner Martin.”

Gus nodded, his hair sliding into his face. “I know. We’ve been waiting for you to show up.” Reiner’s eyebrows rose, and Gus waved a hand. “Not, you

know, like you're late or anything. But me and Joel have been here for like almost a week, and we're not supposed to start anything until all of us are here. Did you just get here?" Reiner opened his mouth—not fast enough, though. "We have rooms over at the Inn. They're *really* small, so I'm glad we don't have to share. Not that I figure we'll be there much, 'cause, y'know, we'll probably be here most of the time, anyway."

A second male joined them from a room Reiner hadn't even noticed, the doorway screened by a palm or something. He was as tall as Reiner but skinny, no muscle to him at all. And messy. In general, Reiner didn't pay much attention to his hair; every other month he got it cut short and that was it, the shorter the better. This male looked like somebody hacked at his dark hair with dull scissors—or maybe he'd chopped off the front to keep it out of his eyes. It made Reiner twitchy to look at it.

"Joel Lund," the new male said, not meeting Reiner's eyes. The hair on Reiner's neck bristled at the evasion. "You're the hardware guy, right?"

"I do both." Reiner didn't quite get why these two made him want to growl. He'd never gotten like this with his cousins or his brothers.

Joel nodded, and something about the set of his shoulders eased the prickle down Reiner's spine.

"So when did you get here?" Gus almost bounced on the balls of his feet.

"Yesterday afternoon. My car broke down, and the garage had to come and pick me up." Reiner frowned as Gus and Joel exchanged an *oh shit* look. "What?"

Gus and Joel stared at him, wide-eyed. "Did you see him?" Gus whispered. "Aidan?"

"Yeah. He was driving the flatbed." Reiner shrugged. "Why?"

"God, I would've freaked," Gus muttered. "Look, why don't you get checked in and we can all go for coffee or something. I mean, we're gonna be working together, right? Might as well get properly introduced."

The female behind the reception desk—who was both young and pretty—looked up as Reiner approached. He got a clear impression of *ears and whiskers forward*—polite curiosity—as she tilted her head, light brown eyes bright and friendly. Her nostrils flared, and she smiled at him, a flash of white teeth and some serious dimples.

“You must be Reiner Martin,” she said, her accent pure southern girl all the way. “Welcome to Stone Mountain. Mr. DaSilva left an envelope for you.” She handed Reiner a manila envelope. “There are instructions inside, and papers you need to sign. You can bring them back on Monday and leave them with Personnel.”

“Thank you.” Reiner smiled back automatically, wondering if there was anything else he was supposed to do.

She shook her head, a spark of humor in her eyes now. “If you have any questions, I’ll be here until three. Otherwise, you can ask Trey.”

Heat crept along the back of Reiner’s neck, and he stepped back from the desk, fighting an embarrassed smile. “Thank you,” he repeated, wondering if he needed a second shower. He didn’t *think* he smelled like sex. Or Trey. Did he?

He rejoined Gus and Joel, and they all went outside. The day was heating up, and he pushed his sleeves up to bare his forearms.

“Her name is Lily,” Joel said, looking at his sneakers. “The receptionist. She’s a Cole. I have to check with my mother, but I think we’re related.” He scuffed through the gravel at the edge of the road. “I didn’t figure on having any relations here.” Joel finally looked up, revealing eyes so dark they were nearly black.

Gus punched him lightly on the arm. “Give it a break. Seriously. I’ll bet there are dozens of females here who aren’t related to you.”

The three of them finished crossing the road, angling across to the diner, and Joel picked up the thread of conversation. “She just smells good. I don’t know about you guys, but I was hoping to meet some nice females here.” He

offered a small smile. “I have six sisters, so I’m kinda wishin’ I throw females.”

“That would be cool,” Reiner agreed. Overall, there were always more males than females; the ratio was about three to one. Females did the choosing when it came to sex, and a male who consistently produced female offspring was always popular, to put it mildly.

They went inside, and Reiner headed for a booth in the back, far from the door. A different waitress than the night before offered them menus. They ordered coffee all around, plus a breakfast special each. The coffees appeared instantly, and Reiner picked up a sugar packet.

“So where are you staying?” Gus asked, dumping three sugars into his coffee, and following that with milk.

“Um. My room wasn’t ready at the Inn.” Reiner stirred his coffee and took a cautious sip, wrinkling his nose at the heat. “I’m staying over the garage for the weekend.”

“Aren’t you...” Gus frowned, and looked at Joel for help. “I don’t know. Nervous?”

*Nervous?* Reiner had a vision of Trey, skin gleaming with sweat, braced over Reiner while their hips ground together. Joel yelped as hot coffee went up his nose, and Gus’s eyes opened as wide as they could go.

“Fuck,” Gus breathed, nearly reverent. “That was Trey DaSilva, right?”

“You just got here,” Joel said, scowling. “How did you manage *that*?”

“It just sort of... happened.” For hours. “He flirted, and I figured...” Reiner trailed off, not sure how much he wanted to say. “It was just some fun.”

Gus and Joel both snorted. “You know about the DaSilvas, right?” Gus asked. “I mean, I’m from Colorado, right?”

“Okay.” Reiner had no idea where this was going.

“So, about twenty years ago, maybe a couple more, Blais DaSilva made a few trips to our settlement. He had one son from way before that, then he fathered another one, and then Trey. But it was like—he doesn’t *like* females.”

Joel and Reiner stared at him. “What do you mean?” Joel asked, frowning a little. “He’s got four, five offspring.”

“Yeah, but he never has sex with a female *unless* she’s in season.” Gus raised his eyebrows.

“So?” Reiner said slowly. “That’s true of lots of males, right? I don’t get it.” He remembered then the way Trey rubbed against him, the way he said “I don’t want a female,” and it took on a whole other meaning. “So you’re saying he *prefers* males? What’s the big deal?”

“Really.” Joel shrugged. “Females are crazy. Yeah, the sex is great, but there’s a reason we don’t... you know, pair off and shit like that. Males are tons easier to get along with.”

“I’m just sayin’ that DaSilvas are weird, is all.” Gus threw his balled-up empty sugar packet at Joel. “Most of ’em prefer males—pretty much exclusively—and they like pain. That’s why most them are pierced.” He hunched his shoulders, but their meals came before he could say anything else.

After that, Reiner made it a point to keep the conversation on work, or at least on what they’d be working on come Monday. Once they all got going with the geek-talk, it was easy to not think about Trey, or what they’d done. Might do. Much.

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When Reiner headed back to Trey’s apartment, Trey was nowhere to be seen, and the garage was closed up tight. Reiner’s car sat off to the side; Trey must have rolled it back, out of the way. At the top of the stairs, a note was stuck in the door.

*Took a look at your car. Water pump is shot. Ordered the parts. See you later.*

*Trey*



Reiner shoved at the upstairs door to get it open; Trey had to do the same thing last night. He left the note on the table, and debated setting up his laptop and spending some time catching up on his email. He yawned, and scratched his belly under his shirt. A nap would be nice. A couple of hours, then he'd see what Wi-Fi was like out here. He shrugged out of his shirt and toed off his sneakers next to the bed, lying down in just his jeans. The pillows and sheets smelled like both of them: black pepper, sassafras, and orange peel. It made a nice combination in his nose. Reiner curled up around a pillow and dropped off to sleep.

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At five o'clock, Reiner changed into a ratty pair of jeans and a T-shirt he'd had since high school, figuring he'd be naked in a little while anyway. If he had to stash his clothes someplace while they ran around in the woods, he certainly wasn't wearing anything nice. He slipped on his old sneakers, the ones he'd had for years and couldn't part with, and sat at the bottom of the stairs outside to wait.

At five twenty-five, something shiny and black came grumbling down the road next to the garage, something with a big engine. He didn't know for sure, but he'd guess it was older than he was by maybe thirty years. It *looked* like a car, but had an open bed in the back like a pickup truck. A bed filled with six young jaguars of varying ages, all wearing pretty much the same as Reiner. And Trey was driving. Reiner got up and walked over to the idling vehicle.

Trey put the car—truck?—in Park and got out, leaving the engine running. “Behold,” he said, waving a hand, TV-presenter style. “The Chevy El Camino. The world's most useless vehicle.”

“I don't know.” A teenage female, lithe and lean, hopped out of the back. Her sable hair almost reached her waist, and the only word Reiner had for her was *exotic*. She didn't look anything like his female relatives, who were rounded and soft in comparison. Eva was sleek, and moved like there was plenty of muscle underneath her clothes. “Dad says the civilian version of the Hummer is the world's most useless vehicle.” She stalked over to Reiner and gave him a once-over—mind and body. Her mental touch was almost

electrical, with the promise of a nasty shock if you ventured too close. He bristled at the intrusion in his head, and her amber eyes gleamed, accompanied by a friendly show of teeth. “Don’t get your fur all ruffled. Trey says you need your shields fixed—we can help you with that.” She stuck her hands in her jeans’ pockets and rocked on the balls of her feet. “I’m Eva.”

Reiner’s jaw loosened, because along with her name, she gave him a strange cluster of images, a little mental data packet, a zip file of personal information. He knew her full name was Eva Jameson, she was sixteen, and she was no relation to Trey at all even if they had grown up as siblings. And, although she called Aidan “dad”, same as Trey, she was, in fact, Aidan’s sister-in-law, not his daughter. She huffed at his confusion. *Yeah, we’re complicated.*

“How did you do that?” Reiner blurted. “And can you teach me how?”

Eva nodded. “Think so, unless you’re completely stupid.” Reiner growled, and she grinned, unafraid. “Just ’cause you went to college doesn’t make you smart. Not that way, anyway. ’Sides, Trey likes ’em smart *and* pretty.” Now Trey growled, and she wrinkled her nose at him. “Well, you do.”

A younger male sidled up to her, lighter-haired and green-eyed, and she put an arm around his shoulders. “This is Marcus—” *age eleven, Aidan and Emery’s son. Plays soccer and loves video games.* His mental aura was bubbly water, a less-scary version of Aidan’s cascading waterfall.

Two more teens jumped out of the El Camino, a male and a female, followed by two five-or-six-year-olds. The teens were Ethan, dark-haired and amber-eyed—*Aidan and Emery’s oldest son, fourteen, better at video games than Marcus—*

“Who whipped who at Ultimate Halo?” Marcus sneered, as only a pre-teen could. Eva shook him by the scruff, accompanied by a light mental slap. Reiner knew his mouth was open and shut it.

—and Sophie, who smiled at Reiner while she sent him *fourteen, Ethan’s fraternal twin, and video games are for geeks.* Her eyes, amber like her brother’s, widened, and her mouth made an O. *Sorry.* Sophie struck Reiner as

a softer version of Eva, in fact, both she and Ethan reminded him of Aidan a little in the shape of their faces.

Ethan and Sophie's mental barriers were also variations on water, swirls and froth, with a touch of fog. "We get that from Mom," Sophie informed him. "The fog part."

Some stray fact tumbled through Reiner's head, disappearing the instant he focused on it, leaving an odd disquiet behind. Where had that come from? He could almost see the... *words*, that was it, a huge whiteboard in a chilly classroom and the professor writing in red—

"And last, and certainly the most terrifying—" Trey scooped up the two little ones, who settled themselves on each hip with their arms around his neck, giggling at his put-on growly voice. "Eliza and Dean." *Five, fraternal twins, Emery's children.*

At first, Reiner thought they had no shields—the two of them were perfect blanks—and the hair on his neck rose as he realized that *was* their shield. The only way he could tell them apart was by their eyes: Dean's were the same amber as Eva's and the older twins, Eliza's were hazel. Their dark hair was the same length, and the clothes—jeans and a T-shirt—were unisex.

"Don't be fooled," Trey told him. Reiner had to shut his mouth again, and Trey gave him a small, strange smile. "Like Eva said—"

"*Sumus contortum?*" Reiner offered, and Trey's smile grew to include his eyes.

"Yeah," he murmured, and Reiner's heart hitched, an odd sensation.

Eva nodded. "Right. Now that we've got that over with, can we all get back in the car?" She tilted her head, the same way Trey did sometimes, and squinted at Reiner. "I'm thinking we can work on your shields when we get out in the woods, if that's okay? Better to do it before we all shift."

"Okay." *We who?*

"I think this is gonna be a group effort." Trey deposited the five-year-olds in the back of the El Camino. The others piled in, too, and Trey opened the

driver's door. "You get to ride up front with me." He laughed when the six younger jaguars all made kissy noises, and Reiner hoped his flush wasn't visible as he slid into the warm interior.

*No, but we can all feel it*, Eva told him, snickering. *Trey and Reiner sitting in a tree...*

The rest of them picked up the sing-song chant, out loud: "K-I-S-S-I-N-G. First comes sex, then comes grooming—"

"I am *really* sorry about this," Trey muttered, covering his eyes with one hand.

"—then comes Reiner with a lot of bruising."

"How come *I'm* the one with the bruises?" Reiner protested, half-laughing.

*Because Trey doesn't scan*, Eva said. *Although you did leave some nice bite-marks.*

*I think 'carnage' would work better than 'grooming'*, Ethan said. *Or maybe 'damage'.*

*Yeah, but what rhymes with damage?* Eva countered.

*Bandage?* Marcus suggested.

Eva hummed thoughtfully. *Then comes Reiner with a... big old bandage? That sucks.*

Ethan snickered. *I bet Reiner—Ow! Hey.* A thump from the back of the car was followed by growling, and more thumping.

Trey laughed out loud and put the car in drive, easing out onto the blacktop. *Try not to fall out.*

"Are they always like this?" Reiner kept his voice low.

*We can still hear you*, Sophie told him. *This is us being nice. Just wait till we get to know you better.*

Reiner slumped down, the vinyl seat squeaking under him, and sighed. Trey reached over and patted his knee before signaling a turn.

*There isn't a car for miles*, Ethan pointed out.

“And when you're old enough to drive, don't signal. I'm signaling.” Trey made a right, into the woods, onto another paved road.

Reiner sat up, realizing there were houses on both sides of them. He'd half wondered where everybody lived, but didn't expect *this*. The road—two narrow lanes, no center markings—wound aimlessly, a lazy, swooping serpentine with offshoots that curved off and disappeared. No street signs, no house numbers, and no mailboxes. And the houses were all *old*, with different kinds of wood siding and lots of multi-paned windows. It made him think of a movie set, fake suburbia from the early twentieth century filled with gingerbread houses.

“Close,” Trey said, waving to a male with a weed-trimmer at the side of the road. “The oldest one is from about 1910, and the newest is 1940. There's some newer houses further back, but most of them are like this. They're kit houses.”

“What, like pre-fab?” The house he'd grown up in was *nothing* like these.

“Yeah, but these are from Sears.”

“Like, what? You mean the store?” Reiner laughed. “You're shitting me.”

“No, really. Sears sold, like, tens of thousands of these. They had, I don't know, something like three hundred models. You picked one out from a catalogue, and they shipped it to you in a boxcar.”

“Holy shit.” Reiner stuck his head out of the window to get a better look. Now he could see that some of them had additions tacked on, or newer roofs, and one or two had aluminum siding.

“That's how Stone Mountain Construction started. The males learned carpentry and stuff by building these.” Trey slowed down and made another right, and gravel thudded underneath the car. This road, oddly enough, was nearly straight, although just wide enough for the car. The gravel stopped after a couple of car lengths, and the road changed to plain dirt ruts, with tall grass running between them.

Trey rolled the car along at a sedate ten miles an hour, and finally crept over a simple wooden bridge spanning a dry creek bed. The woods were pushed back here, making a clearing, and the road made a left into the woods and disappeared. Trey pulled over and parked, turning off the engine.

The car rocked as the passengers in the back scrambled out, and Reiner smirked at Trey. “Are we there yet?”

Trey smirked back, twisting sideways, and slid a slightly damp palm over Reiner’s shoulder and around the back of his neck. He leaned over, and Reiner met him halfway, his mouth finding Trey’s with no hesitation. Their tongues met and slid, poor imitation of what Reiner could imagine them doing naked, although maybe not in the front seat of a car. Trey’s fingers tightened, and the kiss turned hungry for a breathless few seconds.

Trey pulled back, panting, nuzzling Reiner’s neck and ear. “You’d be surprised.” He drew in a shaky breath, and rested his forehead in the curve of Reiner’s shoulder. Reiner trailed his hand over Trey’s hair and down his neck, over his strong back, then did it again, waiting for his own breathing to slow. The thudding pulse in his groin echoed his heartbeat—he didn’t remember anybody working him up this fast, not ever.

Trey huffed, and licked Reiner’s neck before sitting up. They kissed again, heated and slow, a promise of more to come. “Not tonight, though,” Trey sighed into Reiner’s ear, and they both shivered. “Come on.”

Reiner’s whole body protested getting out of the car; walking wouldn’t be easy for a couple of minutes, that’s for sure. The others were nowhere to be seen. Nice of them to give him and Trey a couple minutes of privacy.

Trey barked out a laugh, pulling a limp backpack from behind the front seat. “They’re just impatient. Trust me, if they weren’t distracted, they’d all be here watching.”

Reiner let Trey lead the way out of the clearing and onto a barely-there path. A few yards in, his knees wobbled, and he threw out a hand for balance. Trey grabbed his arm as another wave of vertigo ran through him, and Reiner gritted his teeth against the static charge building in his joints. The next wave

was worse, and his knees gave out as the staticky prickle amped up into an outright burn. *Fuck. Oh... fuck.*

*Don't fight it.* Trey tugged at Reiner's shirt, sliding it over one arm while Reiner swayed; even kneeling Reiner had to work to stay upright. *Go.*

Reiner held on long enough to wriggle out of his pants, pushing his sneakers off at the same time. He let the charge build, buzzing in his ears, trickling along his tendons until there was nothing but that sizzling energy coiling up, higher and hotter; exactly like the instant before orgasm, the same biting promise of pleasure. The ground was warm under his palms and his knees, his only points of reference in the physical world; then those disappeared, wiped out as his whole focus turned inward, coiling even further and tighter. He resisted, dammed it all up, until the bite threatened to rip him apart... and he let it.

Energy roared through him, tumbled him, and he rode the surge, right into the darkness—three heartbeats of nothing, a black lacuna of sensation—and shot out the other side, whole again.

He blinked the world into washed-out focus, rolling onto his elbows and belly while his senses sorted out the woods... and found Trey. Reiner exhaled on a purr, stretching his chin out so Trey could use his whole hand to scratch under it instead of just his fingertips. He rubbed his cheek on Trey's hand, rose to his feet to reach the rest of him, leaning his shoulder into Trey and nearly knocking him on his ass.

Trey's hands were *everywhere*, and he knew all the good spots, digging his fingers through Reiner's fur to the muscle underneath, easing the lingering aches of shifting. Reiner wanted *more*; he shoved into Trey and laid him out flat, nosing under his T-shirt to scent-mark his abs, ears sideways and eyes closed in bliss. Trey's scent filled his nose and coated his tongue, spicy and strange and familiar all at once. He licked Trey's ear, and Trey scrunched his shoulder to keep him from doing it again, laughing and pushing Reiner off him.

God, Reiner loved that sound, and how it made Trey's interior forest of bamboo glow with warmth.

Trey got to his feet, brushing leaves and dirt off his jeans and still managing to leave a hand free to explore Reiner's ears. Trey picked up his backpack, now full of Reiner's clothes and shoes, and started down the path again, one hand on Reiner's head to keep him close.

The path opened into a clearing, and all of Trey's sunniness evaporated. Everyone else had shifted already, and Trey crossed the clearing in three fast strides, snarling at the two smallest jaguars. Reiner's dorsal fur went up, but he knew better than to interfere.

The black cub—Reiner knew it was Eliza—hissed at Trey, and he snatched her by the scruff, lifting her forepaws off the ground. Dean—cinnamon and cream, with dark rosettes—made himself small when Trey hissed at him.

“Apologize,” Trey growled at both of them. “Apologize *right* this fucking second. You *know* better—that was rude and you know it.” He dropped Eliza, and she flattened her ears and her whiskers, tail fluffed. She hissed at him again, and Trey crouched in front of her, elbows on his knees. His growl was almost silky with menace. “I know where you go when you run away from day care. Think about *that*.” Trey stood, dusting imaginary debris off his thighs, eyes locked on Eliza.

Dean radiated dismay even through his perfectly opaque shield, and it occurred to Reiner how really weird it was for a cub that young to have that kind of control. And, right on the heels of that thought, was that even the adults he knew couldn't trigger a shift in another jaguar. Damn.

Then Dean slunk—there was no other word—over to Reiner, curling his tail around one haunch when he got close. He blinked at Reiner, slow and deliberate, whiskers quivering and not quite flat. *Sorry. We won't do it again. But you need better shields.* His ears dipped when Trey growled. *He does. You said so, too.*

Eliza came over, low, but not slinking as much, and offered Reiner a nose touch. She was sorry, he got that, and he rubbed his cheek over her head,



mingling their scents. Dean joined them, and Reiner pinned him with a paw and groomed his ear with rough strokes. *Apology accepted.*

*Me*, Eliza demanded, butting his shoulder. *Groom me, too.* Young as she was, Eliza tasted of female—a kind of new-leather-richness—and something warm he had no name for. *Nutmeg*, she told him, closing her eyes as he licked her forehead. And showed him a wrinkly light-brown nut-thing, almost like a very small walnut shell. *Mami puts them on mushrooms. You grate them.*

God, it was like a little movie in his head. He saw a female, an older version of Eva, near a huge stove, using a tool that looked like something from wood shop to grate the nutmeg-thing over a steaming pan, sending a drift of tan powder over the food. An HD movie, to boot. With smells. Jesus.

*He thinks like Daddy*, Eliza announced. *Slippery. Not straight lines. Your fence is stupid.*

Before Reiner could ask her to clarify that truly strange non sequitur, Eliza was *in* his head, fluid and cool. He stiffened, claws digging into the dirt, and she bathed him in warmth, aided by Dean.

*Watch.* To his complete amazement, his interior privacy fence disassembled itself and melted, multiplied and resolved into a series of staggered barriers that looked solid but sort of weren't. Then she showed him how it looked from *outside* his head: the entrance to a maze.

*Oh.* He explored the construct, running over it almost the way you ran your tongue along the inside of your teeth. It... *fit*, and god, the *elegance* of it, like code.

*Better.* Eliza licked his jaw, and Reiner reciprocated, washing her ears until she purred.

*Not much of a weapon*, Sophie pointed out. *What is he going to do? Confuse somebody into a stupor?*

Ethan yawned, showing a lot of teeth and pink tongue. *Ooh. Somebody reached S in the dictionary.* Sophie swatted him, ears sideways.

“Are we done fixing him?” Trey asked. He sat cross-legged a few feet from Reiner, elbows on his knees. He gave Reiner a slow blink, eyes warm and very gold. “And not everybody needs to be a weapon, Soph.” He unfolded his legs as he stood, shrugging his T-shirt over his head and slipping off his flip-flops at the same time. The barbells winked in the dying light, and Reiner licked his own nose, remembering the feel of them on his tongue. Trey shucked his jeans, standing there naked while he folded his shirt and jeans and stuffed everything in the backpack. He straightened, rolling his shoulders, bulkier without the disguise of clothing. Then he took a breath, chest expanding, and sank gracefully to his knees.

Their species didn’t have a lot of rules, but not watching while somebody shifted was basic. For the first minute, though, Reiner *couldn’t* look away.

Trey was gorgeous at that moment, muscles standing out in sharp relief and a fine sheen of sweat breaking out all over. His cock rose halfway and his balls lifted, the burn of the impending shift translating into another kind of desire. Reiner understood then that the barbells acted both as amplifiers and focus, a way to fuel a faster shift. Trey didn’t resist—or even ignore—the accelerating pain, he *embraced* it. Rode it. *Used* it.

Every young jaguar timed their shift at one point or another, competing to see who could do it the fastest—or delay it the longest. If he pushed, Reiner could shift in seven minutes, start to finish, although every part of him hurt like a son of a bitch for about a half hour afterward.

Trey managed it in five.

When he rose to his paws, shaking his fur into place, he was panting, and humming with adrenaline. His eyes shone a brassy gold with a green rim, almost the reverse of Reiner’s green-into-copper. And his coat... Reiner got up, too, leaving Eliza and Dean, and sniffed at Trey’s muzzle, closing his eyes to process better. Trey rubbed his cheek against Reiner’s, and that turned into a long glide, shoulders bumping, leaning into each other for maximum contact as they exchanged personal scents. They did it again on the opposite sides, and then Trey swatted him, hooking a foreleg over Reiner so he could gnaw on his ear, purring deeply.

Their coats were a close match, copper shading into cream, although the rosettes down Trey's spine were nearly solid blocks of black. Beautiful.

*God, you're pretty*, Reiner told him, bouncing away and laughing when Trey pinned his ears. *You are*.

*Bite me*, Trey growled, more invitation than threat.

*Is the love-fest over?* Eva said tartly, sitting down and wrapping her tail around her forefeet. Like Eliza, her coat was black, and her rosettes appeared and disappeared as she moved. *'Cause we're losing the light*.

*Fine*. Trey gave a fast shake to settle his fur again, and sat down to groom one paw. *Where do you wanna head?*

*North*, Ethan suggested. *Over near the little cave, the overhang one*.

*Sounds good*. Trey blinked at Reiner. *You ready?* They fell in next to one another as Eva led the way out of the clearing, all of them slipping through a screen of rhododendrons and into the dim woods.

*So how does this work?* Reiner had never hunted anything bigger than a turkey, although he'd chased deer once or twice for fun. Strictly speaking, jaguars weren't built for running. *We split up, and whoever gets a deer shares it?*

*What fun would that be?* Marcus circled back, coming close enough for Reiner to catch his scent, apples and black pepper, without the deeper edge of sexual maturity.

*Really. That's no fun at all*. Ethan flicked his tail.

*We stay together*, Trey explained. *Spread out, though, in a big flat V*. He showed Reiner what he meant, a line of them sweeping through the woods at a jog.

*But we're...* It seemed stupid to state the obvious, but Reiner did it anyway. *We're ambush predators. Not... pack animals*.

*Right*. Trey bounded forward, used the momentum to run up a tree and tag a low-hanging branch with a paw. *You go sit there and wait for a deer to come*

*by, and we'll let you know when we catch one.* He landed easily, and flattened his ears at Reiner. *You got the predator part right, but we're not animals.*

Reiner hissed, on general principle, and Trey rushed him. Reiner went with it, rolling under Trey and coming up behind him, raking his paws down Trey's sides, claws half out. Trey twisted, supple as a snake, and his hind paws shoved Reiner, lifting him clean off the ground.

*Claws,* Reiner snarled, wrapping his forelegs around Trey and biting high up on his chest. Trey bit his ear and then licked it, swiping his rough tongue inside and making Reiner shudder. They rolled apart, tails lashing, dorsal fur spiky with excitement.

*Males,* Eva drawled, sauntering between them, her black tail describing a lazy sideways sine wave. Trey chuffed at her, and Reiner leaned over to sniff her flank. Lemony-minty-leather, very nice, very—he caught himself when Trey growled at him.

Eva chuffed back, whiskers bristling. *Mom is right. All balls, no brains.*

*Mom never said that.* Trey sounded scandalized, much to Eva's obvious amusement.

*No, what she said was that you're all dumb as rocks most of the time. You can both go piss on stuff later—can we hunt now?*

Trey yawned elaborately and licked his whiskers. *Sure. Ethan?*

Ethan's ears pricked, and he cocked his head.

*You be the center, 'kay? Me and Eva will take the ends.* Trey stretched, digging into the loam with his claws, then brushed his muzzle along Reiner's jaw. *You know the thing you felt coming into town? You called it an antenna or something. Well, we need to do that now.*

Reiner tilted his head, not hiding his confusion. *Why?*

*'Cause that's how we hunt. Just—give us a second?* Trey looked at Ethan. *Go ahead.*

Reiner never thought all that much about the group sense that existed between members of his species—it just... *was*, there on the edge of awareness, running quietly in the background. He'd never used it for anything, not really. But Ethan... Ethan sent out a—Reiner saw it as a slender glowing cable—to each one of them, one after the other. Reiner did what everyone else did, let it snug up against his shields, and then the cables *multiplied*, becoming a bright connecting web.

*That's so cool.* Reiner could feel them all, networked together. Like... a LAN. Or an Intranet.

*Wow.* Sophie laughed, but not in a mean way. *Geek, much? Let's go.*

Ethan slipped off the path, jogging off into the twilight dimness, and the others followed, fanning out in his wake. Reiner had a moment of concern for the twins; they were maybe a third the size of the older jaguars.

*This isn't their first hunt,* Trey told him, falling in off to Reiner's left and moving out several yards. *They know to stay back if it's something big. We're after deer, but if you smell feral pig, let everybody know. Dad and Papi will go after it.*

Reiner's comment on the wisdom of purposely hunting a feral pig was cut off as the connecting web went *live* somehow, and he tripped over his own paws at the overload of information. *What the fuck is that?* He cursed some more as he got his balance; seeing the woods from multiple viewpoints made him dizzy. Everybody caught his unease and dialed back the flood of images, the other jaguars coming to a halt when he did.

Trey loped over and bumped shoulders with him. *You okay?*

*No.* Reiner tried closing his eyes; it didn't help. *You coulda warned me.* Eliza came to his rescue, tugging at the invisible connections, turning seven conflicting inputs into... Reiner blinked, but the image in his head stayed steady. *Like a video game?*

*Yes,* she told him. *Daddy calls it a heads-up array. Does that work?*

*I think so.* He shook his fur smooth and gave Eliza a slow blink, full of warmth. *This'll work just fine.*

Reiner got lost for a bit, trying to figure out the mechanics of the web-thing, then had to concentrate as the whole line of them picked up speed, angling into a V. He bounced over a log, using all four sets of claws to propel his body, and god, he'd forgotten how much fun running in the woods could be. Around where he grew up, it was a lot of farmland with woods scattered here and there, and hunting season of one kind or another made running around shifted dangerous most of the year.

*There's hunting here,* Eva said. *This is state game lands, and over that way—*Reiner saw a flash of bare granite slopes in his head*—is the state park. Maybe twenty thousand acres all together.*

*We keep track of who comes in, and we'll hear a human from a good ways off,* Ethan added. *None of us come over here during deer season, though. Humans shoot first, check what it is later.*

All of them caught the deer scent at the same time, and Reiner's whiskers bristled forward. The other arm of the V, anchored by Eva, flattened out as they all changed direction. Off in the woods, maybe a half dozen yards ahead, Reiner caught a flash of white.

*Turning,* Trey snarled, echoed by Eva. *Turning, it's turning—go, go—shit, move!*

Down a slope now, and Reiner let gravity do its thing and help him accelerate. Loam turned to dirt, then sandy silt and pebbles—the deer leapt the stream in one bound, with Marcus hot on its heels.

Marcus stretched, swiped; the deer's hindquarters bobbled and it put on a burst of speed. Sophie lunged, and the buck darted out of reach. Reiner shoved with his hind legs, completely misjudging how much traction he'd get, and the deer veered again, right into his trajectory. Reiner twisted in midair—no thought required—collided with two hundred or so pounds of *Odocoileus virginianus*, and flew sideways in a tangle of flailing hooves and spotted fur.

He let the momentum roll them both and came out on top, front claws hanging on to the buck's shoulders as it tried to lurch to its feet. Reiner heaved his body forward, claws digging in even further, jaws opening, and bit down. Fluids exploded on his tongue, hot and salt and copper and sweet—*oh my*—and his mind blanked at the exquisite combination. The deer jerked and his jaws closed almost all the way in reflex, skull and vertebrae crunching marvelously under his teeth. A live current of unbearable, fabulous excitement ran through his core, and he pulled back, just to feel the pressure on his jaws.

Reiner rode the deer as it dropped and slid, and backed off the carcass with an effort, licking his whiskers to taste the blood on them, his fur fluffed from the adrenaline rush. He wanted to do it again, experience the visceral shock of biting down and the frantic power of the deer between his jaws. God, yes. He snarled at Trey and Eva, ears flattening, blocking them from getting anywhere near the kill.

Trey crouched, lowering his belly until it brushed the ground, and blinked at Reiner, slow and deliberate. Eva hung back, and when Trey blinked again, adding a purr, Reiner blinked back, relaxing. *Share*, Trey sent him, and crept close enough to touch noses. He licked Reiner's jaw, eyes closing, and Reiner let him, shivering in pleasure.

Reiner returned the favor, and Eva approached to offer a nose touch. *Let's eat*, he told them.

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They dragged the carcass farther from the stream, and between the eight of them, turned it into nothing but scraps by the time they were all full. Reiner heaved himself onto his paws and padded down to the stream for a drink, dabbling his front paws in the flowing water. No matter how much you groomed, you could never get them clean enough, in his opinion. Trey joined him, lapping at the cold water.

*We need to move before we all fall asleep*, Trey said. *I don't want to sleep here.*

Reiner sat down and groomed a paw, working one claw with his teeth. *Not like there's anything bigger than us out here.*

*Yeah, but there's lots of smaller critters who'll want the leftovers. They won't come around with us here.*

The others were all on their feet now, and after they'd all gotten a drink, Marcus led them up away from the stream, climbing a low ridge. They followed it for a ways, before heading into a dip in the terrain. There were a lot of rocks here, pushing up from the earth, and something had dug a broad, shallow cave underneath a rocky overhang.

They all crowded into the space, leaving Trey and Reiner closest to the front. Reiner flopped down, and Trey sprawled half on top of him, hooking a foreleg across Reiner's shoulders. He groomed Reiner's ear, his rough tongue pleasantly warm, and Reiner closed his eyes. Trey was thorough, finding all the blood and deer bits and washing him clean.

Reiner leaned into the pressure, sighing at the soothing strokes. He'd forgotten how nice it was to let somebody do this, get the parts you couldn't lick for yourself. Soothing, yeah, but more than that, it felt *good*. Not sex-good, but close-good; the way he remembered from being little, when he'd sleep in a pile with his cousins—four legs or two, it didn't matter much—for warmth and comfort. When had they stopped doing that? Puberty? When sex started to become less theoretical and more possible? He had no idea, hadn't even known how much he missed it until right now.

*Sometimes*, Trey mused, once they switched and Reiner was licking Trey's muzzle, *we all sleep together in the big bed*. He sent Reiner an image of an enormous bed, easily bigger than a king. *In the winter, mostly, but sometimes during big storms. Mom—Emery—that's how she was raised, and she misses the others, even after...* He trailed off.

*After what?* Reiner asked.

*They died, and it was just her and Aidan left.* Trey shivered, and Reiner saw—a huge helicopter? He thought that's what it was—burning and wrecked. It reminded him of war movies.



*Was she a mercenary?* He didn't think females joined Arrowhead, but he wasn't sure.

A current ran through all of them, a thought too slippery and quick for Reiner to follow, more picture than words. Trey tipped his chin up so Reiner could wash his neck. *No*, Trey said, after a pause. *She was born on the Preserve.*

Reiner paused mid-lick. *But—How did she get out?* Come to think of it, how did Aidan? He pulled his tongue in, spitting out some hair.

*They had help, from inside the Preserve, and they got lucky—I promise I'll tell you the whole thing, okay? Just... it's a really long story.* Trey rubbed his head against Reiner's, cheek to cheek. *And that's just the parts I know—they don't like to talk about it. Lots of bad stuff happened to both of them.* He shivered, and Reiner moved, curling around Trey until they made a yin-yang symbol, and rested his chin on Trey's hip. Trey sighed and did the same, and Reiner...

Something moved, deep inside him, clicked into place and completed some essential circuit. Made a connection. Reiner breathed in, and their scents were mingled, tangled, one complex scent instead of two distinct signatures. Mostly it was the grooming, true, but Reiner still liked it, a lot, and drifted off with a sigh of his own.

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## CHAPTER FOUR

They slept almost straight through the night, although once it got chilly they piled closer, one ball of fur. Trey woke up first—his side was cold because he'd ended up in the very front of the cave somehow. He lifted his head and tested the air, sorting the smell-taste and checking for danger. Not that anything out here was a threat, except maybe bears, and not too many of them wanted to share the mountain with the jaguars. He'd never seen nor scented a cougar, and compared to most of the South, their county was almost free of feral hogs. Trey had absolutely no desire to mess with one of those; he left that kind of craziness to Blais and Aidan, who hunted them for the pure joy of it. No thanks.

Trey eased away from Reiner and padded a few feet away, stretching to warm up. He shook, fluffing his coat against the chill, and headed off into the predawn to find a tree. They had maybe an hour, hour and a half before the sun came up, and he wanted all of them back at the car, shifted and dressed, by sunrise at the latest.

He was scuffing his hind feet in the dirt and debating if he should use his claws to mark another tree when Reiner found him.

*Cold*, Reiner said, and bumped shoulders with Trey. He swatted Trey's hip, claw tips only, and Trey tried to bite his tail. Reiner twitched it out of the way, and managed to pin Trey's tail for a split second, nipping the very tip before letting go. *Gotcha*.

Trey lunged, tried bowling Reiner over and didn't quite manage it, although he did get a nip of his own in. Reiner ran, and Trey chased him in a circle, their breath puffing in the gray light. They played tail-tag, swatting at each other until Reiner changed direction and they slammed together, going down with an audible thud. They were evenly matched, both in weight and in reach, which made this all the more fun. Trey finally got both forepaws on Reiner's tail and nibbled the length of it, deliberately reminding Reiner of doing something similar somewhere else. A little spark of excitement jumped

between them, and Trey growled happily as their play acquired an edge, claws coming out a bit farther, neither of them being so careful.

Reiner bit his shoulder, a nice sting, and Trey twisted to bite Reiner's chest, fast and hard. They rolled apart in a flurry of fur and legs, and Reiner dove back in, low, aiming for Trey's belly. Trey flopped sideways, rabbit-kicking with his hind legs, and froze when Reiner sprang away, hissing in surprise.

*Did I get you?* Trey stood up, shaking off leaf litter and settling his fur.

Reiner's eyes were wide and he licked his nose, ears out sideways. *I didn't think—they're still there.*

*What? Oh.* Trey sneezed and sat on his haunches, moving one foreleg out of the way to groom his upper belly. The barbell winked silver through his fur. *What did you think happened to them? Not like I took them out.*

*I don't know what I thought. I don't know anybody else who's pierced like that.* Reiner sat down and curled his tail around his paws, tilting his head as he watched Trey.

*Some piercings work better than others. Ears, not so much. Navel works sometimes, but not always. I know a male with a guiche—*Trey showed Reiner an image, and Reiner flinched—*that pretty much stays in place, but it's still tricky. Nipples are the best, though, if you want to be pierced anywhere.*

*I don't think so.* Reiner yawned widely, showing a nice set of strong white teeth. *I like yours, though. Fun.*

Trey agreed, laughing inside his head, and strolled over to press his head into Reiner's warm neck. *Yeah, they are. Let's go get the others—we need to get going soon.*

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They shifted back in the same clearing as the day before. Eva, Sophie and Eliza went first, followed by everybody but Trey, who stood guard. After he shifted and got dressed, the younger jaguars ran ahead to the car; Trey snagged Reiner's arm and held him back.

“Did you have a good time?” Trey asked him.

“Yeah. I did.” Reiner leaned over and kissed him, a little surprised by the impulse. Trey’s mouth was warm, parting invitingly, and now Reiner wanted more than a simple kiss. He heard the backpack hit the ground right before Trey’s arms went around him, and they both moaned softly. Reiner managed to get his hand down the back of Trey’s jeans, gripping one bare ass cheek, and Trey arched his back and opened his mouth wider for Reiner’s tongue. Trey moved, walking Reiner backwards until they got to a tree, and the bark bit through Reiner’s shirt, a minor thing compared to the way Trey panted and rubbed against him, almost frantic. Reiner used his free hand to unbutton Trey’s fly, but Trey stopped him from lowering the zipper.

“No,” he gasped. “I want to, but we don’t have enough time.” Reiner groaned in heartfelt protest, pushing his own erection into Trey’s thigh. “Later,” Trey promised. “I have to open the garage at noon—we’ll find a way before then. *Goddamn.*” He shuddered, fingers tensing on Reiner’s hips. “You get me crazy, the way you feel.” He sucked a kiss on the side of Reiner’s neck, wet and hot. “Way you taste. Fuck.” He laughed, breath puffing on damp skin, and now Reiner shuddered. “Not the way to calm down.”

Reiner breathed out, slowly, willing his body back from the edge. It wouldn’t have taken much, not with the hard feel of Trey’s body or the heat under his scent, and that surprised the shit out of him. “Yeah,” he agreed. “And I’d rather not have to ride back all sticky and smelling like come.”

Trey smirked, raising his eyebrows, and hummed under his breath. “I’d lick you clean.”

Reiner laughed and shoved Trey away, shaking his head. “*Not* helping.”

Trey scooped up the empty backpack and slung it over one shoulder, and they walked out of the clearing side-by-side, arms brushing. Reiner knew his surface thoughts radiated a ridiculously sappy kind of arousal, desire and affection in equal parts. He *liked* Trey, for all kinds of reasons, half of which he couldn’t put a name to.

Eva and Ethan made a show out of sniffing the air when Trey and Reiner reached the car, and Trey gave them the finger—but he was grinning. Reiner slid into the front seat, yipping a little at the cold vinyl.

“Pussy,” Trey said, under his breath, and Reiner punched him in the upper thigh, snorting.

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The car turned onto the main road just as when the sun lit the trees with gold and made the lingering fog glow silver. Instead of stopping at the garage, Trey made a right, and went up the one lane drive around the side of the SMS building. The drive curved, slowly rising three stories, and ended in a paved parking pad tucked under a broad wooden deck attached to the back of the building. Trey pulled in next to a passenger van and the Porsche that Reiner had seen the other day.

The passengers in the back of the El Camino scrambled out in a wave of excitement.

“They’re back,” Trey said to Reiner, nodding at the two cars. “I know they took the Porsche. I wonder what happened.”

Reiner hesitated as the rest of them ran up a set of wooden stairs to the deck. “I should go back to the garage.”

Trey stopped and stared at him. “Why? I want you to meet Emery.” He tilted his head. “I thought—”

Reiner caught the tail end of the thought, and stepped closer without thinking. “No. I mean, *yes*—I like being with you. But I don’t want to—to—presume, okay?”

“Okay.” Trey smiled, and the warmth in his voice and his eyes pulled at an invisible space in Reiner’s chest. “Come meet my mom.” He led the way up the stairs and onto the deck, over to a pair of French doors about two-thirds of the way down the side of the building. He held one open for Reiner, motioning him inside.

Reiner had no idea what to expect, which made feeling surprised all the more odd. The house—apartment? What would you call it? He had no clue—occupied the entire top floor of the SMS building. The enormous open room served as living room, entertainment area, and dining room, if the sofas, TVs, and the long, wooden table with twelve chairs were anything to go by. God, the house he'd grown up in would fit inside this room with about an acre of floor space left over.

The windows and skylights filled the room with natural light, and the artwork on the white walls glowed—Reiner caught himself staring at a huge painting that hung all by itself, flanked by tall bookcases crowded with books and DVD cases. It looked like stuff he'd seen on a museum trip in middle school or in books, maybe Mayan, and depicted an upright human-looking jaguar holding curling vines that ended in some kind of water lily. The dots and rosettes in the jaguar's coat, done in matte black, stood out against the metallic coppery-gold body, and the eyes were—and this was really strange—blue.

He turned around, intending to ask Trey about the painting, and froze, heat crawling up his neck. Blais sat at the kitchen island, and his ancient jeans, equally ancient T-shirt, and bare feet were miles away from the expensive custom suit of the other afternoon. Next to him stood a female who had to be Trey's mother. Except she wasn't, not biologically, so—

“Stick with *mother*,” Blais said. “It's less confusing.” He nodded at Trey, standing over by one of the sofas. “Nice job on his shields.”

“Wasn't me,” Trey admitted. “Eliza did them.”

“Very brave of you,” Blais told Reiner, and picked up a mug. “She scares the crap out of me half the time. I have no clue why I thought having a daughter was a good idea.”

Wait. What? Reiner tried to remember what Trey and Eva said about the two youngest jaguars. *Emery's children*, that's what they called them, not *Aidan and Emery's* like the others. Twins, yeah, although Eliza's coat was black and Dean's wasn't. Which didn't make *any* sense, even if they were

fraternal twins. That was the kind of thing you learned growing up, no biology class required. If you carried the recessive gene for a black coat, you only got offspring with black coats if the other parent also carried the gene.

Eva was Emery's sister—and had a black coat, therefore Emery carried the gene. Sophie, Ethan and Marcus were all regular colored, so Aidan *didn't* carry the gene. Basic stuff, if you grew up with it. So that meant that Emery... and Blais... *Oh*. But Dean *couldn't* have been fathered by Blais, then, so... oh god, both of them? Blais and Aidan? At the same—*shit*.

Emery laughed at him, and the sound—low and dark—raised the hairs on Reiner's neck. She was barefoot, too, wearing a plain brown V-neck T-shirt and faded jeans, and in no way looked old enough to have five offspring. She fixed her amber eyes, exactly like Eva's, on Reiner, and he locked his knees so he wouldn't back up. Her mental aura was a rippling curtain of flame, fire to Aidan's water, and Reiner wanted to brush up against it just as much as he wanted to curl into a ball and hide.

"I'm not so bad as all that," she chided. "And I'd suggest you call me Emery—even less confusing."

"Yes, ma'am," Reiner said, and winced at the backwash of startled humor from Blais and Emery.

Trey groaned, and came over to ruffle Reiner's hair. "Dude, no fair setting the bar that high, you know?" Trey laughed when Emery wrinkled her nose at them. "So how did it go? We didn't expect you back until tomorrow."

Blais hissed, softly, and banged his forehead—gently—on the granite countertop. Emery pointed to two mugs on the counter, then the coffeemaker. "Coffee first," she said. "Reiner? Help yourself. Sugar there, milk in the fridge."

"That bad?" Trey poured for himself and Reiner, adding sugar to both mugs before handing Reiner one.

Reiner took a seat next to Trey at the island, trying not to stare at Emery. She really was an older version of Eva, maybe mid-thirties. Their species aged

slowly, so maybe he was off a bit. Blais and Aidan were in their forties, late forties, probably, so how much younger could she be?

*A lot*, Emery told him, apparently amused and not offended at all.

Trey patted Reiner's knee under the counter with his free hand and leaned around him to talk to Blais. "So what happened?"

Blais glanced at Trey and shook his head. "The orthopedist wanted to do an MRI—"

"Oh fuck."

"Yeah. Oh fuck. We *told* them it was bad idea, and nobody listened until he snapped at the nurse. Literally. If Em didn't shove her out of the way, he would've nailed her for sure."

Reiner blinked. "He tried to *bite* the nurse?"

"Oh yeah," Blais said. "Aidan and hospitals? Not a good combination. But the VA was the only place with security clearance high enough in case something went wrong." He rubbed his face. "The injection part was dead simple compared to that. Thank fuck we don't have to go back for six months."

"Dad messed up his knee a long time ago," Trey explained to Reiner. "It's a given that he can't have a knee replacement, and as a rule, he won't take drugs—so injecting his knee was the best option. He's been putting it off for almost a year."

Eva came bouncing down a staircase Reiner hadn't even noticed was there. Her hair was wet, and she had on sweatpants and a T-shirt. When she stood next to Emery, the resemblance was startling. She went to the fridge and took out a bottle of water. "Marcus, Eliza, and Dean are in bed with Dad, taking a nap. The other two are in their rooms. Dad didn't *really* bite the nurse, did he?"

"Almost," Blais said, and Emery exhaled on what might have been a laugh.

"Not for lack of trying," she muttered. She leaned back against the counter and folded her arms. "We'll have to wait and see if the injection helps at all. I



don't see the point of going through that again if he's not any better." She shivered, and Blais pointed a finger at her.

"*You* weren't helping."

Emery narrowed her eyes and growled at Blais, and Reiner instinctively held very, very still. You did not mess with pissed-off females. Not ever.

Blais sighed. "*Querida*. I know you hate hospitals. But maybe next time—" Another sigh, and he spread his hands, palms up. "Maybe next time, we have the doctor come here. Or maybe we take the other doctor's advice and try it with Aidan shifted."

"No." Emery and Eva said it at the same time. All the hair on Reiner's arms rose at the flash-fire of alarm from both of them.

Blais growled and slipped out of the chair, planting both hands on the island countertop. "We need to try. Whether this works or not, we should try it the other way, just in case." He blinked at them, slow and deliberate, and both females stopped bristling. "We all pushed him to do this—now we need to *ask* him what he wants." He tilted his head and caught Reiner's eye, his mouth curving in a faint smile. "We aren't always so much of a *telenovela*. I hope the drama doesn't scare you off." The smirk Blais directed at Trey made Reiner's cheeks heat.

"*Papi*," Trey protested. "We're just—"

Blais waved a hand at him, and started for the stairs. "You need to lie better than that, *gatito*."

Trey hissed between his teeth, and Reiner figured they were both blushing equally. He slipped his hand onto Trey's knee, curling his fingers around to the inside. Trey leaned their shoulders together, and his hand covered Reiner's.

Reiner bent his neck to look at Trey. "We're not just..." He shrugged. "Are we?"

"I don't know." Trey swallowed. "I want—" He paused, and Reiner remembered they had an audience. *Oh god*. His ears had to be glowing, they

were so hot. He and Trey looked up at the same time, to matching interested looks from Emery and Eva.

Trey pushed his mug away and slipped off the chair after patting Reiner's knee. "We're gonna go now," he announced, and Emery's mouth twitched.

Reiner took the hint and stood up next to Trey. "It was very nice meeting you," he told Emery. "Thank you for the coffee."

"You're very welcome." She tilted her head, and sent a hint of warmth his way. "Make sure Trey brings you for dinner soon."

"Yes ma'am, I—" The rest got cut off as Trey dragged him out of the house by one arm. "Hey," Reiner continued once they were halfway down the stairs from the deck. "I was being polite. You don't—"

Trey kissed him, one hand on the railing and the other behind Reiner's neck, pulling him down. When he let Reiner go, they were both panting. "I love my family," Trey said, still holding onto Reiner. "But they don't need to be—This is between you and me. Private."

Reiner had no idea where the dismay came from, and he wasn't quick enough to hide it, either. Trey blinked at him, eyes flat. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth and bounced down the rest of the steps, taking long strides once he reached the ground. Reiner ran to catch him, sneakers skidding on the gravel as he slid to block Trey.

"Why are you mad?" Reiner demanded, because the anger hung there in the forefront of Trey's thoughts, tinting everything a sullen gray.

"I'm not." Trey's jaw bunched before he burst out, "I'm... I don't know, okay? I thought maybe we were, you know, starting something."

"I thought we were, too. I just don't..." Reiner tried to make sense out of the lead weight in his gut. "When you said 'private', what did you mean?"

"What did you think I meant?" Trey raised his eyebrows. "*Private*. As in, none of their business. They don't need to know everything we say, all right? That's... *us*."

“Oh.” Reiner swallowed. “I thought you meant...” He waved a hand, shrugging. “Private, like not being together where anybody could see.”

“What would be the point?” Trey tipped his head to one side, radiating confusion. “If I was embarrassed to be with you, why would I want you to meet Emery? Or go hunting with us?” He blinked and shook his head. “See, this is why living around humans is bad. It totally fucks up your head.” He aimed a friendly cuff at Reiner’s head, and Reiner swatted his hand away. Trey started walking, and Reiner fell into step next to him, heading down the driveway.

“It’s just... I’m nobody. And you’re...” Reiner shrugged.

“Fuck.” Trey started laughing and bumped Reiner’s shoulder. “I’m a mechanic, okay? I live over the garage where I work. I have no desire whatsoever to take over when Blais retires. If anybody, it’ll be Ethan taking over, not me.”

After a moment, Reiner nudged Trey’s shoulder. “What’s a *telenovela*, anyway?”

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There were two customers waiting at the garage when they got there, so Trey opened up shop and Reiner headed to the apartment. He wasn’t really hungry yet, but he did want a shower. Trey popped in about a half hour later, at the same time Reiner—now clean and in sweatpants—padded barefoot into the kitchen in search of a snack.

“Here.” Trey handed him a bakery box that smelled good enough to eat, cardboard and all. “From the bakery. Forgot—if you go around outside, make a left out the door, there’s a deck in the back. Couple of lounge chairs if you wanna lie in the sun.” Then he was gone, leaving a bemused Reiner in the middle of the apartment.

Lying in the sun actually sounded wonderful. Reiner took the bakery box and two bottles of water and went to look for the deck. He saw immediately what Trey meant; the landing extended around the side of the building and

opened up across the back into a good-sized deck. There was even a roll-out awning attached to the building for when you wanted some shade.

The bakery box turned out to hold an enormous cinnamon roll, still hot from the oven, covered in a gooey glaze. Reiner stretched out on a lounge chair and ate it, piece by sticky, delicious piece, and followed it with a bottle of water. *Mmm...* he dropped the empty box and the bottle on the deck and let the sun put him to sleep.

He only woke up because something was blocking the sun, and realized it was Trey a split second later.

“Do you taste like cinnamon?” Trey murmured, and licked Reiner’s lips to find out. “Oh *yeah...*” His groan vibrated in Reiner’s mouth. *The chair’s too small. Come inside.*

Reiner struggled to his feet, sleepy and dazed. He blinked when Trey tried to shove him through a window. “What the fuck?”

“Bedroom,” Trey said, like that explained anything. Reiner barely managed it, staggering a little after he stepped over the sill into... yup, the bedroom.

Trey was naked, very much so, and all Reiner could do was stare. “Were you just... outside? Naked?”

“Really?” Trey paused in pushing Reiner’s sweats down to scowl at him. “I’m standing here with a hard-on and that’s what you ask?”

Reiner shrugged, and dropped his sweatpants to the floor before kicking them away. “Gimme a second to catch up, okay? I was asleep.”

Trey grunted and urged Reiner back, onto the bed, and crawled on top of him. He stopped when their cocks lined up, and Reiner dragged him down for a messy kiss, relishing the way they fitted together. He rolled his hips, sliding along the crease of Trey’s hip, enjoying the friction and the catch in Trey’s breathing. He didn’t mind at all when Trey started south, trailing nips that turned to open-mouthed bites the lower he got. Trey’s mouth was everywhere but the place Reiner wanted it most, and Reiner tried a direct approach,

grabbing Trey's head and guiding it onto his cock. Trey grabbed one wrist, bracing on the bed with his other hand, and forced Reiner to let go of his head.

Reiner growled in frustration, and tried again. Trey reared back and grabbed the other wrist, growling back. Reiner yanked, twisting to break Trey's grip, and Trey fell forward and sank his teeth into the meat of Reiner's shoulder. Snarling, Reiner bucked, threatening Trey's balls, and... well, things went downhill from there.

But damn, was it fun.

Twice Reiner bit Trey hard enough to taste blood, and the brief pain of Trey's teeth in retaliation didn't matter—not when Reiner's cock was an iron spike and his balls were ten pounds each. Reiner wanted more in his mouth than a forearm or even Trey's shoulder; he wanted to know if Trey would explode the second he felt Reiner's tongue, because it wouldn't take much more than that for Reiner.

Trey's thigh slammed Reiner's, and Reiner rolled to protect his already-aching balls—and found himself facedown on the bed. The touch of the sheets was almost—almost—enough to get him off, and he popped his hips up, not wanting this to be over yet. Trey bit one ass cheek, and Reiner bit the comforter and pushed back, whining through a mouthful of bedding. He hadn't—he didn't remember anybody doing that before, and he liked it. Trey soothed the teeth marks with his tongue before switching to the other cheek, opening his jaws and taking an easy grip, increasing the pressure until Reiner squirmed at how good it was.

Trey licked the bite, blowing lightly on the abused skin, and Reiner braced himself for another touch of teeth... *Oh no, no, no*—Reiner groaned into the mattress and shuddered, not sure if he should like what Trey was doing quite this much. Trey lapped between Reiner's ass cheeks, holding his legs apart with both hands wrapped around Reiner's knees. Every few licks he'd stab a little deeper, and Reiner's cock jumped every time he did, throbbing and a hair's-breadth from coming.

Humans—male and female—fucked... *there*, sometimes. He knew from the few times he'd seen gay porn that human males even got pleasure from it. His species? He couldn't imagine doing it, never had imagined it, not with the sure promise of damage and the risk of infection. Females were built to deal with the barbs, he knew that. Males... no. Right this second, though, with Trey's tongue cranking him up past sanity, he wondered if the risk might not be worth it.

Trey let go of one of Reiner's knees and levered Reiner's cock down, back between his legs, and Reiner lifted higher to make it easier, needing—*Fuck*. Trey's hot, perfect mouth surrounded his balls, drawing them into wet heat. He pumped his hips, beyond speech, urging Trey to suck him, lick him—something, *anything*.

*Please. Please, Trey. Now. I need it now—*

Without any warning, Trey engulfed the head of his cock, tongue flicking his slit, and at the same moment, something—Trey's finger?—slid into Reiner's ass. The shock of it didn't matter for any longer than it took for Trey to touch a spot inside Reiner and stroke it, because then Reiner's balls did their very best to turn inside out as he muffled his scream in the comforter. His body took over, wanting more of Trey's fingers and Trey's mouth, and he shook, blissed out by the waves of sparking pleasure and riding the body rush all the way to the end.

When Trey released him, Reiner went flat on the bed, right into a damp spot, and couldn't care less. He was still hard, and would be for a while yet. He rubbed back against Trey's sweaty skin as Trey draped across his upper body, wondering what Trey was getting out of the low dresser near the bed. Reiner heard a *snick*, and a squelchy *click*, and then Trey braced one hand by Reiner's hip and licked the back of his neck.

"Let me..." Trey whispered, and cold slickness pressed along Reiner's crack. "Not... I won't... just let me—" Trey's breath hitched, and then his cock slid deeper, not inside, but rubbing against Reiner's sensitized hole in a way that had Reiner arching up to meet every glide. They found a rhythm, and Trey showed him what it felt like: tense muscles cradling harder flesh,

irresistible slippery heat and the teasing brush of hot skin on his balls. Trey rutted against Reiner's ass while Reiner let the comforter give him the friction he craved, dizzy with need and want and the harsh feel of Trey's breath on his neck.

They came together, Trey covering Reiner's lower back with spunk while Reiner soaked the already damp comforter. Trey finally slid off to the side, breathing in long shuddering gasps, wrapping an arm around Reiner to keep him close.

"That was—" Trey kissed Reiner's damp shoulder, laughing weakly. "I didn't think—"

Reiner rolled to face him, edging their hips together. Maybe... they both hissed when he wrapped one hand around both their cocks, and he calculated they maybe had one more orgasm left. The stuff Trey had used was still nice and slick, and there was enough for Reiner to get himself wet, too. He experimented, easing their foreskins down and sliding his fingers around under each head, teasing until both cocks were hard and straining, making the barbs flare out enough to play with.

Then he bit Trey's lower lip and demanded a kiss. Trey obliged, sucking Reiner's tongue and moaning when Reiner started jacking them in earnest, fingers tight around and under their crowns, squeezing to flare the barbs even more and dragging up just enough to drive them both over in record time, coating both of them with fresh heat. That was it for now—they both felt the subtle un-tensing as their bacula retreated deeper into their bodies, leaving their cocks flaccid in Reiner's hand.

Reiner flopped onto his back—for once not in the wet spot—and Trey snuggled up next to him, burying his head in the crook of Reiner's neck and throwing an arm and a thigh across with a contented sigh. "Thank you," Trey murmured.

"I think it was a group effort," Reiner said, surprised at how hoarse the words sounded.

“No.” Trey shook his head, still buried in Reiner’s neck. “I mean for not tossing me off the bed when I—I should have asked.”

“It felt... good.” Reiner shrugged, and turned his head to nuzzle Trey’s ear. “I wouldn’t mind... if you did it again.”

“Or you could—do it to me. You don’t have to. I don’t expect...” Trey hunched his shoulder when Reiner nipped his earlobe.

“Would only be fair, right?” Reiner knew Trey could hear that he was smiling.

Trey huffed a laugh against his skin. “Absolutely. Fair.” He stifled a yawn. “Nap. Then I think it’s only fair that you help me get clean in the shower.”

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## CHAPTER FIVE

The rumbling, ratcheting clatter of the garage doors going up brought Trey awake with a strangled groan, and he stared stupidly at the digital clock on the dresser until the number at the end changed. Eight thirty? *Shit.*

He shoved frantically at Reiner, who swatted him and *mmphed* into the pillow. “Ry,” Trey hissed. “It’s eight thirty.”

Reiner lifted his head and blinked at Trey, green eyes soft. His lower lip was puffy on one side and—damn. Trey reached over and traced the bruise on one cheekbone. Reiner’s eyes closed and he nuzzled into Trey’s hand. “So?”

“It’s eight thirty *Monday morning.*”

“Fuck!”

Trey got a great view of Reiner’s ass when he rolled off the bed and leapt over the balled-up comforter on the floor. Bite marks on one cheek and bruises on the other, not to mention another bite on Reiner’s left thigh that Trey did not remember putting there. He heard the shower come on, and crawled out of bed to find a pair of sweats to wear. God—everything hurt, even his dick. No, wait—*especially* his dick.

If he’d had half a brain cell working, he should have suggested they shift at some point before they passed out. That would have taken care of the worst of the bruising, at least. He plucked the sweats away from his dick. And probably most of the chafing. Tray winced when he got a look at the rest of the apartment. He didn’t... when did they have *cereal*? He put the cap back on the milk and stuck it in the fridge, closed the box of Lucky Charms, and then got out the ground coffee so he could set up the coffeemaker. He only made enough for himself, because no way was Reiner going to have enough time for coffee if he expected to get over to SMS by nine.

The shower shut off, and a minute later Trey got another flash of ass when Reiner went back into the bedroom, followed by some creative swearing. Less than five minutes later, Reiner reappeared—polo shirt, chinos, and deck shoes—and looked wildly around the room. “I had an envelope—”

“Desk. In the—”

“Right.” Reiner went and retrieved the envelope, and sprinted for the door. At the last second, he reversed direction and slid a hand around the back of Trey’s neck. He kissed Trey, a soft brush of lips and a teasing hint of tongue, and stepped back, trailing his fingers down Trey’s chest. “That was fucking amazing.”

Then he ran out the door.

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Reiner ignored the twinges of pain in his quads as he hurtled down the stairs. The bite on his thigh hurt, too, so did the one on his right pec. The rest wasn’t too bad, just some bruising. He slowed down when Aidan stepped out of the garage, shaking his head at Reiner, whose heart rate began a steady acceleration.

Even just standing there, in jeans and a T-shirt, Aidan managed to be intimidating. Maybe it was that relentless waterfall in his head, or maybe it was his scent; Reiner had no fucking idea, but around Aidan he felt more like a rabbit hiding in the grass than a one hundred and seventy-five pound predator.

Aidan waved a hand at him and Reiner tensed but didn’t—thank you very much—flinch.

“Take your time getting over there,” Aidan said, nostrils flaring slightly. “And the two of you better plan on shifting later, or you’re going to hurt like hell. Next time...” He raised his eyebrows and shook his head, blue eyes gleaming. “Next time put a damn fan in the window, or turn the ceiling fan up. You get that drunk on pheromones, you’ll forget to eat and drink.”

Reiner almost—but not quite—tripped over his own feet on the last step. *Drunk? Well that would explain the hangover.*

Aidan growled, sounding disgusted, and pointed at Reiner. “Stay.” He retreated into the depths of the garage and Reiner hunched to make the itching down his spine go away.

Five seconds later, Aidan came back out with a bottle of water and handed it to Reiner. “Drink this on your way. And walk—Blais is running late.”

Reiner took the bottle, all too aware of his dry mouth and pounding head. How did he know—?

Aidan growled in the back of his throat. “We sleep in the same bed—that’s how I know. *God*. Did Trey suck your—”

“Dad,” Trey snarled from the top of the stairs. “Could you not go there?”

Aidan looked up at Trey, face gone cool and unreadable and the waterfall in his head nothing but white noise and tinged with red. Reiner stopped breathing—and down deep the odd thought that Aidan might not be entirely sane glowed to life. Reiner stamped that shit right out—he was not going there.

Then Aidan’s mouth twitched, one side curling up in a sly smile, and he went from scary-ass-motherfucker to handsome bastard. “You’re *really* loud,” he told Trey. “It was...”

“Oh fuck.” Trey sat down on the stairs, covering his face with his hands.

“Everything but,” Aidan said dryly.

Trey moaned, and lowered his head onto his knees. “Did everybody...?”

Reiner’s sluggish brain caught up with the conversation, and he nearly did a facepalm. *Loud*. They were *loud*. Oh, Christ.

“Not *everybody*. You didn’t reach the house, although Em said—”

Trey held out a hand, palm out. *Stop. I don’t want to know*. He lifted his head and heaved a sigh, meeting Reiner’s eyes. *Sorry*.

Absurdly, Trey’s dismay made Reiner feel a hundred percent better. “Don’t be,” he said, and Trey’s answering smile warmed him all the way through. “Totally worth it.” He stepped backwards, saluting Trey and Aidan with the bottle of water. “I’ll see you later.”

He spun around, stretching his legs a little, and uncapped the water. He chugged the entire bottle before he reached the road and his body demanded

more. Okay, so definitely dehydrated. He vaguely recalled eating something, leaning on the kitchen counter, sometime around midnight. Cereal, *big* bowls of cereal, with lots of milk. There had been more cinnamon rolls in the morning; Trey had gone out early and brought them back. After that? The day was a blur of taste and touch and smell—the world narrowed down to him and Trey.

He'd never truly believed the stories his cousins told about being with females in season—sex was nice, but not so much that you'd forget to eat and drink. Or that you wouldn't care about being bitten and scratched because the pain just made it all better.

Reiner shivered at the memory, and nearly ran over Joel at the door to SMS. Joel eyed Reiner's face and smirked at him as he opened the door. "Looks like you had fun," he muttered.

Reiner decided saying nothing was the best course, and they both walked over to the reception desk. Reiner got rid of the empty water bottle in a wastebasket and wished he'd asked for a second bottle. Lily, the pretty female from Friday, pointed off to the right. "Down the hall, go into Personnel first. After that, you'll go next door to get your ID cards."

Gus was already in the Personnel office, sitting in a chair by the door and filling out a form on a clipboard. An older female, maybe his mother's age, wearing a long swishy skirt in bright colors and a fancy T-shirt kind of top popped out from behind a partition before Reiner did more than nod to Gus. "Come with me," she said, and walked away, clearly expecting them to follow. She steered Joel into a cubicle—"Olivia will get you set up"—and led Reiner into an actual office.

He took a seat, trying not to wince. The chair was *not* comfortable.

"I'm Anna Martinez. Head of Personnel." She gestured at the envelope in Reiner's hand, and he slid it onto the desk. "Did you get a chance to fill everything out?" Pulling out the envelope's contents, she went through them, nodding a little and sorting the pages into a neat pile. "Do you have any questions?"

“Not really.” His stomach went hollow when he thought about all of it. He had health insurance now, a life insurance policy with his mother as beneficiary, and an account with a bank in Wilkesboro—with money in it. He’d read the so-called fine print, too. SMS owned his ass for the next five years; after that he could work wherever he wanted. His salary was slightly lower than he might make anywhere else—not unreasonable considering what they’d paid to get him through college—but on the other hand, he didn’t have to pay rent and he could walk to work. Even with sending money home every month, he’d still have plenty of disposable income. He could—he lifted his head, catching Anna’s bemused stare—he could get a better car. Damn. He could get Trey to—

She smiled at him, light brown eyes crinkling at the corners, and he caught a hint of indulgent humor over the predictability of young males—*hey!*—before she handed him a thick black plastic card on a lanyard. “This will open any door, including the elevators, provided you have authorized access. Go next door—they’ll take care of your ID card. If you have any questions, just come back here.” She stood up, still smiling, and Reiner stood, too, a little dazed. That was it?

“Yes,” Anna said, tilting her head. “Now, get over to next door before Blais gets impatient.”

Joel and Gus waited by the door to Personnel, and the three of them walked the dozen feet to the next door. The two of them looked as dazed as Reiner felt, and they all exchanged wide-eyed looks.

“I don’t know why,” Gus whispered, glancing up and down the hallway, “but I thought there was gonna be a catch. You know—sorry, that salary we mentioned? That won’t be for another few years.” He brightened. “I can buy a new gaming laptop.”

The male in the photo studio, which is what the office next door turned out to be, took their pictures and sent them back to the waiting area just inside the door. He had the lightest hair Reiner had ever seen on one of his own species, nearly blond, and amber eyes; Gus watched him walk away and hummed in the back of his throat.

He shrugged when Reiner huffed at him. “What? He’s pretty.” Gus smirked, eyes on Reiner’s puffy lip. “I might have a chance, with you all occupied with Trey.” He waggled his eyebrows. “You got a little loud.”

Reiner curled his lip at the smaller male. “Jealous, much?”

Gus sniffed and looked away, glaring when Joel punched him lightly on the arm.

The door opened right then and Blais walked in, throwing off so much compressed irritation he almost vibrated. Ingrained politeness urged Reiner to stand, his amygdala said *freeze*. It won.

“Are you almost done here?” he snapped, his eyes more gold than hazel. Like the other day, today’s clothes were hanging-out-at-home casual, a chambray shirt and jeans over plain brown slip-on shoes. Were the suits only for special occasions?

The blond male called out, “two minutes” from the back and Blais grumbled, nearly a growl.

“The plan was to have you three spend the day in IT, meet everybody—that plan is now officially shot to hell. I need you to start work on the new server today, and do the meet-and-greet later.” He nodded at the black keycards. “Get used to wearing those now. If the light stays red, you don’t have access to that area, and none of the doors work without them—they will not open to let you in or out.” He leaned back, propping one shoulder on the wall, and Reiner’s lungs uncramped as Blais relaxed.

“Um.” Joel cleared his throat, and Reiner totally sympathized with the other male’s attempt to look small. “What if the power goes out?”

Good question. Locked doors were way worse than closed ones.

The smile Blais gave Joel wasn’t reassuring. “That depends on the reason. If it’s natural causes—the power grid goes down during a storm—our auxiliary power system will come on within a minute. All of the computers and servers have battery backup, so there will be no loss of data.” The faint Spanish accent was back, making Reiner think it was a kind of tell. “On the

other hand, if the power is cut somehow—from inside or outside—the backup systems will not come on.”

Gus was the one who spoke up this time. “So we’d be *trapped*?” His voice rose on the last word.

And that gulf, the one between life back home and life here, yawned wide again, reminding Reiner of the gun in Trey’s kitchen drawer and the knife under his pillow. God, and he had to stay here five years? He nearly missed the assessing look Blais gave him before Blais smiled his not-smile at Gus.

“Every room has an emergency exit, either in the floor or through the ceiling.” Blais stood up straight when the blond male came out of the back and silently handed Reiner, Gus, and Joel their ID cards. “Right. Come with me and we’ll go see your new workspace.

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Reiner stared at the wooden crates stacked against one wall. “You’re shitting me,” he said, regretting it immediately. “I mean—”

“I know what you meant. No one has touched them since they were delivered.” Blais shrugged, apparently uncaring of the dismay rolling off Reiner and the other two. “I didn’t want the IT staff messing anything up, so I asked them to leave it all intact. The crates are numbered.” He waved one hand at a pile of tools: two pry bars, two rubber mallets and two hammers. “If you need anything else, call IT on the internal phone. Extension three-one-one.”

“What’s...” Reiner wet dry lips. “What’s the deadline?” Because he was pretty damn sure there was one.

“I need this up and running by Memorial Day weekend. You can pull staff from IT if you need more hands—Just tell Tomas what you need done, and he’ll give you somebody or two.” Blais nodded at Reiner. “Have fun,” he said, and left them alone with what had to be over two dozen crates.

Gus eyed the tools, and then the crates. “I’ve never used a hammer in my life.”

“Me neither.” Joel looked at Reiner. “You?”

Reiner sighed. “Yeah.” He picked up a pry bar. “I’ll start, you watch.”

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Trey sat on the stairs and watched Reiner walk away, his heart high and tight in his chest. He had no idea sex could be like that. God help him, that had been—

“You’ve known him for three days,” Aidan said, and the *way* he said it, the slight reprimand, made Trey growl, surprising them both. Aidan raised his eyebrows and waited, a muscle ticcing in his jaw.

Trey had to swallow hard before he could speak, and his voice still came out rough. “How many times have I heard about you and Mom? About how you fell for her five minutes after you met?” He pushed to his feet, gritting his teeth when his thighs protested. He really wished he could remember exactly what they’d done, because it must have been epic to hurt this much.

Aidan’s head tipped to the right, eyes flaring gold around the pupils, and his mouth flattened. “That was—”

“Do not fucking tell me that was different,” Trey spat, and Aidan hissed at him, eyes narrowed to slits, clear warning for Trey to watch his mouth. For the first time ever, Trey didn’t want to back down, didn’t feel the knee-jerk urge to drop his eyes in the face of Aidan’s temper. “All my life, all I wanted was what you have,” he ground out. “Not—not with Mom. I don’t—” His voice failed him, because there was no way he was talking about *that* with Aidan, of all people. He forced himself to keep going. “I want what you and Papi have. The... I don’t know what to call it.”

Aidan breathed out sharply, and something in Trey eased, even if the hair on his neck wouldn’t go down and the skin between his shoulder blades itched. He knew better than this. Blais you could push, and get away with it, but Aidan? No.

Then Aidan shook his head, sighing, and the gold in his eyes faded a little. “What Blais and I have isn’t—you understand that it’s not always *healthy*, right? Sometimes?”



“No.” Trey’s chest hollowed out. “I *don’t* understand. You—you *get* each other. No matter what. I know—” Okay, maybe he should shut up. Saying *I know you fuck him* probably wasn’t—

The clear dismay—no, wait, better make that horror—on Aidan’s face stopped Trey from saying anything else. “Fuck.” Aidan turned around and walked away, into the garage, and Trey had no choice but to follow him.

“I’m not going to ask how you found out,” Aidan said, after a long pause. He faced Trey, hands on his hips, weight off his bad knee. “And that’s not what I meant about it not being healthy. I know how relationships work for our species, and...” He rubbed a hand over his jaw. “It’s only been the three of us for almost twenty years—and that is not normal. I don’t want you basing your idea of a relationship on our fucked-up family dynamics.”

Trey shrugged, at a loss to explain. “I still want what you have. And I don’t think that’s ever gonna change.”

Aidan crossed the few feet between them and reached for Trey, hugged him hard and pressed a kiss to his temple. And it occurred to Trey that Aidan was relieved somehow, that he’d believed Trey would reject him and walk away. As if. Part of Trey sagged in relief—the idea of disappointing Aidan cut deep, and hurt way more than any possibility of not living up to his father’s expectations. Not that Blais ever seemed to have any when it came to Trey.

“Go take a shower,” Aidan growled into his hair, arms tightening for a moment before he let go. “You reek. Bring me down some coffee and I’ll go pick up some breakfast. *Git.*”

Trey mock-saluted and ducked a good-natured swat at his head before heading outside and up the stairs. He went for the shower first because he did reek—sweat and come and blood. Turning on the shower, he hung the sweatpants off the doorknob and then used the john while the water heated up. Trey hissed softly because even pissing hurt; he was that raw.

He flushed, adjusted the water temperature and stepped under the spray. At some point, he figured Aidan would bring up the whole “I know you fuck him” thing, and he seriously was not looking forward to that.

Jaguar youngsters spied on adults. That was a given. You listened in, because once the sex got hot and heavy, surface thoughts were all about sensation—it was pretty much virtual porn, and how most teenagers learned about sex. Trey stuck his face under the showerhead and let the water pound his head and shoulders. They all did it, and nobody minded, not really. Granted, he'd never purposely listened in on Aidan and Emery, or when it was Emery, Blais, and Aidan, either. Or just Blais and Aidan, for that matter.

He moved so the water sluiced down his back, stretching sore muscles as he leaned forward to reach the shower gel. No, the one time had been an accident, and he'd *never* done it again. He'd cut out of middle school and come home, sneaking into the deserted house in the early afternoon... and it wasn't deserted. And he'd listened, shivering with a sick combination of disbelief and arousal, to Aidan and Blais in the bedroom. Listened to Blais beg and growl, heard Aidan snarl—and groan—and finally relent and give Blais what he wanted.

Did Trey have a drawer in his dresser with a collection of toys and lube? Oh yes he did. Did he like using those toys? Definitely. But not a single one of those toys came equipped with barbs, thank you very much. Fantasy was one thing, asking another male to actually do it was—not going to happen. Trey's soapy fingers brushed over the bite mark Reiner had left on his shoulder and he shuddered. One day soon he'd show Reiner that drawer, let Reiner see what Trey liked to do—to have done to him.

Trey snorted and turned to rinse. Not for a few days at least, though. He'd had absolutely no fucking idea things would get so out of hand. They'd—barely—remembered to eat, flying high on pheromones. He knew that was normal, even though the only time Trey had ever been with a female had been pure disaster; if she hadn't been in season he doubted his body would have performed at all. With Reiner, though, he'd been hard for hours on end, and the wanting hadn't been all physical.

He... *liked* Reiner, that was the thing. Trey shut off the water and stepped out of the shower, pulling a towel off the back of the door. He wouldn't mind if Reiner stayed here in the apartment a few more days, even if sex was out of

the question at the moment. Maybe—maybe see if this thing they had going could go somewhere for real. Or maybe Reiner wouldn't move into the Inn after all.

He'd meant what he said to Aidan; he'd known what he wanted since he was maybe ten or so. And before that, he'd flat-out worshiped Aidan, the first adult who'd ever given a shit about him. His mother? She'd dumped him with Blais when she found out she was pregnant with a daughter. Mothers weren't supposed to do stuff like that, and he had a vivid memory of how pissed off Emery had been on his behalf when she found out.

Granted, it was old news to Trey at that point, he'd been at Stone Mountain for over two years by then, and was used to being ignored by Blais, who'd been dealing with a shit-ton of other stuff, with no attention to spare for a stray son. Trey hadn't liked it much, but that was his life.

He didn't recall the exact day, maybe six months or so after Aidan and Emery came to live at Stone Mountain, but Eva had been maybe a year and half old at the time, he'd been not quite six—and god, he'd been so fucking jealous of her. She'd go over to Aidan—this impossibly huge male with blue eyes, scary as shit—and crawl into his lap for attention like she had every right to be there. And Aidan would let her, let her crawl on top of him while he watched a movie or took a nap. Trey wanted to do the same thing so bad it made him sick to his stomach. From fourteen years distance Trey got how careful Aidan had been, treating him like a skittish rabbit instead of a little predator. Waiting patiently for Trey to make a move.

And then one day—and it had been a shitty day, he knew that, even if he didn't recall why—Eva hauled herself up onto Aidan's thigh and Trey's misery nearly strangled him. Aidan had reached out and put a hand on Trey's shoulder, thumb stroking his neck, and Trey shivered at just the memory of that first simple contact.

"Come on," Aidan had rumbled, and guided Trey closer until he could scoop him onto his lap, one-handed; a feat that confirmed Aidan's god-status right then. Aidan got them both settled, Eva on one side and Trey on the other, and... it was too much. Trey curled into the solid warmth of Aidan's chest,

held tight by a muscled arm, and cried as quietly as he knew how, one hand gripping Aidan's T-shirt. And all Aidan did was hold him, resting his cheek on Trey's hair and purring, until Trey finally fell asleep.

After that, things—life—got better. Emery, hugely pregnant with Sophie and Ethan, simply took over as Trey's mother without any further discussion; Aidan charged Trey with looking after Eva and keeping her safe... and, somehow, Trey ended up with a family and Aidan became the center of Trey's universe, offering uncomplicated affection and the physical closeness Trey craved.

Right after that, Blais and Aidan stopped circling each other with their hackles up, and Aidan—to Emery's exasperated relief—finally accepted the fact that Blais wanted him. It still took nearly a month before they moved from cautious courting to being lovers, and then... well, once they came together, they were inseparable. Aidan's heart still belonged to Emery, but Blais now owned his soul.

And *that's* what Trey wanted, that kind of connection, somebody to share his life with, not just a bed.

He slung the damp towel over the door, and went into the bedroom for clothes. Once he was dressed, he took the entire carafe from the coffeemaker and went downstairs, sniffing happily at the bacon smell coming from inside the garage. They had a customer—busted radiator or a hose, going by the sweet stink of antifreeze—and Aidan didn't do more than wave at Trey from under the hood of the car.

Trey checked the clipboard on the office door while he unwrapped the bacon and cheese sandwich, scanning their list of jobs for the day. Tune-ups on four ATVs, two oil changes and a tire swap. Not so bad. He could do the oil changes and let Aidan do the tires. The tire machine they had was old, and a bitch to use, but Aidan could do that standing and not stress his knee getting up and down. Trey crammed the rest of the first half of the sandwich in his mouth and checked to make sure they had the supplies for the oil changes.

A normal day, then, except for the bites and bruises reminding him of the best sex he'd ever had. Yeah, so they'd only known each other three days—so what? Not like they were human and had to play guessing games over who liked who and how much. He'd had semi-serious partners before, when he'd been with Arrowhead. He'd shared quarters with one male, Luc, for nearly six months. It had been good, sure, but neither of them ever figured it for long term. It was company at night, or during the day, depending on their shift, another body and a pair of hands—and that was it. Trey licked his fingers clean and tossed the paper from the sandwich in the trash. Normal day, but he'd have Reiner next to him again tonight.

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## CHAPTER SIX

The mountain of crates turned out to only be eighteen boxes after all, though Reiner had maybe twice that many splinters by the time he yanked the last giant-assed staple out of the last stubborn lid. Joel and Gus were absofuckinglutely useless with tools—"I can use a soldering iron," Joel had protested, and Reiner just glared at him—so Reiner had them pull the Styrofoam cubes out of each crate as he opened it. He sent Joel out for breakfast sandwiches right after they started, but that was hours ago according to his pathetically whiny stomach.

Reiner had pried the crates open in number order, and of course the parts for the rack were in the last two damn crates. It figured. He'd need different tools to assemble the rack—an electric screwdriver would be nice—and maybe IT had what he needed. First they had to finish clearing the wood and stray bits of Styrofoam out, and then he could lay the pieces of the rack out and find out where the instructions were. The three of them made multiple trips dragging all the empty crates down the hall and stacked them by the freight elevator.

"Fuck me," Reiner groaned when they got back from doing that, and slid down the wall. He hurt all over and had one major fucking headache, to boot.

"Go get food," a deep honey-and-sand voice said, and Reiner made a half-hearted effort to get on his feet. Blais, who'd changed his clothes and was back in an expensive suit again, raised a dark eyebrow at the pile of technology, most of it still cradled by Styrofoam. "Nice. Now go get food."

Reiner used the wall to stand, wincing when a splinter bit his thumb. Gus stared at Blais with wary fascination, absently offering Joel a helping hand.

"On second thought," Blais muttered, "it's two o'clock. Come back tomorrow and start fresh." He snorted at Reiner's disbelieving look. "You have more than enough time, and most everyone leaves at three, anyway. Go." He jerked a thumb at Reiner. "And you? Shift later and get rid of those bruises, *me oyes?*"

"Yes, sir."

Blais said something else in Spanish under his breath, shaking his head. “*A los tres—vámonos*. Go eat. Back here at nine tomorrow.”

Food. Okay. That was probably the best idea ever, considering the way Reiner’s head went all spinny when the sun hit him between the eyes once they got outside. Water, too. Water would be good.

“You comin’?” Gus asked, waving at the diner. Joel was already halfway across the road.

“Nah. In a few. Need to—” Reiner shrugged, not really sure what he needed more of at the moment: food, water, or some nice synthetic opiates. All three, maybe. In that order. Gus ran after Joel, and Reiner scuffed his way over to the garage, wishing he had sunglasses.

Five cars were parked out front, and four ATVs sat in a scruffy herd over next to Reiner’s Toyota. Classic rock blasted out of both open bays, punctuated by short, loud bursts of an oddly angry-sounding *whirr*—the world’s biggest pissed-off mechanical cicada on speed. Great. Now he was hallucinating.

“Jesus, you look wrecked,” Trey said, and Reiner jumped like a—well, like a startled cat.

“Fuck,” Reiner spat, and Trey handed him an almost-full bottle of cold water. That went down in one long sucking gulp, and when Reiner lowered the bottle, Trey handed him another one. *You’re forgiven*, Reiner told him, downing that one with something approaching bliss.

“Gee, thanks,” Trey drawled, and Reiner’s dick gave one tentative twitch and gave up.

“Ow,” Reiner said, enunciating carefully, and Trey snorted at him, eyes lighting up.

“I know what you mean. Um... you wanna get an early dinner?” Trey indicated the garage with a tilt of his head. “We’re gonna be done here in about an hour. If I get you something to eat, think you can wait a bit?”

“It better be good,” Reiner told him, and followed Trey into the garage. Aidan had a car up on a lift, two wheels on and two off, and as they came inside, he hefted the third wheel into place with a clank. He had his shirt off, and Reiner tried not to trip while he stared.

Aidan had tattoos on both upper arms, and another one stretching between his hipbones, the tops of the letters just visible as his jeans dipped when he raised the wheel to chest level. That was just... *weird*. Just about every human he knew in college had tattoos, but his own species—well, they didn’t, plain and simple. Then again, maybe Aidan had gotten them bef—

“Shit!”

Trey dragged him into the little office and shut the door. “Breathe,” he said. “Seriously. Breathe.”

Reiner managed three jerky inhale-exhale combinations before his lungs cooperated. That was—that was—oh, fuck. He’d never—not even his uncle, who was pretty dominant, had—okay, compared to Aidan and Blais, not really so much—“Shit.” He sat down on the desk chair Trey shoved at him and breathed some more. Aidan’s back... Reiner shivered.

Sometime in their mid-twenties, the skin along a male’s spine darkened and mottled until it matched the pattern they wore when they were four-legged and furry. On most males it was maybe a shade darker than their nipples, and on some—a few—it turned darker still. Supposedly it advertised virility, and it kind of corresponded with how dominant a male *felt*. Not so much in the physical sense, but mentally. Reiner’s oldest uncle had markings that were sort of brownish, like a coffee stain, and Reiner had never seen any darker ones.

Aidan’s markings were the deep purplish-brown of a nasty bruise, stark even against his tanned skin. You’d mistake them for a tattoo if you didn’t know any better.

Trey crouched down in front of Reiner, his thumbs rubbing along Reiner’s thighs while he gripped him just above the knees.

“I don’t know that I can do this,” Reiner croaked, and Trey’s hands went still.



“Do what?”

“I’m not... used to this kind of... I don’t know what to call it. You’re all—and I’m not—”

“It’s okay,” Trey said, sounding like it wasn’t. “I get it. What do you wanna do?”

“I don’t know.” Reiner managed a normal breath, and the buzzing need to shift, to... *run*, ramped down to a bearable level.

With a grunt, Trey stood, and crossed the small room to open the refrigerator. He pulled out a big glass cereal bowl and peeled the plastic wrap off the top. He handed the bowl to Reiner, along with a fork from a mug filled with cutlery. “Eat this first.”

It smelled *amazing*, and Reiner stuffed a forkful in his mouth without caring all that much what it was. He moaned in appreciation, and Trey raised an eyebrow. “That sounds familiar.”

“Bite me,” Reiner told him around the mouthful of meaty goodness.

“Did, thanks.” Trey sat on the edge of the ancient metal desk and grinned at Reiner. “Good?”

“Fucking awesome.” Reiner scooped up some more, hoping he wasn’t drooling. Little strips of tender meat—beef?—with citrus—lime?—and oil and minced up leafy stuff and *spices*... The combination of almost-raw meat and everything else started a nice body rush, oh yeah, and he growled happily while he chewed.

“Beef and venison,” Trey told him as Reiner stuffed his face. “And lime juice. Cilantro, cinnamon... not sure what else. It’s like Aidan’s favorite food in the whole wide world. We almost always have a bowl handy. So do I, but I ate it all and didn’t get more from home.” He shrugged. “Mom makes it.”

Reiner wondered if licking the bowl would be rude and decided he didn’t care. The meat juice and the lime hit all the right places on his tongue, and his stomach shut right the hell up. He stared at the empty bowl and swallowed a belated rush of saliva. “I’d love to try this on waffles.”

Trey gagged. “That’s just wrong. Fried chicken and waffles, maybe. Bacon, yeah—”

“Whatever. I want this on some waffles.” Reiner sighed at the vision, and sucked a stray bit of herb out of a molar. “Sorry about the freak out.”

“S’okay. Just... I don’t know why you think you’re not—” Trey shook his head, frowning slightly. “I mean, Aidan’s... *Aidan*, yeah. And Blais is just as bad. But you’re not exactly... submissive, you know?” Trey’s mouth widened in a slow smile, eyes bright. “I have the bruises to prove it, too.”

Reiner huffed, and had to look away, shrugging in unwilling agreement.

Trey bumped Reiner’s foot with his own. “I’m gonna finish up here, then go shower. Wanna go to the Inn for dinner? They do turkey on Mondays. And... we can talk. After dinner, if you don’t wanna while we eat. Either way is good.” Trey looked at him, and Reiner caught it all: a little worry, some tiredness, but over and around and through all the random surface stuff was a big fat thread of *happy*, warm and solid and real.

He stood and set the bowl on the counter so he could reach for Trey with both hands, drew him in until they touched from chest to knees, and tucked his face into the crook of Trey’s neck and breathed him in. Trey’s arms and hands returned the embrace, and Reiner felt the vibration as Trey purred.

“Let’s do that,” he said, into Trey’s skin, “dinner, then talk.” He tasted Trey, a brief touch of tongue to salty skin, and they both shivered. “Okay?”

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They spent fifteen minutes with tweezers and Trey’s desk lamp while Trey got most of the splinters out of Reiner’s hands, and after that they both showered and changed into clean jeans and T-shirts. Trey loaned Reiner a pair of flip-flops to go out. According to Trey, he wore shoes in the garage only because there was too much dangerous shit in there, but the rest of the time he either wore flip-flops or went barefoot.

“Even in the winter?” Reiner asked, looking up at Trey from the bottom of the stairs.

“In the house, yeah. I hate wearing socks. You ever try and shift wearing socks?”

“Why... Why would that even be an issue?”

Trey didn't answer until they were eye to eye. “Didn't you ever practice? You know, shifting with all your clothes on?” He shook his head at what Reiner knew was a blank look. “We did it when we were little, like a game. Just in case we ever had to do it for real.”

They'd started walking toward the Inn, but that brought Reiner up short. There it was again, that chasm. Trey had stopped walking, too, and Reiner almost asked what the hell *for real* meant, but Trey huffed at him, mouth flattening.

“Must've been nice, growin' up all safe like that,” Trey said, with enough bitterness to sting.

“We still had to be careful. Most of the farmers just figured we were leftover hippies or something—or white trash.” Reiner could do bitter, too. “Not all of us grew up rich.”

Trey laughed at him, and if Reiner's inadequate human ears could have flattened, they would have. With both hands on his hips, it was easy to see that Trey was Aidan's son, just as much as he was a DaSilva. “That's what you think? We all just sit here, and the money just falls down from the sky?” He jabbed a finger at the SMS building, looming behind him. “You think all the money comes from there? It doesn't. If it wasn't for Arrowhead, and the military contracts, believe me, you'd've been working some shit-ass job and going to community college—and you'd be in debt up to your ears anyways.” Trey scrubbed his face with one hand, and the mix of emotions churning his gut and his head hung between them like a curtain. “How old do you think I was when I got sent to Arrowhead? Did you even think about that?”

Reiner scrambled to pull that conversation up, wondering what the fuck that had to do with anything. “You... high school. Sophomore year. But...” He did the math and the answer made no sense. “You would've been sixteen.

But you can't join the mil...itary..." Trey didn't say *dumbass* out loud, Reiner heard it fine, thanks, loud and clear.

"Not the human one, no. And even if *was* old enough, Aidan and Blais would lock me in a cage—fuck, shoot me—before they'd let me do *that*."

Reiner only imagined that the ground under his feet fell away, and he stood there blinking like the dumbass Trey had called him a few seconds ago. They stared at each other until Trey shook his head and grunted.

"I'm not havin' this conversation on an empty stomach. How 'bout we get dinner to go and take this back inside?"

After that, Reiner went back to Trey's apartment and set the table, moving like he was underwater, while Trey went over to the Inn to place their order.

Reiner vaguely remembered registering for Selective Service when he'd turned eighteen; that was the law, and not doing it would make a red flag pop up somewhere, he knew that. He didn't know the last time the US had actually drafted anybody—way before even his uncles were born, probably—so it wasn't like he'd thought much about it. As far as he knew, his species *couldn't* join the US military; all it would take was one physical exam and the doctor would know they weren't human.

He had no clue how males managed to join up until World War II, because he knew for a fact that they had, but after 1952 they didn't dare. Later, in the sixties, males headed south to Mexico if they did get drafted, swimming across in four-legged form—and joining Arrowhead when they got there.

When Trey came in with their food, they dished it out and ate without saying a word out loud, although the thicket in Trey's head rustled ominously. Reiner's own barrier stretched *taller*, somehow, which was pretty weird, really.

For some reason, his brain seized on the word *barrier*, watching it with predatory patience, and somewhere in between scraping up the last of the mashed potatoes and gravy and stripping the rest of the meat off the turkey leg, one phrase swam out of the murk of miscellaneous trivia left over from his elective classes: the Weismann barrier.

What the fuck? Where the fuck did that come from?

Trey sat back, setting his fork down with a decisive *clink*, eyes wide and fixed on Reiner.

What... Reiner tried to think what class that was from, and he saw the words, scrawled large on a classroom whiteboard and underlined twice. Cold classroom, green leaves outside—air conditioning then, not winter. Spring semester? Summer session? God, what was the name of that course, it *was* an elective, an extra two credit cushion in case he screwed up...

Genetics. *Modern Genetic Theory*. Was that it?

“It’s a... principle,” Trey said flatly. “Is that the right word?”

Reiner needed more air. “Yeah. That’s... yeah. It means that Aidan can’t be Sophie and Ethan’s biological father. Or Marcus or Dean’s. He shouldn’t be able to have offspring *at all*, not with one of us.”

Trey curled his hands around the edge of the table, knuckles going white for second. “Except he is. He did.”

“He *can’t* be.” The rest of it came flooding back, the pertinent bits, anyway. “The... genetic changes happened to him because of gene therapy, not a... natural mutation. They’re not inheritable.” Was that even a word? “His genes were... *altered*, but that doesn’t affect the—fuck—the whatchacallit, the sperm cells.” That wasn’t quite right, but it was close enough.

And Trey understood, oh yes he did. His hazel eyes remained steady, watching while Reiner worked it out for himself, followed the wriggly trail right to the end.

Trey dropped his head, breaking contact, and swallowed. “Pax doesn’t know. I mean, they know Emery has offspring, but Aidan swore up and down that Blais was the father, not him. Because if they knew the truth—”

“—they’d never let him go,” Reiner finished, when Trey didn’t. “Because that would be huge—it would mean that you could alter somebody genetically and they could pass it on. But that would be great, right? I mean, all those...” His voice died. “Oh.”

“Yeah.” Trey’s laugh was shaky. “*Oh*. And then they’d want to run tests on Sophie and Ethan and Marcus and Dean, and maybe breed Sophie to see if it’s viable that way.”

Reiner breathed through his nose until the urge to throw up went away, but the acid lingered in the back of his throat.

“The only reason they haven’t looked too close is ’cause Aidan has a brother, Danny, and Pax got him, too. Did the same thing, and it worked, right? Danny can shift and all—but he’s sterile. No, not sterile.” Trey rocked his chair back on two legs. “His sperm are *human*, so he can’t breed with us. So, ’cause of that, Pax bought it, the whole Blais-is-their-father thing. I don’t understand all of it, okay?” His voice went all raspy, and he sat the chair back down with a thump. “I looked stuff up on the Internet, and Mom explained a bunch of it, too. Pax tested Aidan’s come all along, but Mom says that all the changes probably didn’t happen until he shifted the first time—and they never tested him after that, ’cause he was here at Stone Mountain by then.”

“I need a drink.” Reiner stood up on legs that didn’t want to cooperate, and went to the fridge. “You?”

Trey nodded, and the smile he gave Reiner when he took the offered beer was twisted. “You know I’m not old enough to buy this legally, right?”

“No. I just...” Reiner thought for a moment. “...didn’t do the math. How old *are* you?”

“Twenty. Twenty-one in October.” Trey held his beer out of Reiner’s reach, and this time his smile was closer to normal. “I don’t think so. How old *are you*?”

Reiner gave up on getting the beer away from Trey—what was the point? Not like he’d never had a beer before he made twenty-one—and sat down to drink his own. “Twenty-three. I pushed so I could graduate a semester early.”

Trey looked blank, and Reiner shrugged and took a healthy drink of the cold beer. The bottle felt good on his lip, still a little swollen from the day before. “Blais *and* Aidan said we should shift and get rid of the bruises.”

“God.” Trey didn’t slam the bottle down, but it was close. “I’m real sorry they’re buttin’ in like this. I just never got... involved with anybody here before.” He squinted at Reiner. “I really don’t feel like goin’ through all that—we’d have to shift back before we could sleep. Can we just, I don’t know, watch TV tonight?”

Reiner picked at the label on the bottle with his thumb. Vegging out on the sofa sounded like the second best idea ever, but he wasn’t ready to let everything else go yet. He met Trey’s curious look with one of his own. “The thing you said earlier, about joining the military. You can’t really do that, right?”

Trey tipped the chair back again, one hand on the edge of the table for balance. “We can, just... not the normal way.” He upended his beer and finished it off. “I can’t just walk into a recruiting station and sign up, right? There’s all kinds of special forms, and we can’t be regular soldiers—we’d stand out too much, and there’s all this stuff about security clearances. I think...” Trey shrugged. “Maybe a dozen of us have joined up since 2013, I guess. And I thought about it a little, but like I said, Aidan would skin me alive and Blais would help.”

“But they let you join Arrowhead at what, sixteen?”

“Yeah.” Trey sat the chair down again and gave Reiner another quirky smile. “I was with my grandfather—Blais’ father—and his partner. Believe me, they made the human military look like a fun idea. Can we—can we do the couch thing now? Please?” He whined the last word and widened his eyes, and Reiner nearly choked on the last of his beer.

“Yeah, okay.”

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Trey woke up in time to watch the last five minutes of *Dune*, and didn’t remember falling asleep in the first place. He was sitting up, and Reiner had his head on Trey’s thigh. When Trey stirred, Reiner rolled onto his back and stretched a little, licking his lips and blinking.

“Bed?” he asked, and Trey nodded. Reiner shut off the TV and stood, stretching again, hands overhead. Trey couldn’t resist leaning in to huff Reiner’s armpit, inhaling so the orange peel and peppercorn notes washed over his palate and coated his tongue, the smell-taste doing funny things to his head. He ran his nose along the silky skin on the inside of Reiner’s upper arm, holding his elbow when Reiner tried to lower it.

*Tickles.* Reiner turned his head and licked Trey’s ear before he blew on it, and Trey breathed out on a silent laugh.

In the bedroom, they both stared at the disaster that was Trey’s bed. The moonlight did nothing to make the sheets look less nasty and he could smell them from here. Well, shit. No way were they sleeping on those sheets, and the comforter needed to be washed and hung out in the sun before he’d even think of putting it back on the bed. On the other hand, he did *not* have the energy to find clean sheets and put them on.

“I can’t,” Trey groaned, and Reiner rubbed his cheek on Trey’s shoulder with a matching unhappy sound.

“I know. Just—” Reiner growled under his breath and started stripping the bed, throwing everything on the floor. Trey gave in and went to the linen closet next to the bathroom for sheets and a quilt, and between them they had the bed back together in a couple of minutes.

Trey let his clothes fall wherever as he undressed, and they crawled into bed at the same time. Reiner shoved Trey flat and sprawled half on top of him, head tucked into Trey’s neck, one thigh thrown over Trey’s and his hand resting on Trey’s chest. Reiner’s hair was soft under Trey’s cheek and his fingers, and Reiner’s sleepy, contented sigh made Trey grin.

Reiner snuggled closer, and his hand flattened and then flexed against Trey’s skin, kneading. Trey hummed, a low rumble, and his body moved closer to Reiner, all on its own. Reiner hadn’t said a word about moving his stuff to the Inn, hadn’t even thought about it so far as Trey could tell. Maybe everything else had pushed that to the side, maybe not.



Reiner mumbled something against Trey's skin, followed by a soft kiss, right where neck and shoulder met. He repeated it when Trey made a questioning sound, but all Trey got was the last bit.

“...stay here.”

Trey nodded, and let out the breath he'd been holding. And he fell asleep to the sound of Reiner's faint, pleased purr.

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## CHAPTER SEVEN

Tuesday morning was less of a frantic scramble out the door, mainly because Aidan opened the garage at seven thirty in the fucking morning. They both heard him laughing in their heads when the overhead doors startled them awake and sent Reiner dashing for the shower.

*You have a seriously warped sense of humor*, Trey told him.

Aidan gave him back an image of a much-younger Trey and Eva launching themselves into bed on top of Blais, Aidan, and Emery. *Just paying back the favor.*

*Yeah, yeah, yeah.* Trey didn't bother with clothes, just went and set up the coffee—for two, this time—and pulled the toaster down off the top of the fridge before getting some bacon out of the freezer.

*Bacon?* Aidan hummed and Trey snorted.

*None for you. I had plans.*

Trey heard Aidan's bark of laughter even through the floor, and the warm fuzzies stayed with him while he put on a T-shirt and boxers—hot bacon fat was not something to take lightly, thanks.

He stuck his head in the bathroom, and he'd never appreciated the design of his shower—no curtain required—more than right that second. His lower body twitched at the rear view of a wet, soapy Reiner, decorated with the fading bruises from Trey's teeth.

"Ooh, baby," he crooned, and Reiner turned to blow water at him with his eyes closed. "How do waffles and bacon sound?"

"I don't know. How *do* waffles and bacon sound?" Reiner opened one eye, swiping water and shampoo off his face.

"Fine. See if I ever make you breakfast again," Trey assured him, and walked out, grinning as Reiner's wail of "but I *like* waffles" echoed off the tile.

This could work.

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This wasn't working.

Reiner wrinkled his nose and hissed at the mess on the floor, just on general principle. On what fucking planet did anybody think not including instructions for something with this many parts was a good idea?

He'd gotten in at ten to nine, eager to start on assembling the rack, and found out from Lily the receptionist that Joel and Gus were spending the day in IT helping with a shipment of new laptops. That wasn't so bad—he didn't mind working alone—and there was a toolbox sitting there, waiting for him outside the door. His keycard got him in, the room wasn't too warm or too cold, he was full of waffles and bacon—so far, so good.

After that? Not so good.

He searched the entire room and couldn't find assembly instructions, not even a picture of the finished product. So he sorted the pieces by size, thinking that might help. It didn't. He'd never had to put anything like this together in his life. And now it was going on eleven o'clock, and all he had to show for two hours of work was... nothing. Wonderful. He dusted off his jeans and headed off to find IT.

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By three, Reiner had the rack put together, thanks to Brian from somewhere in the bowels of IT, on loan for the afternoon. Brian, another pale blond like the male from the day before—were they related?—came equipped with a laptop, and found a diagram saved from when they ordered the new server. The first hour, Brian's lowered eyes and subtle avoidance had Reiner half a breath from snarling. He couldn't help it.

"What the fuck?" he snapped, and Brian flinched, dark hazel eyes going wide and startled. "I'm not that scary," Reiner grumbled.

Brian blinked at him, his shields wavering for a brief second, enough for Reiner to get that he was, to Brian, kind of scary.

"I'm not," he protested. "God, I'm a geek, same as you. Really."

“But you’re—” Brian hunched his shoulders up around his ears and slid his eyes in the direction of Reiner’s chest. Then he *showed* Reiner, and nearly made him laugh—he was not that tall *or* that big, and he definitely didn’t smell like that. No way.

Brian’s sigh telegraphed total disbelief, but he stopped the vague flinching that had Reiner wanting to lash his currently-not-there tail and thump Brian in the head just because he could.

By the time the rack was assembled—with no left over parts, thank you very much—Brian had actually initiated conversation beyond, “now you need the five millimeter rubber washers”, it was three o’clock, and the entire building filled with a whispery hint of intent: *Done. Home.* He’d thought Blais had been making an exception yesterday, it being their first day and all. Apparently not.

To be sure, he asked Brian, who was already closing his laptop, “Is this normal? Everybody goes home at three?”

“Yeah.” Brian nodded. “On Fridays, we all leave at lunchtime, unless you have to stick around for something special.” Brian’s brown eyes flicked over Reiner. “There’s a soccer game on Friday afternoons for whoever wants to play. In the field out back.”

“That’d be cool.” He liked soccer, he’d missed playing with his cousins when he’d been away at college. “Do you play?”

Brian tilted his head, looking at Reiner through his lashes, and his voice dropped maybe a quarter octave. “I like to watch.”

What had Trey said? *Once you hit town, I figure there’ll be a line. Best take advantage of seeing you first.* Reiner shrugged, flattered and not altogether sure what to say.

Brian grinned, and, okay, he was damned cute when he did. “Just so you know.” He headed off, laptop under his arm, and Reiner did check out the view—he was male, it came with the equipment.

Besides, the thing with Trey wasn't serious, not... yeah. Reiner touched the tender spot on his cheekbone with one finger. Maybe it wasn't serious *yet*, but it sure as hell could be. Not that he wanted to sit down with Trey and talk about it—shit, no. They were just fine not talking about it. There had been that one point last night, when Reiner caught Trey's stray thought about him not moving into the Inn, and said he wanted to stay. Trey's happy relief had been obvious—what else did they need to say?

He shut off the lights and made sure the door closed behind him, realizing as he headed down the stairs that he'd completely forgotten about lunch. He didn't know what was around, outside of the diner and the Inn, but maybe he and Trey could go someplace else for an early dinner. That would actually be kind of cool.

The mid-afternoon heat and humidity hit him the second he left the building, and he sighed in relief. Computers might not appreciate early summer in North Carolina, but he sure did. Being cold sucked.

There were half a dozen cars in front of the garage, and Reiner detoured around them on his way to Trey's—their—apartment. He knew Trey was inside, so was Aidan.

As he reached the first open bay, he saw Trey, crouched in front of a stack of boxes and writing on one of them with a marker. Aidan leaned against the wall with a clipboard in one hand, idly scratching his belly under his T-shirt with the other.

“—California,” he said, his eyes on Trey. “You need to think about what you want to do. Theo wants to retire, and you're the best choice to replace him—we both know that. And it's not like you'd have to live in L.A. itself, you can—”

“I already thought of that,” Trey replied mildly, and Reiner's stomach performed an awful stop-drop-and-roll maneuver. He knew he didn't make a sound—he'd have to be breathing for that—and he thought he kept his dismay off his face, but the cool assessment in Aidan's eyes when he looked up made Reiner doubt it. What he didn't doubt was that Aidan had sensed him coming

from a ways off, and that the topic of conversation was deliberate. He was meant to overhear this.

*You bastard.* The thought slipped away from him before he could grab it and stuff it out of sight.

Aidan took a deep breath, but his expression didn't change in the least. He let the air out in a huff, and Reiner looked away from Aidan to meet Trey's startled—guilty?—eyes.

"Hey," Reiner said through dry lips. "You wanna go get an early dinner somewhere? After you finish?" He was insanely proud of how casual all that came out, not to mention grateful as hell for Eliza's construction project in his head for keeping his ricocheting thoughts safe and sound.

Trey nodded, his internal bamboo grove gone impenetrable and dark, matching the wide pools of both pupils. "That sounds good."

"Cool." Reiner took the stairs two at a time, and by the time he got inside the apartment he'd almost convinced himself it didn't matter if Trey was going to move to L.A., or wanted to move, or even had to move. They were both young males, and too young to be settling down, right? Right.

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Trey was mad enough to spit, and he seriously considered throwing something heavier than the permanent marker at Aidan. He breathed around the tightness in his chest, and wondered which box had the least fragile heavy thing in it.

"Your mother threw a table at me once," Aidan offered, still leaning against the wall. Out of all of them, he was hands-down the best at keeping his thought to himself and off his face. Even his voice gave nothing away. For the first time in his life, Trey resented the absolute shit out of that ability.

"Why are you trying to fuck this up for me?" Trey stood up, knowing that he gave off *ears flat, tail lashing* and not giving a damn.

"You do need to decide if you want the job in L.A. or not." Aidan didn't move, but Trey couldn't miss the way Aidan's pupils flared inside their

sudden gold coronas. Bad, oh shit, that was *bad*, and still, Trey's mouth kept going.

“Really? And just by coincidence, you bring it up when Reiner shows up? After telling me the job was mine whenever, no pressure?” Trey swallowed to clear his throat, wanting to just tell Aidan to fuck off even as his other half stirred in warning. “Please,” he croaked. “Stay out of this? I’m old enough to know what I want—and if I fuck it up and it falls apart, fine. I can deal with that.” His muscles twitched with adrenaline and he rode the rush, ignored the prickle of fresh sweat under his arms and along his spine.

Aidan shuddered, skin breaking out in visible goose bumps, and he breathed in until his T-shirt went taut across his entire upper body. Trey's other half rose higher, breaking the surface of his mind and demanding that he wake the fuck up and pay attention before things went further to shit. Stupid—easy to forget what Aidan was like underneath calm and patient Daddy-Aidan. He *didn't* handle stress well, and even Blais knew when to back off or risk an explosion, which was saying something. Plus, the trip to the VA was only a few days ago... shit.

Trey shoved his own temper in a cage and breathed out, trying for calm. He swallowed and took one more deep breath, let that out slow and easy. “Dad.”

Aidan blinked at him, and the red tinge to the waterfall in his head faded slightly. “Go upstairs,” he said, with only a hint of growl, and closed his eyes. “Go.”

Trey didn't need to be told twice. Aidan would—and had—hurt himself before taking out his runaway temper on someone else when things got too much for him. Trey had said his piece, and he wouldn't apologize for that. Or back down, not on this. That didn't mean he was going to stand around and wait for Aidan to go *boom*.

He didn't know what he was going to find upstairs. Reiner's bags by the door, maybe. He didn't quite expect Reiner to be sitting on the sofa, eating beef jerky. Trey shucked his work boots by the door and peeled off his socks,

not sure what to say. Reiner silently offered him a piece of jerky when Trey crossed the room and sat down on the other end of the sofa.

“About six months ago—” was as far as he got before Reiner interrupted him.

“It’s okay. You don’t need to explain it. I heard... downstairs.” Reiner smiled at him, and Trey wished he could see past the entrance to the maze to what Reiner was thinking—because that smile wasn’t right.

“I don’t want to move to L.A.—you heard that part, right?” Trey edged closer on the sofa.

Reiner nodded, eyes on Trey’s mouth. He reached across and hooked two fingers in the neck of Trey’s T-shirt, leaning forward as he pulled Trey to him. The smile might not be right, but the kiss was, and Trey laid back on the sofa and took Reiner with him, spreading his legs so Reiner could get right up close from mouth to balls.

Their tongues moved together with a low-grade urgency, a slow build, and Trey’s body took a moment to get the message, even with Reiner hot and solid on top of him. From the feel of things, Reiner was a little ahead of him there, his back muscles tightening under Trey’s splayed hand as his hips rocked. This wasn’t anything like what they’d done the other times, this was... god, it was good. Trey ran his other hand over Reiner’s hair, not urging or rushing, enjoying the tickle of it on his palm.

He didn’t know how long they stayed like that, long enough for the pleasure of exploring each other’s mouth to wash out everything else, anyway, but then Reiner detoured away from Trey’s mouth to bite along his jaw, soft bites, little tastes, and Trey lifted his chin to offer his neck up for the same treatment. He pulled Reiner’s shirt up so he could smooth his hands down, thumbs finding the dimples above his ass, catching on slightly sweaty skin.

Reiner’s teeth closed on the thickest part of his trapezius, and the jolt of sensation went straight to Trey’s cock and set up an echo of need in his balls. “Yes,” Trey hissed, drawing it out. He curled his hips, trying to get some



pressure or friction—anything—and move things along. A tongue found his ear and Trey's moan of appreciation drew an answering sound from Reiner.

*Hey, guys?*

They both froze, and Reiner drew back enough for Trey to see those gold flecks in his eyes. Pretty. Like leaves in the sunlight—oh fuck, did he really just think that? And not for the first time, either. Then and there, Trey figured he was screwed.

*Yeah?* Trey sat up as Reiner sat back, and Trey didn't imagine the reluctant way Reiner let go of him. *What, Eva?*

The door to the apartment opened, and all six DaSilva-Foresters were on the landing. Eva waved a handful of twenties at them and shrugged. "Mom says to take us all to Sonic." She raised her other hand, and jingled a key ring. "I've got the keys for the Escalade."

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It took forty-five minutes to drive to Sonic, and Reiner got to listen to Eva argue with Trey for the first fifteen of them about why she should be allowed to drive. Personally, the idea of a sixteen-year-old female driving anything this enormous—with him in it—was enough to kill his appetite.

"I need twelve more hours of practice," she pleaded. "Come on."

"I don't qualify as a supervising driver," Trey pointed out.

"But Reiner does."

"Reiner doesn't have a North Carolina driver license."

"So? He—"

Trey's voice acquired an edge. "And what if that's against the rules? You wanna risk your license?"

"Who's gonna tell?"

"What if we get stopped?"

They kept at it until Eva was nearly hissing and Trey looked ready to bite something. It was kind of reassuring, more like Reiner and his siblings, who fought constantly. Sophie watched them with an amused patience way older than fourteen while Ethan pretended to nap and Marcus played games on a tablet, earbuds in place. The twins, in the back row next to Marcus, were ominously quiet.

Trey stopped, mid-syllable, and glared at the rear view mirror. “You put that fucking seatbelt back on, Eliza, or so fucking help me I will turn this fucking car around and go home right this goddamn second.”

“Nice Dad imitation,” Ethan muttered.

“Go back to sleep, Ethan,” Trey snapped.

“It’s not *my* fault you got interrupted.” Ethan slumped in his seat. “Jesus. Not like you haven’t gotten any.”

Trey’s growl sounded strangled, and his hands flexed on the steering wheel.

“Mom gave Dad Valium.” Everybody in the van except Trey looked at Sophie, who shrugged. “She did.”

“Dad doesn’t *take* drugs,” Ethan said. “And how do you know, anyway?”

Sophie gave him a withering look. “I was there, dumbass. So were you. Oh wait, you were too busy playing video games to notice.”

“It’s the stress,” Trey said, and Reiner frowned at the slight hesitation before “stress.” Trey shrugged one shoulder. “The whole thing about the knee injection. And—” He shot Reiner an indecipherable look.

“And Dad thinks you should take the job in Los Angeles,” Sophie finished for him, and Reiner did not have to imagine that she was looking at him when she it, he knew she was.

He thought he’d gotten past the disappointment, he didn’t expect the same bitter taste to rise up in his throat at the idea that this was just him and Trey fooling around for a bit before Trey moved on and moved away. Because obviously that’s all it was, and he was okay with it.

“And I told Dad that I still had to think about it,” Trey said, in a way-too-even tone.

“Jeez, Trey.” Eva almost rolled her eyes. “You’ve been drooling over that job ever since you found out about it. What’s to think about?”

Reiner’s flinch was all internal, and totally ridiculous. They’d known each other for four? five? days. Barely. Expecting Trey to—

“A lot,” Trey said. “Papi and Dad offered it to me when I first got back, and I get why, okay? But that was months ago, and I’m not so sure that’s what I want. That’s all. Besides, it’s not like Theo is retiring tomorrow, you know? I don’t need to decide right this second.”

The weird thing was that Reiner could actually feel the warm weight of Trey’s gaze on him while Trey said all that, even though Trey had his eyes on the road the whole time.

“Police car,” Dean announced, from all the way in the back.

Sure enough, one had pulled out of somewhere and was rolling along behind them at a discreet distance. Trey snorted. “Still wanna drive, Eva?”

They rode for a couple of miles in relative silence, shadowed by the cruiser. Trey explained that some of the local cops had a hard-on for Blais, and didn’t miss an occasion to mess with anybody from Stone Mountain.

“Don’t ask me,” Trey admitted. “I got no idea why. It’s not like any of us go into town and start bar fights and shit, or mess around with their wives or their husbands.”

Sophie hummed, sort of sing-songy, almost like she wanted to laugh, and Eva hissed at her, very, very softly. Reiner, along with everybody else, waited for more, but all Eva did was heave an exasperated sigh after glaring at Sophie for a few seconds. Trey made a questioning noise, and Eva shook her head.

“Nothing,” she said. “Sophie’s just being a pain in the ass know-it-all. And she doesn’t know *anything*.”

“Can we get ice cream?” Marcus asked, pulling out his earbuds, and hunched his shoulders when everybody muttered at him. “What? What’d I miss?”

After that, the rest of the trip was nothing but debate over what they all wanted to eat, and whether they should bring shakes back for their parents, and if so, what flavors. Reiner’s stomach had settled again, despite the warm way Trey met his eyes at odd moments.

They ordered an obscene amount of food—and Reiner figured it would take two carhops to deliver it all to the SUV. It took three, actually, two girls—and one teenage boy.

“Hey, Eva,” he said, blushing a little as he handed the bags in the window, and Trey twisted around in his seat to stare, handing Reiner his cherry limeade at the same time.

“Sam,” Eva replied, not blushing as far as Reiner could tell. “Didn’t know you worked here.”

“Summer job.” Sam stood there—Ethan pictured him for everybody with big cow eyes—until Trey cleared his throat and startled him.

“Can we have more catsup?” Trey asked, with more of an edge than condiments called for, in Reiner’s opinion. *Bite me*, Trey told him, moving his seat all the way back so he could tuck one foot under his thigh and sit sideways, facing Reiner.

Sam unloaded a double handful of catsup packets into Eva’s hands, blushing harder. “Is that enough?”

“Yeah. That’s enough,” Trey said, and Reiner poked his knee, earning a huff.

Sam and the other two carhops skated off, and Trey leaned over so he could get closer to Eva. “Seriously?”

“It’s *nothing*,” Eva said, stressing the last word and curling her lip at Trey. “Seriously.”

“He asked her to prom,” Sophie muttered. “This isn’t mine. Who ordered the one with mustard?”

“He what?” Trey spat, at the same time Eva said, “And I said no.”

“Wow, this *is* a *telenovela*.” Reiner smirked at Trey’s indignant grunt, and handed Trey a burger. “Nothing exciting ever happens in Pennsylvania.”

Eva shot him a grateful look.

“Well that would suck,” Ethan said around a mouthful of Tots. “What did you do for fun?”

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

They pulled around to the back of SMS before it was fully dark, and everybody except Trey and Reiner piled out, taking the one chocolate-chip-mint and two chocolate shakes they'd decided on with them.

Trey drove around the short side of the building, to the automatic door at ground level, hitting the fob to open the door to the parking garage. He parked the Escalade in its assigned space and got out, inhaling the familiar smell of cool concrete with a hint of motor oil and exhaust and wondering if Reiner was going to ask—

He didn't get further than that, because Reiner had him pinned against the warm metal of the SUV and his tongue was exploring Trey's ear. *Oh yeah.* The dozens of little touches they'd exchanged—every brush of fingers reaching for a Tot at the same time, a casual tap on a knee for attention, not to mention watching Reiner lick catsup off his fingers—all added up to them both wanting *this*, mouths on skin and hands searching for evidence of arousal.

What he didn't expect was for Reiner to pull back, panting, and say, "Let's shift and go running."

"Indigestion," Trey pointed out, although it had been over an hour since they'd eaten by now, so not out of the question. "You sure?"

Reiner kissed him, both of them tasting of lime, and hummed a *yes* into Trey's mouth. So Trey undressed him right there, in the garage, taking time to run his fingers over the solid heft of Reiner's cock and balls. He toed off his sneakers and stepped out of his own jeans when Reiner finished getting them open, and shrugged out of his shirt, leaving all of it where it fell. He'd come get their stuff tomorrow, now was all about getting the two of them naked.

His skin pebbled in the chill of the garage, and Reiner bent and flicked one barbell with his tongue before sucking it into his hot mouth. Trey let his head drop back and inhaled sharply, sliding his hands down to grip Reiner's ass. And when Reiner closed his teeth and tugged, that was all it took—Trey let the flare of pain grow, fanned it into a full-on fire and let go, let the shift take him

with no resistance, burning him to oblivion until the blackness sucked him in and spat him out.

He couldn't even feel bad for dragging Reiner into shifting with him, not even when Reiner lay there on the concrete floor for maybe half a minute after they both finished. Reiner blinked at him, eyes shining even in the dark, and rolled onto his chest, absently grooming his whiskers.

*That was fucked up. Cool, but... fucked up.* Reiner turned his head and let Trey lick his jaw, and his ear, and then did the same, purring into Trey's ear and making him shiver. *How do we get out of here?*

Trey shook his fur into order and jogged across to the automatic door. He used one paw to hit a white button down near the floor, and the door creaked into motion. It only opened partway, enough for them to slip underneath. A few seconds later, the door slid down, and Trey bumped shoulders with Reiner. *Ready?*

Reiner bounced forward, heading for the strip of woods beyond the driveway, and Trey swatted him, claws in. He pounced on Reiner's tail, and that started a mad chase, dodging around trees and scrubby bushes while they played tag and tripped each other. Trey finally gave up and ran flat out, Reiner behind him, nothing in either of their heads but the here and now.

So why did that feel like it wasn't enough?

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The moon was up before they made it back to Trey's place, their wet fur covered in leaf litter. They came out on the slope behind the garage, and Trey leapt easily onto the deck, claws digging in to the railing as he hauled himself up and over, followed by Reiner. Trey shook, and Reiner flattened his ears when he got splattered with water and leaf bits.

*It was your idea to go swimming, Trey grumbled. And now we have to shift back, because I'm not getting into bed with wet fur—or sleeping on the floor.*

Reiner sat down with a thump and cocked his head. *I thought we had fun.* He sounded... not sure, and Trey's heart did a ridiculous stop-and-start dance in his chest.

*I thought we did, too.* Trey rubbed his head under Reiner's chin, inviting a lick or a nuzzle, and got a heavy foreleg draped over his shoulder instead.

*I understand about you wanting to go to L.A., you know?* Reiner licked the top of Trey's head. *And it's okay.*

What? Trey kept his ears up with an effort. Reiner wasn't lying, but the words didn't match the—the—Trey couldn't pin down the slithery underthought to put a name to it. Not lying, no, but Reiner didn't entirely believe what he was saying, either.

*I don't want to go to L.A.,* Trey repeated, because it was true, and not just because he wanted to know if he and Reiner could make this work. Okay, he'd wanted the job in California when he first got back home, mostly because being home, after three years of military life, was just too strange. But now that he'd renovated the apartment and settled into working at the garage with Aidan—something he'd dreamed about doing since he was ten—he didn't want to run off to the opposite coast quite so much.

*Okay,* Reiner repeated, which wasn't what Trey wanted to hear. At all. What he wanted was for Reiner to say *I don't want you to go to L.A.,* and how stupid did that make him? Yes, fine, Aidan had a point—he'd known Reiner for all of five days—but, come on, he'd always known right off whether what he had with some male was just sex or not. And didn't it make sense to give it a try if it might be more? Unless...

Trey closed his eyes as Reiner continued to wash his face and ears, slow strokes of his tongue, sinking down flat on the deck with Reiner half on top of him.

Unless Reiner wasn't planning to stick around, which would explain him being all casual about the L.A. thing. Trey had overheard enough dinner-table conversation to know that Blais planned to set up a new server in California, and it would make sense to move Reiner there to do that.



*We could sleep out here,* Reiner suggested, nibbling the edge of Trey's ear. *Bring the comforter out and sleep on that. I'll wash it,* he added, *if you want.*

Trey shook off his weird funk and heaved himself onto all four paws, dislodging Reiner. *That sounds good.* He padded over and jumped through the window into the bedroom, climbing back out with the edge of the comforter in his jaws. They got it spread out, more or less, and Reiner sprawled in the center, rolling onto his back and stretching.

Trey nipped his belly—hard to resist—and Reiner grabbed him with all four legs and bit his head. Trey flopped on his side, bracing his paws on Reiner's chest and shoving a little. *You smell like corn chips,* Trey told him. *Hot stale corn chips.*

Reiner wrinkled his nose until his canines showed, and then licked his own nose. *So do you.* He yawned, the inside of his mouth startlingly pink even in the dark. He rolled over until he could rest his head on Trey's ribs, high up near his forelegs, and sighed deeply, settling them together. *G'night Trey.*

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## CHAPTER NINE

They didn't talk about Reiner moving to the Inn, not the next morning or the next night, and after two weeks, Reiner didn't *want* to talk about it. They didn't talk about L.A., either, which was okay, too. What they had was just fine, and asking Trey outright when he planned on moving to the West Coast would just... ruin everything.

He got used to having coffee with Trey in the mornings and talking about nothing—like what they should have for dinner, and whether Trey should pick up some groceries down in Wilkesboro if he made a parts run—or debating what kind of car he should buy. The plan was to wait until after Memorial Day, and then they could go around and check out the local dealerships. The twelve-year-old Toyota wasn't worth much as a trade-in, so Trey had come up with offering it to Eva, who had some money saved for a car but not enough. According to Trey, she'd been given a choice: she could drive one of the family cars—not the Porsche—or buy her own, with money she earned. Same choice as Trey, actually, although he'd left before he'd gotten his license.

Late afternoons and evenings were the two of them out on the deck or in front of the TV... except for the times they tumbled into bed or onto the couch the minute they were alone. And for every time they wrestled and bit and bruised each other before and during sex, there were the other times—kisses that went on until they were both panting and impatient, a slow buildup that left one or the other begging for more. Reiner understood the rough, looked forward to it, liked it. The gentle stuff left his stomach in a knot wondering if Trey meant... whatever it was that kind of thing meant.

A few times he'd come close to bringing up the subject of Trey leaving, and realized he'd sound ridiculous. He didn't even know what he wanted to say, other than a vague demand that Trey give them, the two of them, more time. Reiner had grown up deliberately not paying attention to random thoughts around him, so the idea of actually rummaging around Trey's surface thoughts *on purpose* made him slightly ill. He wasn't an idiot—he knew that Trey knew something was bothering him, but Trey was polite enough not to try and push into Reiner's head and see what was going on in there.

The server was up and running—mostly—on schedule. He'd chased bugs and gremlins for three days, Joel and Gus scratching their heads right along with him, until they figured out one of the power cords was bad. The replacement came via overnight mail, solving that problem, and then one of the diagnostic routines started hanging up. Joel swore he had that fixed and Reiner really fucking hoped so, because this was the Friday of Memorial Day weekend, and he did not want to have to tell Blais they needed more time.

Reiner waved to Lily as he jogged through the lobby, wanting a shower so bad he could taste it. He'd nearly been late this morning, and had to settle for a quick rinse before throwing clothes on and dashing out the door.

The late afternoon had turned sultry and still, and absolutely nothing moved outside. The garage apron was empty except for his Toyota and Trey's El Camino over on the side, next to Trey's pair of ATVs. The big doors were open, though, and Reiner could sense Trey inside, in the office.

*I'll be done in a bit,* Trey told him. *We've got some time before the barbecue.*

*I'm gonna grab a shower.* Reiner headed up the stairs, taking them two at a time. He left his shoes by the door and stripped once he reached the bedroom.

The sight of the laundry basket gave him a pause, with his and Trey's clothes mixed together. They hadn't even tried to keep stuff separate; the first week, Reiner had tossed everything in the washer one day before he left the apartment, not bothering to sort it, and Trey ran back up later and stuck everything in the dryer when it was done. It hadn't hit him until right now how *domestic* that was. Even cleaning—they just did it, together, and it had to be done, right? And with the two of them, it went fast, so that made sense.

He shook off the funny weight in his gut and got the water going in the shower. The hot water heater was downstairs in the garage, and it took freaking ages for some reason. He got in before it was hot enough, sticking his face under the stream and bracing his hands on the wall.

He knew Trey was there a second before callused hands slid around his waist and a more than half-hard dick pressed up along his ass cheeks. Reiner

stayed right where he was, dropping his head forward so Trey could bite at his neck. He did spread his feet, and Trey hummed against his skin in appreciation at the same time he rolled his hips, sliding along Reiner's crack.

Reiner got that Trey liked a finger—or two, or even three—inside him when he got off, and after over a week of trial and error, so did Reiner. He wasn't so sure about the toys, although he absolutely appreciated the effect on Trey. Speaking of which...

Trey hummed again. *Sorry, wanted to get in here with you. Next time?* He licked water off Reiner's neck and ran one hand down to circle the base of Reiner's dick and his balls, squeezing enough to be fun but not *enough*, and Reiner grunted, pushing into Trey's fingers.

"Don't tease," he said, and they both knew he meant the opposite. That was half the fun. He twisted to reach Trey's mouth, and the rest of his body followed until they faced each other. His hands couldn't decide what was more interesting—the hard curve of Trey's ass or the slick expanse of his upper back. Then Trey slid his tongue deep into Reiner's mouth and after a second or two, he forgot about everything but how good Trey tasted.

They moved so the water cascaded over them equally, and Reiner reached down and wrapped both their cocks in his fist. He didn't need to do more than that; Trey started a nice slow rock and glide, and between that and the matching push and retreat of his tongue, all Reiner managed was to moan and shiver.

He got his other hand back on Trey's ass, and the feel of the muscles tensing and relaxing under his palm and fingers was almost as good as a pheromone rush. He dug his fingers in, trying for a better grip on the taut, slippery skin, and Trey whimpered into his mouth. Reiner pressed a little, breaching the very outer ring with his middle finger, just to hear that again. Instead, he got...

*...Trey on his knees, hands braced on the headboard, knees wide to welcome Reiner behind him. And Reiner was balls-deep in heat and slick and—oh god, so, so tight—and then Trey reached around and grabbed*

*Reiner's thigh to urge him harder, deeper, faster, rocking back with enough force to make Reiner hold even tighter onto Trey's hipbones. Trey groaned, a guttural vibration that set off a chain reaction in Reiner's gut and sparked an explosion in his balls and turned the world white...*

...and his head fell back, hips stuttering, ass clenching in helpless sympathy as they both pulsed hotly into the meager space between their bellies and chests.

And the second Reiner had control over his body again he shoved back from Trey, still hard, wanting to see that again, so help him, wanting to feel that—

“No,” Trey said, reaching for his arm, and Reiner moved out of reach. “Just because I think about it doesn't mean I want to do it for real.” Trey pressed a hand against his own hard-on; grimacing, he stuck his face under the water and sluiced his abs and belly clean. He wiped his face and blinked at Reiner. “I swear—I don't want to.”

What made everything worse was the flash of an image Reiner got when Trey said *for real*. And even though he'd never seen Blais or Aidan naked, the tattoos were a giveaway. That couldn't be right. They wouldn't—He caught the way Trey's whole face tightened, and knew the answer to that was *yes, they would*. Oh... god. Worse, his mouth engaged with no input from his brain.

“How does—do they use condoms?” Now there was a thought. A bad thought, but a valid one.

Trey shook his head. “Rinse off,” he said, and Reiner moved to do just that. “I don't think so,” Trey went on. “For one thing, they'd probably rip. Maybe not completely, but yeah, even a thick condom? I don't think so.”

“So... How?” Reiner stepped closer, needing reassurance, and slipped his hands around Trey's waist. Trey did the same, and they stood there, under the not-quite-as-hot water, their still-interested cocks bumping and twitching.

“Well...” Trey sighed, nuzzling behind Reiner's ear. “If you shifted, right after—”

“—you’d heal,” Reiner finished, and Trey nodded. He shut off the water, since it was starting to run cool, and his hazel eyes were serious when he looked back.

“There’s limits—we all know that. It works on minor stuff, and I’m guessing it works for... *that*, too. I just don’t know if I want to go that far. I’m not...” His voice trailed off and he lifted one shoulder. “I don’t mind some pain. But I don’t know if I’d have the control to shift right after—and...” Trey shrugged again, and his voice lowered to barely audible. “Doesn’t mean I don’t fantasize about it, though.” He reached for a towel.

Reiner breathed out on a broken laugh. “Damn, Trey. I don’t think I’m gonna be able to get that out of my head anytime soon.” Trey’s smile was crooked, and Reiner kissed him, body still humming with arousal. Trey bumped him, hip to hip, and Reiner sank to his knees on the thick bathmat, mouth trailing over Trey’s wet skin. He closed his eyes as Trey ran both hands through his hair, and found the damp head of Trey’s cock with no trouble. Reiner answered Trey’s rumble of pleasure with his own low hum, hands coming to rest with his thumbs tracing the point of Trey’s hipbones.

“We’re gonna be late if you—*jeezusss*—” Trey hissed and his fingers tightened in Reiner’s hair.

*Tell me to stop, then.* Reiner eased his tongue inside Trey’s foreskin, gently pushing it down so he could play with the barbs. *Well?* Trey’s answer was a full-body shudder, and his flanks tensed under Reiner’s hands. Reiner didn’t smile, not quite. *Let’s try a different fantasy.*

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## CHAPTER TEN

Reiner had never in his life been around this many members of his own species, period. One or two, shit, three or four of his species in a crowd of humans didn't stand out that much. Put forty or so of them all in a group, though, and all of a sudden the *sameness* got too obvious to ignore.

At the moment, what seemed like thirty males were wrestling on the mowed grass field behind SMS, maybe five or six yards away from the deck leading to Trey's family's house. A ball—a football? Reiner was fuzzy on team sports other than soccer—arced over the larger tangle, and a big male snatched it out of the air and ran like hell. With a start, Reiner recognized Blais as the one with the ball.

Blais, in shorts and nothing else, made it about a dozen feet before an equally large male—Aidan—vaulted over two other players and launched himself after Blais. Aidan tackled him—that *had* to hurt—and somehow, Blais twisted around and threw the ball as he went down. A blond male stretched to catch it and started running, putting on extra speed to evade snatching hands and a failed tackle. He made it over some invisible line and spiked the ball into the grass, giving a triumphant thumbs up to the rest of the players and doing a sinuous victory dance.

That caught Reiner's eye, more interesting than watching everybody else running on the grass, or even Blais helping Aidan to his feet, both of them laughing. He honestly didn't get why Trey growled, or the reason for the hot wave of frustration washing over him, also from Trey.

At Reiner's questioning look, all Trey did was growl again, and finish walking over to the deck. Reiner trailed him up the stairs, distracted by the way Trey's ass looked in an ancient pair of faded jeans. A half dozen pairs of female eyes surveyed him and Trey when they reached the deck, and Reiner did not imagine the way Trey went dark inside, not even a wisp of a thought escaping the dense thicket in his head.

"About time you showed up." Eva arched her eyebrows and waved at the grassy field. "Thought you were gonna play."

“Not in the mood,” Trey muttered, not looking anywhere near Reiner. “And it’s football, anyway. Thought they were gonna play soccer.”

“All the soccer balls had holes in them,” Emery said, sounding grimly amused. “Because *someone* let the cubs play with them.”

“Right.” Aidan brushed by Reiner, leaving a heady trail of smoke-and-apple scent, and snaked out an arm to grab Emery. She didn’t even try to get away, and Aidan wrapped her close, resting his chin on top of her head from behind. “Not like *you’ve* ever destroyed a soccer ball, hmm?”

Emery smiled, almost smug, and Aidan rubbed his cheek on her hair before he let her go, eyes gleaming with a touch of heat. Reiner checked to make sure his mouth was closed. His mother would’ve done serious damage if a male tried handling her like that, even one she knew. He vaguely recalled his own father coming around before his youngest brother was conceived, and you’d think his parents had never met before, much less made offspring together. Reiner hadn’t found out it was his father until after the fact.

Reiner smelled Blais right before he saw him, and for the first time he realized how much alike his and Aidan’s scents were. Blais lacked the apple notes, he was smoke and some kind of wood, maybe oak, and a hint of salt. Which explained the vague smokiness of Trey’s scent, since family members usually had some similarities.

Blais patted Aidan’s hip, and leaned in so he could run his nose along the side of Emery’s neck. She reached up and petted his hair, and this time Reiner did have to close his mouth. He turned and caught Trey watching him, eyes hooded.

What? He had no idea what that look meant. Out of the corner of his eye, Reiner saw Emery’s head swivel in his direction, and he put his body into motion, heading for the tables of food.

He filled half a plate with the marinated meat concoction Trey had served him in the garage, and took an ear of corn, too, dripping with melted butter and some kind of powdered chile—whatever it was, it smelled good.



Trey was already sitting at a table on the deck, and Reiner slid into the seat across from him. Trey had his head down, so Reiner started eating. Mutual blow jobs had left both of them feeling pretty good, if not entirely satisfied, and he planned on continuing what they'd started later tonight. He was about to ask Trey what the problem was when Emery slid into the seat next to Trey.

She ignored Trey and smiled at Reiner. "I see you like the meat dish."

"Yes, ma'am," he assured her. "Trey gave me some at the garage, and it was amazing. What's it called?"

She laughed, and it was the same dark sound he remembered from the first time they met. "It doesn't have a name. We just always called it the meat dish when I was growing up." Except when she said it, she attached a picture to the words, tiny strips of meat gleaming with oil and bits of cilantro.

"Reiner said he wanted it on waffles," Trey mumbled, and Emery leaned her shoulder into his.

"It would be excellent on waffles," Emery said, and Reiner didn't imagine the sharp look she gave Trey.

"Would there be any way for me to get the recipe?" Reiner asked, partly to distract Emery from the way Trey was acting, and partly because his mom would love it.

"I'll email it to Trey, and he can forward it to you, if that's all right." She sat back in her chair and tipped her head to the side, studying Reiner. "Did Blais explain what the new server is for?" Reiner shook his head, and Emery nodded at his plate. "Eat. And I'll explain."

Reiner picked up his ear of corn automatically—the command in her voice was impossible to ignore. She was a little... he didn't want to say *scary*, but she kind of was, in a way he couldn't pin down. Emery had to be close to his mom's age, and his mom was rounded and soft and undeniably female—complete with the unpredictable female temper. Emery wasn't round or soft. She was lean and... scary.

Emery hummed in the back of her throat, and invisible warm fingers trailed across Reiner's surface thoughts. Her mouth curved up on one side. "I'll try to be less scary." She waved a hand at Reiner's instant, wordless protest around a mouthful of corn. "Anyway—the server. Next week, Pax is releasing their genealogical database. To us. That will give us accurate bloodline information for every jaguar Pax ever bred, with DNA information going back almost to the beginning. Some of those bloodlines don't exist outside of Pax, not anymore." Her eyes fixed on something behind Reiner for a moment, and then came back to him. "With our limited gene pool, those bloodlines are important. So we want the database, but the risk..." She sighed.

Reiner nodded, and picked up where she'd left off. "It needs to be kept isolated."

"Yes. So there's no way we let it anywhere near our other systems. And once we unpack the data, it's going to take time to match it up with our own records—which are not complete. At all." Emery sighed again, and reached up to run her hand over Trey's hair. "You're being very quiet."

Trey didn't raise his head, although he leaned into her touch. "Don't have much to add. Not like computers are my thing."

The chair next to Reiner scraped on the deck, and he had a split second to realize it was Blais, now wearing a tank top with his shorts. "Filling him in?" Blais asked Emery, and she huffed at him.

"He should at least know why you needed that thing up and running on a deadline." She pushed back from the table and stood, her hand lingering on Trey's shoulder. Some thought, some message too quick for Reiner to catch, passed between them, and Trey shrugged away from her, frustration rising off him like heat waves on blacktop. Reiner frowned at Trey, and only realized that Blais was talking to him when Blais paused and tilted his head like he'd asked a question.

Reiner ignored the flush heating the back of his neck and sat back in his chair. "I'm sorry—I didn't realize—"

“*Que está bien*—” He snorted and waved a hand at Reiner’s blank look. “That’s all right. I was just saying that until the database arrives, I’d suggest taking some time for yourself—because once it gets here, making the database accessible is going to be your priority for the foreseeable future. And no, there isn’t a deadline, not exactly, but we do need to know early on if there are any traps. I don’t want to spend months on this and have it blow up because they’ve hidden a worm somewhere.”

“That’ll be Gus,” Reiner told him. “He’s better at that than I am.”

“That’s fine.” Blais flicked his pale eyes from Reiner to Trey and back, and for no reason, Reiner braced himself. “It’s very possible that I might need you to transfer to the L.A. office in a few months, depending on how far we get on this.”

“Okay,” Reiner said carefully, trying to think around the lead ball forming in his gut.

Blais nodded. “You—”

Trey stood up, and the heat in his eyes was *not* Reiner’s imagination. Reiner reached, mind to mind, and bounced off Trey’s shields with enough force to sting. Trey’s face was a perfectly blank mask as he stepped sideways and pushed his chair back under the table, and he walked away without saying a word to Blais or Reiner.

“No,” Reiner blurted to a startled Blais. “I’m sorry, but... I don’t think that would be a good idea.” When all Blais did was raise his eyebrows, Reiner tried to explain. “I know that Trey is supposed to move out there, and maybe it would be better if I was here.”

Blais tapped his fingers, long and blunt, with scarred knuckles, on the edge of the table. “I’d think you’d want to go with him,” he said, with a sideways glance at Reiner.

“He hasn’t asked me to.” His neck hair bristled at the admission, and he wasn’t about to confess that he and Trey had avoided the subject entirely. He didn’t understand the noise Blais made, a sort of amused grunt. Stung, his

words came out with more of an edge than he intended. “And until I discuss this with him, I really can’t give you an answer either way.”

He didn’t expect Blais to blink, or huff thoughtfully. Or to incline his head and squeeze his shoulder before getting up. “You do that,” Blais told him. “And then let me know what you decide.”

Reiner tried breathing again once Blais walked away, and wished he’d thought to snag a beer before he’d sat down. One appeared, beads of condensation just forming on the dark brown glass, and Brian, the cute blond from IT, laughed at the grateful look Reiner threw at him. The blond male slid into the seat Blais had abandoned, stretching his legs out under the table and lacing his hands across his—very flat, very cut—bare abs. “I was looking forward to watching,” he murmured, and there was no mistaking the tone for anything but flirting.

“Hmm.” Reiner took a sip of beer. “I wasn’t planning on playing.” He only realized how that sounded after the fact.

Brian’s mouth curved, and all right, he was damn cute and smelled like hazelnuts and salt—an invitation in and of itself. Brian slid his hands along his belly, down to his faded jeans, hooking his thumbs in the waistband and tugging it lower to display a bit more of skin. And, Reiner was sure, not incidentally drawing attention to his package. And as nice as all that was, Reiner’s body had zero interest at the moment.

“You gonna give us all a show?” Trey drawled from across the table, and thumped two beers down before taking a seat. “Or are you the one who likes to watch?” Brian’s eyes narrowed, and he breathed out sharply through his nose. Before he could say anything, Trey slouched and curled his lip, looking down his nose at Brian. “Yeah, that’s right—your cousin’s the one into doing—you’re just a tease.” He smiled and gave Brian a slow blink, all lazy menace, and took a long pull on his beer. When he put the bottle down, he sucked his lower lip clean, and Reiner’s idiot dick plumped against his thigh.

Trey’s nostrils flared, and he met Reiner’s eyes. “That what you want?” he asked, voice rough, and Reiner’s dick thickened more at the harsh tone, not

caring that he had no idea what Trey meant. “‘Cause I don’t know if I can share.”

Reiner could literally not look away—on the one hand, Trey’s mind was a blank wall of leafy green with not a hint of emotion escaping, and on the other, his eyes were bright and hard, and he smelled sharply of peppercorns. “Jealous?” he asked, with a vague twinge of *déjà vu*, and had no idea why he was surprised when Trey nodded.

“Yes,” Trey said, with absolutely no inflection. He clenched his jaw.

Reiner tipped his head to one side, wondering if the tightness in his chest was anger or dismay and not entirely sure he wanted to have this conversation right here, right now.

Trey blinked twice, fast, and repeated, “I don’t think I can share.”

Oh. Reiner realized that Trey wasn’t talking about Brian—who’d disappeared—at all. It hadn’t even occurred to him that Trey might want the same kind of relationship Aidan, Blais, and Emery had, which, apparently, Trey *didn’t* want.

When Trey didn’t add anything to that, Reiner shrugged. “Okay.” He could deal with that. Not that he’d have to deal with it, would he? Not if Trey was in California. He spared one nanosecond to consider it, to imagine the two of them someplace else, and couldn’t do it for some reason. He didn’t get it at all. The urge to explain that itched like mad all of a sudden, and he took a breath, ready to just come out and ask if Trey was really going to leave for L.A. and when—and at the same time, he realized Eva was standing behind Trey, frowning at him.

Trey’s eyes widened, and he twisted around in his chair. “Eva—”

“You’re my brother,” she said.

“I’m *not*.” But he said it oddly, more like he was trying to convince himself than her, and Reiner had the feeling he’d tuned in to the end of a movie.

She shook her head, biting her lower lip with sharp white teeth. “Trust me, I know that.” She lowered her head, and her amber eyes were dark. “Still.” Her eyes flicked to Reiner, and she gave him a burst of information, complex and compact at the same time.

There had been a time, when she and Trey were small, when Aidan had hoped the two of them would pair off, a less-complicated version of himself and Emery. Trey would have tried to make it work, for no other reason than loving Aidan and wanting to make him happy... and Eva would have had to leave—or Trey would—because she couldn’t *not* think of him as her brother, even if she tried.

Trey’s face lost all expression, and any idea Reiner had of asking about L.A. disappeared. “Trey,” he said, and waited until Trey faced him. “Is that beer for me?”

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It wasn’t until much later in the evening, when it occurred to him to wonder why no one around them seemed to pay attention to their brief bit of drama, that Reiner realized the difference between his upgraded shields and what everybody else—other than the DaSilva-Foresters—had in their heads. If he pushed, even a little, he had no trouble picking up stray thoughts here and there, whereas the rest of the two dozen jaguars on the deck saw him as a blank wall—the maze that Eliza had showed him. What he hadn’t noticed at the time, and what had him on the edge of laughing at the moment, was exactly *what* the walls of his maze were made of.

Bamboo.

He didn’t know if it was a five-year-old’s idea of a joke or... or what?

Trey had shaken off his mood from earlier, but Reiner couldn’t forget the way Trey’s jealousy revved him up or stop wondering if he’d missed something important—other than Trey not wanting to share a female with another male, or not wanting to pair off with Eva. He’d kind of understood that being with Trey meant being with Trey’s family, and really, he thought he could deal with that. He’d been too caught up in getting the server up to think

about much else, and now he had the feeling he should have paid more attention when Trey talked about L.A.

The six beers made concentrating a neat trick, but not impossible, though. His species might feel the buzz a bit earlier than a human—a gift of their faster metabolism—they also burned off the alcohol quicker than a human would.

The two of them had been careful with each other for the rest of the evening, which Reiner appreciated at the same time it pissed him off. Now he wanted answers, wanted to know why Trey would be jealous if he wasn't planning to stick around. They sat or stood close to each other, but not too close, and by mutually unspoken agreement, far away from Blais and Aidan.

Finally, though, Trey leaned in and murmured, "How about we head out?" He leaned up against Reiner, throwing off heat and smelling like temptation, and Reiner didn't bother to say anything—he headed for the stairs. Trey caught up with him at the bottom, bumping shoulders and striding off down the dark driveway.

The sounds of laughter and conversation died away by the time they were at the road, and Reiner didn't want to disturb the comfortable, quiet vibe he and Trey had going. Across the apron in front of the garage, up the stairs—Trey crowded him all of a sudden, and Reiner would have had to be a lot more intoxicated to miss the spike of hot-musky-salty rolling off Trey in waves.

Inside, shoes off, standing in the dark with the rest of the world outside—Reiner paused in the doorway to the bedroom, not sure why he did. They needed to talk—

"Reiner." That's all Trey had to say, one word, and Reiner closed his eyes against the shiver that racked him from head to feet, toes curling on the cool wooden floor. Trey's hands slid up his back, up to his shoulders, fingers curling around the muscles there while he breathed out, and then in, against Reiner's prickling skin. Trey rubbed his cheek against Reiner's neck, purring almost inaudibly, running his nose into the hollow at the corner of Reiner's jaw and behind his ear. His tongue came out to taste, tickling the inside of

Reiner's ear, followed by his lips, sucking gently until he reached curve of the neck into shoulder.

Trey's arms slipped around him from behind, and still, all he did was simply stand there, face pressed to Reiner's neck. Breathing. Trey gave a little shudder, an uneven inhale, and Reiner couldn't stand it—he turned inside the circle of Trey's arms, nudging at Trey until their mouths met and fused.

Trey tasted like beer and himself and... heat. One-handed, Reiner undid his own jeans and shoved them down until gravity took over, stepping on them and working one foot and then the other free. He got Trey's jeans off, too, still not breaking their kiss, and finally pulled off with a gasp so he could whip his shirt off over his head. Trey did the same, turning around and falling back onto the bed. Reiner crawled over him, and Trey eeled higher on the bed, reaching for Reiner's face and drawing him down for another kiss. Reiner rocked back on his knees and grabbed Trey's wrists, forcing them onto the bed, above Trey's head, using his weight to pin them to the mattress.

Trey arched his back, head stretched back to bare his throat, and Reiner took that for the invitation it was. He licked from the hollow between Trey's collarbones up to his jaw, laying the flat of his tongue on Trey's madly pulsing jugular and taking a deep, deep breath. He practically felt his synapses fry, rode the body rush when it wanted to turn him—turn both of them—inside out. He growled against Trey's skin, wrapped his fingers more firmly around Trey's wrists and rolled his hips, feeling Trey groan as he pushed back. Their other halves nearly surfaced, bumping the edge of awareness and wanting out—it would be easy to let go right now, but Reiner wanted a different kind of satisfaction.

He slipped one leg in between Trey's, moaning a *yes* when Trey moved his own leg to rub more firmly behind Reiner's balls. "Come on," he whispered, guttural and almost not speech at all. "Fuck yourself on me." He licked inside Trey's mouth, and lowered his hips some more, but not all the way. Trey curled his spine, hooking his free leg as high on Reiner's thigh as he could.

His fists clenched, wrists tightening against Reiner's palms and fingers, and he whined through his teeth. "Please—" He tried again, his entire lower



body curling up off the bed, reaching for Reiner. Their cocks bumped and slid, almost randomly, and Trey's arms bulged, fighting Reiner's hold. Reiner threw his weight forward and let his lower body drop, hissing through his teeth at the catch and release of Trey's sweaty abs on his cock. Trey thrust up, grunting in time, and Reiner took up the counter rhythm, sliding his hips over enough so they could rasp lengths, sandwiched between bunching muscles and growing slicker and stickier by the second. Reiner bent his head and thrust his tongue into Trey's mouth, breath whistling through his nostrils, moaning deep in his throat.

*Do it, do it, do it—so good. So, so good. Perfect—oh god, the way you feel—*Reality tilted, and he couldn't be sure whose voice that was in his head, his or Trey's. Sensation overlapped, his balls tightening at the same time he knew to shove his leg up that much higher to give Trey just that much more pressure right there, oh god, fuck yes. Trey got his wrists free, only to twine their fingers into fists, pressure and counter pressure, Trey pushing up, Reiner down. Trey sucked on his tongue, making Reiner's hips rabbit all on their own, fast frantic friction and a hint of barbs now—so close. Their bellies were wet, sweat and slippery goodness making the grind and the glide absolutely perfect.

What he wanted was right there, just like that, no way to separate whose cock caught the perfect angle and exact right amount of resistance and it didn't matter—Reiner couldn't breathe unless Trey inhaled, and Trey writhed their bodies together like he could eliminate the last bit of distance between their skins. Total overload, electricity coiling low inside and lighting them up as they spilled together, and as they drifted, gasping, Reiner carefully unwound their hands, stiff and tingling.

He rolled to the side, and Trey nuzzled up under his chin, keeping them close. Reiner curled his numb hand around the curve of Trey's skull, and remembered how to breathe on his own.

"Please stay," Trey murmured, just as Reiner drifted under—or maybe it was the other way around.

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## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Trey untangled himself from Reiner at first light, not that he'd slept for more than a few hours, tops. The scent of sex pulled at him, urged him back into bed, into Reiner's warmth—he steeled himself and walked out of the bedroom.

He went to the kitchen and started the coffeemaker, even if coffee was the last thing his acid-filled stomach needed. His headache from the night before lingered—he sat the mug back down on the counter with a *thunk*, catching himself before he gave in and threw it.

He huffed out a silent laugh. In that, he was Aidan's son for sure. Pushed hard enough, Aidan would throw *things*; Blais was more likely to throw a punch. On the other hand, given a choice of weapons, Blais would go for the gun every time, and so would Trey, while Aidan preferred a knife.

Trey inhaled through his nose and then let it out, long and slow. He couldn't believe that Blais had done that, right in front of him, too. He'd thought since Aidan had backed off, the two of them would leave him and Reiner to work this out on their own. But no, just when Trey figured maybe he and Reiner really did have something—a partnership, friendship, call it whatever—Blais had to go and offer Reiner a chance to see the world beyond Stone Mountain and the back of nowhere.

And he knew that was something Reiner wanted because they'd talked about it, talked about the places Trey had been, and the places Reiner wanted to see. Alaska, for one, and that would be easy if Reiner was in goddamn California, now, wouldn't it?

Fuck. He leaned his head on the upper cabinet. He'd thought—he really thought he'd made it clear that he wasn't going anywhere, but maybe he hadn't. Although maybe him being a total asshole about some harmless flirting had clued Reiner in that this was more than casual sex for Trey. And then, to cap off the stupid, the thing with Eva.

God—Eva. She was still way too young, and he'd figured on three or four years before they would need to have that particular discussion. Even so, as

much as it stung, he knew she was right—he didn't want her any more than she wanted him. Better to admit it now, right? Shit, the fucking family drama alone should give Reiner a solid reason to run away from Trey. He bumped his forehead once on the cabinet door. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, *fuck*.

He wanted—needed—to talk to Reiner before anything else, because if Reiner was planning to head off to California in the near future then he wanted to know what the fuck all that was last night. Good-bye sex? It felt more like a goddamn promise, like whatever they had done was binding somehow.

*Trey?*

He twitched—not the voice he expected to hear this time of the morning.

*Can I come in?*

*Sure. Just—one second.* He grabbed a pair of boxers off the bathroom doorknob and slipped them on. Not that she hadn't ever seen him naked, but that was when they were shifting, not standing around in his apartment—it just felt wrong. He opened the door. "What's up, Mom?"

Emery stepped inside, and the way she surveyed the place made him realize he'd never thought to invite her here to see what he'd done. She huffed, almost a laugh, and gave him a sideways glance, her mouth curving in a half smile. "I never expected you to," she said. "It's very nice, though. Bright." Her half smile turned to a full one when Reiner appeared in the doorway to the bedroom. Naked. She looked back at Trey, amber eyes gleaming wickedly. "Very pretty."

Reiner made a noise that sounded like "*Eeep*" and disappeared. You couldn't grow up shifting and be body-shy, but naked in front of your lover's mother? Trey didn't blame him.

"Do you want coffee?" Trey offered.

"No." Emery tucked her hair behind her ears and sighed. "Dean and Eliza have run off." She held up a palm when Trey opened his mouth. "Not as in *run away*, just... slipped out of the house without me seeing. It's one thing if I know—I don't worry about them out in the woods, not those two. And I

understand about them escaping from day care. This... they tried to get away last night, and they had food with them. I worry that they're baiting some animal out in the woods to lure it in. I wouldn't put it past them to try and get a closer look at a bear." She reached up and cupped Trey's cheek, and his eyes half-closed. He inhaled against her wrist, breathing in mint and leather, and her familiar scent soothed some of the ragged edges off his mood. "At least with you and Eva, it was never anything bigger than raccoons." Her smile matched his. "So I have a favor to ask."

"You want me to go find them?"

She patted his cheek and nodded, taking her hand away with a last brush of her thumb on his skin. "You *and* Reiner, preferably. Just in case. I'd send your fathers, but you know how they get. No matter what, they'll overreact." She raised her eyebrows.

Trey got the message. "I'm sorry about all the—"

"*You* haven't done anything, so don't apologize. The two of them have been perfect idiots." Emery showed him an image of Blais and Aidan sleeping on the big sofa, and not looking happy about it.

*Ouch.* Trey raised his head when Reiner reappeared, dressed this time.

"Good morning," Reiner said, and Trey didn't imagine the faint flush along his cheekbones. He also didn't imagine the approving look on his mother's face, either. She apparently liked Reiner, and not just because he was pretty to look at.

*Although that helps. I forgive your father a great deal for being pretty.* Out loud, she said, "I'll let Trey explain, but I'm hoping you'll help him look for Dean and Eliza." She turned to Trey. "Let me know when you find them." With a wave to Reiner, she let herself out.

Reiner frowned at the closed door. "Did she just call Aidan *pretty*? 'Cause I don't see it." He shivered, and scrubbed at his face. "Look, before we do anything else—I'm sorry for not talking to you more last night, okay? I didn't expect you to be, I don't know, jealous."

“And I didn’t expect you to be flirting right in front of me,” Trey snapped, and felt like a perfect idiot. It must be hereditary.

Reiner just stared at him, whatever he was thinking completely hidden from view.

“What?” Trey’s stomach cramped, and not just because it was empty.

“Just... nothing. Forget it. What did your mom mean about us looking for Eliza and Dean?”

Trey clenched his jaw against the protest he wanted to make—if it was nothing, why did Reiner feel so edgy?—took a breath, and explained.

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“Two hours.” Reiner slapped at a mosquito, and spoke up for the first time since they’d left the apartment. “We’ve been out here for two fucking hours. How can five-year-olds just disappear?”

“Think about that for a second. We’re tracking who?” Trey brushed a swarm of midges away from his eyes.

“I thought you said you knew where they went when they ran away from day care.” Reiner didn’t snarl, but Trey could hear it anyway.

“I was just messing with them. I got no clue.”

Reiner heaved an exaggerated sigh, and Trey almost smacked him. At first, the silence had been okay, but over the last hour he could sense whatever it was Reiner had started to say earlier damming up behind his shields, and he guessed none of it had to do with why they were wandering around in the woods getting bitten by insects.

“Maybe we should shift,” he suggested.

“Right. You wanna strip naked and get eaten alive, be my guest,” Reiner hissed, and damn if there wasn’t real anger behind it.

“What the fuck is your problem?” Trey snarled, sweaty and irritated and a little bit desperate.

“My problem?” Reiner glared sideways at him. “Really? *I’m* not the one leaving.”

“What are you talking about? I’m not going anywhere. *You’re* the one who’s gonna head off to California.”

“I am not.”

“Yes you are. Blais said—” Trey stopped, flushing cold and then hot. Reiner blinked at him, and the honest dismay on his face dropped Trey’s stomach to about knee-level.

Reiner shook his head, or maybe it was the midges. “I said no.” He slapped at another mosquito. “I figured, if you’re moving to L.A. it would be better if I stayed here.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Trey wanted to sit. Or throw something. Or maybe shake some sense into Reiner. Now there was a thought. “I *told* you I don’t want to move to L.A., I dunno, ten times. Did you think I was *lying*?”

“I thought”—Reiner slapped another mosquito—“I thought you meant you didn’t *want* to move but you had to anyway.”

“That’s—” Trey spit out a bug. “Why the fuck would I say something like that?”

“So you’re not moving?”

“I just *said* I wasn’t!” Trey snapped. “Why the fuck would I move?”

“Because... the job. And... that’s what males do.” The rest of it was there, too, plain as day: Trey heading off to breed up some more little DaSilvas.

“Oh for fu—” Trey scrubbed his face with both hands, then laced them on top of his head. “I don’t want—” He made a dark, frustrated sound. “I *can’t*, okay? I tried and it was a total fucking disaster and I think—I *know*—that if she wasn’t in season, I wouldn’t have been able—And then she didn’t get pregnant, right? And I was so fucking glad, because the last thing I want is to—to—*god!*”

“The last thing you want is what?” Reiner asked softly, and they both stopped moving.

“To do—I don’t want to be with a female at all, okay?” Trey could’ve fucking howled right then, because if this was what had been simmering under the surface for the past week—fuck. And damn. “All I want—” he started to say, at the same time Reiner said, “But—”

Both of them swiveled their heads at the single explosive bark, out of place in the woods. Trey didn’t stop to ask, he grabbed at Reiner through the group-sense and flung out an invisible net in the direction of that bark, letting Reiner boost him, their minds spinning out, out, out, until... *wait*.

*There.* A blob of static energy, bigger than anything else in the woods, and Trey started moving the instant he had a lock on it. Reiner followed him, no stealth at all for the first dozen strides, breathing hard. Easy to forget that Reiner wasn’t used to hunting like this, as weird as it seemed.

Trey had maybe been four the first time he tried going after anything bigger than a mouse or a vole—who knew turkeys could run like that? A couple of years later, Aidan took him hunting, and after that it was always Trey and Eva roaming the woods together, pestering the local wildlife. Emery taught them both the finer points of stalking and tracking, and they’d spent a lot of summer evenings hunting frogs for fun. She was the one who’d taught them how to use the group-sense for hunting, too.

*They know not to run, right?* Reiner asked.

*Yeah.* Trey spared him a glance. *The rule is to hide if they can’t climb, wedge into someplace tight. Dogs—*He hurdled a log, and how stupid did he have to be to get distracted by the graceful way Reiner went over it next to him? *Dogs have owners. They know better than to tease a dog out here. Emery would—*

Oh god, Emery would flip the fuck out if those two got hurt by a dog. She hated dogs to begin with, and Aidan wasn’t all that fond either. Shit. There were so many ways this could be bad, and going up against a dog while he was two-legged was the least of it.

Not that he planned on killing the dog, not unless it was threatening Eliza or Dean. Emery, on the other hand—

Another bark, and they both angled off more to the left, Reiner catching up a bit. Trey had a good idea where they were; they'd come around in a rough half-circle, heading back toward SMS and the garage. Damn.

*What are we gonna do?* Reiner slowed down to get behind Trey as they hopped across a shallow stream, and then sped up again. *With the dog?*

*Depends.* Trey wasn't gonna sugarcoat this. *If it's threatening them? I'm not gonna stop and check if it's got a collar or a microchip. There's no humans out here, not that I can sense—whoa.* They both semi-slid to a stop, Trey putting out an arm to steady Reiner. *You have got to be fucking kidding me.*

Missing five-year-olds? Check.

Large hairy—and filthy, and, oh god, *smelly*—dog? Check.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Trey roared, and only realized he'd said it out loud when Reiner winced.

The dog whipped around, drool flying everywhere, and Dean and Eliza flung themselves on it to keep it from moving, arms around the matted, and no doubt flea-infested, neck. *Gross.*

Trey stalked closer, trying to think of something to say other than “fuck me” or—Well, that pretty much covered it, really.

“A *dog?*” was what he ended up saying. “Are you shitting me? You run away, give Mom fits, Reiner and I spent two hours—*two whole fucking hours*—looking for you, and you're out here playing with a *dog?*” He stopped maybe six feet short of the hairy thing, truly grateful to be upwind. “Leave it and let's go.”

“He's ours now,” Dean said, not moving an inch.

“They left him out here. Tied to a tree.” Eliza added, glaring at Trey. “To die.”



“It’s a dog.” Trey stuck to his main point, because he was not going to let them talk him into anything stupid. He looked at Reiner for reinforcement, and Reiner shrugged. *Oh for fuck’s sake, could you back me up here?*

He’d have to spell it out. “Mom. Hates. Dogs. Period. Okay? There is no way in hell that thing is coming back with us. It’s probably got *fleas*, and—and—*ticks*. Lice. You’d have to shave it bald—”

Reiner bit the inside of his cheeks, and Trey growled at him. The dog growled, too, and Trey turned on it—him?—with a full-throated snarl. That made the fur-ball think twice, hell yeah, and Eliza let go—thank you—and took a step forward, scrubbing at her face with both hands.

*Eww—dog hands.* Next to him, Trey could hear Reiner suck in a breath and knew he was trying not to laugh.

“Eliza—” That was as far as he got. She stared at him, breathing hard and... *shaking*... and he let go of being furious long enough to realize she was trying not to cry. He squeezed his skull, pressing his palms tight, and took a deep breath. “Honey, I don’t know what to tell you. You know how Mom feels about dogs. Oh for fuck’s sake—” He was never, ever, *ever* going to sneer at Aidan for being a sucker when it came to crying females. Eliza flung herself at him and he caught her, lifted her up and held her while she trembled and buried her face in his neck.

The dog twitched, eyeing Trey with its ears back, and Trey glared at it. “Stay.” To his surprise, the dog laid down right where it was, and actually sighed. The matted ears rose, like it was making an effort to be polite—unless of course he was completely anthropomorphizing the damn thing. Which, okay, was fucked up all on its own, considering.

“What if...” Reiner raised his eyebrows in a facial shrug when Trey turned to look at him. “He could live at the garage.”

“You’ve met my father?” Trey asked him. “He’s not really a dog person.”

“Duh,” Reiner offered, deadpan, but his widened eyes made it nearly impossible for Trey to keep a straight face. They both swallowed, and Reiner

gave the barest hint of a shrug. “Maybe... we could wash him first, you know?” His voice shook with suppressed laughter.

“I don’t even want to get close enough to smell him,” Trey admitted with a shiver, “much less give him a bath.”

“We could take him somewhere, pay somebody to wash him.” Reiner frowned and shook his head. “I dunno, one of those big pet stores. They all have grooming services.”

Trey didn’t even want to know how Reiner knew that, but he did figure it would be good for a ton of catnip jokes at some point. “You got your phone?” Reiner nodded. “Fine. Where’s the closest pet mega-store?”

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The El Camino was their only choice—Trey was not de-fleaing one of the SMS vehicles—meaning Eliza and Dean had to stay behind. *That* argument took up the whole time it took to walk back.

“If we get stopped—and I guaran-fucking-tee that we will—it’s two points on *my* license for you two not wearing seatbelts.” God, he hated being the grownup. “And you can’t ride in the back, so don’t even ask.”

“But we do that all the time.” Dean gave him a narrow-eyed look.

“Just around here. Not... *going* anywhere, like to Wilkesboro. On the county roads.” Trey waved a hand. “You need to wear a seatbelt if you ride in the front, and unless an adult is in the back with you—”

“Reiner could ride in the back,” Eliza pointed out.

“No, Reiner could not ride in the back, because he needs to give me directions. And don’t tell me he can do that just as well from the back because I don’t want to hear it.”

“But—” Eliza froze when Trey rounded on her, and the look she gave him was as close to *ears back, whiskers flat* as human features could manage.

“Do you want to keep this fucking dog?”

She and Dean nodded, and to Trey's disgust, they both moved closer to the dog and dug their fingers in its fur. Hair. Did dogs have hair or fur? Did he give a shit?

He made eye contact with both of them before he continued. "Then stop arguing, or you can take it up to the house just like this and explain about keeping it."

"Not *it*. We told you—his name is Moose." Eliza tried a pout, and Trey didn't hiss, but he did growl at her.

"Moose is a very good name," Reiner said, and Eliza's pout disappeared. "He's kind of... big. Like a moose."

"*Pfah*." Trey gave him a dirty look. "They could have called him 'Possum'—same difference." Reiner raised his eyebrows, and Trey almost, but not quite, rolled his eyes. "The two of them have been pestering Mom and the dads for months about going someplace that has moose. Not a zoo," he added. "We could just go up to Asheville for that."

"Okay." Reiner obviously still didn't get it, and Trey sighed.

"Moose *hunting*. Might as well call him Possum. Or Elk. Now *there's* a name."

"We're not *eating* him," Dean spat, and the dog gave an explosive "woof", surprising the hell out of Trey. "We just wanna *keep* him. He can't stay in the woods."

"That's nice, except he's not going to be living with you, is he? God—this is *not* going to work."

They'd reached the road, maybe twenty yards away from the main driveway for SMS. Trey stopped them far enough back to still be screened from view, and pointed toward SMS with his chin. "You two head home—tell Mom that Reiner and I found you, and tell her I'll come by later and explain, right?" Eliza and Dean nodded in tandem and scampered off—followed by Moose. *Wait!*

Trey stalked over, pointing at the dog, who was watching him with its ears out sideways. “You. Stay.” The dog dropped onto its belly like it had been shot, brown eyes fixed on Trey. “Okay. Change of plan. Everybody stay here while I go get the El Camino.” Trey tilted his head at Reiner. “Watch ’em until I get back.”

He took off along the side of the road at a jog, trying to figure out how the hell he was going to get the El Camino without Aidan noticing. Emery had to have told him about Eliza and Dean—and about asking him and Reiner to search for them.

So the first thing his dad was going to... ask was... *oh, fuck, yeah*. Trey hissed between his teeth instead of doing a victory dance, because the “Back Shortly” sign was hanging on the door to the garage office. The flatbed was still there, but the other truck, the ancient F150, was gone, meaning somebody over at the State Park probably had a dead battery or a busted hose, and Aidan was over there fixing it. Sweet.

Trey ran upstairs and grabbed his wallet and keys, and by the time he pulled up near where the twins and Reiner were waiting, he started to think they might pull this off. The first part, anyway.

He’d snatched a piece of mountain-climbing rope from the garage, a short piece they had hanging on the wall for a reason he couldn’t recall, thinking it would make a good leash, at least for the drive to the mega-store. When Trey dropped the tailgate, Moose heaved himself up into the bed, jaws wide and drippy pink tongue sticking out about a foot, and Trey guessed this wasn’t the first time the animal had ridden like this. So far, so good. The dog didn’t mind Trey slipping a loop over its head, or when he tied the other end to a cleat near the wheel well. Also good.

Dean and Eliza scampered off when Trey hissed at them to “Git”, leaving him and Reiner alone by the car. Before Trey could say anything, Reiner got in the passenger side, and Trey gave up and got behind the wheel—after telling Moose to stay.

“I put the store in the GPS,” Reiner told him, buckling up. “I figured that would be easier.”

Trey pointed at the clamp suctioned to the dashboard. “Stick it in there, and fire it up.” He put the car in Drive and pulled out, rolling east—not past SMS—at a sedate thirty miles an hour.

“Recalculating,” the phone told them.

“Thank you for coming with me,” Trey said, figuring he should say *something*.

Reiner looked out the open passenger side window, and his hands flexed on his thighs. “Did you mean all that? About not wanting to go to California? And the—the other stuff?”

“Yes.” Trey ran his tongue along the inside of his teeth. “When I first came back home, I felt so... out of place. I thought maybe taking the job out there would be better.”

“In one point five miles, make a left onto County Road 517,” the GPS put in.

“Thank you, darlin’.” Trey drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, eyes forward. “But then I renovated the apartment, and—I’ve wanted to work with Aidan ever since he opened the garage. I like what I do, and I’m good at it. But...” He glanced over at Reiner, and tried a smile. “I like not being the boss. I like being able to take a day off, and it’s no big deal. In L.A., I’d be in charge of the garage out there—all the vehicles SMS owns—and the more I think about it, the less I want it.” He cleared his throat. “I understand you wanting to take the other job.”

Reiner didn’t say anything, and the entrance to the maze in his head loomed higher all of a sudden. Trey made the left, and Reiner still hadn’t said anything. The GPS told him to drive five miles. He thought he’d give Reiner another mile. Maybe two.

“Do you want me to take the job?”

It was hard to breathe all of a sudden. Honest answer? No. But he'd also been raised by three adults who'd made it clear that what you wanted and what was right wasn't always the same thing. On the other hand, he'd seen what happened when you lied about what you wanted in the first place. Then again—

"I want you to be happy," Trey said, before he could think better of it. "That's all."

Reiner didn't say another word, not for the entire rest of the drive, and if Trey had eaten, he probably would've stopped to throw up. They had to circle the huge parking lot twice to find a spot, and yes, the damn dog was still there when he got out and looked in the back.

The thing thumped its thick tail on the bed, and Trey did not want to think about what was inside the matted hair. He untied the rope and tugged, and the—okay, *Moose*—jumped out and looked up at Trey with what he read as expectation.

"Oh god, we're really gonna do this, aren't we?" Trey didn't expect Reiner to smile at him, or the way that smile would ease the cramp in his stomach.

"Looks like it." Reiner's eyes were vivid in the bright light, and he waved at the store. "Let's do this."

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## CHAPTER TWELVE

“You have got to be fucking kidding me,” Trey muttered, and Reiner clenched his jaw so he wouldn’t laugh. The grooming—bath, including a flea treatment, plus clipping or shaving or whatever they did, and blow drying—was close to two hundred dollars, much to Trey’s disgust.

And now they had to kill an hour and a half while all that happened. There was a McDonald’s, so at least they could get food, and Reiner figured that was a priority.

Trey wasn’t leaving Stone Mountain. He held on to that thought, letting it balance out the clutch of panic he’d had when he woke up alone in bed. Trey saying right out that he wasn’t leaving was the important part, he figured, and the rest—Trey saying that all he wanted was for Reiner to be happy—that meant that last night hadn’t been some kind of farewell sex. He really hoped so, because he didn’t think he could let go, not now.

At the moment, Trey was eyeing the aisles and the humans with their shopping carts and growling softly. “We need to buy... *stuff*, don’t we?” he asked, and Reiner couldn’t help the laugh that broke loose.

“Yeah,” he admitted. “Food, I guess. And... a collar? A leash, too.” He shrugged when Trey raised his eyebrows. “I had neighbors who owned a dog, when I was in college. And they were always buying shit—bowls, and beds, and treats. All the time.” He tipped his head to one side and grinned at Trey’s resigned sigh. “I think we’re gonna need a cart.”

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The food aisle was confusing as hell—who the hell thought fish and pumpkin was a good flavor combination? That was just nasty, and Reiner said so, not caring about the humans giving him a strange look.

Trey didn’t sneer, but it was close. “I,” he said under his breath, “am an obligate carnivore. Some of the time, at least. About the only way I like pumpkin is in pie. With whipped cream.”

“Dogs are omnivores,” Reiner pointed out, although if you couldn’t figure that out from reading the dog food bags, you had to be pretty damn stupid. “Just pick one.”

Trey tossed a thirty pound bag of grain-free organic dry dog food in the cart. Without pumpkin. Or fish. Or sweet potatoes, for that matter. “Next?”

Bowls were easy—stainless steel, and huge—but collar and leash? Not so much.

Trey fingered a wide rhinestone-studded pink leather collar that was probably too big to fit around his neck. “If you had a dog this big, would you put something like this on it?”

“I think we do have a dog that big,” Reiner only clocked what he’d said—we—when Trey caught his breath and stared at him. Trey swallowed, and Reiner tuned out the store around them and focused on the important shit, like the way Trey’s pupils flared and the shallow way he was breathing.

The funny thing was that he couldn’t actually figure out what he wanted to say, or ask, and what came out was the same question he’d tried earlier. “Do you want me to take the job?”

Trey shook his head, a tiny motion, his jaw so tight a muscle jumped in his cheek. A chill coursed through Reiner, head to toes, prickling all the hair on his body.

“Boys?”

Trey’s head jerked at the interruption, and Reiner heard the aborted growl even if the nice human lady smiling at them didn’t.

“Sorry, ma’am,” Reiner said, and drew Trey over to the side to let her pass. He took the opportunity to crowd him, just a little, just enough to get Trey’s attention. “Okay.”

Trey’s eyes were cool now, shaded by his lashes, and his mouth was a flat line. *Okay what?*

*Okay, can we talk about this when we’re finished here?*



Trey nodded, and picked a wide black leather collar decorated with silver studs off the display. “How about this?” He checked the price tag and blinked. “*Chingame.*”

Reiner didn’t need to ask for a translation on that at all. He found a matching leash and tossed it in the cart, took the collar away from Trey and added that to the pile. He made sure their fingers brushed, humming at the spark that generated.

Jumbo-sized dog biscuits went in the cart next, a big box of them, followed by a huge chew bone—“The twins’ll steal that for sure,” Trey pointed out. “Get three.”—and while they were in line, they picked out a bone-shaped brass ID tag from a point-of-purchase display and got that, too. One hundred and fifty-some-odd dollars later, they approached the machine that would engrave the ID tag.

Reiner inserted the blank tag and waited for the menu to come up on the touch screen. He typed in “Moose” at the prompt, and hesitated. “We should put a cell phone number. Or maybe the garage number?”

Trey leaned in until his chest bumped Reiner’s arm. “Cell phone.” Reiner heard a click as Trey swallowed, and turned his head. The expression in Trey’s eyes hurt, and Reiner’s entire insides hollowed out.

He took a breath and typed in Trey’s cell phone number from memory, hit return... and typed his own on the line underneath. Trey exhaled, not quite a word, and leaned his head against Reiner’s for half a second. “Okay?” Reiner said, all he could manage past whatever was blocking his throat.

“Okay,” Trey whispered. “Let’s get the fucking dog and get out of here.”

One rabies vaccination and an extra tube of something for fleas and ticks later—Trey swore his credit card was going to melt—one of the groomers brought out a dog and handed Trey the cheap plastic combined choke-collar-and leash.

Reiner stared, and so did Trey, because there was no way this was the same animal. Without the hair—fur? Reiner had no idea—the head was blocky and the ears were floppy, shading to black at the rounded tips. Huge feet. What

they'd both assumed was dirt turned out to be color, mottled dark and light bands all over.

"Tiger stripes," Trey murmured, and the dog wagged its thick tail, light amber eyes fixed on Trey with something like adoration. Trey swore under his breath and the tail picked up speed. "I think we need a bigger collar."

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They hit the drive-through at McDonald's—Cokes and fries for him and Trey, plus two Quarter Pounders with cheese each, and four cheeseburgers for Moose—before heading for home.

Home. Reiner tested the idea carefully for almost the entire trip back. The house he'd grown up in wasn't home, not anymore, not since he'd moved out after high school. His apartment all through college had never been home, either, he knew that for sure. He'd put that off to being male. To being too young to settle in a place, to stake out territory of his own or share it with another male or two. Being with Trey, though...

"What if we both went? To L.A., I mean?"

Trey kept his eyes on the road, but he took one hand off the wheel and laid it on Reiner's thigh. Reiner covered it with his own, holding it in place.

"Not forever," Reiner added. "I don't know that I want that. I like it here."

"That could work," Trey said, after about a mile. "Maybe... next spring."

"Or the summer. We could be here for Eva's graduation, and then go."

Trey's fingers tightened for a moment. "That—yeah. We could even drive out, if you want. See stuff."

Reiner picked up Trey's hand and laced their fingers together, and squeezed. Trey squeezed back, hard enough to grind the bones together, and Reiner tipped his head to catch the breeze from the open window. He let his smile grow into a grin, a grin that got wider when Trey lifted their hands and kissed his knuckles. "Yeah. That'll work."

Trey slowed down to swing across the opposite lane and pulled to a stop in front of the garage. He and Reiner both got out, and Trey untied the rope from the leash so Moose could jump down.

“What the hell is that?” Aidan stopped maybe a dozen feet away, glaring at Moose before turning his glare on Trey and Reiner.

Trey reached over with the hand not holding the leash and curled his fingers around Reiner’s. “Um—”

Reiner laughed, almost a snort, and met Aidan’s eyes full on. “It’s complicated.”

**THE END**

## Author Bio

*J.J. Cassidy has held more jobs than she cares to think about over the past thirty-plus years—everything from freight forwarding to driving a hay wagon—and she figures that gives her a lot of experiences to draw on when it comes to writing. At least that's the theory. Her novella, Wish List, was published last year by Dreamspinner Press, as part of their Advent calendar anthology, and Handsome Beast, a retelling of Beauty and the Beast, is available through Amazon, Barnes & Noble and AllRomance eBooks. Dark Mirror, one of her stories for last year's Love Is Always Write event, can be found on Amazon and AllRomance eBooks. With a little luck, she plans to have two novels out by the end of 2013. She is always happy to hear from readers.*

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