

Chapter One

Niel exited the car as quickly as he could to escape the tense silence that had filled it. His dad had tried, and failed, to fill it. Most questions faltered before they were fully uttered. The one he'd managed to say in its entirety had been innocent enough, inquiring about Niel's history classes, but that had made Niel think of the research into that Antarctica expedition and Jarod's history. The reminder of the secret his dad withheld had only rekindled the anger, and Niel had stayed silent rather than let it explode.

The house was rather unassuming, except for its size. It was an apartment building on the outskirts of downtown St-Paul. By the size, it could house five or six families. He suspected Kuno's family lived in the entire building because they were rich, and the margay had mentioned there were a lot of guys living in his father's house.

Niel had refused to come.

His initial argument was that he was nowhere near upper-class enough to be with his family, to which Kuno had rolled his eyes and quickly explained that no one in his family considered themselves 'upper-class'. They were rich, but they all worked and had plenty of friends across a large gap of social levels. Niel was certainly the poorest person Kuno considered friends.

So, Niel had brought up the fact that he wouldn't have anything appropriate to wear. He'd worn a suit a handful of times in his life, and each one had been a rental. And that if Kuno said their thanksgiving dinner didn't require anyone to wear anything, he wasn't interested in participating.

Kuno had replied by pointing out they were Society, so wearing something was never required, but if they had guests, they ensured they were comfortable, so everyone would be dressed for the meal. Niel could count on that.

In a last attempt, Niel pointed out Kuno couldn't expect his father to just agree to have Niel and his dad over. They'd be two strangers intruding into their thanksgiving.

Kuno rolled his eyes. The two of them were friends, that would be enough to get his dad to agree, but he was also a friend of the Hertz, who was going through a tough time. His father was going

to be overjoyed to set a place for them at their table.

And really, Kuno had added, when the alternative was thanksgiving alone with his dad, and maybe one or two of the guys in the room, which included Limbani, did he really want to turn him down?

So here he was, in his best jeans and shirt and his church shoes. His Sunday Best, as his mother had liked to call it.

He'd expected his dad to shoot down the offer once Kuno confirmed there was no problem with the two of them attending. Instead, Stewart had been elated at the idea. Or he'd just been so happy with Niel talking with him that he would have agreed to anything.

His father was in dress pants and a shirt that he'd wear for a meeting with his boss.

The door opened before they reached it, and a margay a few years older stood in the doorway, watching them. The most surprising thing, in Niel's mind, was that he was actually dressed. Jeans and an old T-shirt with a faded design on it of stylized lightning over an electric guitar and drum set. He looked back inside the house.

"Kuno, your friend and his dad's here! You didn't tell me how hot they were!"

"Bastien!" came a yelled reply, "what have I told you about ogling guests!"

"Be discreet about it!" Bastien replied.

"And do you call what you're doing discreet?"

"I'm not ogling anyone, Dad!" He looked at Niel and his father and rolled his eyes. "The man raises me for the last seven years and he thinks I'm going to obey him more than before he took me in." He offered his hand. "I'm Sebastien. Everyone calls me Bastien. If you don't, we're going to have problems."

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Bastien," Stewart replied, shaking the hand.

"Sorry if I made you uncomfortable, but hot guys are hot guys."

Niel's dad chuckled. "I'm flattered, actually."

"Cool, there's nothing hotter than a guy comfortable enough with himself not too offended when another guy calls him hot."

"I think I'm uncomfortable enough for him," Niel said, shaking the hand.

"There's nothing wrong with him considering me hot, Niel."

"It's what I'm pretty sure he's imagining that's got me squirming."

"Don't let my cousin chase you away," Kuno called, sounding out of breath.

"We're not going anywhere," Niel called back.

The margay appeared. "Good, I would have been here to welcome you, but someone—" Kuno glared at Bastien "—told my dad I'd volunteered to help with meal prep."

"Did you want him to as Gaston?"

Kuno closed his mouth, then looked annoyed. "There's thirty other guys in the house right now. Half of whom also know how to cook. You just wanted to be sure I wouldn't be here to supervise you. I apologize if Bastien tried to jump your bones, whoever was in charge of installing his self-control chip should have been fired."

"There was no jumping," Stewart said.

"Well..." Bastien said, looking the older raccoon up and down. Kuno pulled him inside before

he could voice the rest. “I swear, Bass, you give the rest of us a bad name!”

“It’s Bastien,” the other margay replied.

“Come on in.” Kuno moved out of the way. “I can’t promise everyone will be on their best behavior, but they will behave.” He took their jackets and after putting that in a closet, he escorted them deeper in the house, where they were greeted by a lot of guys, in a wide range of age, from a little younger than Niel, to their mid-thirties with a few in their forties or fifties.

Quickly, Niel found himself separated from his dad as everyone introduced themselves with a shake of the hand and... nothing more. Which threw Niel off a bit since he knew how handsy Society men tended to be.

The few times he could track down his father, he was in a conversation with some of the older men, although even the younger ones seemed happy to talk with him. The few who noticed him while they talked with his dad smiled knowingly.

Niel would have to ask Kuno about that; if he could find him.

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Niel still hadn’t located his friend by the time Dinner was called, but he’d met just about everyone in the house, he thought, had hadn’t been offered a quickie even once. Niel just couldn’t figure out if he was reassured they were keeping things respectable, annoyed they didn’t seem interested in him, despite the looks he got, or just plain worried this was eventually going to explode.

The dining room was huge. Niel supposed it had to be, with more than two-thirds of the bedrooms in the house occupied. Niel was guided to the table and found himself sitting six seats away from the head, with Kuno next to him. His dad was on the opposite side, a few seats further, in conversation with one of the older men.

The table was loaded with more food than Niel had ever seen. More than needed for even this crowd, he decided. There were seven turkeys, large ones, plenty of cheese and vegetable casseroles, potatoes in multiple forms, loaves of bread, fresh by the smell, bottles of pop, wine, beer.

The plates were plain, a large, a small, a fork, a knife, and a spoon. He realized he’d expected a place setting with twenty different parts, with an instruction manual on how they were to be used.

“Alright everyone,” the margay at the head of the table said, as he arrived and stood before his seat. “I want to start by thanking our guests for accepting our invitation and to ask if there is a way you prefer starting a meal. We aren’t traditional in our belief, but as our guests, if you want to say grace, please feel free to do so.”

“Thank you,” Stewart replied, “but this is your home. I’ll be happy to follow whatever tradition you do.” He was then perplexed at the snickering that caused.

Kuno’s dad, Leo, shushed everyone. “That’s kind of you. In that case, I’ll simply say. Thank you for everything we have, have gotten, and will get. Dig in.”

Chaos erupted around the long table as everyone seemed to reach for the food at the same time. Then, things quieted as everyone ate. Niel ate little, but what he did tasted amazing.

“Hey, Niel!” Bastien called from the other side of the table.

“Yes?”

“I thought you lived off sex.”

“Sebastien,” Leo chastised.

“What? I’m just curious. He’s from the Survivors, right? And the story is they don’t have to eat,

just have sex. Yet there he is, eating the food we made.”

“I don’t remember you helping,” someone said.

“We, us, the Richards,” Bastian replied with an eye roll. “Not me specifically.”

“Sure,” the same person said, imbuing the one word with an impressive amount of sarcasm.

Niel caught his dad’s interested expression and had to remind himself that Stewart only had the barest of information on what it meant for him to be a Survivor.

“I don’t need to eat,” He said. “So long as I have sex once a day, I’m good, but I can still eat, food tastes good. That reason enough, I think.”

“You aren’t exactly eating like someone who’s loving the food.” The older man next to his father said with a hint of reproach.

“I am.” How much did he want to say? As far as he knew, none of this was a secret to the Society. The Survivors just liked to keep to themselves, and Jarod even more so. “But my body’s not fully adjusted yet. If I eat too much. I basically get sick.” They didn’t need those details. “In a couple of weeks, I should be able to eat and not have any side effect from it.”

“But you don’t get anything from the food? Like at all?” a thirty-something asked. “I thought the surviving off sex was like us, just what we need to do to stay powered up.”

“Powered up?” Stewart asked. And the table fell silent.

“Way to go, Russel,” someone sounding young said.

“He’s his dad,” Russel replied. “How is any of this a secret?”

Kuno groaned. “That’s what I get for not making this a presentation and forcing everyone to watch it.”

“It might have been too much to expect this to remain secret at the table, Kuno,” Leo said, then turned to Stewart. “The short of it is that the group your sun is linked to is part of our group as well. Sex is also power for us. It’s more complex than just that, of course, but magic is real.”

Stewart nodded.

“I was expecting a freak-out,” someone said.

“Pay up!” another one.

Niel noticed Kuno sink in his chair, but he was more interested in his dad’s behavior.

“My grandfather looks younger than me,” Stewart explained. “He explained even details of how things worked for him so I wouldn’t accidentally make them happen to Niel. It’s how I knew what was happening when the doctor mentioned he wasn’t getting any nutrition for food or the IV. It’s a little surprising to find out there’s more, but not really shocking.”

“I’m glad that you’re taking it in well,” Leo said. “It isn’t a common reaction.”

“Can I ask a question in return?”

“Of course.”

“Everyone here’s referring to each other as siblings, but also cousins, Jackson’s your nephew, but you called him son. Also, I didn’t see anyone under seventeen, or women.”

“Ah,” Leo said in the silence. This time, the silence was total. “You were aware of the increase in anti-gay sentiment, seven years ago or so.” Stewart nodded.

It had been all over the news, especially after some protest had turned violent. Even Niel, who was only eleven at the time, remembered it.

“It’s more complicated than just that, of course. We, the Society, were the main target, and we have worked hard at keeping this part quiet, but many of us lost family members during that time. Some families were hit much harder than us, but the Richards’ losses were significant.”

“My condolences,” Niel said at the same time as his dad.

“Thank you. We dealt with the losses by coming together. Not so much abandoning the standard North American family structure, but setting it aside until we are healed.” He paused. “As for the women... I lost my wife during that time. Collateral damage, since I and Kuno were the intended target. We’d been together for twenty years and while there was a push to repopulate, we aren’t the Lewistons, and personal choices were respected. You can think of this household as filled with bachelors. The older of us, because the loss was too much for us to be willing to look for another woman, the youngers... well, they’re young and probably think they have all of the time before them to have a son of their own.”

“Or some of us are, you know, perfectly happy not having a kid?” someone said, sounding quite young.

“Give it time,” the man next to Stewart said. “You don’t know what you’re missing until you’ve held him in your hands.”

“Then I’m golden. I’ll never know what I’m missing.”

“And that’s why there aren’t any kids here tonight?” Stewart asked.

“Oh, there are plenty of kids at this table,” the older man next to him said and looked around the table.

“There are children in this household,” Leo said. “Many babies lost their parents, and the rest of us are doing our part. Because there are so many older boys and men currently, instead of forcing them to endure what I’m sure they’d feel is a tedious meal with us, they have their own Thanksgiving celebration together. One more in line with their age and preferences.”

“And I wish I’d gone to that one now,” someone said.

“As I said,” the man next to Stewart said. “There are children at this table.” This time, the comment generated laughter, and conversations moved on to lighter topics.

Desert was a collection of cakes and pies and Niel was unable to believe anyone at the table was still hungry. He and his dad shared a look of disbelief as arguments over how to get the last piece of a cake erupted.

Once that was eaten—Niel indulged in a little white chiffon cake with the best strawberry ice cream he’d ever tasted—everyone finally seemed to be sated.

At least in one fashion.

The men at the table took off their shirts.

Oh shit.

“Now,” Leo said, standing and undoing his belt. “It’s our tradition to thank Him, the way He wants us to on this day more than others.” There was a lot of disbelieving snorting around the table, even from the older man next to Stewart. “You are welcome to join us in the celebration.”

“I think we should go,” Niel said, standing.

“Why?” Stewart asked his son, perplexed.

Niel stared at his Dad. “Because they’re going to have sex? Guys, together, having sex? I know at least one of them is going to try to force himself on you.”

Steward seemed surprised by the statement. “Niel, why would you think he’d have to force anything?”

“Because you’re straight?” Niel replied, stating the obvious.

His dad smirked. “Niel, how do you think I was comfortable enough asking a gay man to have sex with my son to save his life.”

Niel just stared at this man, trying to process the implications. The realization his dad was bi hit just about the time Bastien exclaimed.

“I call Dibs!”

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