



F-BOY

BY LAURA S. FOX

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M/M Romance

Intended for Mature Audiences Only

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

Chapter One - A Beautiful Jerk

“You’re going to be fine.” His mom ruffled his hair, like he was still ten and due to summer camp.

“I’m going to be miserable,” Dante countered, petulant just like a ten-year-old.

Her sigh told him that it didn’t work. He needed to pay his dues, so to speak. In other words, he had to make nice with his new relatives. Was that what they were called? Dante wasn’t entirely sure.

He hiked his luggage over his shoulder. Maybe, just maybe, if he had known that he was about to fall in love for the first and last time in his life, he wouldn’t have felt that miserable.

The new Elsher house was a McMansion on a cul de sac, nothing striking about it when compared to the rest of the properties lining the street. However, there was one aspect that made it all different, as his dad had tried to sell it to him over the phone.

The pool. Dante snorted just remembering that particular detail. The cab driver looked at him in the mirror, probably trying to gauge where he fit with the rest. Dante’s clothes were plain, as his mom couldn’t afford to dress him up from the same designer brands adored by his stepsister.

Yes. He sighed. He had one of those. Shana, she was called. And, as much as Dante didn’t like to use strong words, she was a total b-lady. The year before, while he was still in high school, they had met for the first time. Neither of them had been impressed with the other. At least, there was that. Any feeling Shana nurtured toward him, it was definitely mutual.

Not that it was much of a relief. She was probably frolicking in that cool pool right now, with her plethora of girlfriends, laughing too hard, and exchanging too mean glances between them, while leaning their heads together and judging anyone who wasn’t a part of their little world.

He was doing this so that he would spend the summer close to his dad, before starting college in fall. Shana was, supposedly, a minor nuisance.

Who needed a pool, anyway? He looked in the rearview mirror for a moment. Those few freckles were bound to multiply. His mom said they made him cute. Dante wasn’t sure she was telling the truth. Sometimes, she really liked to lie to him like he was still ten.

He ran his fingers through his strawberry blond hair. It ran a bit too long, but he had refused to cut it before summer break. He liked to think that it made him look like a surfer, a very skinny one, and the type who didn’t enjoy getting close to water that much.

He paid the driver and headed toward the front door, looking around to see if any curious neighbors were up and about. Not a chance in that sweltering weather. Outside the air conditioned cab, in just the several steps he needed to reach the house, he was already melting in his new kicks.

That were not ideal for that type of weather, and, without a doubt, very unfashionable by the standards of the people living in that kind of neighborhood. He rang the bell and waited. A smile stretched his face at the thought of seeing his dad again. His mom had taught him not to judge any of his parents for splitting up from early childhood, and he had grown without ever thinking that he was coming from a broken home or anything silly like that. There was nothing broken about the house where he lived with his mom. It was cozy and nice.

This one, however, was huge. Dante waited patiently, but it looked like no one was coming to the door. Now, he would have to call his dad, and --

The door flew open, and there stood his nemesis. Shana, dressed in a skimpy dress, cut too short both at the top and bottom, swayed with a hand on her hip and a big grin on her face. Her very pink lipstick made her look like an extra in an 80s movie... But that was something he would better keep to himself.

“Baby brother,” she exclaimed and opened her arms.

They weren’t actually related by blood, but his dad had insisted they should consider themselves siblings of sorts. Shana collapsed in his arms, flicking her long hair over his face and making him smell her hair product. Or products. However, their overpowering smell couldn’t cover another. Now, the reason of that effusion became clear as day.

At over 100 degrees outside, Shana was utterly drunk. Dante helped her get to her feet somehow. “Where’s dad?”

“Didn’t they tell you?” she asked innocently and giggled. “Mom and dad,” she said, emphasizing each word and taking possession of Dante’s father, “went on vacation for a couple of weeks. We have the house to ourselves!” She threw one arm in the air and shouted happily.

Oh, damn. Dante stepped gingerly inside. Thank heavens for AC.

“Come on, come on,” Shana said and grabbed his hand. “I want everyone to meet you. Throw your bag over there,” she pointed in a vague direction, “and let’s get you in the pool.”

“Shana,” Dante tried to reason with her, “I need to change into my shorts first. That means that I have to put my luggage away, preferably in my room--”

“Later,” she interrupted him as she continued to drag him along.

What grownup in their right minds would let Shana by herself in that big house over a weekend, let alone two weeks? Apparently, his dad and her mom. Dante was forced to drop the bag and follow Shana helplessly.

He stopped dead in his tracks, once they reached the backyard and the famous pool. There had to be like twenty people there, laughing, dancing, jumping in the water and making splashes. The music was loud, the booze obviously was flowing like a lazy river if not a full-fledged one, and everyone wore either shorts, or bikini.

In fewer words, he was in hell.

At least, Shana let go of his hand and staggered dangerously toward the water. “Everyone,” she shouted, “this is my baby brother, Dante. Be nice to him. He’s from the sticks--” She didn’t finish as the firm ground ended and she fell into the pool. A guy caught her promptly, but not before she took a proper dive. She laughed and pushed her wet hair out of her face, and then kissed her savior.

Dante could consider himself relieved. Shana had already forgotten about him. He could sneak back inside, find his luggage, with some luck, find his room, and then his hard earned peace.

Yet, before he could begin putting his plan in action, his eyes wandered over the raucous congregation and fell on someone who was standing by the other side of the pool, opposite from him.

It was a tall, dark boy, who seemed to look down on the rest of the party people, like they were beneath him. Unlike them, he didn’t wear a swimsuit. However, he was half naked, and Dante found himself staring from afar. While he couldn’t make out the minutest details from that distance, he could tell that the guy had a tattoo stretching from his left shoulder up his neck, like an intricate design of vines and flowers. His black hair was cut short, but a rebellious strand hugged his forehead playfully, showing how young its owner truly was.

Dante couldn’t move. What was that poetic way of saying... Arrested by one’s beauty? Maybe he needed to brush on that particular skill of his, because simple words couldn’t curtail the essence of that handsome young man. He couldn’t be older than twenty, yet, his muscular frame made him look intimidating. He moved languidly along the pool, observing everyone, with the acuity of a beast of prey.

Dante longed to see his eyes, but the boy kept them cast down, while his lips quirked in a disapproving smile. The slight bitterness in it surmised or guessed from that distance surprised Dante. There was a pool full of almost naked people at the guy’s feet, and yet, he seemed not only unimpressed but annoyed and even pissed.

“Ash, Ash,” Shana started shouting, “fish on the shore, fish on the shore!”

What the hell did she mean by that? Dante was slightly unnerved by having his observation of that beautiful boy cut off so rudely. Decided to ignore her shenanigans and stick to his initial plan, he turned on his heel.

And found himself face to face with the guy he had just been admiring. How come he had moved so fast?

They were blue, those eyes. A lighter, colder, steel like shade of blue. That was the only thing that registered with Dante. The one after was a warm rough hand pressing against his chest and sending him flying into the water, while the audience erupted in laughter.

The skinny boy sputtered and heaved as he got to the surface, while Ash examined him with curiosity. Baby brother? That guy had no DNA to share with Shana for sure. He had pretty almond shaped eyes the color of roasted chestnuts, and his white skin made such a strange contrast with the tanned skin of everyone there.

He looked completely out of place, in his plain white tee and regular jeans. Ash grinned. The boy was giving him the evil eye while struggling to get out of the water. Always the gentleman, Ash crouched and offered. “Need a hand?”

“No, thanks,” came the curt reply.

“Don’t keep a man hanging,” Ash insisted and pushed the boy back in the water.

Again, the newcomer looked at him with murder in his eyes. He looked sort of cute. What Ash was doing right now, it made him kind of asshole, but that was a reputation to live by.

He expected the guy - what was his name? – to fight a little, but instead, he took Ash’s hand and pulled himself up. The firmness of his grip struck Ash as surprising for a boy weighing no more than one twenty sopping wet.

“Thanks,” the guy said, and the irony dripping from that single word wasn’t lost on either of them.

Ash didn’t move away as the boy passed by him, forcing the reciprocal touch of bodies. He didn’t shy away from it, either. Ash watched him as he disappeared into the house.

“Hey, how you said your brother’s called again?” he shouted at Shana, who was in love with the whole universe and trying to stuff her tongue down everyone’s throat.

She ignored him, or probably, the music was too loud for her to hear him. He shrugged. He’d find out later, provided that he didn’t lose all interest in the newcomer by then.

Why wasn't he surprised that Mr. Tattoo was a total asshole? Dante had found a quiet room at the end of the hallway on the first floor and claimed it for himself. Now, he was taking a shower to wash away the sweat from his long trip and also the indignity suffered. What a jerk, he mused to himself, while washing himself thoroughly.

But a very beautiful jerk, he also concluded, as he soaped his front. His dick was oblivious, it seemed, to such intricacies of the human nature. "Maybe later," Dante murmured under his breath.

It served him right. He was only good to be jerk off material, that beautiful jerk.

Chapter Two – User And Used

Was there anything proper to eat in that house? Dante was starting to get even more worried about Shana being left in charge, as he took in the contents of the two-door refrigerator. It was packed full with beer, but except for a few soda cans and a bag of chips that didn't belong there, no food was present. He grabbed the chips with only the tips of two fingers and threw the bag a dubious look. Could he really trust that there were chips in there and not who knows whatever else?

Since his stomach growled at that very moment, he decided that he could be brave for a change and brought the bag to the counter. With some luck, he fished a clean bowl from one of the many cupboards and filled it with the contents of the bag. Just as he was about to delve into that meager meal, his stepsister made an entrance.

“Ah, that's where those were,” she said and grabbed the bowl.

Dante felt some of his righteous indignation rising inside him at the injustice of it all. “Shana, give that back.”

She turned on her heel and looked at him in confusion. “Get your own chips, loser,” she said with a grin. “Are you so poor that you can't even afford a bag of chips?”

Dante pinched the bridge of his nose. Leaving aside that Shana had forgotten her earlier enthusiasm at seeing her ‘baby brother’, it appeared to be no point in telling her that she was a host to him, no matter how unwilling, and it was her job to fill the fridge with other than beer.

He could be the bigger person, despite being three years younger. He'd call a cab and get to some fast-food place around there, and have a sandwich. Later, he would call his dad and told him something came up and he couldn't spend the summer there. As much as Shana deserved to be told on for her behavior, he wasn't some snitch.

He sighed and rubbed his eyes. Maybe his nightmare of a stepsister would be gone the next time he opened them.

“What?” she taunted him. “Are you going to cry now because I tell it like it is? Poor little Dante,” she added in an annoying voice, faking pity.

He was about to forget about civility and exact some revenge with a few well-aimed words at Shana's leaking mascara when someone else entered the kitchen.

It was the same guy from before, the beautiful jerk, still wearing nothing but jeans, which Dante noticed right away how low they rode on those lean muscular hips. The other thing he wore was a teasing smirk that said it all about his and his stepsister's conversation being overheard. Dante really didn't need an audience to his humiliation, but he was thankful for the interruption. He was the type to always regret saying mean words to other people. It was much better to be able to

live with himself than throw a few insults and then lose sleep over them. That was one of the many teachings he had from his mom.

The beautiful jerk stopped in front of him and pushed an open hand. “Shana forgot to tell you who I am,” he said, although Dante didn’t recall any of that being a topic between him and his stepsister. “I’m Ash.”

“And I’m out of here,” Dante said, ignoring the offered hand.

“What did I tell you?” Ash stopped him, barring the way with his body. Dante could feel the sun and the heat rolling off the guy in waves. It wasn’t good that he came from a cold place and had no natural protection against high temperatures. “Don’t leave a man hanging.”

This time, Dante didn’t intend to indulge him like before. “Why is this guy here?” he asked his stepsister and pointed at the jerk. His question was somehow legit, since it looked like all the other guests had left, probably to go to places where there was some real food to be had.

Shana shrugged. “He just is. Now, Dante, be a nice boy and shake hands with Ash. I promise he doesn’t bite. Ah, no, I take that back. He definitely bites.” She rubbed the side of her neck with a satisfied grin.

Oh, fuck. So Ash was Shana’s boyfriend? Although that had to be one hell of an open relationship if he were to take after how she rubbed herself against any available male body in the place.

“I won’t bite you, though,” Ash said, leaning in and making a show of opening and closing his mouth, teeth showing, close to Dante’s cheek.

Dante stopped breathing. He just didn’t need to know how Ash smelled like. It was enough that his body heat felt so close, so solid. Only lifting his hand would be enough to touch him.

“Come on, tell me your name,” Ash continued, leaning against the refrigerator and giving Dante a long once-over.

All Dante intended to give Ash was a killer look.

“Geesh, what a kid,” Shana commented. “He’s called Dante,” she added, emphasizing the last letters in a weird way, making his given name sound more like a moniker.

“Dan-tay,” Ash tried to imitate her.

Dante rolled his eyes. “It’s just Dante.” And then, under his breath, “morons.”

“What did you say?” Ash stopped him again as he tried to move.

Shit. This guy could beat the crap out of him if he liked. All those muscles couldn't be just for show. Not that Dante was paying attention to all that; he was way too engrossed in admiring that intricate tattoo from up close. A rose stretched on the round shoulder, then it lost itself in a jumble of lines that stretched, now Dante noticed, around the neck, too. Shana really knew how to pick her bad boys. That must have taken hours, and maybe hurt some, too. A tattoo artist, one lucky guy or gal, must have spent those hours bent over that good looking asshole, close enough to kiss him.

Dante stopped from checking the guy's lips, too. He was already playing with fire. "I didn't say anything."

"You did." Ash moved out of the way but only enough for Dante to squeeze through. "You just won't admit it. Puss."

The insult sounded dirty in that gorgeous mouth – Dante did look, after all. He squirreled away, without daring to look back. He really needed to get out of there, as he was in danger of lusting over his sister's bad as they come boyfriend, or getting a beating from the same guy.

Dante. The name suited the boy. Ash looked after him as he stumbled over nothing and regained his tensed gait on his way out of the kitchen. "How old is this kitten?" he asked Shana.

"Eighteen," she said with a sigh. "Dad couldn't make it to his birthday that was like, months ago or something, and he felt guilty, and Dante got into some fancy college or something," she continued in a droning bored voice while swaying on her high heels, "so he invited him to spend the summer here, despite my very loud objections, and, you see, he wants us to get along, although we're not real siblings--"

Ash tuned her out after that. That explained some. Dante was Mr. Elsher's son, and Shana was very possessive of her relatively new daddy. They weren't siblings for sure, but the girl really had a bad case of sibling envy.

He opened the refrigerator. "Fucking hell, Shana, is there really nothing to eat in here?" he asked in frustration.

"Who the fuck needs food?" She waved the bowl she was holding. "Come on, I have some chips. Hmm, yummy." She made a show of taking one and putting it on her tongue. She wasn't as cute as she thought.

Ash closed the refrigerator door with his bare foot. "I'm going out to have some real food. You coming?"

"Nah." She gestured like she couldn't be bothered. "Later, Mike promised to take me to a fancy dinner and I don't want to lose my appetite."

“It’s like six hours to dinner or so,” Ash pointed out.

Shana pressed one hand over her flat belly. “And how do you think I keep this up? Suit yourself. Just don’t get into a crash or something. Medical bills are one thing I’m not going to pay for you.”

What a fucking bitch. Not like he didn’t have himself to blame for the situation he was in. But Shana and the rest of the bunch were generous, in their own fucked up way. She wasn’t paying for anything, though. Not with money. Those, he had some; he got his ways. But a roof over his head? Shana had offered. Booze as much as he wanted? Hell, yeah. And pussy. That he got plenty, too, to the point that he couldn’t tell one body from the other.

They were using him. And he used them in turn. That was just his fucked up life, in a nutshell. User and used.

“I thought you loved my ride,” he said with a smirk that covered all that shit he sometimes barely held together inside.

“Yeah, but it’s overrated,” Shana said.

Of course. Mike drove a Bentley or something. And while Ash was good for fun, Mike was good for boyfriend hunting, in Shana’s book. Although, Ash would have hated to break it to her that she was for Mike just what Ash was for her. Ah, no point in ruining her day. She’d figure it out by herself, eventually. Like he had, some time ago.

Still, his Low Rider had nothing on that kind of car. Not that he wanted a car. Or a clingy annoying girlfriend like Shana.

“That’s not what you said,” he replied, faking that her low blow didn’t sting, and swaying his hips slowly, “while you were squeezing me between the legs, all wet, and shouting in my ear.”

Shana pretended to yawn. “I was shouting because you were riding like a madman. And I was wet because I pissed myself.”

Ash made a disgusted face. “Good thing I gave that a thorough cleaning then.”

She shrugged. “Just make sure you don’t miss the after dinner party. Michaela keeps on pestering me about you. One more word from her about you, and I’ll either go nuts or kick her off my girlfriend list.”

Michaela. Red-haired, passionate. Her touch reminded him vaguely of a lizard. But she was doable. Ash never fucked anyone he didn’t find doable.

Dante circled round the motorcycle parked on the driveway that he hadn't noticed when he had come into the house, with his brains melting from heat. It was a real beauty, and, while he knew nothing about motorcycles, he was free to admire them.

The front door opening abruptly took him by surprise, so he took a step back. Ash had a white tee on, one that glued to his perfect body like a second skin and left plenty of ink visible. Dante couldn't say that he was shocked to see Ash closing in the distance between them and grabbing the handle. He was a bad boy to a tee.

"Nice ride," Dante said and moved away. He had felt so hot after that run-in from earlier that he hadn't yet called his cab.

"Where to?" Ash asked while putting in the helmet.

He could say 'none of your business', but Dante had already burned through all the uncivility he would allow himself on any given day. "Somewhere to eat," he said and waved his phone. "I'm getting a cab."

The metallic blue eyes examined him slowly. "Hop in."

"Hmm, I don't think--" Dante started.

"I promise I'll go slow," Ash said, giving him another of these looks that made Dante think that he was a human-sized ice cream stick.

Why did every word sound like that in that guy's mouth? Dante tried to blame it on his horny eighteen-year-old self but didn't succeed. Ash made it so.

He moved toward the bike like the proverbial moth to a flame. "Helmet?" he murmured.

Ash squinted and grinned. "Not required here. But if you're chicken..." he let the words trail.

Dante nodded. His mom would be so disappointed if she saw him right now. Getting on a bike with a stranger, not wearing a helmet...

Probably falling for the wrong kind of boy.

Chapter Three – Weird Questions

Ash waited patiently for Dante to work through his hesitation and finally climb behind him.

“I’ve never been on one,” Dante admitted.

“I’m not surprised. Hold on to me.”

“You said you would go slow,” Dante said.

The kid sounded so anxious. Ash didn’t know why he thought of Shana’s baby stepbrother like that. He wasn’t old himself, at twenty-one. But maybe he felt older, and that was that. On the other hand, it was a lot of fun to tease this boy and see him react to everything like it was new. Nothing was new to Ash. Not lately, it hadn’t been.

“So, you want to ride without holding on to anything?” Ash asked and turned his head.

He put the bike into gear a bit brusquely and Dante leaned forward, taken by surprise. That seemed to convince him. There was no point in telling him that he could hold on to the backrest if he so wanted. Ash felt a small rush of pleasure as long arms wrapped around him, showing the same firmness as before. There were some mean lean muscles underneath that pale skin, it seemed.

Good. He wouldn’t have to worry that his passenger would end up sprawled all over the road. Chicks always said they digged his ride, and then complained about how uncomfortable it felt.

Even as he was hugging him like that, Dante appeared to want to put some distance between their bodies, which Ash knew it wasn’t possible, not on a ride like his. He took the curb out of the driveway, and Dante had to hold on tightly.

Better. His slim body was now plastered against Ash’s back. His thighs squeezed Ash, and it wasn’t like the usual grip he experienced when riding with girls. Dante was a real squeezer, and the thought alone moved past his brain barrier and poured a different type of pleasure through Ash’s spine, only to make a downturn and end up pooling in his groin.

It had been so long since that had happened last. Ash shook his head. He was doing this to himself. He didn’t fuck boys. No matter how much his body told him it was right. He should know better.

But he could play around with Dante. No harm in a little bit of teasing. Plus, they had something in common; they needed to eat some real food.

What was Ash thinking right now? He probably only rode with girls. Dante was overly conscious of how tightly he was holding the strong muscular body in front of him. The interior side of his

knees rested against thighs of steel. His arms could feel the hills and valleys of those washboard abs. And he was resting his burning cheek against the back of Ash's head, the short hair there prickling a bit.

All that, while there was no escape from breathing in Ash's scent. Dante was pretty certain it wasn't aftershave or some body care product he was sniffing so shamelessly right now. Boy, he smelled nice. Dante had never acted on his attraction toward guys in his life, and now, there was a front-row seat... no, actually, he was on the back seat, so to speak, to do just that.

Part of him pushed him to run his hands over the awesome abs and feel the pecs, too, but it would be wrong on so many levels.

One, they could crash.

Two, Ash would kill him for sure.

Three, he might just die from self-combusting desire.

It was just better to keep his hands to himself. What an irony.

Ash must have taken dozens of dudes for a ride with him, not just girls. With that kind of attitude and those looks, he had to be popular. So, it was only Dante making more of it than it truly was.

He hadn't asked where they were going, so he felt relieved when Ash pulled in the parking lot of a diner with a name Dante didn't recognize but didn't appear to be some fancy place where they served fusion hamburgers. He had enough money for a normal vacation, saved from his after-school jobs, but not on the same footing with the wealth bracket his dad was now in, after striking gold with his company. And Dante didn't want to ask his dad for anything. It was a matter of principle, and he didn't want his father to think that his mom couldn't afford things like that.

Dante knew very well that she had saved the alimony money so that he could go to the college of his choosing. His school wasn't cheap, either, and Dante hoped to repay her for everything one day. Her and his dad. So, under no circumstances had he replied to his invitation while expecting to be a freeloader all summer long. They had both done enough for him as things stood.

Relief washed through him the moment Ash stopped the engine. As promised, it had been a slow, pleasant ride, which had only proven torturous to Dante due to his lewd thoughts regarding the guy.

His skin was prickling a little from the wind, but in an enjoyable way. He got off the motorcycle quickly, to avoid any contact with Ash that wasn't justified by riding with him.

"Great, we're here," he said with a sigh.

Ash gave him a lopsided grin. “Were you scared even though we went at a snail pace like that?”

Dante could understand why his relief would be understood like that, and it was all for the better. “I told you. My first time and all.”

Ash brushed his chin with a closed fist and brought closer that amazing smile. “Congrats on having your cherry popped then.”

Dante closed his eyes, hoping for Ash to move along already. Thankfully, he did. “I’ll buy you lunch,” he said and rushed after the other. “I practically saved on the cab fare by riding with you.”

“Sure,” Ash replied without turning.

Dante slowed down a little. He had assumed that they would have lunch together after riding like that, but there was no guarantee that Ash wanted the same thing. There was something cold in how this older boy carried himself, even when he was smiling.

“Are you coming or not? I’m hungry,” Ash said, his hand on the door, half-turning to watch Dante. “And bring out that dough,” he added with a wink. “I have quite the appetite.”

That made some things clear. Dante no longer hesitated as he followed Ash into the diner.

Sitting across from the kid gave Ash the opportunity he wanted to observe him at length. He was one damn pretty boy, hands down and two thumbs up. During most of the last years, Ash had really tried not to stare at guys like that, and now felt like a person on a diet ending up breaking into the cake shop.

He had such an interesting hair color, Ash thought, as he took in the guy while waiting for the waitress to come back with their order. It wasn’t blond, but it wasn’t red, either; it was somewhere in between, and maybe some chicks would take that out of a bottle, but not a boy like Dante.

Everything about him said that he wasn’t the type to dye his hair. His clothes were plain, a bit too large for his frame, his kicks were practical, although not for that kind of weather, and he didn’t even have a phone that screamed ‘rich kid’. That, Ash didn’t get. He had learned from Shana that Mr. Elsher was fucking loaded - her words, not his. Sure thing, the guy was busy enough and had no idea he had a freeloader practically living in the guesthouse. Shana’s mom covered for her, and the stern man who put money on the table in that house never seemed to question the amount of young people always visiting. Of course, Shana played the good girl act when ‘daddy’ was around, and even forced Ash to pretend to be the pool boy on occasion. He doubted that Mr. Elsher would notice anyway. He seemed a bit of an airhead. Ash could see some of that in the boy sitting across from him. But if Mr. Elsher was so loaded, why did his son

look like he belonged to lower middle class at best? Ash had developed a special sense for things like that; it helped him identify and set apart people toward whom he needed to playact and the rest. It had worked so far.

Dante bit on his bottom lip while staring at the menu. The silence between them had to be awkward by now, but Ash didn't plan on breaking it just yet. The boy had beautiful pouty lips. He could purse them in anger or let them twist when delivering a bit of sarcasm, but nothing changed the fact that he was pretty, he wore his heart on his sleeve, and that he was out of his depth at his dad's place. Ash felt mighty tempted to show him around, and he didn't mean it like sightseeing and stuff.

He should really pull his mind out of the gutter. Not that he could. He had been born there.

But a pretty boy like that, going to college, he'd have no shortage of girls to fawn over him. Ash would do the same if allowed. No, that was no option.

He turned his head to search for the waitress.

“Do you come here often?”

Dante's innocent question sent the ball in his court. “Is that your usual pick up line?” No harm in teasing and flirting a little. No one had to know.

Dante blushed and looked away. “I meant it like an actual question. You ordered without even looking at the menu.”

He had a handful of freckles, spread over his nose and the height of his cheeks. Not visible, except if you looked closely. Ash grinned. “You're a no nonsense kind of guy, huh? How does that work with girls?”

Dante shrugged. “I wouldn't know.”

Ash quirked an eyebrow. What kind of answer was that?

The waitress interrupted them that very moment. Dante thanked her politely. She examined him briefly and smiled. Yeah, as he thought. The guy was a charmer, in his own way.

It was astonishing to look at Ash wolfing down his burger. Either he had been sunstruck or Ash was every bit Dante's dreams were made of if he couldn't even stop staring and imagining inappropriate things for a moment.

“Are you going to eat those fries?” Ash asked him. “And stop staring. You're giving me the willies.”

“Sorry. I just haven’t seen anyone making food disappear like that.”

Ash grinned and took a sip from his soda. His lips wrapped around the straw, giving Dante just another unnecessary dozen of dirty thoughts to worry about later. “No wonder you’re so skinny. You’re a dainty eater. Is that why you’re called Dante? What kind of name is that?”

“Are you for real? Ash?” Dante tried his best impersonation of an affronted person while crossing his arms and resting his elbows on the table.

“It’s short for Ashton. Ashton Moreno.”

Dante looked at the offered hand and finally shook it. “Dante Elsher. I suppose I was a bit of a sourpuss earlier.”

Ash laughed while holding his hand. It was calloused, warm, and strong. Dante could swear something was creeping up his arm from that touch alone; it was the opposite of unpleasant, and it threatened him with small attempts at his sanity. During this time, Ash also held him locked in his hypnotizing gaze, the color of steel and storm.

Dante pulled his hand slowly, and at least, this time, Ash got the message. “So, you and Shana, huh?” he said. This dude was so just pulling his leg, flirting with him – was it really flirting or was he imagining things? – when he was entangled with the most annoying stepsister on the planet.

“Me and her, what?” Ash asked roughly.

Yeah, those eyes could freeze a person on the spot, too. Dante looked away. “You’re an item,” he said slowly.

Ash snorted. “Yeah, right. Me, her, and some other twenty dudes and chicks.”

Dante frowned and searched his mind. Maybe he was just a closeted gay guy with a very narrow look of the world. “Is it like one of those communes?” he asked.

“What’s that, a commune?” Ash asked and stared at him curiously.

“Are you in a polyamorous relationship?” Dante asked.

Ash frowned and stared even more. Dante withered under that glare. Was he asking weird questions?

“I have no idea where you’re going with this, but let me tell you how it is.” Ash leaned over the table and grabbed Dante by the back of the head in a firm grip, as if he wanted to make sure that his words would sink in. “I’m fucking your stepsister. She fucks everything on two legs. I fuck her girlfriends if I feel like it. Does that make any sense to you?”

Not really. Dante was even more confused than before. “Yeah, totally,” he lied.

Ash grimaced and pulled away. Then, he got up and went to the register.

Wasn't the waitress supposed to come back to get their money? Dante looked as Ash paid. A crease on his forehead that hadn't been there before made his handsome face look dark and menacing.

Dante decided that it was for the better if he didn't insist on having promised to pay for lunch. He had a feeling Ash would take it as an affront for reasons only he understood. And it was better if he made himself scarce at this point and not ask for a ride back.

Little Dante and all his little questions. Ash worked his jaw. No one had forced him to admit how things stood, but he didn't want the cute blondish guy to have any misunderstandings about what Ash was to his stepsister and the rest.

So, if it had been his choice, why was he so pissed? He was what he was. No shame in that.

Really? Not usually.

But this was different. Those pretty eyes... yeah, Ash wanted them to look at him like he was some fucking movie star or something. Like that first moment, when they had stared at each other, before Ash had sent him flying into the pool.

He waved and left the change on the counter. He'd have to go for a long fast ride to cool his head, and fuck some real pussy tonight to take Dante out of his head.

Now, where the hell was he? Ash looked, but there was no sign of his passenger anywhere.

And he had just bolted. That was a sign for Ash, one that said that he should know better than trying to get under some dude's skin, no matter how pale and pretty.

Chapter Four – Desire To Teach

“So, did you bring me something?” Shana asked him the second he was inside.

“What?” Dante ignored her and continued toward the stairs. One lunch with Ash, and he needed some time alone. This vacation proved suddenly dangerous in more than one way.

“You didn’t bring me anything,” Shana complained.

“Well, you didn’t say anything,” Dante replied and continued on his way.

“Ah, damn, I’m so fucking hungry. I’ll just call that fucking Ash and tell him to bring some fucking food.”

His stepsis was truly in love with the F-word. And Dante needed to get away from her before she asked if he had been with Ash earlier.

By how her footsteps hurried away, he could tell he was spared for now.

Dante considered whether he should call his dad or not. The chances were he wouldn’t be able to lie, and his dad would probe him for info on what it was going on at the house that made him want to leave. Again, he wasn’t a snitch and as disagreeable as Shana was, he didn’t plan to rat her out.

All those were just reasons he was inventing on the go. The real reason why going back home wasn’t in the cards sounded a lot different, and it concerned Dante’s desire to have a bit more time to admire Ash, his chiseled torso, and that intricate tattoo on his shoulder and neck. Just a few things, really. Otherwise, the guy was obnoxious and while he had paid for Dante’s lunch, of which he had eaten like half anyway, and that meant that they couldn’t even be friends.

He snorted in self-deprecation and rubbed the front of his pants. No, he wouldn’t go at it for another time. What kind of man was he?

Apparently, the kind who wanted to masturbate in the middle of the day while thinking of cold blue eyes, soft inviting lips, and thighs of steel. Yes, he had to remember those, too. Dante grunted as his little friend grew against his hand and he could feel it through the sweatpants.

Well, seeing how he considered himself a man now, it was all right to drool a little more over that straight guy, who had just told him to his face that he was sleeping not only with Shana, but also with other girls, who knew how many.

In the meantime, besides giving himself all the self-loving he was capable of, he needed to find some other things to do. That involved his getting out of bed and confronting his stepsister again. Maybe there was stuff to do around, and he could ask her.

The prospect of having to talk to Shana again made him wince. Well, his dad wanted them to go along, hence the whole leaving the house to them and all that. The least he could do was try. Dante got to his feet, decided that real men had to do plenty of things they didn't like.

When he got downstairs, the house seemed completely transformed. There were yellow balloons everywhere, glitter, and various decorations.

"Is it Christmas?" he asked, taking in his surroundings with keen eyes.

Shana was whistling, busy with sprucing up the place, if that could really be said about it. "No, you dork," she retorted. "We're having a party!"

"And that in the morning, was it something else?"

Shana scoffed and paid him no mind. "Bring me that garland. I need to leave the place properly dolled up before I go out to dinner with Mike."

Dante obeyed and took the gaudy glittery thing to her as indicated. "Who's Mike?"

Shana glared to him and searched his face for signs that he was trying to pull her leg. How on earth was he supposed to know who this Mike was?

"I keep forgetting you're new around here. Well, dear baby brother, Mike is the lucky man who's going to put a ring on this little finger." She gestured for emphasis.

"What about Ash?" Dante asked, still unsure about how things stood between the beautiful jerk, making the headlines of his current wide-eyed fantasies, and his stepsister.

"What do you mean?" She was, once more, absorbed in her interior design efforts.

"Isn't he your boyfriend?"

Shana first snorted, and then burst into laughter. "Ash? For real? He's basically my charity case."

"How so?" Dante questioned further and continued to feed her with garlands and balloons without being told again.

"Ash is like practically homeless," Shana explained. "I put him in the guesthouse." She stopped and turned to stare him down. "No word of this to daddy, or I'll kill you."

Dante wasn't entirely sure she was joking with that killing stuff. "I'm not a snitch," he assured her.

"Good. Well, since you're so curious. Ash is freeloading here. Well, not entirely. He gives something in return."

“He’s paying rent?” Dante handed Shana another garland.

Shana sighed for show. “You’re eighteen, so I suppose you’re old enough to know how the world works. Fucks. That’s what he gives in return.”

“Fucks? Like in those memes, ‘I’m looking for a fuck to give’?” Dante sort of understood where that was going, but he needed a confirmation from his ditzy stepsis. And, while he didn’t use vulgar words, in Shana’s presence, he needed to act like one of the crowd so that he could get all the information he needed from her.

“No, silly,” Shana said with fake affection and patted his head. “He’s a fuckboy. But, you know, as real as that word gets. He fucks me when I feel like it, and he fucks my girlfriends for favors.”

“I thought that word was used for guys who cheat on girls, two-timing and such,” Dante murmured.

“Well, it’s what we like to call the likes of Ash around here. Fuckboy. Because, come on, a guy like that should fuck for cash. I’d do it in a heartbeat if I were in his place,” Shana said.

“And you’d be a manwhore,” Dante concluded.

Shana rolled her eyes like she couldn’t believe him. “Fuckboy sounds cuter,” she said with a broad grin. “Between you and me,” she leaned closer, forcing Dante to lean back, “Ash is top notch at what he does. Too bad you’re a dude. I would’ve ask him to do you.”

“No, thanks,” Dante said wryly.

Shana laughed. “Too bad it’s lost on you, just how good Ash is at what he does. Man, when he grabs you by the hips and pulls you on his cock,” she gestured, making Dante look away, “he takes you to fucking heaven.”

“How about Mike? Is he just as good?” Dante asked, just to veer the conversation away from what Ash could or couldn’t do.

“Mike doesn’t need to be good at that. He drives a fucking Bentley,” she said every word like it was the most important thing she needed to dish out.

“Does he know about your fooling around with Ash?” Dante continued.

Shana rolled her eyes. “We’re all fooling around in this place. It’s no secret.”

Dante somehow doubted about the possibility of said Mike to put a ring on his stepsis’s finger. “And how does it work? With the favors and such?” he asked. He had no reason to know that, but he wanted to.

“For Ash? Well, he’s poor, so he needs stuff. The girls know what the deal is. Why do you want to know? Don’t tell me you’re gay or something.”

The way she spat the word convinced him that it wasn’t a good idea to tell her the truth. However, it wasn’t like him to lie, so he just ignored her.

“I could hook you up with one of my girlfriends,” Shana continued, “but I don’t think they’re into the dork type. Unless one of them is a charitable mood tonight.”

Dante couldn’t care less about the mood Shana’s girlfriends were usually in. “I have someone back home,” he lied this time.

“Oh, okay, Mr. Loyal. Don’t get your panties in a twist. For the record, I bet your girlfriend sucks a bag of dicks right now, while you’re here, being true to her, like a sad little dog.”

“Does Mike enjoy the way you can string so many vulgarities in a single sentence?” Dante asked, unwilling to let his stepsister get on his nerves so much without at least giving something back.

“He absolutely loves it.” Shana pursed her lips and blew a kiss at him. “I’m so going to blow his mind tonight, on the backseat of that Bentley.”

Dante really didn’t need any more details about Shana’s plans. He left her to continue the preparations for the big party. He knew what to do. He’d get his shorts and go into the backyard to try dip his toes in the pool before everyone got there.

Ash had a good look at the pool from the guesthouse. He had roamed for a while but then decided to return, for lack of anything better to do. Since Shana had threatened him that Michaela wanted a piece of him tonight, at the party, he needed to get his sleep. That was just a little lie he was telling himself, when he was in fact just curious if Dante had got home, too.

He looked out the window and grinned when he saw exactly the guy he was looking for. Dante wore a pair of long and large swim shorts and he was gingerly letting himself into the water. Clearly, the dude didn’t do a lot of swimming. And Ash suddenly had a burning desire to teach him how it was done.

Dante let the water close over his head, enjoying the coolness of the water on his skin before resurfacing.

And seeing Ash standing by the edge, wearing practically nothing. It all happened so fast, but Dante managed to sneak a peek at the dormant snake and the coarse hair above it, as Ash jumped into the pool, laughing.

“Dude,” he protested and splashed water at the other. “Haven’t you heard of swim shorts?”

“We’re both guys,” Ash replied and swam dangerously close to him. “Don’t tell me it’s the first time you’ve seen another dude’s dick.”

Dante swallowed thickly. If he didn’t count the porn he was consuming in maybe not so healthy doses...

“For real?” Ash was standing in front of him now.

“Not everyone’s sex-obsessed like you,” Dante accused. He couldn’t take the word ‘fuckboy’ out of his head, and it was all Shana’s fault.

Ash didn’t appear to mind. “I can see that you know nothing about swimming. How about I teach you some?”

“It depends. Are you going to put some shorts on?”

“Hmm... no.”

“Then--”

Dante didn’t manage to continue that thought, as Ash pushed his head underwater. He struggled, and Ash only let him get back after ten seconds or so. He was laughing the jerk, while Dante sputtered and coughed.

“See? Your shape is bad,” Ash said and slapped him on the back. Then, he moved behind him and guided him gently into a floating position. “I’m pretty good at this.”

Dante had a mind to ask at what other things Ash was equally adept. He feared that he might not be able to handle the truth. Shana’s words were still with him, about how Ash would grab his sex partner from behind and take her to heaven. Dante could see himself in that position, and it was so bad to fantasize like that while real-life Ash, completely naked, was holding him from below with one arm and pressed against the small of his back with the other.

“Do you work out?” Ash asked him, in-between instructions.

“I skate a lot,” Dante explained.

“On rollerblades?”

“No. I mean ice skating.”

“Hmm. I guess that explains the ass.”

Dante blushed and leaned forward so that the pool water cooled his face.

Ash remembered something he read at one time about ice skaters having strong butt muscles because of all the control they need during different moves, not that he was personally into ice skating. However, while taking in the nice curve of Dante’s ass, now visibly through the wet baggy shorts, he had a feeling he might reconsider his hobbies. If he were to look at Dante ice skating in the buff, his dick swinging with each move, he might just get into it.

“What are you two doing?” Shana shouted at them from the side.

She was dressed to the nines, or whatever version of that she cared to impersonate with her slutty little black dress and fuck me pumps, and she looked pissed.

“Just teaching your baby brother how to swim. You’re neglecting your duties as a sister.”

“Get out of the pool, suckers,” she yelled, tapping her foot. “Tonight had to be perfect.”

“Come on, Shana,” Ash drawled. “There’ll be like a dozen or dicks and chicks in here. What do you think we’re doing? Drinking the fucking water?”

She didn’t explain herself. Ash wondered whether she was high, too, and not only drunk. That chick took to the bottle like a duck to water. It was a wonder how she still held herself on those high heels without falling face first at every step.

“Just clean it!” she shouted and turned away.

“Man, your sister is a slave driver,” Ash commented.

“And you’re the pool boy,” Dante added.

Ash felt all his muscles stiffening. What the hell had Shana told her baby brother about their arrangement? “All right,” he said, “school’s out, lesson’s over.”

“Thank you, teach. And I can help you with this... although I know nothing about pool cleaning.”

Ash worked a kink in his neck, ignoring Dante and his hopeful smile. “Nah. I got this,” he said brusquely and hit the water with one open palm, splashing water everywhere. “Now, go, shoo,” he added, seeing how Dante still stood there. “I’m not crazy about having an audience while I work.”

Dante nodded, without hiding his disappointment, and got out of the pool. Ash followed him with his eyes. Yeah, he had a perfect little butt. With a grunt, Ash squeezed his cock. “That ain’t for us,” he mumbled under his breath.

Chapter Five – What’s The Big Deal?

Ash was one hell of a character, flirty and all smiles for one moment, and cold and all a frown the next. Dante couldn’t make sense of him, and the problem was that he wanted to do just that and very much. Sure enough, he was a ladies’ man... no, it was how Shana said, more likely. A fuckboy.

Dante turned the term in his head over and over. Ash did things in exchange for favors. Could he give Dante something, too, if he offered? No, he couldn’t think like that. Yes, he was a narrow-minded boy, who hadn’t even come out to his mom, so stuff like that was beyond his comprehension.

No matter how flirty Ash got with him, it didn’t mean anything. It probably came as a second nature to a guy like that. And he fooled around only with girls. Shana would have told him if Ash was at least bisexual.

Dante rubbed his face. He had a crush, obviously. He couldn’t even bring himself to remember that only that morning, he had wanted to go home without a glance back. Now, he felt as if he needed that summer to go on forever.

He rolled on the bed. He didn’t have the guts to make a move, mainly because it was clear as day that Ash would at least laugh at him if not worst, but that didn’t mean that Dante wasn’t free to enjoy his good looks from afar. By the end of the night, Ash would be in the arms of some girl or even more than one, if his reputation was real, and Dante would be alone in his room.

But, the party was just starting, which meant that Dante had some hours to spend doing that admiring thing he had been planning. Plus, he needed to collect as much jerk off material as he could while he was still around.

He took a critical look at his clothes. Whenever his mom had attempted to get him to try something other than jeans and plain white t-shirts, he had opposed vehemently. Now, he very much regretted being so unfashionable. Not that it mattered, he reminded himself. After all, everyone there would pay him no mind, and that included Ash, who would have his fair share to pick from.

In the end, he got into the skinniest jeans he had, as those seemed more fitting for a party and a regular cut t-shirt that at least didn’t make him look like he was floating inside it.

Michaela sauntered toward him, flicking her red mane over one shoulder and placed a clammy hand on his arm. Her green eyes were lined heavily with black, making her look like an owl. Ash fought the knee jerk reaction to shake off her touch. She was skinny, mean, and she wanted him tonight.

Usually, he'd have no issue with that. Michaela was one essential part of Shana's posse he hadn't yet banged. The novelty was supposed to keep him going. Plus, she had said something about getting him a part-time at her uncle's car showroom. Ash didn't know how much trust he could place in that, but he had fucked before for a lot less than a promise.

The problem was, he realized, that while he liked fucking and it came to him like a glove, tonight, he wasn't in the mood to give it to this Michaela chick. His head was full of that boy, and it was annoying. They had barely met that morning, and all the barriers Ash had built so carefully to make sure that he wouldn't look at another guy like that had disappeared into thin air.

Instead of wrapping his arm around Michaela and nuzzling her cheek, while scrunching his nose at the overpowering smell of her hair spray, he would have much wanted to feel the perfect curve of Dante's ass filling his hand. And instead of faking it for the umpteenth time, he would have just fucking loved it for a change.

He shook his head. He needed to stop thinking like that, or he was doomed.

"What is it, baby?" Michaela cooed and caressed his cheek with her sharp nails. Ash could bet those hurt if she put her mind to it. She'd probably scratch his back while nailing her, thinking that the wild cat look was good on her.

"I'm not feeling it tonight," he said brusquely. Where the fuck did it say on him that he had to do it with her if he didn't want to?

"What?" She leaned toward him and tried to make him look at her. "But Shana--"

"Well, you and she both can go fuck yourselves for all I care," he threw at her. Then, he reconsidered. "Sorry, just got some bad news, is all."

Michaela ignored his earlier insult like she hadn't heard it at all. "Baby," she drawled, "but I have just the remedy to make you feel better. You can just lie on your back and I'll be on top, doing all the work."

Ash caught her wrists and pushed them down, away from him. Those long nails were starting to freak him out. They were just so red and pointy. "I'll go rest for a bit. I'll look for you later." He kissed her on the forehead and patted her butt.

He didn't care what she might be thinking while he was walking away.

Dante watched with avid eyes while it looked like Ash had just rejected that redhead. What was that all about? Whatever it was, Ash was leaving, and now, Dante had some liquid courage in his

system. Since Shana had pressed him into drinking a glass of whiskey and even watched him to check if he got it down his throat, he felt braver than usual.

He grabbed one bottle that was still full and began walking. Could that be considered a favor? The kind he could use as leverage to ask for something really, really small?

Now, where had Ash gone? The pool was lit like it was day, but that made the darkness around it darker. He tripped once but got back on his feet right away. He could do this.

Ash sat on the grass and rested his back against the tree. The Elshers really had a nice property. That garden was his secret favorite place. The one place where Shana and the others didn't like to wander because it wasn't their jam.

It was Ash's jam, though. Shana had no idea, but that was where he spent the most time when she wasn't looking, trimming a bush here and there, caring for the flowerbeds and all that. Mrs. Elsher even bragged to some friends of hers that she was doing nothing to care for the garden, but it just thrived. Ash suspected her of having half a brain, just like her daughter, but he also had more respect for her, because unlike her child, she was kind. That was probably what Mr. Elsher must have seen in her. According to Shana, he was super smart and had dedicated all his life to his work. It must have been why things hadn't worked out between him and the other Mrs. Elsher, Dante's mom.

What business did he have to sit there and think of some strangers' family?

It was only because he couldn't take Dante out of his head. And he needed his head so that he could play Michaela into believing that she was a good lay, and he really liked giving to her instead of thinking of how slender hips belonging to a guy, not her, would feel in his hold, while he took him from behind.

Dante's ass would surely offer plenty of cushion while Ash slammed hard inside him. He bit his lower lip. That kind of thing, he was supposed to keep for Michaela and the rest. Only that, tonight, he just couldn't.

He jumped to his feet when he heard a twig breaking under someone's foot. "Who's there?" he asked loudly.

"It's me." Dante emerged from the bushes, carrying a bottle in his hand. "Wow, you're hard to find."

"Maybe I don't want to be found," Ash shot back. The last thing he needed was the boy who had taken control over his mind to appear out of the blue and interrupt his efforts of straightening himself out.

“I brought you this,” Dante said, ignoring his jab.

Ash took the bottle. The small romantic light casting over the small garden was enough for him to notice that Dante was as pretty as before, and also, that he was a little tipsy.

“What is this?”

“For you,” Dante insisted. “The others said... hmm, that you like favors.”

Ash worked his jaw slowly. Was Dante trying to piss him off or something? “No shit. And what else did they say?”

Dante squirmed. Even with some booze in his system, he was a nice kid. “They said, um, that you, that you...”

Right, he couldn't bring himself to say it. Ash threw the bottle on the grass and walked close to Dante. “That I fuck them,” he finished the sentence. “Is that why you're here? Do you want me to fuck you like the others?”

Dante just squirmed a little more, worrying his bottom lip that Ash longed so much to take into his mouth and savor at length.

“I don't fuck boys,” Ash said roughly. Even if Dante offered, which had made his heart leap for a moment, he just couldn't bring himself to do it.

“Okay,” Dante said slowly, “okay. But... what if... I mean, how about a little kiss?”

Ash couldn't believe his ears. Did the guy even realize what he was saying? What he was offering?

“I mean,” Dante continued to ramble on, “what's the big deal? It's just a kiss, and you could close your eyes anyway and think of that redhead--”

Ash surprised even himself as he abruptly caught Dante's wrists and forced them behind the guy's back, bringing their faces together. Dante's lips smelled of booze and longing, and Ash couldn't bring himself to stop.

He brushed his lips against the willing ones, slowly at first. Yet, as they parted to welcome him in, all the frustration and confusion he had endured all day came through like a flood, and he grabbed Dante hard, pushing his tongue in, wanting to swallow him whole if he could, this soft innocent boy, who had no idea what he was getting himself into.

Dante keened and moved his tongue clumsily to rise to the occasion. He was obviously inexperienced, but that made him all the sweeter. Ash tasted him at length, his eager mouth, his scrumptious lips and ready tongue, while he couldn't stop thinking about how they would feel against his body, touching him everywhere.

With a growl, he pushed Dante away. He turned and grabbed the bottle from the grass. Tonight, fuck everyone. He'd get hammered and forget.

"Ash," Dante called for him pleadingly.

"You got your kiss," Ash shot at him. "Now beat it, kid."

He walked away, his heart beating hard in his chest. What the fuck was wrong with him?

Dante remained standing there, for a while, hoping Ash would come back. The kiss lingered on his lips. It had been perfect. But, in the end, Ash had still rejected him. He just couldn't stand kissing him, was that it?

Sometimes, bravery was overrated, he thought as he turned on his heel, tears in his eyes. What good had it done for him, anyway? Now, he had the memory of a perfect kiss to torture him forever.

Chapter Six – I Have To Tell You Something About Santa

He threw himself on the bed and hid his face in the pillow while letting out a self-pitying moan. Why did it hurt so much? He had been the one to decide that he would go to Ash without expecting anything to happen. The guy had been clear about it. He didn't fuck boys. Dante revolted, something of that liquid courage still present in his veins. Well, he wasn't a boy. He was eighteen. A real man already. Why couldn't others see it?

Next time he saw Ash, he'd tell him that. Yeah, that would make him think twice about telling Dante off like that after kissing him like there was no one other than them left in the world. He pressed his fingers against his lips. That had been amazing. His first kiss. Just perfect. If he could only separate it from the beautiful jerk responsible for it.

It was impossible. And Ash was perfect, too, just like the way he kissed. Dante rolled on the bed, unable to find a satisfying position for practicing self-pity. Even without closing his eyes, he could make out that handsome face close to his. Why did he have to be so beautiful and break Dante's heart in so many little pieces?

It wasn't fair at all. Dante stuffed the tortured pillow between his legs and rested on one side. The music outside his room blared loudly, but if he put his mind to it, he'd be able to sleep, eventually.

And maybe forget about cold unforgiving eyes and hot lips messing with his head.

"Where's Dante?" He was halfway through the bottle the boy had given him, and the more he drunk, the less sense his self-imposed restrictions seemed to make sense.

Shana was hanging from that guy Mike's neck and ignoring him. He patted her shoulder. "Dante's room, where is it?" he asked.

She turned her head, annoyed with being interrupted from what she considered skillful seduction. That was anything but; she was just throwing herself at the guy, and Mike took her only because she was available and easy. Ash didn't need a special book to tell him how men thought. That was a valid point for him, too. He was also thinking about only one thing, how to nail pretty little Dante to his bed and fuck him senseless for daring to come up to him and offer himself.

"Somewhere upstairs. What business do you have with the dork, anyway?" Shana watched him through her eyelashes, so heavy with mascara that she couldn't keep her eyes fully open. Or she was just that wasted.

"He dropped his phone outside," Ash served the lie like it was his second nature.

Shana didn't offer to get her baby brother's phone and take it to him herself, and Ash was counting on it. "He's probably sleeping already, the nerd," she said with a shrug. "But knock yourself out. I think it's the second on the left as you go up the stairs."

He just nodded shortly and made a vague gesture with his chin at Mike. The asshole had privilege written all over him. Even the tee he was wearing had to be something at least ten times more expensive than what Ash wore. He was spread on the sofa, his legs parted wide like he owned the place and stared at Ash with the entitled superiority only unearned money could buy. He wore his hair brushed back and glued to his head, and had the bone structure of a Neanderthal. The look he gave Ash, along with a sneer, was scornful.

Mike had to know Ash had fucked Shana. Maybe that was where the scorn was coming from. But what the hell did Mike expect from a crowd like that? Everyone fucked everyone. Well, not entirely. Chicks fooled around, kissing and touching each other's boobs, just to make the guys hornier, but Ash didn't recall ever seeing guys doing the same.

All the more reason to keep his attraction toward Dante under wraps. Still, half of that whiskey bottle said that he couldn't keep it like that, as far as Dante was concerned.

Yeah, the little prick would learn what it meant to flaunt his pretty face and perky ass in front of a dude whose cock needed only the slightest incentive to end up fucking the said ass.

Dante jerked to wakefulness as the sound of someone entering his room found its way through his addled brain. He blinked as the same person turned on the lights. "Ash? What are you doing here?"

He watched, without understanding a thing, as Ash fiddled with the knob, seemed frustrated with it, and then grabbed a chair to block the door from getting open from outside.

That was enough to send Dante into a state of alarm. Was Ash there to give him a beating for that kiss from earlier? He scrambled to his feet. "Get out of my room," he asked in a shaky voice.

Ash snorted and pushed him back on the bed, and then straddled him and bore his intense eyes into Dante's. "Let me tell you how it is, you little fucker. I'm a fuckboy. That's what they call me. So, you want to get fucked. I'm the man for it."

It didn't take a genius to realize that Ash had to be quite drunk. Dante pressed against him, but Ash didn't move. "You need to get off me and get out right now."

Ash snorted. "Are you going to make me?"

Dante narrowed his eyes and pushed hard against his intruder's chest, making him sway a little. Then, he used the momentum to try to punch him, only managing to brush his fist ineffectively

against the other's jaw. That appeared to anger Ash, because he grabbed Dante's wrists and pinned them above his head. Then, without any warning, he leaned forward and captured Dante's lips with his.

That wasn't fair. Dante felt his resolve to kick the jerk out the door melting, just as that sweet tongue searched his mouth slowly, mapping it bit by bit, without caring that someone's sanity was a stake.

Dante felt all too ready to give up on his sanity for the sake of a kiss. Other parts of him seemed willing to join the circus, as Ash ground his hips against his body, making him feel that both of them were getting hard.

"Do you feel it, pretty boy?" Ash said hotly while teasing his cheek slowly with his lips. "You're like this for me. A pretty boy with pretty lips. You want my cock in you, right? Better you than those skanks downstairs."

"Hey," Dante protested, trying to get back his bearings while his cock rubbed against Ash's crotch through two layers of fabric, "that's my sister you're talking about."

"Well, news flash, pretty boy. Santa's actually a fat drunk, and your sister is a skank. Wanna hit me again? Just try. I'll let you." He pushed Dante's wrists into the bed hard and let go of them.

Then, he let himself fall on the bed by Dante's side with an annoyed huff. All his desire to throw the jerk out disappeared from his mind as he took in that handsome profile, the bitter line of his lips and the arm thrown over the eyes.

Dante reached for him with one hand. He let it rest on Ash's chest, hoping against hope that he wouldn't end up rejected for a second time tonight. "You're pretty," he accused.

Ash gave up on guarding his face, and the look in his eyes was one of so sudden vulnerability that Dante had no idea what to do with it.

"You're pretty," Ash shot back and rolled on his side so that now they were staring at each other openly.

Dante snickered. They were lying apart from each other, but the moment they were sharing was intimate and true. Ash laughed, and the bitterness from his handsome features was gone.

Laughter died on their lips as Ash reached for Dante and traced the shape of his upper lip with a rough finger. Dante blinked slowly and moved his head just enough so that he could lick that invading finger and take it in his mouth.

Ash moved closer and wrapped one hand around the back of his head. They were now close enough to kiss.

“If you’re just doing this because you’re drunk--” Dante started.

“You don’t know,” Ash said, unclear about what exactly Dante didn’t know.

It no longer mattered as their mouth came together. Ash’s tongue snaked inside, enveloping Dante’s around it. He was being taught how to kiss without any verbal directions. Dante found himself mimicking every move, and the better he got at it, the more encouraging soft muffled moans poured out of Ash.

Dante put a timid hand on the hard chest, feeling it through the t-shirt. Ash was more daring by bringing one hand to grab Dante’s ass.

“Don’t worry,” Ash whispered in his ear, “I won’t fuck you tonight. I’m too damn raw inside to make it right. But I will. Don’t think that I won’t.”

Dante wanted to protest, but Ash was firm in how he was handling him, kneading his ass and kissing him, and making him fall in love so hard that there was no way he would come back from that unscathed.

Then Ash pushed him on his back and pushed down his sweatpants. So, after all, he wouldn’t keep that promise, Dante thought and tried to prepare himself mentally for the next part. Even if it was so sudden, he would do it in a heartbeat. Maybe it would hurt; it would most likely hurt. But he was horny enough to go through with it, for sure.

Ash interrupted his horny thoughts by wrapping one hand around his erection. “Is this for me, pretty boy? You’re hard like this for me?” he teased, while his fist pumped Dante’s cock slowly.

Dante squirmed. Some of the alcohol from earlier still lingered in his mind, but it was only enough to give him a little buzz and nothing else. No, the source of his hitched breathing, the tickling sensation traveling across his skin, and the hot desire pooling in his lower belly, wasn’t the booze.

Ash flashed his usually cold eyes at him, but they were burning now, and Dante couldn’t help thinking that he had never seen eyes as pretty in his life or would again.

And then, the bad tattooed boy did something that would remain engraved forever on Dante’s mind. He stuck out his tongue and traced a wet trail from the quivering sac to the tip and took the entire thing in his mouth.

Dante gasped and moaned, throwing his head back. “Ash,” he whispered.

The skilled tongue he had taken in his mouth earlier was now wrapping against the head of his cock over and over, sending him into an overdrive of desire he had never thought possible.

He watched helplessly the lovely lips moving up and down his length, while their owner looked at him from time to time as if to check if he was doing it right. Dante reached for Ash's hair and moved his fingers through the strands, enjoying how they felt against his skin.

All this time, he was breathing hard, and his toes curled as he fought to keep still for fear that the smallest wrong signal on his part would make Ash disappear.

Ash pulled back a little but held the tip of Dante's cock on his tongue. His eyes were dreamy now, that single lock of hair now glued to his forehead. There was something so vulnerable, so naked in the way he stared that Dante felt the most privileged human in the world to be allowed to see it.

No time for thinking. The generous mouth holding him hostage moved lower, and this time, Dante experienced hot white heat behind his eyelids as tongue and lips devoured him slowly but with serious intent.

It was just too much for him to consider anything else but the pleasure growing inside him, focusing on a single part of him, until he couldn't hold it in anymore.

"Ash, I'm--" His voice cut off abruptly as he kept one hand locked in Ash's hair, and his hips pushed upward, turning his entire body into a tension rod from his toes to the crown of his head.

The climax hit him like never before. It felt as if it would never end, the release coming from deep inside him and exploding into Ash's mouth.

The other didn't move away; he didn't let go but instead held Dante in place, a hand squeezing his hip, the other the base of his cock. And he drank and drank from Dante, all his desire and earlier frustration, and all of him.

Dante was still breathing hard even as Ash's mouth left him. His eyes were moist, and he worried he was dreaming.

He tried to catch Ash's eyes, but, after the deed, it seemed like they didn't want to look at him anymore.

Dante hurried to wrap his arms around Ash and pull him over him. "That was so amazing," he murmured. "Oh, Ash, you're so amazing."

A low chuckle tickled his cheek and small, feather-like kisses followed. Dante closed his eyes and held Ash tightly. A firm thigh hooked itself over his leg, and he could sense a hard cock pressed against him. "You're--" he started.

"Don't worry. Let me just stay here," Ash said softly in his ear. "Let me just stay here for a while."

Dante held Ash tightly by the shoulders, afraid to let go. “You can stay for as long as you want.”

No, not in that room that wasn’t really his room, but in his arms that were now locked in place, unwilling to ever let go.

Chapter Seven – In The Light Of Day

When Ash woke up, it was just before dawn, the light in the room barely announcing the rise of a new day. It wouldn't be the first time he woke up in a stranger's room. A new feeling, however, was safely tucked inside his chest, and it took him some time to remember.

Sweet Dante. Yes, he was sweet, with his too trusting pretty eyes, that energy of innocence that Ash didn't remember having. He had wanted Ash, but not like the others, no matter the lies he must have told himself.

A boy. He had kissed a boy. Nah, not only that. Ash wanted to laugh as he recalled the sensation of Dante's hard cock in his mouth. A young man, a beautiful unguarded young man. Ash shouldn't have done it, shouldn't have gone ahead with whatever his whiskey soaked brain had told him to do, but there were no regrets inside him, nothing to tell him he had done the wrong thing.

Maybe it would come to him later, all the anger and pain. But, for now, he wanted to shout from the top of his lungs that he had been there, in that room, blowing Dante's mind, and not for one moment, Ash had thought about getting something in exchange for it.

He brushed his hand against Dante's forehead. The guy had a funny sleeping face. He was a cutie. Ash wanted to smooch him and wake him up to tell him that it had been the first time for him, too. Not the sex part, but the feeling.

No, that was one thing he wouldn't do. The light of day was creeping through the curtains already, and with it, it dragged out the truth. Ash pulled his hand back. Reality had nothing to do with this cozy room and the beautiful young man lying sprawled over the blanket with that adorable expression on his face.

He tiptoed around the bed and out, measuring every move to avoid any noise. And then, he closed the door behind him and all the what-ifs that messed up with his mind now and then.

With careful steps, he went downstairs, all the time checking for signs of life in the sleeping house. All of Shana's so-called friends must have gone home already. That was one rule Shana had for her group of party people. No one was allowed to sleep wherever he or she fell, no matter how drunk. If daddy came home and found the house like that, she just wouldn't cope – her words, not his. Like the sad decorations, half ripped, and the glitter covering everything were easy to hide. Shana had a messed up sense of what it meant to be a good girl, but Ash didn't blame her. Until Mr. Elsher had dragged both her and her mom out of the tiny one-room apartment they were sharing in the city and brought them here a couple of years ago, Shana's life hadn't been that different from his. Maybe it was that kind of bonding they were experiencing as people who had had it tough just the same.

“Where the fuck have you been all night?”

Ash stifled a groan and turned on his heel to face his 'employer', as Shana had called herself as a joke on more than one occasion. He didn't like that joke. "I got sleepy," he replied with a shrug.

"Michaela cried on my shoulder for like half the night, cramping my fucking style, all because you didn't care to give her the fucking D."

Was he really friends with this asshole? Shana threw her 'fucks' around like they were fucking candies.

"I wasn't in the mood." Ash hooked his thumbs in his belt loops and tried to stare Shana down.

Not an easy thing to do. She was pissed. The day-old makeup was caked on her face, making her look like a clown after hours.

"Not in the mood?" At first, she said the words slowly, and then she bellowed, "Not in the fucking mood?"

"Geesh, stop it with the yelling, what the fuck? And what do you care, anyway? The rule is simple. I fuck only the chicks I dig. And I don't dig her, okay?"

Shana threw her arms into the air. "I'm so done with your shit, Ash. I was this close to get Mike to fucking commit, and there she comes, her face a mess, to tell me that you're a fucking coward and a limp dick."

"Weird thing to cry about," Ash said and yawned.

"Where did you sleep?" Shana narrowed her eyes and watched him through her eyelashes. They were so close Ash could see the mascara gluing them together in clumps.

"What's the deal with Mike?" Ash changed tack. "Maybe I can help. You know, I could tell him what a catch he is."

"You slept with Alicia," Shana said, ignoring him, "didn't you?"

Alicia. Ash had to make a real effort to remember who that was. Was it that petite brunette he had nailed for like four times in a row on the backseat of her daddy's car? She had been fun until crying about how her daddy's never home. Then how come his car had been home that time?

"I don't think I even saw her at the party," Ash replied.

"You have a thing for that chick," Shana accused him. "Well, tough luck, lover boy. You're a whore and you don't get to choose your clients."

Ash frowned and stepped close enough to force Shana to move back. "What did you say to me?"

She had the devil in her. She put her chin up and stared at him. “Yeah, you heard me.” She flinched when he lifted one hand and picked a bit of crumpled paper from her hair.

“And I thought we were friends,” he said slowly and shook his head in regret.

He knew how to play this. He had done it so many times. Reading people, telling them what they wanted to hear at the right moment, hurting them when they went against him, manipulating for the most part because when you’re weak and have nothing, you better get good at the game.

So, he moved away slowly, putting all the fake hurt he could muster into that last look he threw her, and then walked out the door.

And now, in one, two, three...

“Ash, hey, wait up.” Shana ran out of the house after him. “Okay, okay, you’re right. We’re friends, and that Michaela is a total ugly bitch.”

Ah, well, it looked like there was no lost love between those two. Go figure.

“You’re not leaving, are you?” Shana asked while finally catching up with him.

“I don’t really have anywhere to go, do I?” Ash said under his breath.

Fuck, he didn’t mean to sound like a whiny loser, no matter how true that was. If he put his mind to it, he could leave, find another place to crash. The world was full of possibilities, right? In his case, most of them had proven rotten. All of them. They came with strings attached.

“Did you really just sleep last night?” Shana asked him while taking his arm and pressing it along her body.

No, I sucked off your baby brother. He moved away from her but without being too rough. “Just going through a rough patch,” he explained. “I’ll do right by Michaela, don’t worry. But first, I need my head screwed on right.”

And take my sorry mind off cute boys. One boy.

“All right, all right,” Shana said and tapped him on the shoulder in a comforting gesture, “take your time, dude. And I’ll deal with her. Now, what were you saying about you helping me with Mike?”

“I can put in a good word for you. We’re both guys. I bet I can find some common ground with him. And tell him you’re good for him.”

She beamed at him, which for a moment made her look more like her age, and not a tired party animal with too many booze-filled nights under her belt. “That sounds cool. Now, you go rest or whatever you need to do. I need my beauty sleep like hours ago.”

Ash just nodded and placed a small peck on her cheek before heading to his place.

His place. Now, that was a stretch. The unused guesthouse was supposed to remain unused. Mr. Elsher just wasn't home enough to realize what was going on and that he had a freeloader on the premises.

All was good for now, but how long until that blew over, and he had to move on?

The room was so bright that Dante wondered at first if he hadn't ended up on a spaceship and was now subjected to objectionable experiments. Ah, he remembered now. He wasn't at home. Damn, the sun seemed a lot more powerful here compared to where he came from.

He smiled and stretched. Last night, the most beautiful guy he had ever seen had gone down on him and given him the most amazing blowjob in his life. The most amazing, of course, because it was also the first.

Dante touched his lips, recalling the kisses. Ash's lips had been so soft and warm as they had nibbled along his jawline and given him such a thrill.

Wow, this summer was announcing itself to be fantastic. Dante wanted to jump for joy, shout from the windows, and...

His enthusiasm died down. Ash had gone away sometimes during the night. Did it mean that he had hated what they had done together afterwards? Dante deflated. He should have held Ash more tightly in his arms to prevent him from leaving.

Well, he didn't need to jump to conclusions. Maybe Ash had a job.

Or he just couldn't let himself be caught in bed with Dante.

That was another good explanation. Still, it meant nothing in the sense that it changed nothing. Dante was starting to make himself a plan.

He didn't even check the fridge for any real food as he doubted that Shana had turned into a responsible human being overnight. So, it was either takeout or going out to eat breakfast. Maybe Ash wanted to hang out, too, in case he was around.

Shana was sound asleep on the sofa in the living room, still in her clothes from the night before. She was even snoring, and Dante snickered. He walked over to her and shook her shoulder.

"Go away, creep," she mumbled.

“Don’t you think you’d feel a lot better if you showered and got in a real bed?” he asked.

“Too tired,” she replied and turned her back to him.

Dante had wished for a sibling for a while, before understanding that it took two people to do the horizontal cha-cha for that to happen. His mom was alone and had him, right? She could just make himself a sister or a brother, because there was a dad, too, even though he wasn’t at home.

It looked like things weren’t that simple. Still, that desire to have a sibling hadn’t truly died. So, he shook Shana again. “I’ll help you up the stairs. Come on.”

She growled something at him but eventually swayed to her feet. Dante took her by the waist, and she threw an arm over his shoulders, so soon, they started toward the stairs. “You’re not going to undress me or anything, right?” she asked.

“No, I wouldn’t go that far, sis,” Dante joked. “But your neck will be thankful if you sleep on a bed instead of a sofa when you get up.”

Her room was surprisingly neat compared to the rest of the house. It wasn’t particularly difficult to find her beauty care supplies. As she sat on the bed, he proceeded at removing her makeup with sure moves. He had seen his mom doing that so many times that it couldn’t be rocket science.

Shana seemed to appreciate the treatment and hummed as he patiently brushed the makeup removal pad against her closed eyelids. “Are you being nice to me?” she asked.

“I guess I am,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Why?”

“I’m your baby brother, remember?”

She laughed until she snorted. He joined her.

“At least, take off this dress before you go to sleep. I’m out of here. By the way, do you know if Ash’s around?”

“Ash. Your buddy.” She snorted again. “He’s at the guesthouse. That’s his lair.” She gestured in a vague direction.

“Okay, I’ll find the way.”

Shana dropped on the bed like a log. Dante no longer insisted she get out of her dress. He closed the door behind him quietly and rushed down the stairs.

In the light of day, would Ash remember about the promise he had made last night?

Chapter Eight – Comfortable Masks

The convo with Shana had left him with a bad taste in his mouth. It had even managed to remove the pleasant giddy feelings from the night before, but it was for a good cause. Last night, while half drunk and wanting Dante to look at him with those big beautiful eyes, all had seemed fine, but right now, Ash had the chance to think things more thoroughly.

“The fuck am I doing?” He stared in his reflection in the mirror while washing his face.

Brushed teeth, fresh shave. He looked good, even with all the booze he had poured in his system last night. He knew that was the face girls liked. He could smile and charm them off their panties in a heartbeat. It wasn't like he had planned for it. And once he understood he had something women wanted from him, he had felt wanted, too.

It had felt nice. He shook his head. It hadn't taken long to understand that feeling wanted like that wasn't exactly all he had been dreaming of.

The strong knock on the front door pulled him out of his self-pity. He threw himself one last look in the mirror. “Cut the crap,” he told his reflection.

Did Shana want to send him to Mike and start building up her case already? “Coming,” he grumbled as he went to get the door.

He stopped dead in his tracks when he saw Dante.

“Hi, Ash.” His pretty face was all a smile. “What do you say we grab breakfast? I don't think there's any real food in the house. Shana practically never eats. Like real food.”

The more Ash remained silent and examined his guest, the more nervous Dante got. “I don't think we should hang out,” he said. Better to nip this in the bud. It would save them both a lot of heartbreak. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe Dante was tougher or more superficial than Ash gave him credit.

“Really?” Dante seemed surprised. “Are you going back on that promise already?”

Ash blinked. “I don't remember promising anything about breakfast together.”

Dante ambushed him by putting a hand against his chest and pushing him inside the house, while following closely. “You promised me,” the pretty eyes bore into his, “that we would—no, that you would fuck me.”

Ash caught his jaw with his hand in time. The nerve on the little guy. “I did?” he asked slowly while rubbing his chin.

Dante's eyes grew darker. He was pouting. Was this guy for real? Ash felt his cock twitching in his jeans at the memory of how the boy in front of him had looked the night before, coming so hard like he had never done that in his life.

"You so totally did. And now, I'm here for that."

Ash grinned and leaned closer, testing Dante's courage. "I thought you said breakfast."

"Just a euphemism," Dante said with determination. "You promised."

Ah, damn, how easy it would be to just reach out and take him. Ash hated himself for that desire. He smiled although he didn't feel like it and ruffled Dante's hair. "Don't make so much out of the words coming out a drunk guy's mouth. Come on, let's get you out of here."

Dante didn't move. "So, you regret it, huh? In case you don't remember, you sucked my cock."

Ash needed a fucking moment. He didn't need to look at Dante's mouth, the way he licked those rosy lips or biting on the bottom one, probably to stop himself from crying or something just as childish.

Again, he needed to get back into the act before things got out of hand. So, he put on the next comfortable mask. He pushed Dante roughly, making him hit the door with his back. Then, in a second, he was on him, towering over and shoving a menacing finger in the boy's face. "Now listen here, smartass, not a word of that to anyone, or I'm coming for you, and it won't be pretty."

Dante scoffed. "I'm not scared."

"Oh, yeah?" Ash could feel his cheek muscles hurting from trying to keep up with the act. "Why's that? You don't think I can kick your ass?"

"That, I do. But it looks like you're an expert at making promises you don't intend to keep." Dante pushed him away and walked out on his own accord.

He had expected that! He should have known better! What a coward! Dante had to stop for a moment just so he could breathe.

"Let's make some rules," he mumbled under his breath. "Let's not make out with drunk guys ever again."

He found his way to the front of the house in no time. He'd call a cab and have a nice breakfast by himself. Then, he'd call his dad and tell him his mom needed him back home, and he had to leave.

He began pacing the pavement while waiting for his cab. Fucking Ash! This summer sucked, and that was a strong word in Dante's vocabulary.

The front door opened and closed, but he didn't even look. It couldn't be Shana, unless she only needed like five minutes of sleep to be up and about after a night like that. That left a single other resident as the possibility. All the more reason for Dante not to turn and look at the guy.

"Let's go have breakfast," Ash said, calling for him from behind.

"You go by yourself. I'm going by myself," Dante said. His mom had taught him not to be rude on purpose and when rude by accident, to apologize. Yet, now, he felt like none of those rules applied.

"Don't be stupid. We'll take my ride."

"Like I'd ever get on that thing with you again," Dante threw over his shoulder. He had an inkling his resolve would melt once he looked into those magnetic eyes.

"Dante," Ash said firmly while grabbing his arm, "how about--"

"My ride is here," Dante said and brushed off Ash's touch while waving for the cab driver to notice him.

He got on the backseat, greeted the driver, and opened his mouth to tell his destination, but Ash surprised him by climbing next to him. He stared at him nonplussed, and Ash grinned. He even dared to wink.

Dante scoffed and crossed his arms, choosing to look away. Ash told the driver where to take them.

That was the story of his fucking life. He was given a way out, and he just didn't take it because it either seemed too easy or whatever. Seeing Dante so pissed had roiled something inside him, placed somewhere between the center of his chest and the top of his belly. It was a sensitive spot, and it was all he could say about it.

Dante kept his head turned away from him throughout. That only gave Ash the time he needed to inspect him from up close. At first glance, he looked like some ordinary young man barely out of high school. He was lanky, wore large clothes, and he didn't seem to care that much about cutting his hair. Guys like him, Ash could find by the dozen.

Yet, there was something special about him. His pale long arms felt the greatest when wrapped around Ash's body. His lovely pout remembered Ash about how he had kissed that willing

mouth the night before. And the way he held his head turned, the slight tremble in his body, told Ash that he had taken that rejection pretty badly.

It was all his fault, Ash admitted. He shouldn't have made any promises, and he shouldn't have tried to threaten Dante. He wasn't an easy guy to impress with that kind of thing. Ash should have known better than assuming that Dante was the same as everyone else.

He tried to pay the cab driver, but Dante was faster. Ash followed him out and hurried after him. "Can we talk a little?" he asked.

"We talked enough." Dante turned to look at him. "Do you always blow guys before you blow them off?"

Ash looked around, aware of the strangers walking into the diner, but they were at a fair distance so that they couldn't hear them talk like that. "Not always. I mean, never."

Dante inspected his face slowly. Ash reached for him and touched his elbow, cupping it gently. "Let's take a walk."

A simple nod came as a confirmation. Ash hadn't expected this kitten to be so feisty. It did nothing to calm either his heart, or the twitch of his cock in his jeans. Dante just had that effect on him, and Ash didn't understand how it could be possible.

They moved past the diner and headed toward the hill behind it. There weren't that many places ideal for hiking around there, as the hills were barren, but it was still early enough, and the sun wouldn't fry their brains if they took a walk away from strangers' eyes.

"What do you have to say for yourself?" Dante questioned the moment they were far enough from any signs of life.

Ash sat on a big rock and looked the other up and down. "I don't blow guys, Dante. I just don't."

"You did it to me," Dante pointed out. "Wait, let me make it easy for you, because I think I saw a movie about a jerk like you." He put his index fingers to his temples and squinted as if he needed the effort to recall it all. "It was a mistake, right?"

Ash looked down. Way to make him ashamed. Fucking Dante. But he was right, of course. "Yeah, something like that," he pushed the words one by one out of his mouth.

"Then why are we even here?"

That was one fair question. Ash met Dante's accusing eyes. He couldn't stop staring. Why did he have to be so pretty? "Because I never crossed that line before you," he growled, annoyed at how easy it was for him to give up on all his defenses just because of a cute face. "And then, you just came, and you just took that away."

Dante looked to the side. "It's all right, I guess," he said with difficulty. "You're fucking only girls, right?"

The last thing Ash wanted right now was for Dante to be so fucking understanding. He got up and walked over to Dante. "I," he started and exhaled noisily, "I'm not supposed to suck off guys and then think about them all the time."

Dylan stared into his eyes. Ash blinked but didn't move. "I'm like the first guy you did that to?"

Ash sighed. "I tried before. Never gotten far. Never gotten all the way. I just can't afford it, do you get it?"

"Because you're a fuckboy, and you need all those perks?" Dante asked.

"Perks? What perks?" Ash frowned and searched Dante's face for signs that he was pulling his leg.

"You fuck them, and they give you something in return, right?"

Fuck Shana. She must have put all sorts of weird ideas in Dante's head. But he wasn't entirely wrong. "Not quite like that, but, whatever," he said and moved away.

Dante caught his arm. "It's okay, I get it. I could give you something in return, too."

Ash didn't know just what to make of that. "Do you want to pay me for fucking you?" The idea seemed so damn funny in a bad way that he just couldn't get it while his cock still strained his jeans just at the mention of Dante wanting to get fucked by him.

"Nope, 'cause I don't have that kind of cash on me," Dante said promptly. "With how you look, you must be expensive."

Ash had to press a hand on his mouth hard not to laugh. He should have felt insulted for being called a whore to his face, but Dante made it so that it didn't seem like such a bad thing.

"But there must be something I can give you in return," Dante continued. "Like, what's the biggest thing you want? You know, like a dream and stuff."

Ash remained dumbfounded and stared at the other to check again for any signs that he was being taken for a fool.

"You must have dreams," Dante insisted.

Yes. No, he had used to have dreams. Until he had realized that everywhere he went, he would be treated like trash, no matter what he did.

"Aren't you going to tell me about them?" Dante was close enough that they could touch now.

“You’re wrong, kid,” Ash said roughly. “I like my life as it is.”

“Hmm.” Dante angled his head and gave him a long look. “I don’t think that’s it. You wouldn’t feel tempted to suck off a dude like me if that were the case.”

“You’re making a huge deal out of that lame blowjob,” Ash shot back, growing more and more irritated.

“Oh, was it lame?” Dante tilted his head back and looked at Ash, blinking a few times. “I wonder how it is when you’re at the top of your game.”

“Fucking smartass,” Ash exclaimed. This dude was playing him, and he was damn good at it. “Just how many guys have you wrapped around your little finger with this attitude of yours?”

Dante gasped in outrage. “I’ll have you know that, until last night, no one has even kissed me.”

Ash’s eyes grew wide. “Are you for real?” The guy was pulling his leg, for sure. “With this fucking pretty mouth? No one, ever? Ah, I guess it must have been your attitude that kept them away.”

Dante got in his face and stared him in the eye. “It looks like it didn’t keep you away. What does that tell you?”

Chapter Nine – Birds Of A Feather

His knees were hard as wood as he was trying to keep himself from breaking into a run, shouting apologies of various kinds. He didn't recall ever being so brave in his life, but most of him pushed him forward to grab Ash and stop him from running away, even if that meant that he would make himself look bad.

What did it matter if he looked bad or not if last night would be all he could take from Ash? Lame blowjob. Dante wanted to yell at the guy only to convince him that it wasn't possible for him to do anything lame in his life.

Ash's eyes stared him down from above. "Yeah, it looks like I like a sassy asshole to tell me what to do."

"Really?" Dante forgot about his act for a moment. "I mean, yeah, you totally like that. And now, I want to give you something in return for last night."

"Pretty boy, you can't give me anything to match that."

"Oh, yeah? But I thought it was just a lame blowjob. How hard can it be to offer something of equal value?"

A playful smirk lit up Ash's dark face. "Don't tell me you want to blow me," he whispered.

Oh, Dante so wanted that and more. Ash had no idea. "I could do that, yeah," he offered in a cool, detached voice.

"I've got blowjobs by the ton," Ash said slowly, his smirk widening.

Now, it had to be a challenge, and Dante understood that much. "You haven't got one from me, though."

"Hmm, and what's so special about how you do it? Have you done it many times?"

"I just told you last night it was the first time I got kissed."

"One doesn't exclude the other," Ash continued to taunt him.

"Then, for the sake of being clear, I haven't sucked off anyone until now."

"And you're offering me your first blowjob? Is that it?"

Dante felt slightly dizzy just inhaling Ash's scent. His entire body became an erogenous zone whenever Ash was concerned. "It's my cocksucking debut. I'd say it's a pretty good deal for a lame blowjob."

It wasn't like he hadn't noticed how Ash had avoided to talk about his dreams. That didn't mean that Dante would give up. He would prod and push, but, for now, he would be more than happy if Ash just accepted him to get down on his knees and blow him. Dante hoped he wouldn't be completely lame, especially since the other's standards for a blowjob seemed to be pretty damn high.

"You don't know what you're getting into," Ash warned him.

"Now, let me be the judge of that. Or do you think that, without the booze, you wouldn't be able to hold an erection while I'm going down on you?" Dante munched shortly on his bottom lip. He was digging deep, and he didn't even have a shovel.

"That depends on your skill, virgin boy," Ash teased him. "But, whatever, since you're so keen on putting your mouth on my cock, I'll let you have it. Listen to me closely. You'll have to suck it, and you'll have to swallow, or else it doesn't count."

Ash was either a high level player or he had no idea what those dirty words were doing to Dante.

Ash had to give it to the little guy. He had a nice pair to go with his sweet cock, which Ash had tasted at length the night before. It was enough to think about it that he was starting to lose whatever control he thought he had over the situation.

Dante was already getting on his knees, with a pleading hopeful look on his face.

"Hey, hey, what the fuck?" Ash said and laughed. "Not here. People might wander about. I hope you don't want your cocksucking debut to come along with an arrest for indecent exposure."

"Well, it's your country. Where should we go?"

Ash took Dante's arm to help him back to his feet. There was no guarantee that they remained like that, with those pretty eyes begging him to take his cock out, he wouldn't forget about the entire fucking world and do just that.

"Let's get moving."

He knew places to fuck. That was his livelihood, so to speak. He accepted Dante's hand wrapping around his and started leading them off the beaten path. Some people had had the strange idea at one point to make an observation deck out there, many years ago. It had been abandoned, and squatters didn't liked it because it offered little in terms of shelter, but it was enough for what they had in mind.

The little room that was supposed to serve guests as a place where they could have a drink and rest some had a working door, and they would hear if anyone got in.

Dante remained quiet as they walked inside. Ash pushed him against the wall and kissed him hard. Now that they were there, they didn't need to pretend anymore. Once more, the world outside was locked behind a door.

"Ash," Dante moaned while letting himself be kissed on the cheeks, the neck, and lower. "I want to suck your cock."

"You don't know what you want," Ash said heatedly and pushed Dante's t-shirt up so that he could suck on his pretty little tits.

"Will you fuck me then?" Dante begged. "I promise you, no one will know."

Ash growled while his hunger only grew the more he was devouring Dante's naked vulnerable body. He brushed his lips and tongue over the smooth hairless belly and dragged the guy's pants down. He wanted more of that. Sure, he wanted Dante to put his lovely lips on him, too, but he needed to give more.

So, he grabbed a hold of Dante's cock and took it in his mouth again. Small muffled moans confirmed that he was doing it right. Even if it was new for him, too, it appeared that there were no complaints. And tasting Dante's cum again? Hell, yeah. He hadn't been grossed out by the taste the night before, although he had expected it. No, he had tasted his own plenty to know that there was nothing to fear about the act itself. And Dante's was really tasty, sweet as him.

"More," Dante demanded, "more, please, Ash. Just fuck me."

Women before had said the same, but only now Ash felt like he could give his all without it mattering in a bigger scheme of things.

He turned Dante and took in the milky buttocks. To test their firmness, he grabbed them and released them, happy with the way they bounced back. The little fucker pushed his ass up, giving Ash a complete sight of his hole, his taint, and his ball sac. Ash licked a long line starting from the full balls, along the taint and up to the asshole that quivered under his tongue and lips.

"Oh, fuck, condom," Dante moaned.

"Don't worry," Ash assured him. "If I'm not ready for unplanned sex, I don't know who is."

He continued to play with Dante's ass cheeks and tongued his hole as deep as he could. As far as condoms went, he was prepared, always having a spare, but he didn't have lube on him 'cause he didn't go around, fucking pretty boys' asses.

That meant that he would have to take all the time in the world to open the tight hole in front of him. How many times hadn't he dreamed about this, about having a willing body at his mercy, waiting to get fucked, no strings attached?

No, not just any body. His dreams were filled with visions of an ideal boy, and Dante had no idea just how close he was to those. No, that wasn't even right. Dante had replaced them all from the moment he had walked on that pool deck and into Ash's life.

"Ash," Dante begged some more. "Someone may come. Please, fuck me."

"Easy," Ash said and slapped his butt playfully. "This is going to hurt. You have no idea."

"What do you even know? You never got fucked," Dante accused petulantly.

That was where Dante was wrong. That thing had happened to him, and it had hurt, and it had been painful in more than just physical ways, and it had left him with nothing but self-loathing to creep into his sleep when he was at his most vulnerable.

He pushed away the memory. The pleasant smell of Dante's clean sweat was keeping him grounded. He pushed a finger in. No, Dante would wait until Ash was sure that his body was ready for that kind of thing.

Dante moaned and whispered cute polite obscenities at him as Ash added another finger. The tight channel of muscles was giving in, but more patience was needed.

"Damn you, Ash," Dante moaned.

It took Ash a bit to realize that Dante was shooting from his cock while his virgin ass was being played with. He began laughing. "Nice, kiddo," he teased. "It looks like I don't have to fuck you, after all."

"Don't you even think about it," Dante growled. "Get back to work and put your cock in while it's still today."

"Aren't you demanding? And what is this 'damn you' business?"

"You made me mad," Dante replied.

"And couldn't you say 'fuck you, Ash' instead?"

"I try not to swear," Dante offered matter-of-factly.

"I see. Well, it doesn't work like that with me. I want you to cuss at me. Let me hear you."

It looked like Dante needed more convincing than that, so Ash pulled out his cock and rolled down the condom. He pressed against the tight pink hole only to tease.

"Oh, fuck, oh, yes," Dante groaned, apparently forgetting about his earlier promise not to use cuss words. The way he saw it, Dante had no problem with the words; he had with directing them at people, though.

He was just that much of a nice guy.

It was daylight. None of them was drunk. Dante was pretty certain the situation had improved tremendously since the night before. Ash came to it willingly, and he, Dante... well, willing didn't cover it.

His mind was a mess, soft like molasses, his entire body quivered in expectation, and Ash's cock poised right at entering him was so hard that it was driving him mad not to have more of it inside him.

He had imagined his first time in many different ways. This wasn't one of them, but it was perfect nonetheless. Ash wanted him. He wanted him a lot if he didn't mind going all the way for the first time in his life with a guy. That hard cock couldn't be lying.

Only that he kept on postponing the moment of penetration. That really drove Dante crazy. "Come on, Ash," he begged shamelessly. "What are you waiting for?"

Ash chuckled right against the back of his neck. "I'll go in only if you cuss at me properly."

"What do you mean?" Dante stammered.

"Say it like this. Say 'fuck you, Ash'."

"But all I want to say is 'fuck me, Ash'," Dante retorted while Ash pushed in just a smidge and sent his mind reeling again.

"Let me help you. Say," Ash's warm breath caressed his skin, "that you want my cock in you and that you'll fuck me up if I don't do you how you want."

"You need some serious help," Dante moaned.

"And you need cock in your life, and I don't hear you say it."

Dante couldn't bear it any longer. "Ash, you jerk," he said through his teeth, "give me all your cock or I will fuck you up, although I don't know what that is or how I'll do it."

Ash chuckled in his ear and licked it playfully. "Good enough, I think. Brace yourself."

Dante let out a strangled cry, half in pain and half in pleasure. Ash had been right about insisting with his fingers first, and nothing had quite prepared him for that sensation spearing his body.

Ash stopped and caressed him. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry, just got carried away."

"Don't apologize," Dante barely managed to say. "At least, is it in?"

“Um, not quite,” Ash said in an apologetic voice.

“What do you mean?” Dante mumbled. “Half way?”

“I barely got the head in,” Ash replied.

“Oh, damn,” Dante whispered. “I don’t have a working hole, is that it?” Ash moved slightly. “No, don’t go. Finish what you started,” he began pleading right away.

“I don’t intend to go, but we need to give you some proper time to adjust. You’re a virgin, and I have nothing but spit at hand.”

“Okay.” Dante breathed in, one time. “How about we try--”

Ash pulled him close and began kissing him, turning his head so that their mouths would meet. His hands began wandering over Dante’s chest, teasing his nipples, pulling hard at them to the point the move warranted an ‘ouch’. But Dante lost himself in the sensation, and when Ash pushed inside him a little more, the pain seemed to disappear some.

“Good job distracting me,” he whispered while Ash licked his neck and played with his nipples more.

“Thanks,” Ash said in a playful voice. “I’m almost halfway in.”

“Oh, no, there’s still half left?” Dante complained. “How long is it, anyway?”

Ash kissed his cheek. “I’m just joking. It’s all in.”

“Too bad. You missed your chance to brag about how huge your cock is.”

“Yeah, well, I guess I can live with that. Ready, pretty boy? I’m a cowboy in the saddle and I’m not afraid to use it.”

“Am I the saddle?”

“That’s what I meant,” Ash teased him for one last time before he pulled slightly back only to push inside again, making Dante know a new type of pleasure that he had never heard about before.

Dreams and wide-eyed dreaming could only take you this far. This was real, and Dante knew it with his entire body. “This is the best,” he moaned each word. “Ash, you’re the best!”

“It doesn’t hurt no more?” Ash asked. His breath was hitched, and his question sincere.

“It does, but it’s also so good,” Dante replied. “Maybe a little faster? A little... harder?”

“You don’t know what you’re asking, do you?” The note of tenderness in Ash’s voice was too much to take in.

Dante keened in a higher pitch. Ash wrapped one hand around his cock and began rubbing it fast. “This should help,” he said breathlessly.

It did. Dante trembled from his head down to his toes, while Ash took him fast and hard, as he wanted. It was way beyond what he could bear, so, as much as he wanted it to last forever, when Ash groaned his own pleasure, Dante was grateful, his own cock shooting and painting the old wall with new fresh cum.

Chapter Ten – The Way You Look At Me

Dante was resting, his back against the wall, his pants still down to his knees, and in no mood to get dressed and go back to the world behind that door. He loved how Ash's eyes moved over him, a look that said that the handsome young man would like to lick him head to toes. "What?" he drawled, so spent, nothing but liquid dark honey replacing his bones that he couldn't even bring himself to open his mouth properly to speak.

Ash had thrown away the full condom and now was moving his hand over the length of his gorgeous cock so slowly that Dante didn't want to miss a moment.

A smirk welcomed his question. "You're lucky I only had a spare condom on me."

"Or you would have fucked me again?"

"You catch on quickly."

"I'm a smartass, remember?" Dante caressed his cock, too.

They were sitting a couple of feet apart, and it seemed that they took great pleasure in admiring each other. Dante knew for a fact that he had a lot to admire. "Can I see you naked?"

Ash's low chuckle sent shivers of pleasure down his spine. "You're seeing the most important part of me naked right now."

"But I want to see all," Dante begged and bit on his lower lip.

Ash growled playfully. "Stop doing that."

"What?"

"That thing where you bite on your lower lip. It's like food porn. You make me wonder how it would feel to taste it."

"You know that already. You kissed me. At least, take off your t-shirt," Dante suggested.

"You're so demanding," Ash commented with a grin. However, he pulled his t-shirt over his head, allowing Dante a complete view of his muscular torso and all the ink stretching on his left shoulder. "Is this what you wanted to see?" He rubbed one hand over his chest, brushing over his nipples a few times, making them hard.

Dante swallowed. He wanted his mouth to be there, on those perky things, taking them slowly, lapping at them with his tongue. Without complaint, he understood Ash's reference to food porn. Just looking at that harmonious body made him hungry beyond belief. "You're so beautiful," he whispered. "Will you let me lick you?"

Ash laughed and, maybe it was Dante's imagination, but he appeared a bit embarrassed at receiving so many compliments. "Then come here and start with this." He pulled out his balls over his lowered jeans.

Dante didn't hesitate for a moment and collapsed to his knees on the dust covered floor. His mouth was on Ash's ball sac and he started taking one ball than the other into his mouth. Ash rewarded him with soft moans. "Yes, like this. Oh, you know you want to lick my balls. Come on, show me how much you want to be a cocksucker."

Dante had never wanted something more badly in his life. He quickly covered the cock head with his lips and tongue. There was plenty of precum for him to taste, and he lapped happily at it, scooping with the tip of his tongue for more.

Ash laughed and pushed his head away playfully. "You little fucker," he said. "It's a bit sensitive after fucking you earlier."

But it had been through a condom, and Dante realized a sudden ache in the lower part of his body that would have much liked to have Ash there without the rubber between them. He knew, of course, he knew that it wasn't a matter of choice, that he should always play it safe, but still, he longed for Ash in so many ways that he couldn't keep track.

Ash held him by the back of his neck. "Show me some tongue, pretty boy."

Dante obeyed and held his mouth open, his head tilted back. Ash used his cock to rub against Dante's tongue over and over. "You don't look bad at all for a cocksucking noob," he teased. "Yes, swallow it a bit, let me see your pretty lips handling my cock."

Encouraged by those praises, Dante became more daring. He fooled around, grabbing Ash's cock and pushing it against one cheek, looking up to see the consequences of his actions and declaring himself content with how Ash's eyelids dropped and his mouth parted in a silent plea.

He liked to taste it, to have it all, to see how far it could go, to experiment with its fullness, texture, flavor, everything.

"How do you even know how to do this?" Ash breathed out. "Am I really the first guy you're doing this with?"

Dante would have assured Ash some more, but he was too caught up in having that cock all to himself. He grunted when Ash pushed a little, taking him by surprise, but he recovered quickly and opened his mouth more.

"I will fuck your pretty mouth," Ash promised in a heated voice.

Dante held his head at the right angle, allowing the other to move in and out. For balance, he pressed against Ash's hard thighs with his palms.

“Oh, yes, oh, that’s so good,” Ash whispered. He suddenly pulled out and pressed Dante’s mouth shut. “Close your eyes,” he warned, and Dante barely had the time to do so as warm drops of fresh cum landed on his closed eyelids, his cheeks, nose and he could tell that some had even gotten in his hair.

He took his cock and rubbed it just a little. Nothing more was needed, and soon, he was shooting, too, spending himself on the dusty floor.

Rough fingers were busy wiping his skin, and then there were lips kissing his face as Ash knelt in front of him. “You said I should swallow,” he remembered his partner.

Ash kissed him on the lips. “You shouldn’t do that with strangers, Dante. It looks like your sex ed needs some brushing up.”

Dante nodded quietly. Ash was right, of course, not as taken over by the tide of desire and pure lust, like him. Maybe sometime in the future, when it would only be them, and none of the others who wanted to sleep with Ash. He winced at the jealousy he felt. At that moment, he wanted to ask Ash to become his, but could he really ask that?

“You can open your eyes,” Ash said. “Ah, don’t look at me like that. My balls are empty.”

Dante snickered. “And how am I looking?”

A smirk played on the beautiful lips. “Like you’re cock-hungry for my tool again.”

He accepted the offered hand and got to his feet. Ash helped him pull up his pants, all the while looking at him from up close, observing his every move.

“Do I have something on my face?” Dante joked.

“I was thorough, but it looks like you have some in your hair.” Ash pulled at one strand, making Dante release a short ‘ouch’.

Ash took Dante’s hand and made him follow, as they snuck out. His steps were so light, he was afraid he might start to float if he weren’t careful. Only the solid warmth of Dante’s bony strong hand in his held him close to the ground.

Such feelings should be illegal. They were better than any high or buzz ever experienced in his life. They were better than all the sex he’d had before.

He turns his head and a beaming smile welcomed him. Dante was his dream boy, without a doubt. Ash wanted to push him back into that secret room and have his way with him again, but it wasn’t possible.

No room for regrets was left in his heart, though. It was full already, and he didn't even need to look at Dante to understand why it was so.

"Do you want breakfast, after all?"

Dante squirmed a little and accepted the parting of their hands the moment they left the hill behind and were out in the street again. "I'm not sure I'll be able to sit," he said with a naughty smile.

"Oh, really? Are you trying to tell me I have a huge cock?" Ash dropped his eyes to take Dante's lanky body from head to toes. He was just so perfect for him. Maybe the outside world didn't see him like that. Maybe all they saw was a lanky boy, young and inexperienced. But he saw a lot more than that. He saw all the desire to be more that shone in Dante's pretty eyes.

A part of the light was meant for him. Thinking that lit a small flame in his chest; stoking that fire would be a mistake, he tried to tell himself, but it didn't appear to work that way.

Nothing worked the right way lately. It had to be Dante's fault.

"We could grab some sandwiches to go and eat them outside. What do you say?"

Dante nodded enthusiastically. "I say 'hell yes'."

"Hell yes? Is that within your cussing margin?"

Dante pouted and then gave Ash a lopsided grin. "I'm not some prude, you know."

"A prune?" Ash pretended he hadn't heard right. "I'm not calling you that." He brought a hand up and traced an invisible line on Dante's arm. "You're not at all wrinkled like that."

Dante shivered and laughed, while the height of his cheeks colored.

"You have freckles," Ash said.

"Yeah, I do," Dante said with a sigh. "If I spend too much time in the sun, they're going to wreak havoc on my face."

"I don't think so," Ash countered. "I mean, they'll probably be more visible, but I think each one of them will be uber cute."

"Oh, gawd." Dante bit his bottom lip. "You're so good at this. Just for the record, you already have me, so dial down the charm, okay?"

Ash looked away. Dante thought he was playing. Of course, he would. He had all the right to think that.

“Hey,” Dante called for him softly, and brushed against his arm, “I’m buying, but will you tell me about your tattoos in return?”

“Why?” Ash asked, not wanting to sound ungrateful or pissed, but not at all in control of his own feelings.

“Because I want to get to know you better. You’re the guy who popped my cherry, after all. I’d rather not think that I lost my V-card to a stranger.”

Ash shook his head. It was so easy for Dante to make him laugh. Other people before had wanted to know about his tattoos and what they meant. But they were asking him that because they thought they looked cool and that they made Ash look cool, nothing beyond that. His ink, just like his own person, was for them some kind of decoration, a shiny thing that they sometimes wanted.

But he got no such feeling from Dante asking him. All was possible. He could be a bit hooked on Dante’s pretty looks and not thinking straight. And this young man stumbling into his life like a summer breeze hiding a hurricane inside his heart, was too innocent to understand that he was slowly wrapping the mighty Ash Moreno around his little finger without knowing what that would lead to.

Dante had a mission. He wanted, no, needed to know about Ash’s dreams. They had to be as beautiful as him, but he was also a quiet one when it came to matters too close to the heart. At least, that was Dante’s temporary conclusion.

Understanding the significance of the glorious ink on the round shoulder and manly throat was a start.

They had grabbed some sandwiches to go from the diner, as planned, and they were now sitting on a bench at a deserted bus station. Ash had assured him that it was a quiet spot, and that not many people took the bus these days.

Any place he could use to prod Ash’s mind a little and learn who he truly was would do.

“So, why a rose?” The centerpiece of the skin art seemed to be a large flower with open petals. Dante had wondered at the intense velvety crimson color. Something of how it had been painted on Ash’s dark skin made his heart enter a light phase of trepidation. His fingers itched to touch it.

Ash smiled and turned his head. “It’s a bit funny how you stare at me.”

“Really? How so?”

Ash sighed and looked ahead, without replying. Then, he pushed the sleeve up to offer Dante the unhindered sight of that beautiful rose. “I guess I should give you the whole version, right?”

“I would accept nothing less,” Dante assured him and wiped his hands on a napkin. “May I touch it?”

His eyes met the stormy ones reigning over his most recent dreams. And his heart went from trepidation to downright hammering.

Chapter Eleven – What Is Beauty?

Sitting so close to each other was far more dangerous than what might cross little Dante's mind. Ash knew, for a fact, that he could turn every look he gave the woman next to him into an unspoken compliment, a challenge, or a test. He had fine-tuned his abilities to make them lose their heads over him that now he feared that he only fell into one character or the other, while the questions and wonder in Dante's eyes were genuine.

He cleared his throat. Maybe he was overestimating his power of self-control. Dante's direct stare caused a flutter of wings inside his stomach, and it wasn't in the least unpleasant. "This rose," he started, while pointing at the rose resting on his shoulder, "is called Papa Meilland."

"Papa Meilland?" Dante scrunched up his nose. "Do roses have names? I mean, yes, of course, they do. My mom has a small garden and likes to take care of it. But I don't remember her talking about roses otherwise than in terms of colors."

"It is the name of its variety. It was created by a French dude like eighty years ago or so," Ash explained, proud to be capable of telling Dante, a college kid, something he didn't know.

"It's very beautiful." Dante's fingers hovered. "Is it really all right?"

Ash grinned. "I think we've already touched each other a great deal. And it's a permanent tattoo, in case you were wondering," he teased. "It's not like you'd take the ink off."

Dante scoffed. "I know." His tentative touch, tracing the petals, sent heat and pleasure through Ash's arm. "Why this rose in particular? And how do you know so much about it?"

Ash pondered, but only for a moment. Dante was truly interested in getting to know him. He deserved the truth. "For a while, I stayed with an old lady, when I was around ten. She grew these by the ton. They smell amazing, you know? They make you think that it would be all right to eat them."

"Did you eat the old lady's roses?"

Ash laughed. Dante was delicate enough not to ask why he wasn't with his parents at that age. "No, but she took me to the garden and made me stay with her, while blabbering about her roses. That's why I know about them. At the time, I wasn't crazy about sitting for hours in one place when I could be out in the street, playing or getting up to no good things."

He took a moment to recall those times. "Later, I'd have given everything I had to go back to that place and care about the roses."

Dante kissed Ash's shoulder gently.

“She was a strange one, the old lady,” Ash continued. “She made me sit by her side and stare at the roses for a long time. And she told me something like this. ‘In life, my boy, when you think that you don’t know your way anymore, just take a moment and look at a flower. And then ask yourself: what is beauty?’”

“Strange, indeed,” Dante agreed. “What do you think she meant by that?”

“I didn’t know at that time. And she wouldn’t tell me when I asked her. I guess it’s something about living in the moment. Or that everything is passing. I don’t know. I’m not that much into thinking stuff.” He rubbed his head and gave Dante a coy smile. “What do you think she meant?”

“Why are you asking me?” Dante looked willing to play along, by how he smiled back.

“Because you’re the one going to college. Your sis bragged the day you came to everyone at the house.”

“That doesn’t just make me smarter than you,” Dante pointed out. “But if it helps, I think what you said is beautiful. We should enjoy the beauty of a moment, even if it comes and goes.”

Ash didn’t want to show how flattered he felt that Dante agreed with him. Even if he thought Dante had to be smarter than him, and yes, because he would go to college and was smart enough to get into one. “What are you going to study?” he asked, trying to shake off the sad memories.

“I’m basically into machines, just like my dad,” Dante explained. “But I’m interested in learning more about English literature. It’s been a passion of mine since I was little.”

“Machines and books? How do those get along?”

Dante pointed at his head and a sly smile lit up his face. “Everything’s in perfect order here. The machines are organizing the books by category. What about you? What would you like to do in the future?”

“I don’t really have a plan,” Ash said it in a heartbeat.

“What are some things you’d like to do?”

“Driving my bike, driving people crazy, stuff like that.”

“Hey, I answered truthfully. It’s your turn,” Dante said and pinched his shoulder.

“Hey, you’re taking off the ink,” Ash complained for show.

“You said it was permanent. Come on, Ash, no one’s listening in. Tell me one thing you’d like to do.”

“What if it’s embarrassing and you’re going to laugh at me?”

“I assure you I won’t laugh at you. Come on, what is it? Is it needlepoint?”

Ash searched Dante’s face for any signs that the guy was pulling his leg. Maybe a little, but he definitely looked cute, so open and eager to hear him out.

“Nah. It’s this.” He brushed over the rose quickly.

“You want to grow roses?”

“Not in particular. I like taking care of gardens. They... just seem so peaceful. They can help you chill, you know?” He stared at his hands, embarrassed that he didn’t have fancy words to describe what working on a flower bed or pruning a small bush made him feel.

“Because of the lady with the roses, right? Her gardening lessons must have rubbed off on you. But, then, that’s easy. How about you get into landscaping?”

Ash gave Dante a startled look. “Get into landscaping? Just like that?”

“Why not?”

“Because you need tools and a proper car and--”

“One thing you don’t need is a heap of excuses,” Dante interrupted them. “And hey, you have a really awesome bike. That cost you some real cash, I think.”

“Do you suggest I should sell my ride?”

“No. What I meant is that you wanted that awesome motorcycle and spent the cash on it without thinking twice, right?”

Ash looked away. “Not exactly.”

“What do you mean? Oh, was it a gift?”

“Not that, either.”

Dante’s mind gears appeared to turn slowly. “Oh, holy shit. Did you steal it?”

Ash waved, annoyed. “I got it for stealing something. Are you going to rat on me?”

Dante snorted. “Do you imagine me walking up to a patrol car, ready to report a crime I don’t know anything about?”

“What if I told you the details?”

“That would only make me an accomplice, and they would have to grab us both, then. Please, don’t make me into an accomplice.”

“How would knowing the deets turn you into an accomplice?”

“That’s simple, Ash. I wouldn’t squeak about it. So, I’ll end up covering for you. Hence, accomplice.”

Ash laughed. Obviously, Dante either didn’t know how things worked as far as the law was concerned, or he just didn’t care. It didn’t matter. Ash liked the idea of having an accomplice for a change. “Okay, partner.” He laughed and bumped against the other’s shoulder.

“Do you intend to take me along, as part of your landscaping business?” Dante asked.

“How did you get that idea?”

“You called me your partner.”

There was no winning with this dude. Ash shook his head and laughed. “If you come with the dough to get us started, I might,” he joked.

Dante scrunched up his cute nose. “All I have in my name is a laptop that used to be high end around five years ago, and about fifty books.”

Ash ruffled the blond hair. “Don’t sweat it. How’s your sandwich?” He needed to change the subject before he was starting to imagine forbidden things, such as going away with Dante and living a different life. Things like that were nothing but an illusion, and illusions had the nasty habit of leaving you with a bad taste in your mouth, once they proved to be nothing but empty air.

“It’s the best fast food I’ve ever had.” Dante took another bite. He smacked his lips with unhidden delight.

Ash felt a little proud. “So, it’s really cold where you live, huh?”

“You wouldn’t believe it. But it’s also beautiful in the winter. There’s always heavy snowfall,” Dante explained.

“So, you into other winter sports besides ice skating?”

Dante nodded energetically. “Snowboarding is tons of fun. And skiing. But do you know how you have the best fun?”

“How?”

“Going down the slope,” Dante gestured, “on a really fast sled.”

“A sled? Like Santa’s?” Ash grinned.

Dante grinned back. “Do you mean the fat drunk you were telling me about the other day? Nah, not exactly like Santa’s. But I can tell you that you’ve never felt alive until you do it like I’m telling you.”

Ash looked over the arid landscape stretching in front of their eyes. “I don’t think I’ll ever be okay with cold and snow. I’ve never seen snow, save for on TV and such.”

“For real?” Dante expressed his amazement out loud. “Then you really need to come visit. I’ll show you everywhere.”

Ash pushed down the bubble of excitement bloating inside his chest at the sound of those casually thrown words. “Eh, I don’t know, man. I’m not really made for under fifty temperatures.”

“Wuss.” Dante’s smile was challenging him with its naughtiness.

Ash wrapped one arm around him and began squeezing. “Who you’re calling that?” he asked roughly.

“You. Come on, you could see me ice skating. In winter, obviously.”

“Are you like a pro or something?”

“Nothing like that.”

“Do you ice skate all nekkid?” Ash drawled.

“If it’s an incentive for you, then why not?”

“You’re really brave for a little guy.”

“I’m not little. I’m almost as tall as you.”

“That’s so not true.” Ash got to his feet and pulled Dante up, too.

There were a couple of inches, if not a little more, between them. But that put them in the best ballpark for a pair, because it seemed so easy to just angle his head and Dante to do the same in the opposite direction so that they could kiss like they had been made for one another.

Ash shook his head. This was hooking up. They were having fun. There was nothing else to it. “We should get back. What do you think?”

“Do you have some things to do?” Dante asked.

His disappointment was transparent. Ash didn't want to have to deal with it. "Yeah. I mean, man's gotta eat, right? Hey, why the long face?"

"Are you going with one of those girls?" Dante asked, his face all a frown.

Ash felt the usual rush of anger. "Now that's not exactly your business, is it? But, just for the record, asshole, I do work like any other person, too."

Dante's head snapped up, and his eyes searched Ash's face. He looked guilty as fuck. It should have felt good, but it didn't. "Hey, Ash, I'm sorry--"

"Save your breath. Anyway, thanks for the nice fuck." Ash turned on his heel and marched away from Dante and all the scary promises the beautiful boy represented.

"Ash," Dante called after him pleadingly, but he just sped up the pace.

He really hoped the other didn't get it into his head to follow. Not when he was like this, angry with the entire world, but most of all, with himself.

Dante watched helplessly as Ash walked away from him. He should have kept his mouth shut. People often did what they needed to do, and that was that. And it wasn't like Ash had promised him anything beyond that moment they shared.

All right, so there had been more than just several moments. Anyway, it had been enough for Dante to fall in love, because he just discovered that he was actually very young, very stupid, and so ill-equipped with deal with all that, especially the one he so desired breaking up with him before they even had a chance to see if they could be together.

Chapter Twelve – Different Worlds

The road back to the house had been an ordeal, mostly because he had punished himself by walking in the sun before calling a cab, and then, of course, because he had chosen to torment his sorry soul by calling Dante Elsher a rude, impossible, ill-mannered nincompoop for the entire duration of the drive. What had possessed him to show his jealousy like that? Ash was a free man, free to do whatever he wanted, with whomever he wanted.

When was his dad going to come home? Shana had said something about him and her mom being away for a couple of weeks. It had only been so little since he had arrived, so that meant that he would have to endure the torture of unrequited feelings without anything to take his mind off it for a long time.

Why was time moving so slowly when you wanted it to move fast, and the other way around? Dante sighed as he got out of the cab after paying the driver and thanking him. He dragged his feet as he walked into the house.

He was so lost in his thoughts that he squealed when Shana ambushed him by hugging him and kissing his cheek. “My baby brother,” she began.

“Are you already drunk so early in the day?” There was no way she had any pleasant feelings toward him unless she had previously imbibed seriously. At least, that was his experience till that point.

Shana rolled her eyes and rubbed his cheek, most probably to remove the traces of her lipstick from his face. The truth was Dante felt so miserable that he could even live with that without protesting.

“You took care of me this morning, putting me to bed and all. I’m just grateful, sorry,” she said and threw her arms in the air. “How about I cook you breakfast?”

“It’s almost noon,” Dante said in a deadpan voice.

“Okay, so lunch,” Shana replied and gestured for him to follow her to the kitchen.

“I just ate.” It had been hours, actually, but he didn’t think he would ever be hungry again in his entire life. “What are you going to make? Vodka eggs?”

Shana laughed, throwing her head back, and snorted in a very unladylike manner. “Vodka eggs... You’re a riot, baby brother. We’ll see.” She opened the fridge doors wide and inspected the inside with critical eyes. “We’ll go shopping.”

“No, no way,” Dante protested. “I’m tired.”

Shana turned to observe him. “You slept last night, like for the entire night. How could you be tired?” She blinked a few times, as if she was trying to remember something. “Did Ash get your phone back last night?”

Dante was about to ask what she meant, when he realized that it must have been how Ash had discovered his room. “Yeah, he did,” he said softly.

“Can you believe the fucker?” Shana continued, while she searched the sofa for something and emerged victoriously with a purse. She checked the contents with a preoccupied look on her face. “He got my girl Michaela all in a twist, and then he blew her off.”

“Why?” Dante asked.

Shana shrugged. Compared to last night, she was dressed in more decent clothes. She had a sweatshirt and pants on, and what looked like sensible footwear, until he looked a little closer. The fluffy sleepers didn’t exactly go with the rest. She would probably trade them for some sneakers once she got out of the house. At least, that was what he hoped.

“Ash doesn’t fuck unless he really likes the bitch,” Shana eventually replied. She put the purse under her arm and looked at him. “Ready? We’re taking dad’s car. Have you ever seen it? It’s awesome.”

“He lets you drive it?” Dante asked.

Shana waved what looked like car keys at him. “It looks like he loves me than he does you,” she said and stuck out her tongue.

Dante couldn’t say that he was still impressed with her usual taunts. “Okay. But you’re buying everything. I’m not going to spend a dime. I’m a guest here,” he said with aplomb.

Shana pinched his cheek with the same hand she was holding the keys, ending up grazing his skin a little. “Of course, you are. Now, since I haven’t been that much of a good big sis to you, I’m so going to spoil you. Let’s go.”

“You’re still wearing your sleepers,” Dante cared to draw her attention.

“So? We’re taking the car,” she reminded him as if he had forgotten what she had said only moments ago.

He chose not to contradict her. After all, he wasn’t from around there, and if people looked strangely at them while doing groceries, there would be no skin off his back. In a way, it felt refreshing not to care so much.

Ash had lied. He didn't have any work to do. That had been a lie meant to brush Dante off and make him feel bad.

A punch to the face would feel so nice right now, but there was no one to deliver that blow. Well, it looked like he was doing a good job kicking himself in the ass anyway. The thing was, seeing himself in Dante's innocent eyes, he didn't like what he saw. Sure, Dante looked at him with his pretty eyes like he was the most beautiful person in the world, but at the same time, he was accusing him of sleeping around like a common whore.

No, Dante wasn't accusing him. He wasn't saying anything else but what was true about Ash. That he got freaky with girls because he could get something out of it.

He clenched his fists by his sides. That was the simple truth, wasn't it? In Dante's world, there was ice skating, and snow, and some fairytale land where even roses grew. In Ash's world, there was whoring, and parties, and booze, and wrong choices.

They couldn't be more apart as two human beings. Ash wished it wasn't so, but when had wishing something ever gotten him what he wanted? Wishing didn't make it happen.

There was a solution to the problem. Sure thing it was. Ash needed to get pretty Dante out of his head, get back in the usual game, and have so strings attached sex to remind him of his place in the world.

The only issue was, Ash didn't quite see himself have sex with anyone but Dante. He snorted. That bad he had it. Why had he risked it when it was clear what would happen if he dared to play with fire?

He had played with fire. He had gotten burned. Nothing clearer than that. Ash touched his shoulder, where Dante had kissed the rose just earlier. The feeling of his soft lips against the skin had burned a trail in his memories already.

He needed to do something, and he needed to do it fast before he lost his mind and went over to Dante and confess that he wanted to be whisked away to that country full of snow if only the boy wanted to have him.

Ash didn't do things like that. He no longer ran toward dreams fading in the distance, enticing him with their deceptive glimmer. Dante's interest for literature was warranted. Ash had read some while in that house with the rose garden and the old lady in charge.

Now, he had to get himself back in the game, whether he liked it or not. As long as it didn't involve fucking, he could see himself doing it. That reminded him of the promise he had made to Shana that morning. As much as he hated the guy's guts, he had to talk to Mike and see what he really thought about the girl. Ash doubted the truth would be to Shana's liking, and he'd already guessed what it was.

He put the phone to his ear. “Hey, man, what’s up?”

“Moreno?” Mike’s voice sounded unsure, surprised to hear him. Sure, they had each other’s numbers, but they weren’t pals. They didn’t call each other, and they didn’t hang out, either.

“How would you feel about hanging out?” he asked anyhow.

“Hang out,” Mike repeated. “Yeah, sure, why not? Where are you?”

“I don’t have my ride with me. Long story.”

“No problem, I’ll come pick you up.”

Mike rolled his Bentley into the underground parking lot, seemingly taken with his maneuvers too much to exchange a word with Ash. They went through a door into a fancy club, the likes of which Ash would never get accepted in, with his tattoos and fading jeans. However, it looked like the people there didn’t care as long as he was in the right company.

No, it wasn’t just some club, Ash realized. It was a fucking country club, where they sipped cocktails in the middle of the day while making boring conversation and spending some guy’s monthly wage like it was fucking nothing.

At least, that was what he thought of country clubs and those who went to them. The atmosphere was chill, the open deck was properly shaded from the sun, while still allowing the people there to enjoy the warmth of summer.

Mike took a seat at a table like it had his name on it and gestured for Ash to follow his example. They sat across from each other, Mike leaning back into the comfortable sofa, and Ash bent over the table in his less comfortable chair.

“So,” Mike started. He looked away from Ash the next moment and gestured for a waiter to come.

Ash kept his mouth shut, observing the fucker as he ordered without asking him if he wanted something.

“Shana says you’re not that much of a drinker,” Mike said. “They do have non-alcoholic beverages if you like.”

“I’m cool.” Ash drank like a sailor on occasion. Either Mike didn’t have his facts straight, or Shana had said some weird shit about him. Or the fucker was a motherfucker, on top of it all. “It’s Shana I’d like to talk to you about.”

“Shoot.” Mike adjusted the Rolex on his wrist and gave Ash a questioning look.

“She’s like crazy serious about you.”

Mike snorted. “Yeah. I noticed.”

“She’s a good guy once you get to know her,” Ash continued, fighting the need to grind his teeth.

“She’s good at giving head,” Mike said. He threw Ash an odd look. “You should know, right? I heard how she blew you while like a dozen guys and gals watched.”

That wasn’t quite the truth. The audience had been a lot smaller, but Shana was an exhibitionist by nature. “That was like ages ago,” Ash said. “The past is the past, right?”

Mike didn’t say a word. He accepted his drink from the waiter without thanking or giving the man another look. His eyes never left Ash. “She’s a slut,” he eventually said. “She’s good for jumping on my dick when I don’t have anything else lined up. And she lets me fuck her in the ass. But that’s all about her. All that I care about, anyway.”

“That’s not cool, man,” Ash said in warning. “I mean, she’s getting her hopes high. You’re getting her hopes high.”

Mike swirled the ice cubes in his glass. “It’s not my fault she’s a stupid bitch. She does with me the same things she has already done with who knew how many.” He leaned over the table and looked Ash square in the eye. “Who’s to tell that whenever I put my dick in her, I’m not getting some dude’s sloppy seconds? A dude like you.”

“That’s not how it is,” Ash said patiently. “She’s exclusive with you.”

“For like half an hour at a time or so? Don’t tell me she put you up to this. What does she want? To be my girlfriend or something?”

“She didn’t put me up to nothing,” Ash said in a thick voice. “I care about her.”

“Because she’s giving you some serious business? I know what you two do all the time. She gets you enough pussy from her girlfriends, you give her and those other bitches enough dick. She’s running a fucking brothel over there. Her daddy doesn’t have a clue.”

Ash worked his jaw. He expected Mike to be an asshole, but not that in your face kind of asshole. “If that’s what you think about her, why don’t you end things up with her? It’s not fair.”

“End what? Nothing’s going on. Let me tell it to you plainly. Each time Shana opens her mouth, there’s a cock ready to feed the hungry whore. That’s all she’s good for.”

“You know what, Mike?” Ash frowned. “You’re a fucking asshole.” He pushed himself up. Yeah, Shana was loose and easy, but Mike was fucking her, knowing that well, so what the fuck did that make him?

Mike lifted his glass in mock salute. “Yeah, maybe I am. But I’m an asshole with means, unlike you and your pimp. Shana got a nice house, along with that new daddy of hers. But she got no style, no reputation except for that of a slut. I’m doing her a favor each time I put my cock in her. Because it’s the best cock she’ll ever have.”

He needed to control himself before punching the fucker right in the kisser right there. Ash closed his eyes and considered his situation like so many times before. It wasn’t worth it, right?

“Better than yours for sure. Fuckboy,” Mike threw the last insult at him like it was nothing.

Ash saw red in front of his eyes. The next thing he knew was the pain in his fist as it connected with the fucker’s jaw.

Chapter Thirteen - Why Do We Do The Things We Do?

“How about I make you a fruit salad?” Shana asked while she grabbed a large orange and sniffed its peel.

“Do you know anything about fruit salads?” Dante questioned, mostly out of courtesy. He wasn’t a fussy eater, and the things he liked most were the kind his mom made. He somehow doubted Shana’s culinary expertise would overlap, even a little, with that of his mom.

“They need some sort of liquor in them,” Shana said with a shrug and put the orange into the basket.

So far, they had a couple of corn packages for making popcorn, a bag of green leaves that Dante suspected Shana must have picked because of its fancy packaging, and an orange. Something was telling him that he needed to take charge or else they risked dying of starvation.

“How about some eggs, bacon, and ketchup? And some of those bagged frozen fries, that we only need to throw in a pan or something?”

“Can we microwave them?” Shana asked.

“You are so pulling my leg right now,” Dante muttered under his breath.

Shana laughed and bumped against his shoulder. “I so am. I know how to make fries, dweeb. I used to cook basic stuff before.”

Dante knew what ‘before’ she was talking about. Before her mom had met his dad and they had moved to that big house where Shana considered that cooking had to be a mortal sin or something like that.

“We’ll get a bunch of stuff, and tonight we’re going to eat. Gosh, I’m starving just thinking about it,” Shana said and turned the shopping cart deftly toward the frozen foods aisle. “We’ll grab some chips to keep us still alive until then.”

Dante hadn’t thought he’d have fun shopping with his big sis, but it seemed that, when she wasn’t drunk or starving to keep her figure for some guy, she could be nice enough.

They were barely out of the huge supermarket and putting all the foods in the trunk of his father’s SUV that Shana’s phone rang. Dante watched her as her face transformed from surprise to worry and then anger. “I’m coming right now,” she said hurriedly.

“What’s going on?” he asked, as soon as she was off the phone.

Shana climbed behind the wheel, and Dante followed her inside the car. Then, he watched in surprise as she slammed her hands on the wheel with a heartfelt, “Motherfucker!”

“All right, calm down,” he started. “Whatever it is--”

“That stupid Ash needs me to take him from the precinct, can you believe it?”

“You mean, the police? Why?” Dante asked, feeling all his blood draining from his face. “Was he in some accident?”

“Yeah, in an accident involving his fucking fists,” Shana said. “I hope they accept my credit card this time around,” she grumbled.

“Who did he fight with?” Dante asked, now regretting all the more that he had let Ash walk away from him earlier with so much anger in his system. Obviously, those bad feelings must have gotten to him.

“He didn’t say. Knowing him, it was probably something stupid. Anyway, let’s hope that all that frozen stuff doesn’t melt until we get home. In case of anything, just save the ice cream bucket, got it?”

Dante nodded. He swallowed hard. Ash was in serious trouble, and Shana acted like it wasn’t the first time that happened. “Do you have enough money for... I guess it’s bail, right?” He had only heard of stuff like that in movies. In his world, young men didn’t get into fist fights and needed their friends to bail them out.

“Yeap,” Shana confirmed with a sour look on her face.

“Is it a lot?”

“Enough to hurt this poor bitch’s finances,” Shana said in a funny tone and pointed at herself. “What? You scared? Sorry, but I can’t drop you off home first. That moron needs me.”

“I’m not scared,” Dante protested. “If there’s anything I can do to help, just tell me.”

Shana ruffled his hair and turned the key. “You’re a kid. Don’t worry about it.”

He hadn’t told Shana anything about who he had punched to warrant a visit to the police, knowing very well that she might refuse to help him if she knew. Of course, she’d side with the douchebag, and it wasn’t like Ash could say, in perfect honesty, that he had thrown that punch to protect her honor. First of all, Shana knew very little about that word and what it meant, and second of all, he had punched the asshole just because he had been pissed enough before even sitting across from him.

He was relieved when he was called to walk out, and even happy when he saw Shana. Moments like these were to remind him of how he didn’t have anyone in the world, and that, in a world such as that, having a Shana, with all her drawbacks, was still better than nothing.

However, his good mood went to shits the moment he saw who was with her. “What’s he doing here?” he asked rudely and pointed at Dante.

Shana waved impatiently. “How about a ‘thank you, Shana’ once in a blue moon, asshole? You were lucky, you know? You could have slept here.”

“Thank you, Shana,” he said and accepted her short hug, while his eyes didn’t leave Dante. The guy looked a bit shaken and stared at him with his huge pretty eyes. “You’re the best pal a guy can hope for.”

Shana brushed his cheek with her closed fist as a joke and smiled. “Let’s get out of here. I have a ton of food that’s about to spoil because you’re stupid. And Dante was with me while we were shopping, since you’re wondering so much. Hey, what’s with the dirty looks between you two? Weren’t you best pals or something?”

Shana had no idea what she was talking about, obviously. And it was better if things remained that way. Giving Dante a look that hopefully conveyed what would happen if the boy blabbered to his sis about getting banged by a bad boy like him, he followed the duo out of the building.

Dante felt relieved that Ash didn’t show any sign of having been injured, but probably, if that had been the case, he would have been taken to the hospital, rather than the police. It appeared that he was still mad at him for earlier, and Dante took it silently upon himself to apologize like he should.

“So, who did you punch?” Shana asked, as soon as they were heading back home.

Ash grunted and looked out the window. Dante sat turned in his seat to observe what the other was doing, curious about all the details of such a fight. Now, that he knew that Ash wasn’t hurt, he was a bit excited about it all. How did Ash look while throwing punches? Not that he wanted to be at the receiving end of those punches if he thought about it.

“Ah, you’re giving me the silent treatment? After all I did for you?” Shana asked. However, despite her words, she didn’t appear to be upset at all. “Did you at least put the other asshole in a hospital or something? Ah, no, right? ‘Cause I wouldn’t have been able to get you out so fast if that had been the case. Anyway, we’re going to cook and eat. What do you say, boys?”

“Are you going to cook?” Ash asked roughly.

Dante turned back in his seat when Ash gave him that same deadly look as earlier.

“No. You boys got me tired as fuck for the day. I’m going to leave the two of you in the kitchen and, hopefully, when I wake up from my beauty sleep, there will be something edible on the

table. Do we have a deal? Do we, asshole?” She threw the word at Ash so casually that he didn’t appear to take it to heart.

No, he was even smiling. Dante hurt on the inside that Ash’s quirky smile wasn’t directed at him, though.

He was in no position to give Shana shit for sending him to the kitchen like that. Sure, he’d have to endure the torture of sharing the same space with Dante, and resist the temptation of bending him over the table and kissing him until they both stopped breathing. Yes, he had had some time to let his anger drain from him, and throwing a punch at that asshole had helped a great deal. And that left him in a more dangerous position because now, he had the clarity to notice Dante’s pretty lips, how pouty they turned when he was upset, and how long and curly his eyelashes were while he pretended to be fully absorbed in the process of opening a bag of frozen fries.

“Let me,” he offered and took the bag from Dante’s hands. “I have a bit of experience with that.”

“Ash, look, I’m so very sorry,” Dante said abruptly.

Ash looked at him, surprised. The pouty lips weren’t because the boy was upset? Go figure. He didn’t know Dante’s faces all that well. He wished he did, and especially that he had the time to learn them all.

He let out a sigh. Dante would never rat on him. He was a goody two shoes, and Ash shouldn’t have fucked him. Fuck, he needed to keep his mind in check. Only remembering a moment of that morning made him want to do it again. That bending over the kitchen table could very well involve other things.

“Don’t sweat it.” He emptied the contents of the bag into the big pan with oil. Thank fuck Shana had grabbed some food to eat this time around. Most of the time, he was wondering what she was living on.

“No, for real.” Dante moved closer and touched his arm lightly.

Ash looked at where Dante was touching him. Taking that as a sign that he was overstepping, Dante pulled his hand back. “For real, what?” Ash asked.

He cornered Dante against the table. The pleading look in those chestnut colored eyes was too good not to tease. Ash put his hands on the table, by the sides of Dante’s body, capturing him.

“It was a mean thing to allude to,” Dante started frantically. “I mean--”

As expected, the joke was on him. Ash forgot about how important it was to play safe and cut Dante’s words short with a kiss. A small whimper of surprise followed, but quickly, the soft lips

parted, and Ash was allowed inside with so much ease that it hurt him to know he would have to pull back.

He did so. "It's okay, dude," he said with a forced smile. "I really mean it. Don't sweat it."

Dante remained silent and picked at invisible lint on the table. "Why did you punch that guy?"

Ash grimaced. "Why do we do the things we do?"

"Not fair to reply with a question," Dante said.

Ash stared at him. Dante seemed so much more innocent than him. Maybe a little bit of truth didn't hurt. "A thing like that? Well, because we're stupid. I'm stupid. Did that answer your question?"

"I guess it does. Good thing you weren't hurt. Then, I wouldn't have been able to forgive you."

Ash smiled as he began washing the cucumbers. "That how it is, huh?"

Dante came near and kissed his cheek tenderly. "It is. Any complaints?"

Ash couldn't say that he had any.

Chapter Fourteen - I Think I Hate My Life

Shana appeared to be in pretty good spirits after catching a bit of sleep, and she was busy telling stories of how she and her girlfriends had managed to get their hair fried at some shady beauty salon from the bad part of the town. Dante was only half listening. Ash was barefoot and teasing him under the table by stepping on his sneakers and then climbing higher and trying to pull one of his socks down under his ankle.

He couldn't say that he knew a great deal about that sort of seduction, but it was working absolutely awesomely, because he felt tickled all over by those playful toes.

He jumped when a French fry flew through the air and hit him in the nose. "What?" he turned toward his sis fairly scandalized.

Shana guffawed and threw her head back. "Who do you want to hook up with? That was what I was asking. Which of my girlfriends do you like? I can make it happen. Except for Alicia. Ash got his eyes on her."

Dante looked over the table, at Ash. The guy winked at him and his big toe rubbed playfully against Dante's ankle. "Yeah," he drawled, "no stepping on my turf, or I'll fuck you."

Dante swallowed hard.

Shana smacked Ash over the head. "Don't talk like that with my little bro. He might think you fuck dudes, too."

"And?" Ash challenged her while his toes continued to get busy against Dante's bare skin. "He doesn't look like he gets scared that easily."

"Any dude would get scared if threatened with a fucking. Especially by a scary asshole like you. Don't give me that evil eye. I'm not impressed. You two, just don't get into some argument over which pussies you want to nail. It's all I'm saying."

Dante hoped Ash meant it about the fucking part. He shifted in his chair and cleared his throat. Maybe it was a good occasion for him to let his big sis know he was gay.

Before he had a chance to talk, Shana's phone went off and she grabbed it with a triumphant smile on her face. "You boys do the dishes. I'm off to make myself pretty. I have a date tonight."

Ash's playful teasing stopped. When he looked over, Dante saw that handsome face all turned into a dark frown.

There was no way Mike wouldn't tell Shana about his black eye and who gave it to him. That meant only one thing. That he would have to find another place to crash and soon. Fuck his life.

He would have to be gone soon, and for the first time in many years, he felt like staying for a little while longer.

It all had to do with the pair of beautiful eyes searching his face from across the table. So, their time was short. Ash stood up and offered Dante his hand. "How about I show you the guesthouse where Shana lets me stay?"

"We should do the dishes first."

"Fuck the dishes."

Dante threw him a quizzical look but took his hand. Ash would rather not spend the little time he had left explaining why he was stupid and needed to make a run for it again.

No, he didn't mind being showed the guesthouse, Dante thought, because the first thing that happened once inside was to be pressed against the closed door and given a hard kiss that forced his mouth open.

Ash's hands were urgent while feeling his ass, and Dante only had the strength to remain standing as the thought of getting fucked again by that bad boy made his knees turn butter soft.

His ass twitched and ached dully to remind him that it wasn't that good an idea after all. Screw that. He'd have to deal with it, be a man about it.

"Bedroom, now," Ash said gruffly and pulled him along.

Dante couldn't care less about the layout of the guesthouse. Ash made him walk into a neat room with a bed and pushed him on it. No protests emerged while he remained without his t-shirt and then his pants. However, when impatient fingers searched underneath his briefs and caught one of his buttocks hard, he whimpered against his earlier resolution.

Ash caught on right away. "It's too soon to fuck you again," he said bluntly, and Dante regretted right away his unmanly way to give himself away so easily.

"It's not," he protested and pulled Ash in for a long hot kiss, hoping that would help melt any doubts regarding the ability of his ass to withstand another dicking from that handsome young man.

"Shut up," Ash teased him, "I can tell it's hurting. It's not easy getting fucked in the ass, especially the way we did it."

Dante bristled. "What do you mean, the way we did it? Was something wrong with it?"

Ash was slowly kissing his face and lips and neck. "I didn't have lube to prepare you. I took you too fast because you made me mad about you. And it was in that ugly place, when you deserve to be taken on a bed and loved for hours."

Oh, Dante really liked that 'loved' part, although he didn't dare to hope that far, at least not at that very moment, when he was horny, while a part of him was bent on shying away and making him look like a loser.

"That leaves us with only one option, right?" Ash rubbed their noses playfully together and then pressed a small peck on Dante's lips.

"What's that?" He barely had the courage to breathe when Ash was so close, pinning him down with that intense blue gaze.

"To give you a good screw the other way," Ash said and grinned.

"That sounded quite enigmatic," Dante commented, and the words caught in his throat as Ash pushed himself off the bed and began removing his clothes fast.

Too bad he couldn't get all that and store it away, Dante thought. Ash winked at him and then disappeared through the door with one last 'give me a minute'.

Dante looked at the ceiling and stayed there, thinking of nothing else but Ash. It was a bit funny how another person could fill up his mind to the point that it seemed like he couldn't be contained.

He pushed himself half up as Ash got back, his skin damp like he had been in the shower, completely naked and holding condoms in one hand and a tube of what looked like lube in the other.

Dante braced himself. Whatever that 'other way' involved, he still needed to relax his asshole.

Caught as he was in those thoughts, he missed the speed with which Ash straddled him. Then, his cock was getting handled, very properly, if anyone asked, by being pulled out of his briefs and made to stick out proudly.

Ash winked at him again and moved with his usual grace, getting down and beginning to suck firmly on Dante's cock.

"I'll come fast if you do that," Dante breathed out.

"Not yet," Ash warned him giving the head a last wild lick and locking eyes with him. "I just need you fully hard for this.

There was no time to wonder what that meant. Ash ripped the foil on a condom and then took the thing in his mouth in the most seductive way a living being was supposed to do it.

What followed next left his mind in scrambles. Ash proceeded to put the condom on him, flashing that blue gaze at him from time to time, making him the hardest he had ever been in his life.

“Am I going to fuck you?” Dante whispered. The f-word stuck in his throat and wouldn’t go down.

“What? You don’t want to?” Ash threw him an unsure cute smile.

“I’ve never wanted something more in my whole life,” Dante hurried to assure him. “How are we--”

“Told you I’d give you a proper screw.” Ash’s usual confidence returned, as his sexy wink indicated right away.

Dante was released from his underwear, too, and the next thing he knew was how firm hands began lubing his condom clad erection. Then, he watched in unhidden admiration how Ash straddled him again, his own hard cock bouncing to and fro.

He sensed resistance as his cock was masterfully pushed inside was felt like tight scorching heat. From that position he couldn’t see everything Ash was doing to him, but he was pretty sure he would soon experience what fucking the most beautiful boy he’d had the chance to meet felt like.

“Have you done this before?” he asked as he grabbed hold of Ash’s hips and tried to look more between their bodies.

“Yes,” came the reply. “Jealous?”

“A little,” he admitted.

“You don’t have to. I’ve never liked it till you.”

That was quite the strange answer. Dante wanted to know more, but the sensation of his cock getting through a hot thigh channel was enough to put a stop to his mind altogether. Ash leaned over him and kissed him. And then, he began moving his hips and the sensations overwhelmed him. His cock was squeezed and milked, and there was that maddening friction that made it so good that his mind was on the brink of exploding.

Ash pulled him out of it by capturing his right hand and putting it on his cock. “Rub mine,” he ordered in a soft moan. “I want to come all over you.”

He didn’t have to ask twice. Grabbing hold of Ash’s hard beautiful cock gave him something else to do besides letting his mind blown away by the first time in his life fucking another man.

They now moved like they were made for each other. Ash was breathing hard, throwing his head back, giving Dante a front row seat to the show of an amazing sweaty chest, a taut throat and a

beautiful face in the throes of ecstasy. There had to be something in how well he managed to keep his cock erect - something not difficult, since Ash squeezed him so deliciously - that had to please his partner.

His toes curled against the coverlet in an effort to postpone the inevitable. But it was too good, the sight of Ash taking pleasure out of him like it was his right too much, and soon he felt his entire body tensing and pooling all that energy in a single point of his body. "Ash, I love you," he whispered without thinking while he came and came like there was no end of it.

Hot droplets pelted the skin of his chest, making him open his eyes to see that Ash had wrapped his hand over the slack one holding his cock and now finished the job.

The blue eyes locked with his, full of shadows and light. Dante had no idea what that meant until the useless realization of what he had just said hit him. Any doubts that he should have kept his mouth shut flew from his mind when Ash grabbed his face and kissed him forcefully, like he was about to eat him whole.

True or not, those words rang in Ash's mind long after Dante had dropped the bomb. Maybe that was just a horny boy talking while getting the first proper fuck of his life in the position of the giver, but Ash wanted to doubt it.

It was too bad that soon, he'd had to run away. He remained wrapped around Dante like a snake around his prey, not wanting to let go just yet.

A loud noise right outside and a banshee like scream that spelled his name destroyed the illusion. Dante started, rightfully frightened. "What is it?"

Ash groaned and pushed himself up. "I think I hate my life," he said under his breath as he put on his jeans.

Chapter Fifteen - Life's Not Fair

“You should get dressed,” Ash threw at Dante while he hurried to meet his future and put on his shield that would get him through a brand new heartbreak.

Dante followed his advice by the shuffling of clothes. Ash didn't wait to see more. By tonight, he'd be out of there, and out of Dante's life, too. All for the better. The goody two shoes would be a lot better without a good for nothing like him.

Shana was in the small hallway, fuming as she had the right to be doing. “The fuck, Ash?” she shouted the moment she saw him and slapped him so hard his head snapped to the side. He deserved that for being an idiot. “You punched Mike in the face?! And had me pay the bail for you? You fucking piece of shit!”

“You know me,” Ash said bluntly.

Shana stared at him with her heavily made eyes that lent her the aspect of an owl or a racoon. “Is this really what you want to tell me?” She tried to hit him again, but Ash caught her arm and squeezed in warning.

“I get it. I'll be out of your hair.”

“You better be!” she yelled and pulled her arm free. “You fucking idiot! And I want my money back!”

He was ready for that kind of thing. He rummaged through the stash he kept in a fancy vase on the single stylish shelf in the small hallway and threw a roll of bills at Shana. “Keep the change,” he said with a shrug. “Thanks for everything.”

“Don't you play the smartass with me, asshole!”

“What's going on?” That was Dante, properly dressed and now running his hands through his hair to make it behave.

“This asshole hit Mike. And now he's out of here!” Shana tapped her foot while holding the roll of bills like she didn't know what to do with it.

“No, he's not,” Dante said calmly.

Ash gawked at him. Shana exploded. “Excuse me?!”

“This is my dad's house, not yours. And I say he stays,” Dante continued like the innocent hero that he was.

“No fucking way,” Shana protested. “Since when are you pals with this asshole? Let's see if daddy approves of such friendships.”

“Does he approve of you throwing party after party here?” Dante was beautifully standing his ground.

“Are you blackmailing me?” Shana growled.

“Are you?” Dante shot back. “You didn’t even hear Ash out. Maybe Mike deserved it. Maybe he’s the asshole.”

Shana seemed to boil for a moment on the inside. “What did he do?” she finally asked Ash, taking him by surprise.

“He called me a whore basically,” Ash said with a shrug. “And you.”

Shana pursed her lips hard. “I don’t believe you. Mike’s not like that.”

“Believe what you want. But be careful. That guy’s a user. I’ve seen enough of those in my life.”

“I bet,” Shana snorted, not yet willing to let go of the ax she wanted to grind. “So, did you hit him because he called me a slut?” She threw him a strange look.

“No. For that I just called him an asshole,” Ash said. “I punched him for calling me a fuckboy, though.”

Shana stared at him for a moment and then, she broke into laughter. She was shaking with it, and she walked toward him, still laughing. She stopped and hugged him tightly. “You’re such a fucking knight, Ash. I love your ass. You can stay. But I’m taking this with me,” she waved the money, “because I can’t afford to bail you out all the freaking time.”

Then, she turned to Dante and hugged him, too. “Thanks, lil’ bro. You stopped me from making a mistake. Bye for now. I have an asshole to put on straight.” She dashed through the door just like she must have entered, like a tornado.

Dante stared at him in disbelief once she was out. “Weren’t you going to defend yourself?”

Ash shrugged. “Why? Life’s not fair. People don’t listen just because you have something to say.”

“And yet, she just did,” Dante pointed out.

“She listened to you, not me,” Ash said.

Dante stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. “Now, listen here. You’re too young to be so jaded.”

The wise airs this college kid was putting on were a bit much. Ash stared him in the eye. “And what do you know, house pet?” He used his dangerous voice, the one girls liked. Guys usually got pissed.

Dante didn’t react as expected. “Maybe not much, and clearly, you’ve been through a lot, but you still have hope on your side. There are some good people in the world, and you will meet a few.”

Ash felt his resolve to cut and run wavering under that steady gaze. “Like you?” He pushed Dante’s hair behind one ear.

“Yeah. My mom is great, too. You should meet her.”

Ash burst into laughter. “Do you want me to meet your mom? How are you going to introduce me? As the fuckboy who gave you the first dicking in your life?”

Dante pushed against him hard. Now he looked pissed and he was too pretty like that. Ash wrapped his arms around him and kissed the cute face that tried to dodge his affection. “Did you mean it?” he asked in a whisper.

“I don’t just introduce random people to my mom,” Dante retorted.

“Not that,” Ash said impatiently. He couldn’t bring himself to repeat those words.

There was no need. Dante hugged him tightly. “Yes,” came a very energetic reply. “I knew I fell in love with you at first sight.”

“At first sight? I pushed you into the pool, and you looked at me like you wanted to kill me.”

“Well, you were annoying, yes, but I saw you earlier while you were walking by the pool, looking at the others like they had no idea what you knew. I wanted to see your eyes.”

Ash kissed him. “It’s just a little crush, dude. And I must have blown your mind earlier with that hip move.” He winked, and Dante made a sour face.

“Don’t you worry your cold heart,” Dante shot at him. “I don’t expect to hear the words back.” He patted him on the back. “I need to do some damage control regarding my sis. She’s like a pack of unstable explosives. And I need to tell that rude young man a couple of things, too.”

“To Mike?” Ash didn’t know what to make of that.

Dante nodded and started walking. At the door, he threw Ash a naughty look. “Thanks for the nice fuck.” And then, he ran out the door.

Too soon, Ash felt. Because, if he thought a little, his cold heart could do with a bit of thawing.

The scene Dante walked on was quite peculiar. That Mike character took up all the sofa in the living room, his arms and legs spread wide as if he owned the place. He wore a stylish black suit made of a light fabric, fit for the weather. When Dante saw his face, he understood everything. “Hi, Mike,” he began with a smirk, “it looks like black suits you.”

The young man gave him a withering look. Shana knelt on the sofa by his side and pressed a wet cloth against his black eye. “Oh, my poor baby,” she cooed on a false tone and rubbed his temple hard.

“Ouch, what the fuck, Shana?” Mike complained. “And who’s this smartass? Your little brother?”

Shana exchanged a warning glance with Dante. So, it was her show, and he had to stay away. Even if he didn’t feel like it, he understood it all too well. Shana was an easy girl, but that didn’t make her stupid. She was probably working an angle to get back at the moron. “He is, and you better remember, Mikey,” she replied and smooched his cheek loudly. “He’s very dear to me.”

Well, that was a bit new, because, frankly, Dante thought she merely tolerated him. “What are your plans for tonight?” he asked.

He had some of his own and included cornering Ash for a bit and finding why he was so jaded while being so young. It was paramount for him to find out, mostly because he wanted to discover everything about the brooding boy taking over all his thoughts and not only.

“Mikey here is so going to take me to the nicest place in town,” Shana said with emphasis and gave up on nursing her so-called boyfriend with a shrug. She threw the wet compress and made it land on the table with a plop. Then, she turned toward Mike and gave him an innocent look, as much as she could manage something like that. “So, what was that row with Ash all about? He’s so tight-lipped, it’s getting annoying. Did you two boys fight over me?” She pinched the guy’s cheek so hard it made the skin red upon release.

Mike worked his jaw and continued to give Dante killer looks. “Does he really need to be here and eavesdrop on our conversation?”

“When are you going to drop the accusations against him?” Dante asked, feigning importance and wondering if those were the right terms in a situation like that.

Mike smirked. “Is he shaking in his boots already? I’ll fucking take him--”

Shana stopped him with a loud kiss that left Mike with half the mouth covered in her red lipstick. She began wiping it off with her thumb. “Ash had a rough day. He didn’t mean to throw that punch.”

“Then get him here and make him apologize,” Mike suggested.

Shana laughed. “He’s a dude. Dudes don’t apologize.”

Mike was seething. Dante worried that Shana took things way too lightly for that guy’s patience.

“Come on,” Shana said and got up from the sofa. She offered Mike her hand. “Let’s go upstairs a little. I want to show you the view from my window.” She winked at Dante and then brushed her lips against Mike’s ear. “While I’m sucking your dick.” She chomped on his ear and laughed.

Dante was about to roll his eyes but then reconsidered. Whatever his big sis chose to do was totally her problem. And if she wanted to get in bed with an asshole, it didn’t concern him. Still, he felt like he had failed at doing anything he had hoped to achieve. His sis had unknown plans, and Mike had no idea what big a douchebag he was. Before he had the time to think of the right words to deliver, the duo was out of his sight.

The light knock on the glass door between the house and the backyard deck pulled him out of his self-defeated speech. Ash grinned from the other side and waved at him. Dante forgot about it all in an instant. And memories of the earlier romp in the hay flooded his mind, eliminating everything else.

Ash had no idea what he wanted to say or do, but he had rushed out the door after turning the idea of having Dante Elsher being in love with him on all sides. The boy had no idea what he was getting himself into, and the right thing to do would be to put him on the straight and narrow path with a gentle pat on the butt. However, Ash had never been an expert in doing the right thing, so that was that.

Dante opened the door, and they were face to face. Ash could stare into the beautiful eyes all he wanted. That thought was cut short by Dante grabbing him by his shirt and kissing him, short and sweet. Then, he looked around like they were about to get caught. It was a bit late, seeing his earlier dare, and Ash found it endearing.

“We need to talk,” Dante said, his cute face scrunched up in thought.

Chapter Sixteen – Leaving All Behind

Dante pushed Ash hurriedly toward the guesthouse, quite determined to find out everything about the boy of his dreams, get him to spill the beans or whatever, and then put together a plan of getting him out of there and away from the wrath of people like Mike, who were obviously mean, had means to hurt people, and probably wanted revenge.

“Wow, wow, you’re in a hurry,” Ash commented but obeyed without opposing any resistance.

As soon as they were back inside, Dante forgot about the planning thing and just kissed Ash as hard as he could. Firm hands were at his ass in a moment, and their owner’s intention was clear as day.

“Getting us into trouble?” Ash asked in a heated voice. “Shana might get pissed again. What if she catches us like this?”

“Like what?” Dante murmured and pushed slightly away. “She won’t know.”

Ash grinned and pushed him hard against the door. Then, he got to his knees and began working his fly. “She’ll know if she catches us with your dick in my mouth.”

Sure, plans could wait, Dante thought as he grunted and let himself enjoy that hot mouth on his cock again. Ash looked up, careful to take him as deep as possible, and he looked so good like that, making Dante feel incredibly valiant and ready to go head to head with that Mike fellow, no matter how ugly he looked with that black eye.

“Why does this feel so good?” he whispered.

Ash’s muffled laugh around his cock made it all worse. Or better. Dante was starting to think his cock had to be the most sensitive part of him, because everything Ash did around there blew his mind with new sensations. It looked like the bad boy knew very well how things stood because he pulled Dante’s cock slowly out of his mouth, resting it on his tongue, only to demonstrate how adept he was at taking him deep again.

Dante was still a very simple man when it came to such sexual matters. Ash moved his hand and his mouth, and he looked up from time to time, in search of reassurance, despite his cocky ways of handling Dante’s cock, that he was all endearing.

All right, so that was that, and he just couldn’t last. His toes curled in his sneakers; Dante hoped he wouldn’t get a cramp from all that toe-curling. That thought ran away from his mind because Ash clamped his mouth so hard on him as the release coursed through him with the magnitude of thunder that it shook him to the core.

He closed his eyes and slowly dropped to the floor while Ash allowed him. They were both lying there, and Ash laughed and brushed his nose against Dante's cheek over and over in a playful way.

"Did you just swallow?" Dante asked meekly.

"Every last drop," Ash assured him. "And it was very tasty, I can tell."

"Weren't you the one saying not to do that with strangers?" Dante turned his head and accepted the light kiss on his lips.

"You're not a stranger. Don't tell me you're secretly a heartbreaker and you just played me like a pro. Have you been with other guys?"

"Nope," Dante assured him. "You're my first in every way. The first guy to fuck me, the first to suck me off all the way."

"I love it when you talk dirty. Now, cutie, what did you want to talk about?"

"Your dick is hard," Dante pointed out and felt Ash's erection through his jeans without thinking twice.

"It can wait," Ash said. "Or do you want to give me a hand?"

"A hand? That sounds a bit underwhelming after you just made me come into your mouth." Dante was really getting good at this talking dirty stuff because Ash looked away and then smiled with all his face.

"If you do it, I don't see how it can be underwhelming. Come on, show me how you do it?"

Dante didn't let himself be asked twice. He was all over Ash, taking his cock out and giving it a kiss on the head. He wished he could return the favor, but he knew Ash was right. So, he settled for going for the rhythm he usually enjoyed. "Like this?" he asked, his voice low and anxious.

"You're doing great. Come on, kiss me," Ash urged him.

Ash had to admit that he couldn't remember ever feeling this way. With just one hand moving up and down his cock, this cute guy was making him come undone. He could breathe in Dante's smell, and they kissed, deep and at length. He felt Dante's ass through his pants, enjoying the feel of that firm butt in his hand. Too bad they were both too fucked for a repeat performance. For a beginner, Dante sure had a cock on him, and Ash's ass twitched in sympathy at the memory of their earlier fuck.

Oh, that was a thing to hold on to, them doing it again, him fucking Dante, Dante getting on top and showing him how good it felt when it was with the right person.

Dante straddled him and continued to rub him off. It was good beyond belief, and Ash wanted more of it. His hands roamed all over the other boy, until there was no inch of him left untouched.

“I want to see you come,” Dante whispered, sensing, without a doubt, that Ash was about to explode.

They both looked at the cock between them, as Dante continued to rub it. Ash squirmed and thrashed, for some reason, just being able to look at Dante’s face from up close making him go over without a second thought. Dante let out a small sound of pleased surprise as Ash’s cock erupted, spreading ropes and ropes of cum everywhere.

Both their t-shirts were the victims. They laughed as they stared at themselves. Ash pulled Dante closer for a kiss. “Thanks for the handjob, pretty thing,” he teased.

“You’re more than welcome, sir,” Dante said playfully. “Now, let’s get in a position where we can talk without touching each other much.”

“What? But that’s cruel,” Ash complained.

Dante assured him with a kiss that it wasn’t the case.

Maybe it was true what people said that having a pair of empty balls worked wonders for the brain, because he thought everything a lot more clearly now. Ash sat across from him, his hands on the table, linked together, and he was watching him with that intense blue gaze of his.

“That Mike guy is an asshole. You don’t have to stay here if you don’t want to be anywhere near him,” Dante began.

Ash shot him a look full of surprise. “It’s not like I can find another place just like that,” he explained.

Dante waved. “I’m not talking about today or tomorrow or next week. How about you come back with me at the end of the summer?”

“Come back where?” Ash shot him a quizzical look. “Your house?”

“We live in a small one, but I’ll be leaving for college in fall, and you can have my room.”

Ash shook his head and gave him a confused smile. “Do you want me to come live... with your mom?”

Dante blew air noisily through his nose. "I know it sounds awful because you're used to all the partying and all that, but you could really try your hand at gardening and start a business and all that if you only--"

Ash put one hand up. "Stop right there. Dante, sorry for asking this, but aren't you supposed to be smart to get into college or something?"

"And?"

"And what you just said sounds pretty damn stupid."

Dante pursed his lips. "It's not."

Ash shook his head and leaned back into his chair, looking away. "There's no way you can show up at your mom's doorstep with me in tow." He made a vague gesture at himself.

"What's that supposed to mean? You think my mom would be scared by your tattoos?"

"No, she would be scared of having a stranger in her house. Well, yeah, the tattoos don't sell me that much, either. It's weird as fuck, what you're saying."

Dante looked at Ash, his eyes half-closed. "If mom said 'yes', would you like to come home with me?"

Ash groaned and threw his head back. "There's no point in playing with what-ifs. Been there, done that."

"Geez, you do sound jaded. But I think I got you where I wanted. You're not opposed entirely to the idea of leaving all behind?"

"Do you mean, whoring myself around and whatnot?" Ash asked promptly.

"Come on, it's not like you--" Dante swallowed with difficulty. He had no idea how to phrase that in a way that made sense.

Ash leaned over the table to meet his eyes. "I've never done it for cash, not directly, okay. Is that what you're struggling with? But that doesn't change anything. I'm just a shiny piece of trash, Dante. Don't make the mistake to pick me up."

"Too late," Dante shot back. "Not only I picked you up, but you're in my pocket." He patted the right side of his pants to make a point.

"You're crazy. You don't know me."

"I know you enough. But, if you think that, how about you tell me about you?"

Dante had no idea what he was asking. Ash ran his fingers through his hair. As tough as it was, that sweet guy sitting across the table from him deserved a few hard truths. “I don’t remember how I ended up alone, growing up in the streets. It’s like it’s always been like that,” he started.

Dante made a vague gesture with his chin for him to continue.

“I bounced on and off, from place to place.”

“Like that old lady’s place, the one with the roses.”

“Yeah.” Ash rubbed his mouth for a moment. “I’ve done all kinds of things. Petty theft, getting in scuffles, playing with gangs. And I got fucked, in case you’re wondering. Some older guy, pushing me down and getting on top of me to teach me a lesson ‘cause I was a punk.”

“I’m sorry,” Dante mumbled.

“Fuck, that hurt.” Ash didn’t intend to sugarcoat the truth. “The fact that a part of me seemed to want it was just so fucked up. I ran away again and again.”

“Did you have sex with guys? I mean, you know, fuck them?”

Ash shook his head. “I wanted to. I was angry with it for a while. Didn’t know what to make of it. I thought that, because that dude fucked me, I was now broken inside or some shit, and wanted to hurt other guys like he hurt me. But it wasn’t like that. When I closed my eyes, I imagined kissing some boy and making love to him, not that.”

“Did we make love?” Dante asked. “We only used the f-word.”

“Are you getting shy now?” Ash laughed a bit. “I think we did both. It’s fun with you, Dante, and I can say that’s a first for me, too.”

“Doesn’t your ass hurt?” Dante whispered. “Mine sort of still does.”

Ash grimaced. “Sorry about that. Yeah, if it makes you feel any better, mine hurts, too.”

“Sorry.” Dante winced, making another cute face.

Ash wanted to kiss him and forget about hard truths. “I still bounce from place to place, Dante. I have no idea how to just be in one place.”

“You’ve been here a while,” Dante pointed out.

“Yeah, maybe too long. Look where that took me. I punched a guy in the face. I’ve fucked almost every girl that ever stepped foot in this house. I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“You made me fall in love with you,” Dante said matter-of-factly. “That should count as one good thing.”

Ash laughed and shook his head. “Really? You think? You’re just too innocent for me, too wholesome, you know?”

“Not that innocent anymore. Your cock was in my ass.”

“Now that didn’t sound very romantic, Dante Elsher.”

“I get that a lot. Maybe it’s the part of me that’s all about machines and nothing else.” Dante shrugged. “There are always solutions, you know? You don’t have to face it all alone. Look, I get it that my idea of taking you home to mom so that you can stay at my house is farfetched--”

“Oh, good, that’s progress.”

“Just shut up and listen. The point is, you can change your life. You can live anywhere. I saw you throw that money at Shana. The next time you have enough, how about taking a proper leap in the right direction? It’s all about having a trajectory.”

“You’re a bit weird.” Ash eyed the other boy carefully.

“I’m right, that’s what I am,” Dante said with conviction. “Now, I leave this bomb to sink in, you know, get your mind acquainted with it. We have all summer, after all.”

“Your dad’s going to be home soon. I might not be able to stick around.”

“I’ll talk to Shana. I bet she has a lie lined up. She’s kept you here for some time, right?”

Ash knew that Dante didn’t see the danger in that. The danger that, if he continued to live there all summer, the chances were that he would fall in love, too.

Chapter Seventeen – Coming Down With Both Feet On The Ground

They had no idea they had fallen asleep side by side in Ash's bed until loud noises from outside announced them that there was a party going on, and it wouldn't die out soon. "What on earth?" Dante murmured and tried to make sense of what was going on around him.

Ash wrapped one arm around him. "Shana's throwing one of her parties, don't go."

After the earlier confessions, Ash had proven quite shy around him, and Dante understood vulnerabilities when he saw them. So, he had just taken Ash to the bed, hugged him tightly and told him that he loved him all the more for being honest, and, at one point, they had just fallen asleep together.

"I don't intend to go, don't worry. It's just that, there's nowhere to hide from all that noise. I had no idea dad would allow her to go crazy like this."

"He's not." It was weird to have Ash tell him things about his dad, but the truth was, he must have seen a lot more of the man than Dante lately. "When he's home, Shana is like a totally different girl. You wouldn't believe the way she dresses. Good enough to take to church, I swear."

"I bet she's boiling on the inside while confined like that," Dante said and giggled. "She's a strange one, in my eyes. But I think she's okay. I thought we would spend all summer hating each other's guts."

"Yeah. Sorry for calling her a skank that time."

"I have a feeling she might have tasted that joke about Santa," Dante said. "If only the music weren't so loud. Good thing we caught some sleep, although I think I'll go a bit nuts if I continue to mess up my sleeping patterns like this."

"As I told you. Your dad's going to be home. And then, the never-ending party will be over."

"Can you stay? Even if he's here? I mean, do you want to?" Dante asked timidly.

"I do want," Ash hurried to assure him and kissed his hand tenderly. "It's a bit crazy and I blame you for it, but I do want to stay."

"I want to come out to my dad. My mom knows. She has known for some time."

"Do you think that's a good idea?" Ash turned on one side and they faced each other.

"He's cool," Dante said. "He should know, seeing how I already got myself a boyfriend."

Ash stared at him, his eyes narrowed. Then, his eyebrows shot up in surprise. "Boyfriend? When did I agree to that?"

“Ah, well, getting a little bit ahead of myself, it’s true. But I’m sure you want to be my boyfriend.”

“Dante,” Ash said slowly, “I’m not so out in the open like you. I can’t really afford it.”

Dante had to admit that his heart was getting smaller upon hearing those words. He tried to brush it off. Sure, Ash had a reputation. But people here were supposed to be so hip and open-minded. Was it really a problem? Still, it wasn’t his choice to make, so he nodded quickly. “Of course. I understand.”

Ash caressed his cheek gently. “Do you really?”

“Not entirely, but it’s your choice.”

“Yeah. I don’t think your dad would approve of me being your boyfriend, even if he’s okay with you being gay.”

“Why?”

Ash groaned and let himself fall on the pillow. “Because I’m practically the pool boy. And a bad apple.”

“Hmm, a bad apple sounds a little better than a shiny piece of trash. And I like apples,” Dante said.

Ash snickered and planted a hand on his face shortly. “Do dudes really fall for this quirky act of yours?”

“All the time. I’ve only tried it once, though.”

Ash moved closer and kissed him. “You’re so crazy.”

They jumped when the door flew wide open, and a very disheveled Shana appeared in the doorway. “What the fuck?!” she exclaimed.

It all had happened so fast that they hadn’t had the time to pull away from one another in time.

“Are you two fucking?” she asked out loud. She was holding a bottle in one hand and she could barely stand. “Are you fucking my little brother?”

“Shana,” Ash started.

“Don’t you ‘Shana’ me, you fucker,” she warned, waving with the bottle. “Because of you, Mike broke up with me. And here I was, like a stupid fuck, thinking that you would be able to comfort me. You fucking lying scumbag!”

“Wait, what did he lie to you about?” Dante intervened in her little show.

“And you, you little snake. How come you let yourself convinced by this asshole? I thought you were a prissy little boy. Momma’s boy.” She swayed to and fro and made no sense.

“Whatever,” Dante said. “Anyways, Ash’s my boyfriend now,” he added, forgetting about how he was not supposed to say things like that.

“Boyfriend?” Shana bellowed. “How fucking precious. This guy must have been in a serious funk to put his dick in you. Wait, did he put his dick in you, or the other way around? You have some serious shit to ‘fess up, Ash.”

“That is none of your damn business,” Dante said, remembering how his mom used to say that to annoying people. “And Mike was not good for you, and you know it.”

“And what do you know, nerd?” Shana didn’t seem on top of her game with the insults. “He’s fucking rich, and I had him wrapped up around my lil’ finger until Ash screwed it all up.” She threw her arms out to express her dismay at having been betrayed like that.

“Being rich is not everything that matters in life,” Dante said, putting all the weight he had behind each word.

“Ha! You’ve never been really poor, obviously,” Shana said with a snort. “Anyway, you two, sort your shit up, ‘cause I can’t deal with it right now. And wait till daddy hears about it.”

“Hears about what? I’m not ashamed of being gay,” Dante said.

Shana shrugged. “We’ll see about that, I guess. But seriously, lil’ bro, of all people, you couldn’t find anyone better?” She shook her head and turned on her heel to leave. “Bye, assholes. Thanks for nothing.”

Ash wasn’t sure he was shell-shocked of Shana finding them out like that, or just angered. He did want to punch his way through a wall, and Dante’s assurance that it would all work out in the end didn’t help at all. “She’s going to tell everyone now, I bet.”

He paced the room, not knowing what to do with his hands and all the adrenaline moving through him.

“Maybe it’s for the better. They would have found out eventually.”

Ash groaned and punched the closest wall, one time, hard and short. Then, he caught his injured fist and growled through the pain. “Oh, fuck, Dante. You really don’t understand. I’m screwed.”

“If anyone says anything mean to you, I’ll protect you.”

That simple sentence broke through anger like the rays of sun through the clouds after a rain. Still cradling his hand, he started laughing. “Okay, big shot. But your sister’s about to throw me out, I’m sure.”

“It was just very surprising for her to find us like this. I bet she’ll come around.”

So much trust in things working out in the end was beautiful to the point of hurting. Ash moved and took Dante in his arms, as knelt as he was on the bed, and pressed his chest against his chest. “You crazy beautiful bastard,” he said, putting more emotion behind that than what he was capable of.

“Thanks,” came the muffled reply. “Wait, do you hear that?”

“Hear what? I don’t hear anything.”

“Exactly. That means that Shana sent everyone home. Finally, that stupid party must be over. We should go and talk to her since she’s upset over that asshole.”

Yeah, Dante had a point. Shana had been nice to him, nicer than a lot of people in his life, and it wasn’t fair to let her mope by herself when she actually had friends. Ash offered Dante a hand and a kiss before walking out the room.

The house was still bright with all the lights on when they got inside. Indeed, the party was over, but there was yelling coming out of the living room, and when Ash realized what was going on, it was too late.

His gut told him to stop, pull Dante back or at least let go of his hand, but it was too late.

The Elsher dad was home, with Shana’s mom in tow, and the girl was in tears, while the house looked like it had been destroyed by a hurricane. And Ash saw the man of the house in a completely different light than ever before, a dark stern look on his face while he was talking down the daughter of the woman he had married and for whom he must have gotten that pretty house. He was dressed in his usual plain clothes, grey dress pants and a short-sleeved dress shirt to match. Dante’s dad was taller than his son, and while there were plenty of similarities in their facial features, Dante had to be beautiful like his mom. Everything about Mr. Elsher said that he was something like a quiet accountant, which multiplied the shock of seeing him like that about tenfold.

Shana’s mom was silent, but it was clear by her pursed lips that she had no intention to come to her daughter’s rescue. She was adjusting her very expensive bracelet on the left wrist, while holding very still on her high heels. Ash expected Shana to grow up and grow old like her mom, which wasn’t so bad, although Elaine’s fuller figure might not have been to the girl’s liking. Still, the tight clothes fit her and showed a body that had probably convinced the quiet accountant – Mr. Elsher was actually an engineer – to take her home and make her his wife.

“How could you, Shana?” Mr. Elsher boomed. “We trusted you. The neighbors had to call and tell us you throw party after party every night.”

“I’m sorry, daddy,” Shana keened, her mascara falling freely on her cheeks with her fat tears. “I just wanted to have a little fun, and then more people came--”

“That’s it. We must do something about you,” Mr. Elsher cut her words short, seemingly not impressed by her tears. “Even your mother agrees that you should find work to keep you busy. You must be gainfully employed to understand that things don’t come easy.”

At the mention of that, Shana began to wail as if she had been threatened with being sent to a nunnery.

“Hi, dad,” Dante intervened before Ash could stop him.

Mr. Elsher turned toward them. “Dante. Have you been partying with Shana, too?” he asked directly. “I’m disappointed. And what’s the pool boy doing here?”

His dad looked good, a bit tanned, although seeing him so angered was so new that for a bit, he had had no idea what to say. In a way, and maybe seeing him after so much time, he looked a bit like a stranger. Dante squeezed the so-called pool boy’s hand in his to stop Ash from running. “He’s my boyfriend,” he said naturally.

Elaine, Shana’s mom, turned her head to stare at him curiously. She was impressive for her forty years of age, and very unlike his mom. His mom was willowy and graceful, with what people called an elegant beauty. Elaine showed off her feminine curves without not an ounce of bashfulness. Maybe that was what his dad liked in her.

His dad narrowed his eyes. “Boyfriend? Is this some kind of joke?”

Dante shook his head. “Not at all. I wanted to tell you this summer. That I’m gay.”

His dad’s face turned to stone, and his pursed lips seemed a single dreadful line now. “That’s it. I need to put some order in this house. Shana, go with your mother, and wash that filth off your face. Dante, go to your room. We’ll have a serious talk tomorrow. You, young man--” He stopped for a moment while looking at Ash. “You stay for a bit. I want to have a word with you.”

Dante looked helplessly at Ash. He hadn’t expected that reaction from his dad. He knew him as a man more in love with his machines than anything else, the type you’d tell some life changing breaking news that he’d ignore because real life didn’t matter to him.

“Go, Dante,” Ash urged him softly, as he didn’t want to let go of his hand. “We’ll talk later.”

He didn't feel like he was doing the right thing as they moved away from each other. But his dad needed to sleep through his anger, without a doubt.

He didn't expect much once he was alone with Mr. Elsher. So he just braced himself for the blow.

"You're not really the pool boy," the man said and crossed his arms. "Yes, I'm not that blind. But I thought you were Shana's boyfriend. How did it get from that to you putting absurd ideas in my son's head?"

"What absurd ideas?" Ash didn't really understand the question. He didn't intend to anger the man further. The house looked like shit. He was in his rights to want to punch someone.

"My son hasn't fancied himself gay until he came here, obviously," Mr. Elsher said with contempt.

"That's not true," Ash protested.

Mr. Elsher put a hand up, showing that he didn't care talking more than just that 'one word' he had threatened with earlier. "Please, pack your bags, if you have any, and leave the premises. Unless you want me to call the police."

The threat wasn't thrown at him in anger, but with a certain degree of wariness. Ash put his hands in his pockets and walked out slowly. Of course, Mr. Elsher saw him for what he truly was in the eyes of everyone else but Dante's.

It had been fun dreaming a little. But now, he needed to come down with both feet on the ground and start running again.

Chapter Eighteen – Harsh Morning

Dante didn't really get much sleep and felt awful for not thinking for a moment to get Ash's number so that they could text back and forth and soothe their hurt hearts. At least, his was hurt, because he hadn't expected his dad to be like that. Maybe it was only because he was upset about Shana throwing parties, and Dante's confession had come like a surprise he couldn't afford to think about at the moment.

However, finally, morning was here, and he could have that illuminating talk with his dad and tell him how Ash was actually a great guy, and that once they got to know each other, they would get along just fine. Ash wasn't the pool boy, all right, but he could be the gardener. He could start by taking care of that huge garden, which Ash suspected that Ash took care of, anyway, and then start recommending him and his skills around the neighborhood. That was how a business got built up. From the ground up.

Satisfied with that solution, he got to his feet and went straight to the bathroom to wash his face and brush his teeth. Shana almost crashed into him on her way out. She looked a lot better without all that makeup, but it looked like she had been crying a lot.

"How are you?" he asked.

Shana groaned. "I'm fucked, and not in the fun way."

"He'll come around," Dante offered, along with a sympathetic pat on the shoulder.

"You think?" She looked hopeful. "I've never seen him so angry. Well, I did fuck up, though."

"Let's just clean the house together, and he'll be more appeased," Dante suggested.

Shana made a face like she had just been forced into eating a whole lemon, but then nodded. "You're right. I need to make amends. And that asshole Mike could go fuck himself."

"You'll find others," Dante said as a means to make her feel better.

Her eyes twinkled with amusement. "Other assholes? You bet. I'm good at that."

Dante shook his head and snickered. Well, it felt good to have a sister, even one as whacky as Shana.

The kitchen looked spotless, and most of the house seemed okay, which must have meant that someone had been working hard at putting things in order from early in the morning. When he saw Elaine fluffing some pillows, Dante understood who had done all that. "Good morning," he said softly, feeling guilty of not thinking about telling Shana to wake up early and start cleaning the house.

“Good morning, Dante,” Elaine said and offered him a small smile. “That was quite the night, wasn’t it?”

“It was quiet, actually,” he said. “Usually, there’s a party.”

Elaine laughed and shook her head. “Don’t pull that kind of joke in front of your dad, young man. He’s still angry with you kids.”

Dante tried to smile harder. Dealing with his dad when angry was not something he knew. Actually, if he thought about it, he didn’t know his father very well, although they did share the same love for finding solutions and making things work. In his case, that passion extended to human beings, while his dad only liked his robots, or so his mom said on occasion.

Elaine pushed himself gently toward the kitchen. “Normally, we’d have breakfast outside, but the way the pool looks might just put your dad into a really bad mood again. Let’s not press our luck.”

Dante felt good at her touch. She seemed to be an ally, although he felt guilty. His dad was right to be angry because he expected the house to be nice and in order after paying for it what must have been a fortune.

Breakfast was a quiet business, and Dante didn’t dare to say a word, expecting his dad to talk whenever he felt like it. Although he no longer seemed angry, the deep wrinkle in his dad’s forehead told him that it wasn’t wise to be the first to strike up a conversation.

Shana and her mother left the room after cleaning the table and doing the dishes quickly, which meant that his dad now wanted to have that conversation with him.

Dante watched his dad’s hands, linked over the table. Maybe he should have called his mom, ask for advice on how to deal with such a situation. But no, he was supposed to fight his own battles.

“What is this story, about being gay?” his dad started.

“It’s not a story,” he replied right away. “It’s the truth.”

His dad looked sharply at him. “Since when? Since you put foot in here a couple a days ago or so?”

Dante crossed his arms to show to he didn’t intend to back down. “No. I’ve known for some time. Mom knows.”

“Of course. And neither of you thought of telling me.”

That wasn't fair. "I wanted to tell you face to face. But when I arrived here, you were on vacation with Elaine." He didn't want to sound like he was accusing his dad of something, but he did sound like that, anyway.

"And I wasn't expecting to come home and find such a mess. Elaine will deal with Shana. But I must deal with you. It appears that I didn't think things through when I wanted to have you here over the summer. This kind of lifestyle doesn't suit you."

"Lifestyle? What lifestyle? This is your house," Dante pointed out.

"And I'm not in it most of the time. That means that you are subjected to bad influence without my knowing. I cannot allow this. I'm taking you home to your mother today. I've already booked our flight."

"What?" Dante shouted without meaning to. "But this summer was supposed to be--"

He swallowed his words. He hadn't exactly looked forward to it, except for spending some time with his dad. But things had changed since meeting Ash. And he had wanted to stay for a whole different reason. Guilt crept in, because it made him feel like a bad son.

"I cannot watch over you like a chaperone. I don't even want to start to imagine what you have been up to with that reckless young man. You were safe, weren't you?" His dad seemed fairly uncomfortable while saying those words.

Safe. Dante understood what he meant. He pursed his lips hard. "No, because half of my brain must be missing," he said with a scowl.

"Don't play this game with me, Dante," his dad warned, in such an unlike him fashion that made him straighten up in his chair. "This isn't like you. And I don't believe a word that comes out of your mouth right now. It's only the bad influence. That young man."

"He didn't make me gay," Dante said defensively.

A single stern look from his dad made him think that was exactly what he thought. He hadn't expected his dad, of all people, to be so closed-minded. The words left him for a moment, suffocated as he felt at the injustice of it all.

"I've known for some time that I like boys," he continued, although his wavering tone told him that he wasn't as brave as he thought himself to be. To learn such a thing about himself, at the worst of times.

His dad put one hand up. "Enough of this nonsense. Pack what you need to pack. We leave in the afternoon. Until then--"

Dante stood up brusquely, pushing the chair back, almost making it fall. He grabbed it with one hand just in time. There was no need for a dramatic exit, or maybe there was, but that wasn't his style. He pursed his lips in barely contained anger. "Until then, I'll keep out of your sight."

"Dante--" his dad started reproachfully.

No less dramatic he was as he ran out of the room, almost crashing into Shana, who tried to raise one hand in comfort. He dashed before she had a chance to touch him.

"What the hell, daddy?" he heard her shouting. "Let Dante be gay, for fuck's sake."

"Shana, language," his dad's stern voice followed. "Dante needs to grow up."

He didn't linger back to listen, although by Shana's high voice, he could tell his sis was trying to make a case for him.

Once in his room, he threw himself on the bed and put his face in his hands. And did something he hadn't done in a long time. He began crying.

He kept his eyes stubbornly away from his dad, once they took their seats in the plane. The day had been hell, starting with that harsh morning, and he hadn't had a chance to see if Ash was still around. Through his window, he could only see part of the backyard, and it had remained deserted until the time to leave arrived.

Shana had hugged him tightly, as if she didn't want to let go, and promised they'd keep in touch. They had to pull apart, as his dad rushed him out. Even Elaine watched him with pity in her eyes, her hands on her daughter's shoulders, as he was being whisked away from the place where he thought he must have been the happiest of his life for what seemed now like mere seconds.

"You will understand me once you grow up and have kids of your own," his dad started, although Dante showed no signs that he was listening. "You must have seen that young man and thought he was so cool, or whatever word you kids use today to describe the things that impress you."

It wasn't like that. It wasn't like that at all. Dante squeezed his eyes shut to will away the childish tears.

"But I can see him for what he truly is. He's just someone used to taking advantage of people. Of course, I understand that his life might have been difficult and led him on this path, but I cannot allow him to drag my son into his problems. He's not someone to trust."

"You don't know him," Dante shot back. "You don't know anything real about him, like I do."

"I know enough," his dad said gravely. "You'll be grateful one day."

“I doubt it,” Dante said under his breath and regretted it, because that wasn’t how he had been raised. He loved his dad, and he would never be rude to him on purpose, only that today, he was anything but himself.

His dad surprised him by touching his head and caressing his hair briefly. “I love you, son. Even though you might hate me right now, I know this isn’t you.”

Today, it looked like he wouldn’t stop crying.

His mom was waiting at the airport, looking a bit worried as he hurried into her arms and hugged her. She accepted the perfunctory kiss on the cheek from his dad. “Will you stay for a bit?” she asked him.

“Just take Dante home. I suppose you two have a lot to talk about. And my flight back is only hours away.”

“All right. Have a safe trip back,” she said while she held Dante tightly, just like he was holding her.

They were inside their old car that seemed so comfortable with its faint smell of cinnamon from his mom’s favorite perfume, and the familiar sensations made him feel slightly better.

“What happened?” she asked on her most motherly tone.

“I fell in love,” Dante said, “for the first and last time in my life.”

Chapter Nineteen – At Your Worst And Best

His mom listened to him recounting all that had happened since he had stepped foot inside his dad's house, minus the details young people wouldn't be caught dead telling to those who had brought them into the world. But he didn't leave out Ash's life story, or how Shana tended to fall for all the wrong guys. Even how Elaine had showed sympathy to his plight, and how he had actually enjoyed having an older sister, no matter how strange and wacky Shana was.

Not for one did she interrupt him, just watching him with her understanding eyes.

"What am I going to do, mom?" he asked at the end of it all.

She caressed his head slowly and sighed.

"Please don't tell me that I'm going to forget him," Dante begged.

"Far from me to say such things. I have yet to forget your father, after all these years. I won't be the one to judge."

That had to be the reason why his mother had never remarried. That, and how she always said that Dante was the most important person in his life and always would be.

"It's not the Middle Ages," she continued. "You can get in touch with him, call him, maybe?"

Dante raised his head, which he had held pressed against his mom's shoulder until then. "I'm so stupid," he groaned. "I don't even have his number."

His mom laughed. "I suppose that shows just how head over heels you are. I thought young people today exchanged phone numbers even before their names. Do you have your big sis's number?" She said so playfully. As Dante had told her about Shana and how they had traipsed through the grocery store with her wearing her fluffy slippers, his mom hadn't stopped smiling.

"No, I don't have hers, either," Dante said on a defeated voice.

"Don't worry. I'll call Elaine and ask her for it."

"Do you keep in touch with Elaine?" Dante asked.

"Of course. She's a kind person, despite what some people might think of her at first glance. I'm glad your father finally found someone to put up with him being so remote from everything around him. God knows I couldn't and wanted more of him than he could give me."

That was heavy, grownup stuff. Dante wasn't completely sure he understood everything. "Thank you, mom. Do you think I can invite him over?" he asked timidly.

“Of course. I’d like to meet him. He must be very pretty,” she said playfully and kissed his forehead. “Now go and unpack. Even if I may sound a little selfish, I have to say I’m glad I have you back with me for the rest of the summer. After that, you’ll be away more and more.”

Dante was about to promise to come home as often as possible even if he was in college when his phone began ringing. It was an unknown number, so his heart leaped with joy right away. Hoping to hear Ash’s voice on the other end, he put it to his ear.

Shana’s voice came through loud enough to bust his hearing on that side. “Lil’ bro! How are you? Did you get home safe? Your dad isn’t here yet, so I can still use my phone.”

He noticed right away how she no longer said anything about her daddy, reverting Dante’s dad to having only one child. He must have been really tough on her, even more than on him.

“I’ll leave you two to chat, and I’m going to make something to eat.” His mom got up from his bed and ruffled his hair on her way out. She smiled at him as she closed the door.

“Do you have Ash’s number?” Dante asked.

“I do, and I’ll send it to you, but man, he doesn’t want to pick up. Your dad sent him away, and he’s not anywhere at his usual haunts,” Shana explained. “But don’t worry, I’ll look for him high and low. I have no idea whose couch he’s crashing on tonight.”

Dante’s heart sank. “He’s popular with your lady friends,” he said.

Shana snorted. “Yeah, but I don’t think he’d go to either of them. I already checked, and they’re all on full alert. If any of them sees him, I’ll know, or else I’m going to cut a bitch.”

Dante munched on his lips to stop himself from laughing. Only a few days ago, he would have shuddered at Shana’s usual language mannerisms, but now they just put him in a good mood. “What about you? How are you holding up?”

Shana let out a long drawn out sigh. “I’ll have to be a good girl for years and years. Supposedly, it will do me good. My mom already found a place for me to work at a beauty salon. I like doing nails so much that she believes something good can come out of me. I’ll be a nail artist or something.”

“That sounds pretty good. Listen, Shana, about Mike and Ash and all that. I’m really sorry that it didn’t work out.”

“I’m not. Let’s see how that fucker Mike’s going to get his dick wet now that I told all my girlfriends what a douchebag he is. Anyway, just so you don’t worry, Mike went to the police and dropped the charges against Ash.”

“Did he do it because he realized maybe he deserved that punch? Or was it because of the goodness of his heart?” Dante asked.

“Neither. It had more to do with my threats of telling everyone he’s a two pump chump.”

“Is he, though?” Dante laughed, not believing he was playing along.

“He sort of is. That’s why he didn’t oppose much. But he did break out with me, and my ass is going to miss rubbing itself against that Bentley seat. Now, don’t you worry that pretty head of yours. I’m going to find Ash, and I’ll have him call you.”

“Thank you, big sis,” Dante said. “You’re awesome. And thanks for not being mad at us for, you know.”

“Do you mean, for you two fucking behind my back? Eh, water under the bridge. I always thought Ash was pissed and angry and sad and all that for some reason or the other. And these few days with you, he looked different, happy even. I’d say he deserves that kind of thing just as much as everyone else.”

Minutes after the call, Dante lingered in bed, enjoying the warm feeling nestling in his chest. Ash looked happy because of him.

Even though, as many times as he tried, Ash didn’t pick up his phone.

“Seriously, dude?”

Ash stopped his tinkering at the sound of that familiar voice. He groaned as he turned on his heels. And then, he started laughing at the sight of that conservative frock or whatever that thing was called covering Shana’s body down to below the knees, a thing unheard of, as long as that girl was concerned.

“The convent is across the street, not here,” he said and continued to work on the car left in his care.

“Bullshit,” Shana drew out with a groan. “Why the fuck aren’t you answering your fucking phone? I had to play the detective, you asshole, just to find your ass.”

“Your daddy away again? Can I go back to that swanky guesthouse?” He was just joking.

“I’d have you back if I could,” Shana said quietly and moved closer.

Ash nodded and turned to face her. Without all that makeup, she was actually pretty enough. Not some drop dead gorgeous bimbo, as she tried so hard to turn into, but a regular, next door pretty girl. “It’s all right, Shana. You’ve done for me a lot more than most people I’ve met in my life.”

“You’re welcome. Now, if you care so much to be grateful, how about picking up your phone?”

“I threw it away,” he lied.

“Yeah, I call bull on that one. Are you chicken or something?” Shana asked, putting her hands on her hips.

“What do you mean?” He turned and pretended to be absorbed by something happening under the hood of the car.

“Are you afraid,” Shana came closer and said each word slowly as if she wanted to make sure he understood, “that Dante might call you?”

“Dante who?” he asked abruptly. Of course. An unknown number had been lighting up his phone screen day and night for some time now.

“Don’t be an ass.”

Her slap upside the head caught him by surprise and he slammed his head against the hood by accident. “Ouch. Stop being so violent. Nuns are supposed to be all-forgiving and shit.”

“You haven’t met a nun in your life, obviously. Dante wants to talk to you. Like, badly. I’m an understanding big sis, but that boy is driving me nuts with ‘Ash this’, ‘Ash that’, all day long. I had no idea I turned into some gay dating advice hotline or some shit.”

Ash screwed and unscrewed the same cap over and over. Dante was asking about him. But he was far away, in that place where it truly snowed in winter, and Ash hadn’t ever cared about the cold. “Well, he’s going to stop eventually,” he said.

Shana put a hand on his shoulder. “Listen, you little shit,” she said, using her most affectionate voice, “the kid has it bad for you. So, just stop already with whatever act you try to put on, and pick up the phone.”

“Shana, I’m not good enough for him. Let’s just face it. I mean, I need to face it.”

“Says who?”

“I say. I mean, he’s going to college. I’m a bum. Homeless and all that.”

“I heard John put you up. You’re not homeless. So, if you’re so keen, what are you going to do about Dante? He’s not going to forget you anytime soon. Did you already forget about him?”

“Not really,” he admitted. “Not that I’m not trying.”

“Stop trying. Make a plan. Make yourself worthy or whatever you think you need to do. And then go see him.”

“He’s not going to wait for me that long. And even if I struggle, even if I do my best, do you think he’d settle for a guy like me?” Ash asked roughly, giving voice to what had been on his mind since he had left the Elsher residence and all thoughts of being with Dante again behind.

“Dude,” Shana said and squeezed his shoulder only to shake him with all her force, “Dante met you when you were at your worst and fell for your sorry ass. When he sees you at your best, I bet he’s going to want to marry you or something weird like that.”

Ash chuckled against himself. If Shana had one quality about her, it was that she could make people laugh even when they didn’t feel like it. She had to make herself a standup comedian. “You think?”

“Totally,” she assured him. “Now, if I were you, I wouldn’t wait that long. He’s going to college, and all the gay boys are so going to want to have a piece of that perky butt.”

“How do you know how your brother’s butt looks like? He’s wearing the baggiest clothes I’ve ever seen.”

“You jumped to defend the honor of his butt at the drop of a dime. That tells me everything I need to know. But for real, Ash, do something. That guy looked at you and somehow saw a lot more than people usually see. That’s not something you’ll meet many times in your life. Do you really want to risk losing him?”

Ash pursed his lips and returned to his work, for real this time. “Don’t tell him you saw me.”

Shana groaned. “What a mule. All right. But make me your bridesmaid when you two tie the knot.”

“Like that’s going to happen,” Ash said with a snort.

“I know you’re not going to lose him if I know you even a little. But remember. College, boys, all that. Don’t let him slip through your fingers. Just saying.”

He didn’t need her to tell him twice. But he needed to work like a mule, an apt name for him, but for other reasons, to make happen everything he believed possible for showing Dante that he could be worthy.

Chapter Twenty – A Christmas Miracle

“You’re early,” his mom exclaimed and pulled him into the house. “I wasn’t expecting you until tomorrow. How was school?”

Dante brushed the soles of his boots thoroughly on the front rug, knowing that his mom must have gone through the painstaking ordeal of cleaning all that house top to bottom. It wasn’t large, and it had been enough for the both of them, but now that she was alone, Dante was afraid that she might feel small in too big a space.

It looked like he had nothing to worry about. The house was already decorated for Christmas, and the smell of freshly baked cookies filled the air. “I missed home so much,” he said and accepted her help with his bags while he took off his jacket. “And cold like here you can’t find anywhere else,” he joked.

His mom laughed. “There’s a card for you, from a place a lot sunnier than this.”

“Is it from Shana? And a card, really? That’s something she’d say it’s a boomer thing or whatever.”

His mom shook her head and smiled mysteriously. “It don’t think it’s from Shana. The last time I checked with Elaine, they were planning to spend Christmas in the Caribbean somewhere.” She gestured as such exotic locations could just as well be on another planet.

Dante accepted the card from her hands and stared at it quizzically. Then, his face lit up as he looked at the deep crimson red rose on the cover. He opened it. *Are you ready for a Christmas miracle?* The letters had been written by an unsure hand in blocky strokes, and there was no name underneath.

“So, who do you think sent it?” his mom asked, watching him with keen eyes.

Dante sighed. “I don’t know what to think. It’s been like an eternity or something.”

His mom patted his arm. “As that old saying goes. Better late than never, right? And you told me he liked roses.”

“Do you also think it’s from him, right?” Dante leaned against the fridge, holding the card to his chest.

His mom nodded. “What does it say?” She wouldn’t look into other people’s private things if they were displayed in front of her eyes and her eyelids were forced open and held with toothpicks.

He opened it and held it for her to see. Her smile turned broader. “It seems like we need to get ready for company, then. It’s all right. I baked a ton. But I think I need more of that--” She trailed off while her mind gears began to turn.

Dante was pretty sure she had enough food to feed an army, and they always gave away a lot of that on such occasions, but he couldn’t bring himself to stop her. His heart was already catching wings and he felt a new energy surging through him.

The lake was frozen solid and just ready for him to test his ice skates for the season. That had been one thing he hadn’t been able to do while away for college, and he had missed it a lot. As he caught more speed, his muscles stretched, giving way for the pleasure he felt while dashing on the ice. His mom had been supportive when he had fancied himself an ice skater as a child, but that passion had only remained a hobby. Since he had on his neoprene jacket and pants that protected him against the cold, he could try more adventurous moves and flew through the air, making a pirouette just for the fun of it.

Caught as he was in what he was doing, he didn’t see that there was someone else on the ice, and crashed into them, making them both stumble and roll on the frozen surface.

Bewildered by having been so air-headed, Dante struggled to his feet. “I’m so sorry, are you all right?” He offered his hand and then froze on the spot.

Sprawled on the ice, in front of him, breathing hard and laughing, was no one else but Ash, dressed in what looked like a not so sensible jacket and low cut jeans that let a sliver of skin show just below the tight t-shirt underneath.

“You!” Dante exclaimed and stamped his foot, forgetting he was wearing his ice skates.

The shard blade made flakes of ice rise. Ash put one arm up as if he had to shield a tsunami. “Are you going to scold me or give me a hand?”

Dante opted for the latter and helped Ash to his feet. They stopped for a moment to look at each other. He looked fine, so, so fine, Dante thought as he stared at that handsome face. Then, without wasting a moment, he grabbed him and kissed him hard.

Ash didn’t appear to mind the assault and opened his mouth to welcome him. It looked like other parts of him were just as hungry, because Dante felt his ass kneaded hard through the neoprene pants.

“Fuck, you weren’t joking about that skating thing,” Ash breathed out. “And you look so damn fine in these tight things. Too bad I promised your mom that I’d behave.”

“What? When did you talk to my mom?”

“Like half an hour ago or so. I left my truck in front of your house. It took up all that parking space, and I’m sorry for it.”

Dante had no idea why Ash had a truck, but it didn’t matter. He blinked hard to chase away some of the moisture threatening to gather there. “Why haven’t you answered your phone for so long?”

“I wanted to surprise you,” Ash said. “And I had work to do. A lot of it. Wait, don’t tell me you got yourself a boyfriend?” All the playfulness was gone from his voice.

Dante slapped him on the shoulder. “Would I kiss you like this if I had a boyfriend? What kind of guy do you think I am?”

Ash laughed and hugged him tightly. “I think you’re the best kind of guy.”

“Good answer.” Dante hesitated briefly. “How were you all this time? What have you been doing?” Dante wanted to scold Ash some more, but there were just so many things he wanted to tell him, to share, and there was no room for hurt feelings and whatnot, especially since they weren’t so hurt anymore.

“You know, working. So that I could be at my best when I saw you again.”

“At your best?” Dante couldn’t pretend to understand what Ash meant by that. He was just to happy to care about details, anyway.

“You’ll see. I think you’ll approve,” Ash said with a hint of pride in his voice.

“I completely approve of you being here.” He took a moment for himself. “I missed you like crazy. And hated your unworking phone.”

“Unworking? Is that a real word?” Ash teased him. “It’s working just fine.”

“Don’t remind me,” Dante warned and made a sour face.

“I read your messages hundreds of times,” Ash confessed. “They kept me going when, you know.”

“I don’t know. But I’d like to hear about it.”

Ash pulled him close and buried his face in Dante’s hair. “They made me think everything was possible.”

Dante held him a little longer. “Is it?”

“Yes. You’re still single, thank fuck.”

Dante laughed and slapped As playfully over the shoulder. “Now, seriously, what’s with the clothes? Aren’t you cold?”

“Cold? My tits are freezing,” Ash joked.

Dante took off one glove with his teeth and snuck his naked hand underneath Ash’s flimsy t-shirt. When he brushed his fingers over the perky nipples, Ash let him know he wasn’t doing half bad with a sucked in breath. “I see,” he commented. “You really need warmer clothes. We’ll see which ones fit you from my closet.”

Ash groaned for show. “I don’t want your dorky, college kid, clothes.”

Dante grinned, his mind getting ready to come up with a prank. “I have just the perfect sweater in mind for you.”

“Why don’t I like the sound of that?” Ash complained under his breath.

Ash didn’t say a word while Dante inspected the old truck slowly, from all sides. “What do you think?” he asked, unnerved by the silence.

“What did you do with your motorcycle?”

“I needed the cash for this beauty. Do the math.”

Dante’s long face confused him for a moment. “Are you trying to tell me I can’t flex my boyfriend and his badass ride anymore?”

“Yeah, too bad. Sacrifices had to be made. But, hey, you pushed me into this. And that logo cost me a little fortune,” he joked, pointing at the rose blooming on one side. Shana, in one of her artistic bouts, had taken to it. She hadn’t done a half-assed job.

Dante brightened when he looked at him. “That’s actually pretty awesome, Ash. Now, let’s go inside. I need to put you into a sweater. I don’t want those frozen tits on my conscience.”

Dante couldn’t stop grinning at the sight of his boyfriend donning that horrendous reindeer sweater that his mom had gotten for him as a prank gift some years ago. However, while he had expected Ash to throw a fit rather than wear that abomination, the opposite had happened. Ash wore his new sweater quite contently and with a somewhat stern expression on his face as if he had been given a formal suit to put on instead of that horrible thing.

Dante watched his mom as she cheerfully loaded the table with food and asked Ash all kinds of questions. She wasn’t needling, but she had a way to find out things about people; most of her ‘victims’ never realized they were parting with what could have been sensitive information. It was the same thing she did with her students, to find out when they didn’t understand something or had problems at home. Luckily for the universe, she used her powers for good.

Still, at the moment, he felt as she might just send Ash running by asking too many uncomfortable questions. Not that Ash looked uncomfortable in any way. His eyes were shining, and he looked really happy at the sight of all that food, and laughed at his mom's lame jokes, which she knew perfectly well to be lame. Now that Dante could take a good look at him, Ash did look like he had lost a bit of weight, and he seemed a bit tired, too, although that didn't take away from how handsome he was or his good mood.

After dinner, which his mom complained it was a bit threadbare seeing how there were still two days until Christmas, he helped her with the dishes while Ash was away to wash his hands. "What do you think of him, mom?"

"He's very pretty and, after I listened to him, I believe him to be a very hardworking young man." Then, she stopped for a moment. "And I think he's very much in love with you."

Dante could feel the blush creeping up to his eyeballs. "He is?" He licked his dry lips, but there was no moisture to be had.

"He sold his motorcycle, he wants to start his own business, and he comes from a series of bad places. He's doing it for you," his mom pointed out.

They were interrupted by Ash walking in. "I think I should get going," he said, moving from one foot to the other.

Dante threw his mom a pleading look, and he was met by a sly smile.

"Nonsense," she said. "I've already got the guestroom ready."

If Ash hadn't been present, he would have screamed for joy and hugged his mom. As things were, he schooled his face into as much a neutral mask as he could and gestured for Ash to follow him. "I'll show you where it is."

Chapter Twenty-One – Let's Make A Promise

Ash felt suddenly shy as he was guided by Dante along the small hallway. He stepped into the small cozy room and took in the narrow bed and the sparse, yet practical furniture.

“Mom likes having guests over, so she often complains that this room is too small, but--” Dante tried to explain, but Ash stopped him with a light kiss on the lips.

“I believe it’s absolutely perfect. I mean, it’s under the same roof as you, and this is what I’ve been thinking about all these long months.”

“You could have called, you know?” Dante said in a pained voice. “I missed you, too.”

“Good thing you didn’t get yourself one of those college boyfriends.”

Dante snorted, as if such a thing wasn’t possible to imagine. “Like I’d do that. No, no, no,” he said energetically, “that moment when I fell in love with you was also the last for me to do such a crazy thing.”

Ash threw him a confused look. “What do you even mean by that?”

The little shrug wasn’t helping with the explanation. “Love is ditzy and nutso and a bit annoying. I’ve been daydreaming way too often since I met you. It does a real mess to my otherwise very analytical brain. You’re the only cure, so I’m happy you’re here.”

“I’m the cure, huh? How’s that cure supposed to work?” Ash caressed Dante’s cheek slowly and caught his chin. It was so easy just to kiss him and forget about everything else, like how they were going to make it work, with Dante going away for his studies and him struggling to make his dream work.

“It’s actually rather straightforward,” Dante explained, although his long eyelashes fluttered while he seemed to enjoy being touched a lot. “You need to give it to me.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ash teased, although the same thing had been on his mind since he had last seen Dante, before the world turned on its head and pushed him into a whole different direction than what he knew to be the usual course.

“Come on, Ash, don’t make me talk dirty,” Dante moaned.

Ash laughed and kissed his forehead. “I’m afraid you’ll have to keep that thought. As I said, I promised your mom I’ll be on my best behavior.”

Dante threw him a quizzical look. “Did she pressure you into making such a promise? She’s not the type.”

“She didn’t. I volunteered with that.”

To his surprise, Dante slapped him lightly on the cheek. “Bad Ash, bad,” he said. “You should never volunteer stuff like that.”

“Are you treating me like I’m your dog or something?”

“I do need to train you,” Dante replied with a thoughtful expression on his cute face. “And you’re basically a stray, so I have to take you in--”

“I can stay for Christmas, but then I have to find a home base,” Ash explained quickly. They needed to talk, even if their bodies probably wanted to deal with more pressing matters like getting reacquainted.

“Why not here?”

“In this town? But it’s winter, and it’s not like many gardens need that much caring.”

“Mom can find you clients,” Dante said promptly.

Everything seemed so easy with this guy. Ash knew very well why those feelings Dante had professed toward him mirrored inside him like he was made of nothing but smooth glass. “It’s not that easy.” He kissed Dante’s forehead. “It’s a market, and there are already players that cover it. I will have to work hard to make it work.”

“You do have your truck. You can be anywhere and serve an area, right?” Dante frowned while his very analytical brain began thinking of solutions once more.

“I will see what I can do. But, I need to know, Dante,” Ash said in all seriousness, “if you still feel the same.” He couldn’t bring himself to say the words, afraid that he might choke and begin dishing out all he had been holding inside during these last months.

“Totally. I love your annoying ass,” Dante said right away. “That’s not going to change ever, because, I told you, this falling in love thing is just not good for my brain.”

“That brain that only wants to deal with machines all day long?” Ash teased.

“That’s the guy,” Dante admitted. “Now, you need to tell me,” he pushed a finger against Ash’s chest, “what you feel.”

Ash felt both hot and cold all of a sudden. He rubbed the back of his neck and groaned.

“Still not there yet?” Dante asked in a cool professional voice. “That’s all right. I have all life to do the waiting thing.”

Ash groaned louder. “That’s not—oh, gawd, Dante, what exactly do you see in me?”

“Wow, you start with the heavy artillery, don’t you? Well, I see a great guy. A guy who sold his awesome ride to get into the landscaping business just because of two words we exchanged at some point. A guy who’s been holding a candle for me for some time now and came in the middle of winter, wearing nothing but a flimsy leather jacket and freezing his tits off. And the guy who blew my mind – you know, that analytical mind – from the moment I saw him. There, you have it. For the record, the list is a lot longer, but I need to go to my room, pretend to be asleep for like two hours or so, and then sneak back in here to make love to you all night.”

Ash looked fairly stunned when Dante finished his little speech. “Make love?”

“That’s the only thing you kept from all I said? That’s all right. I’m going to tell you again, for as long as it’s necessary, which might be forever. I love you, Ash. There nothing grander or more complicated to that. I will always feel the same.”

Ash covered his face at that brave confession. Dante touched him gently. “It’s okay,” he muttered. Then, he grabbed Dante and kissed him fiercely. “I love you, too, weirdo.”

“Is that going to be my pet name? ‘Cause I might have something to say against it.”

“It’s not. Forget I said it. You’re my little weirdo, anyway, ‘cause who else’s going to fall in love with a fuckboy like me?”

“Now that you mentioned the word ‘fuck’ – wait, did you just say that you love me?” Dante raised his voice, and then, realizing that he was too loud, he covered it and said the following words in a whisper, “I don’t think I can wait for two hours.”

“Me neither, but we set ourselves up for this. Although, I’d feel bad to go back on my promise. How about you meet me outside, in my truck, later? I have some sort of heating, I think.”

Dante seemed to consider, but then he nodded. “It’s a date. Don’t forget, or I’ll kick your ass, somehow.”

Ash laughed. “I can let you try.”

Dante felt quite giddy when he snuck outside and into Ash’s truck. The other was already waiting for him, and indeed, the interior was cozy. They kissed right away without any introduction, the familiar feel of Ash’s tongue inside his mouth triggering all that ache he had endured with plenty of difficulty over the last months.

“Wait,” he said, “oh, fuck, I don’t have any condoms. Are you as prepared for such occasions as ever?”

Ash laughed softly. “Actually, I have something better lined up. I mean, if you don’t mind.”

“What’s better than condoms at this point?” Dante asked.

Ash searched his dashboard and handed Dante some papers. He turned on the light, and Dante looked it over. “Is this what I think it is? I don’t have one of these, though.”

“Did you hook up in college and you don’t want to tell me?” Ash teased him.

“I totally didn’t. But I get it. This is better than condoms.” Dante turned off the light.

And the next moment, he was in Ash’s lap, straddling him. He groaned as his back hit the wheel. Ash laughed and pushed his seat a bit back so that they had enough room.

Dante gasped as Ash began rubbing his ass through his sweatpants. There was some fabric between them and that wouldn’t do. Performing moves worthy of a gymnast, he managed to get himself out of his pants and push his naked ass into Ash’s crotch.

It looked like he wasn’t the only guy in a hurry because Ash had already taken out his cock and was now pushing it against Dante’s ass.

“Just a bit, wait,” Ash breathed out, and Dante understood why as he felt the wet fingers probing him gently. “Fuck, you’re tight.”

“Told you, no illicit anal activities for me since we split ways,” Dante explained.

Ash laughed softly. “Wow, you feel so nice without the rubber.”

Dante totally agreed as Ash’s cock pushed slowly inside him. “It might be only a mental thing, though. I mean, it’s not that big a difference--”

“Shut up,” Ash whispered and kissed him hard while his cock buried inside Dante’s ass to the hilt.

Dante gasped and wiggled to adjust. It was so good to the point of being a bit unbearable. He had forgotten how it was, since his experience was limited. All because Ash’s fault, but now he’d get to feel it all again, and that was what mattered.

“Would you have prefer it with a rubber, anyway?” Ash asked while holding his hips and breathing out each word.

“No. Actually, when we did it that first time, I thought how much I’d love you going inside me raw and blowing a load.”

Ash growled playfully. “Look at him, speaking so boldly, so dirty.” He grabbed Dante’s ear and munched on it. However, it took him little to turn it into something erotic and a lot more sensation-triggering.

Dante couldn't help himself. His body was adjusting to Ash's girth, and it all felt so very good that he was pretty sure there were tears in his eyes. All that time spent apart melted in an instant, and with it went the memories of feeling miserable on occasion and even despondent.

There was nothing but pure happiness between them, as Ash made him move his hips, and they began making love, just as he had imagined so many times before. It was better than his imagination, though, because he could feel the smell of Ash's skin, his hot lips on his skin, and all that good friction that was making his mind turn into the great kind of mess.

"Can I?" Ash whispered. "Inside you?"

"Yes, please," Dante croaked.

Ash didn't laugh at his funny voice. Instead, he moaned and continued to drag Dante's hips up and down, with more strength than before. Dante could sense his pleasure soaring, too. Soon, he would have Ash in a different way than other people, he thought, and only because his feelings were reciprocated, and maybe, just maybe, Ash had never done that while loving someone, or so Dante liked to believe.

The train of thought he had embarked with no luggage was brought abruptly to a halt, because the sensations inside his ass and along his cock, and even deep in his balls, took over, and he felt himself blowing over, all the while moaning and grunting and whispering Ash's name, while Ash did the same with his.

"Oh, fuck, babe," Ash whispered and rained kisses on Dante's sweaty face and neck. "You've ruined me for everyone else."

"I sure hope I did," Dante murmured, feeling a great exhaustion seeping into his bones. "Now that you came inside me, you obviously have to become my boyfriend. Later, my husband."

Ash laughed softly and cradled him in his arms, not wanting to let go. "You have it all planned out, huh?"

"I do. It's how I function," Dante explained in a tired voice. "Can I sleep here, in your arms? With your cock inside me?"

"As much as I love that, I don't think you'll like it in the morning when you wake up with cramps in muscles you didn't know existed in your body."

With all the reluctance he felt, Dante agreed to move away and dress. For a couple of minutes, they sat there, in comfortable silence, looking at the Christmas lights on the front wall of the house.

"I want this, Dante," Ash said softly. "I want us to be together, no matter what it takes."

“Then let’s make a promise,” Dante suggested. “Let’s make it happen. Work on your business. I’ll study my ass off. And when we are on our feet, let’s get married.”

“Wow.” Ash chuckled, but then he added, “I’d like that. In the meantime, what do we do?”

“Obviously, a lot of this hot raw sex,” Dante replied. “Because it’s totally it, and I’m mad about it. Fuck, I’ll also have to fuck you raw, right?”

“Have to? It’s not like it’s an obligation,” Ash teased.

“As a boyfriend and then husband, I believe it is,” Dante said with conviction. “I am so going to love it, I’m sure.” He put his head on Ash’s shoulder. “I’m glad you came.”

“Me too, ‘cause I’ve been keeping it in for a long time now.”

“You piggy, I didn’t mean that about you coming inside me. About you coming here.”

“I also meant it about that. I imagined it so many times, how I arrive here and tell you that I love you.”

“You did?” Dante straightened up only to take a better look at Ash.

Ash nodded. “Yeah. So, I’m glad I came, too. I’ll keep you to that promise, though.” He gestured with his left hand. “I need to see a ring on it, or else we’ll have a problem.”

Dante burst into laughter. “Done. It’s a deal. It’s going to be a ring you’ll have to flex to all your exes.”

Ash just laughed at that. “There was never anyone else.”

Ah, that was good to know. Because it was the same for Dante, too.

Epilogue

“How are things going?” Dante watched through the window, not wanting to surprise Ash just yet.

It was a real pleasure to watch his future husband toiling in the small garden. His mom had never looked happier with her little patch than at that very moment.

“Like a charm. This boy is a real treasure. I’m so glad you brought him home,” his mom said and hugged him shortly. “Although it was a pain to convince him to stay here instead of paying some hefty rent who knows where.”

Dante had been quite surprised with how adamant his mom had been that someone needed to take proper care of Ash, seeing how many trials and tribulations his life had been made of, and part of that was to stay at their house until he got a place of his own. He suspected his mom of trying her best to ensure that Dante and Ash wouldn’t be pulled apart just by the mundane aspects of life, as she called them.

In all honesty, that had doubled the reasons why he came home as often as he could. He was like no other college kids in that respect, since he preferred to save money for a trip back home, even if only for two days, instead of staying on campus to party like everyone else.

“The other problem, as you might suspect,” his mom said, “is that he’s too pretty.”

“How is that a problem?” Dante wanted to know.

“Some of our neighbors didn’t shy away, once they got a little tipsy, during one of our little get-togethers, to ask me if he’s some kind of sexy gardener like in those movies.”

“Those movies.” Dante shook his head. He had no idea what his mom was talking about. But she and her close-knit group of local gossipers had their own secrets, which he didn’t dare to comment on.

“I straightened them up right away,” his mom continued. “I told them. He’s not that kind of gardener, because one day, he’s going to marry my son. I could tell they were really disappointed. I felt triumphant.”

Dante laughed. “And how’s his business going?”

“Well, it was tough, at first,” his mom explained. “Making a name for yourself is not easy, when you have so much competition. But he’s the perseverant kind. I’ve never seen someone as creative as him when it comes to this kind of things.”

“I see that you’re letting him handle your garden. I thought you’d be jealous of being deprived of one of your favorite activities,” Dante explained.

“Nonsense, child.” She waved and went over to check on her oven. “I like having a pretty garden. Working for it, not as much. And Ash has been such a great help around the house, fixing stuff that I didn’t even know that it needed fixing.”

“Ah, is that why the garage door finally works,” Dante said, now enlightened on why so many things seemed to be working around the house, while he had been used to them being a certain way.

“I’m going to miss the two of you when you’ll get a place for yourselves.”

“We’ll visit all the time,” Dante assured her. “Thank you for everything, mom. Not many people would take in a stranger, even if their only son asked.”

His mom nodded and then kissed him on the forehead. “I trust you. And him. I’m glad to be part of giving him a real chance at being who he can be.”

Dante hugged her. “You’re the most awesome mom, ever.”

Ash walked in, interrupting them. “Dante, you’re home,” he said, his eyes lighting up. “You said you wouldn’t be home until next week.”

“I wanted to surprise you two.” He moved over and kissed Ash, receiving only a shy kiss in return.

Ash had thought himself so indebted to Dante’s mom that he just couldn’t be convinced to be a little bolder in his displays of affection when she was present. Dante had tried to convince him that his mom wasn’t some narrow-minded person, but it didn’t help at all. Ash simply considered that there was no amount of things he could do to show how grateful he was for everything.

“Ah, I forgot to tell you,” his mom said and looked at them with shrewd eyes. “In two weeks’ time, we’ll have some visitors.”

“Who?” Dante asked.

“Just family, so to speak. Your sis,” his mom said with a small laugh, “her mom and your dad.”

Ash made a move like he wanted to walk out of the room. Dante stopped him by grabbing his hand. “Dad? You know how he feels about all this,” he said.

His mom gave him her most assuring smile. “You and Ash have been together for more than two years now. I’d say it’s high time that I change his mind. Of course, I won’t be alone in this. That’s why Elaine and Shana will count as reinforcements. For the record, I’ve only waiting so long to stage this meeting because I wanted to prevent your father’s protests that you two are too young and it’s just a fling. No one has a fling for two and a half years,” she added.

“Miss Taylor,” Ash intervened, “I don’t want to cause any trouble.”

“Listen to him, Miss Taylor this, Miss Taylor, that,” Dante’s mom muttered under her breath. “So much time spent under the same roof, and he still can’t bring himself to call me by my name. It doesn’t matter. When you two are married, you’ll have to call me mom, Ash. It’s the law.” She wagged a warning finger at Ash.

Ash let out a small embarrassed laugh. Dante put one arm around him. “Don’t worry. We’re going to be many against one,” Dante assured his boyfriend. “And even if he doesn’t agree, that doesn’t change anything. Right, mom?”

His mom nodded energetically. “That goes without saying. Come here, you two. Now, listen to me,” she said, once she had them near and she could hold them by the shoulders. “We’re already family, do you understand?”

Dante smiled and looked at Ash. By the look of happy astonishment on his boyfriend’s face, he could tell that was enough for them to last a lifetime.

THE END