The Compromise
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The Compromise
by pleasebekidding

Summary

Alaric has needs, Damon has needs. Alaric can afford to pay to have his needs met; Damon's life is a little more complicated.

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This is 100% inspired by Needs Must, my fave Suits fic, my fave BDSM fic, and a work of genius. A few weeks ago I discovered other people were applying the trope to their OTPs and I decided Dalaric needed it too, so here it is.

- Inspired by needs must by thatotherperv
Chapter 1

Damon spends an entire afternoon going over the money and no matter what he does, it comes out the same:

He’s not broke. He’s bankrupt.

To most people there would be some relief, at the thought. It’s a clean start. All Damon owns now is some threadbare furniture and extremely expensive clothing, even if it’s all getting a little old now. If he was anyone else, he’d take the win. Cross the country and start again. Settle in a new city, find a job, make some new friends. But he can’t.

It’s late afternoon when he steps onto the platform and crosses the city to the private hospital his brother’s been living in for almost the last two years. He flashes a very flirtatious smile at the duty nurse, who gives him a look like he knows there are bills to be paid that haven’t been paid, and signs the registry.

“Mr. Hammond wants to talk to you,” she says, and she tries to be stern, but the truth is she isn’t a stern person. She feels sorry for Stefan. She feels more sorry for Damon and if she suspects what Damon already knows – that Stefan’s comfortable, relatively safe world is about to be snatched away from him, because Damon can’t afford it anymore – she’ll do him a favor. For today at least.

Damon rests an elbow on the counter, and puts his chin in his hand.

“Why would I talk to him when the nurses in this place are all so much nicer to look at? Don’t tell him I’m here.”

Her expression softens, but only a little.

“How is he?” Damon asks, more seriously.

“How is he?” Damon asks, more seriously.

“Had a bad night, but he’s slept for most of the day. Don’t get him excited.”

Damon never does.

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He sits across from Stefan at a small table, and watches as he counts out cards. Stefan’s hair has grown back over the scars from the surgery on his head, but the scars remain hairless, and Stefan’s once perfectly-coiffed hair doesn’t sit right any more. His smile is lopsided, one eye droops.

Damon almost can’t bear to look at him. He certainly can’t tell him they’re broke, and without serious intervention, Stefan is about to find himself living in an apartment the size of his current bedroom, with no rehab nurses, no perfectly balanced meals, and no grass outside. Stefan loves the grass. Takes off his shoes and just stands on it, if Damon can support him.

He rarely speaks. Damon doesn’t know if this is because he is disturbed by the sound of his own voice, the cracks that form between his words, or because the struggle to make himself understood exhausts him as much as trying to understand him exhausts Damon.

“Any big parties this week?” Damon asks, trying to catch Stefan’s eyes. Stefan smiles at him, and nods. Because he can remember having been to a party once before. It might have been this week. It could have been when he was a kid, and there were parents, and money. But he smiles.
“Get laid?”

Stefan smiles again, and nods again, but this time, he probably doesn’t even know what Damon’s asked him. He lays cards out, one at a time, and Damon frowns at the shape his hand makes. The wrist almost totally straightens, when Stefan puts in the effort. And he does, he tries. Damon reaches for his hand, to test the tension in the muscles, but Stefan gets annoyed, and pulls away.

“Does it hurt?”

Stefan ignores him. He’s laying out cards in numeric order. Damon doesn’t try to help, though he knows Stefan wants them laid out straight, and he’s struggling.

“Stefan. Look at me.”

Stefan looks up, and his eye slide off quickly to the side, but they return, twice, three times. Damon bites his tongue.

“This is your home,” he says, and he doesn’t know if Stefan really understands the concept anymore – though he’d understand it if he had to leave. His brain would go into a panic, he’d short circuit, have one of his famous meltdowns. Probably seize. A seizure too many, Damon has been told, and he could be gone, or vegetative. How many seizures is too many, he has asked.

They always say: we’ll know when we get there.

Damon stays an hour, kisses his baby brother on the forehead, and leaves before anyone can make him talk to the manager.

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Discreet rear entrance. Just what any club of this sort needs. Damon slips in the staff entrance just as the sun is going down. Way too early for the clientele. He has some serious sucking up to do. He nods hello to a couple of guys he vaguely recognizes, lounging in the back, wearing unassuming jeans, t-shirts, hoodies, while they still can. A couple of the bar staff polishing glasses give him an envious look as he slips past and up the stairs. He pushes Stefan out of his mind, and knocks lightly on the door.

“Come in.”

Damon takes a breath, and opens the door. He closes it with a soft click behind him, and smiles sweetly – well, okay, probably more predatory than sweet, but he is who he is. He looks out from under dark eyelashes and twitches one side of his face into something like a smile. It’s as close to a smile as she ever really gets from him. Anyone but Stefan, really.

Anyone visiting the manager of a BDSM club of this size and reputation would expect framed whips and chains on the wall, low lighting, a security guard in a gimp mask. The manager to be dressed in fetish gear. But Kelly Donovan is a businesswoman, first and foremost, and she’s not dressed for a meet and greet. Skinny jeans and a loose blouse which does nothing to conceal the surgically enhanced rack that earned Kelly her first two million in dirty pictures. The office is minimalistic. No paper files anywhere. The fireproof safe contains nothing but backup storage drives and cash.

Kelly crosses her arms, and taps the bicep of one arm with the exquisitely manicured finger of the other.

“No,” she says. “No.”
“You haven’t even heard the question yet.”

“I don’t have work for you. I don’t. Go away. Maybe on a Friday or a Saturday night but not a Wednesday. We’re not busy enough to risk customer dissatisfaction.”

Damon rolls his eyes. “You wound me. Come on. I need the money.”

And Friday and Saturday night are when the tips are best at the shitty bar he only manages about twenty hours a week work in. He can’t afford to lose that job until he has something steadier than a ‘maybe’.

“And I know for a fact you lost two guys last week. One of them even looked like me. Sort of.”

One, Damon had heard, left for college. The other had more or less disappeared. No one was worried. People left this life for all sort of extremely sensible reasons, and a hell of a lot of them came back when they realized the real world couldn’t give them what they needed. Whether what they needed was the money, or the sex.

She’s not actually capable of saying no to Damon. It’s a lesson he learned early on, and he never fails to use it. Truth is he can earn a grand a night, here, and he could make a career out of it, if he wasn’t literally the worst sub in the history of prostitution. He can’t keep his mouth shut. He’s demanding, he’s rude, and he can’t bear the humiliation these guys invariably get off on. Twenty-three years of his father’s opinions about him make it impossible for Damon not to defend himself against crap like that. “Something. Anything. I’ll work behind the bar.”

“I don’t need bartenders,” she says. “Shoo.”

Damon doesn’t shoo. If he can get five grand together fast enough he can stave off Stefan’s inevitable removal from the hospital.

“How about a loan?”

Kelly groans. “No.”

Damon still doesn’t move. He grits his teeth. “I’ll work at half pay. Kelly. Please.”

Little known fact: Kelly Donovan is one of five people in the world who know where Stefan is, and why he’s there. It makes it hard for her to keep a firm line. She closes her eyes. “Wait there for a minute,” she says, and picks up the phone.

She puts on her phone smile. It’s true, you can hear it.

“Yes, it’s Kelly Donovan,” she purrs into the hands free mouthpiece. “Very well. And you?”

Oh can she get on with it already?

“No, I’m sorry. I’m not expecting him back any time soon. But I do have someone here I think you might enjoy. Someone I’d only recommend to a very good friend. If you want to take your appointment tonight, the room’s still available.”

She’s quiet a few moments, and taps on the keyboard with her improbable fingernails. “Will I charge the usual card? We’ll see you at nine. Of course, Alaric. Come a little early and have a drink with me. You too,” she says, coquettish, and ends the call.

Damon feels an all-too familiar thrill of fear. A new client might want almost anything, and because he’s prone to very bad decision-making, his record still has limits set that he’s never been
entirely comfortable with. Still, a night’s pay is a night’s pay, and he has nothing left to sell.

“I meant what I said on the phone,” Kelly says. Although her tone is warm, there is a very real threat underneath it. “Mr. Saltzman is a friend of mine. Very wealthy, very well-connected, and very choosy, so make the most of tonight, or you’ll never see him again. Understood? And never breathe a word about him, or his lawyers will bury you alive.”

Damon shrugs, and tips an imaginary hat. He can’t speak because his mouth has gone quite dry. He loathes the truly wealthy. The kind of men who actually think money could buy them whatever they want and don’t care who gets hurt in the process. Men like his father.

Though sometimes they tip well, so he can behave for a night. Possibly.

Life, Damon thinks, would be so much easier if he was a natural submissive. Truth is he’s not sure where he fits in this world. He’s a pretty face and a tight ass, and he can take more pain than the average. He’s effectively trained himself out of any kind of gag reflex. And he’s desperate enough for money that he will let almost anything happen to him.

It’s a very specific combination of self-loathing and desperate, and it gives him commercial value, and that’s it. He’d do better if the tiny spark of self-respect didn’t flare up at the most inconvenient possible moments. There’s a reason he’s not doing this full time.

“So. Naked and oiled up in cell number five by nine o’clock?” he asks. Fuck, flippant already.

Kelly gives him a withering look. “I’m already regretting this. No. Fully clothed, and my suggestion is that you’re already wearing a ball gag.”

Damon’s eyes widen. They have to negotiate. It’s one of the rules. He might not have much power but he enjoys the illusion, from time to time.

“It was a joke. Go get something to eat and drink plenty of water. Be back here before eight thirty. And Damon… please don’t make me regret this.”

Her voice is husky. Cigars, liquor, and god knows how many cocks she’s sucked. Damon respects her. She’ll never be anyone’s bitch ever again.

He, on the other hand, has absolutely no choice.

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At eight thirty, cell five is unlocked. Damon hasn’t eaten enough. He’s nervous in a way he hasn’t been for a while. If only he didn’t know this guy was rich. If only he was some schoolteacher from the ass end of Virginia who’d saved every penny for a whole year to afford this one night, instead of being the kind of guy who can wipe the come off his hands with hundred dollar bills.

Damon sits on the end of a couch set unobtrusively in the corner of the room, and stares at the rack on the wall. He reminds himself he’s playing a part. These are all props. Fuck, maybe he won’t even blow it. Once, twice a week, a thousand bucks a pop… maybe just two manageable clients, maybe he could…

He pictures Stefan’s frustrated face, the arm muscles that won’t behave the way he wants them to behave, and knows he at least has to try.
Around eight o’clock, Alaric enters the club, nodding to the security guards, who wave him through. Without acknowledging anyone, and without being stopped by anyone, he steps behind the bar, and finds the stairs. He doesn’t bother to knock on Kelly’s door, which is why he catches her changing behind a translucent screen.

She pokes her head over the top, and he gives her an appreciative grin.

“It’s polite to knock,” she says, but sashays out from behind the blind, holding a corset to her bare torso. The leather pants look like they’ve been painted on. “But since you’re here, zip me up?”

Alaric pushes her hair over her shoulder, and settles the corset evenly around her body. It takes a minute to hook the bottom up, but the rest zips together easily enough.

“So if I hadn’t arrived just now, how would you have managed that?” he asks.

Kelly shrugs. “I would have worked something out.” She pats down the front of his jacket, nails scratching over the fabric. “Vuitton?”

“Italian guy off Central Park West. Pretty sure he’s Mafia.”

She takes his hand and bares her cheek for a kiss. “Quite a treat for you, tonight,” she says, pulling away, waving a hand at her chair. She leans towards her phone, sleek and digital, and presses the intercom button. “Two whiskey sours – very dry,” she asks. Alaric settles in the chair. He is far from convinced. Any such a treat would have been hand-picked for him months ago, when he started coming to the club.

“What’s wrong with him?” he asks, grinning. His incredulity reaches his eyes.

Kelly smiles a mysterious smile, and then slumps a little. “He’s different. Oh, that reminds me, you really should insist on a ball gag.” Okay, so he talks too much. “But he’s all personality. Spunk. And very few hard limits, but obviously you need to discuss that with him.”

Alaric doesn’t like that at all. It suggests this guy has no idea what he’s doing. Safe, sane and consensual is not supposed to be a slogan for a bumper sticker. But whatever. Alaric has had a very difficult month. He needs a mid-week break before another three days of hell.

“Fine,” he says, shrugging, because if it doesn’t work out, he’ll pay, tip handsomely, and tell Kelly he never wants to see this guy again. He nods at the waiter who brings their drinks on a tray, and palms him a fifty dollar note. Perfectly balanced whiskey sour. Just enough alcohol to enhance his mood without dulling his senses. He and Kelly spend an enjoyable half an hour discussing the market – she’s a very intelligent woman. She won’t be running this place forever. She’ll own a chain of them, if she wants to, and live in a penthouse apartment, or she’ll retire and live on her income from shares. She won’t spend another ten years certifying medical screening and satisfying the health department.

He thinks when it’s gone, she’ll miss it.

“And still not dating?” she asks. Alaric shrugs.

“I don’t have time for that sort of complication,” he says, though some days, he wishes there was someone to come home to. “I think I’ll go. If I don’t see you later, I’ll call about that building in
Manhattan. Maybe we could install a dungeon?” he winks, and stands, slipping one hand into the pocket of his slacks, and heads down the stairs to the bar.

It’s five minutes to nine, and he has no interest in catching a twitchy sub unprepared, so he stops at the bar for a glass of mineral water. He has no real idea what to expect from tonight, other than ‘not much’, but he doesn’t need to make it worse by showing up before the guy’s ready. It’s quiet. Wednesday night. A few people enjoying a quiet drink and the company of the mostly-naked companions who don’t actually offer anything but company and eye candy, which Alaric understands makes up less than twenty percent of revenue, but gets people comfortable enough to start booking the real services. He doesn’t make eye contact. No one would recognize him. He’s the type of guy who’s rich enough to ensure his name never appears on a ‘richest men’ list of any stripe. Unassuming, in a lot of ways. But no one here wants to be stared at.

He sips at the mineral water. It’s nice. Small bubbles.

“Can you take a couple of bottles of that to room five?” he asks the bartender, leaving another large bill. “I’ll be along in a moment.”

He answers two or three emails – Australia is well and truly into Thursday, right now. And at five minutes past nine, he heads downstairs to the cells.

He knocks, to be polite, but doesn’t wait to be asked in. He’s not anticipating the entitled expression on the guy’s face, or the fact that he’s sitting with his knees crossed on a table usually reserved for tying someone up on. He looks like he has something he wants to prove about who is actually in charge, here. That’s an interesting approach.

“What should I call you?” Alaric says. The guy’s eyebrows shoot up into his hairline – he doesn’t have a standard answer.

“Damon,” he says at last, and steps lightly off the bench. He grips the bottom of his button-up shirt – expensive and well-cared for, but old, the creases starting to fade, and undoes the bottom button.

“Did I ask you to take your clothes off?”

Damon stops, and shrugs, and comes closer. Steps right into Alaric’s space. “Then how do you want me?” he asks. “You should know, I do a very memorable strip tease. You don’t know what you’re missing.” He settles his eyes on Alaric’s mouth. “But you’re the boss.”

He’s good-looking, but that was a given. The lights in the simple room are set low, and Damon’s eyes are such a pale blue they look silver. Not remotely dilated, though. He isn’t particularly interested in the process. Not a problem. Not for a one-off. His hair is so dark it’s almost black. Soft-looking and shiny. Neatly built, but probably more muscular than he looks, under the shirt. Pretty mouth.

Alaric doesn’t move. He settles his face to the ‘unimpressed’ setting. “Are you done?”

He has the oddest sense he knows why Kelly paired them, and he’s not yet sure if he’s pissed off about it or not.

Damon looks put off to have been called on his bullshit. He takes a step back, looking a little bemused, and stands with his hips set forward, in a slightly forced way. Trying to look available, Alaric thinks, as if there was ever any question of that; this is a business transaction.

“You can call me Ric, if you need to address me at all,” he says, taking off his jacket and hanging it on a coat rack. Kelly is a practical woman before anything else. He takes the opportunity to look
around the room, while he rolls up his sleeves. Rack on the wall, bench custom built for binding someone – generally with his ass in the air. He opens a shallow drawer. Spreader bars, cuffs, silk rope. A ball gag in sterile packaging. Alaric pulls it out, and holds it up, making a point before he drops it inside again and turns back to Damon.

“I think we’ll take it easy, tonight,” he says, though he really doesn't think he’ll be back. “I assume you’re comfortable with ropes? Would you prefer cuffs?”

Damon shrugs. “All the same to me.”

It’s not a good answer. Alaric decides right away that he’s not going to fuck this guy. He wants to work out what makes him tick.

“No humiliation,” Alaric says. “Nothing that will mark your skin past tomorrow. If I ask you if you’re alright I expect a serious answer. What’s your safe word?”

Damon tenses, and Alaric suspects he wants to roll his eyes. But the relief on his face when Alaric had ruled out humiliation couldn’t have been missed. “Peanuts,” he says, and sets his face to the casually seductive expression he’d worn when Alaric first walked in the room. Out there, it probably works nine times out of ten. In here, it’s out of line.

“Stop trying to play me,” Alaric says, evenly. “How do you feel about pain?”

“Bring it,” Damon says. “I can handle anything you dish out. It’ll cost you extra, though.”

He’s challenging. It has Alaric’s heart beating a little faster. Interesting. “Call it five thousand for tonight, so you don’t have to mention that again. I didn’t ask if you could take it. I want to know how you feel about it. Like it, hate it, indifferent? I expect a serious answer.”

Damon freezes. Apparently, five thousand dollars means a lot to him, and not in a ‘let’s buy a crappy car’ way – this is a life-changing amount of money. Alaric considers the clothes again. Came from money but he’s run out now, and he needs it badly. Maybe Alaric should double it. Perhaps he will, but he’ll decide later.

Damon mumbles under his breath.

“Speak properly, please.”

“I like it.”

Interesting. He’s telling the truth, but he doesn’t want to admit it. And he’s hesitant. Alaric feels an odd tug in his chest. “Has a client ever really hurt you?”

Damon meets his gaze, haughty and proud, and shrugs. “I told you, I can take it.”

This guy shouldn’t be doing this work. Alaric thinks for a moment that he’ll pay, and leave, and tell Kelly he should tell him not to come back – but he stays.

“What do you need from me?”

Damon can’t suppress a groan. “Come on, man. The whole point of paying is so you can do what you want. Look at me! I’m gorgeous. You can fuck me anywhere you want, with anything you want. Tie me up, tie me down, us a belt, use the whip. If you want me to cry, all you have to do is say the word. For five thousand dollars I’ll call you daddy, if you want. Let’s just get on with it.”
Alaric flinches. Alright. He’ll take control, for this first night. But if he ever comes back – and it’s an enormous ‘if’ – there will be a lot of negotiation beforehand, and not while Damon’s gagging for cash and vulnerable like this.

He needs discipline. Not the sort intended to break someone down – the sort intended to build someone up, make them all that they can be. Alaric probably doesn’t have the time to do it, and he certainly doesn’t have the inclination, right now. But…

He envies whoever gets the opportunity.

“Have you had enough to drink?”

“Mandatory two pints.” He’s anticipating a deeply unpleasant experience, Alaric realizes, to his horror. “So are you ready to get on with it?”

Alaric wants to reassure him. But Damon has no reason to trust him, beyond the presence of security cameras, and the assurance that Alaric’s name will be all over the newspaper if he takes anything too far. No matter. He’ll know soon enough.

“Take your clothes off. Down to your underwear. I don’t need a show.”

Alaric pulls a chair from against the wall, and takes a seat, pouring himself another glass of the mineral water. He sips slowly.

This would be easier for Damon if he’d asked for a show. That would have let him act, set him in his comfort zone. He pauses, glares at Alaric, and then steps out of his shoes. They’re expensive and well-maintained, but the soles aren’t the originals, and they’re wearing thin. Socks, next. He unbuttons his shirt, and slips it over his shoulders, and drapes it over the arm of the couch, while Alaric watches quietly.

He has a beautiful body, though it’s marred by scars; some people would be put off. Alaric knows better. A scar means ‘I survived’. His arms are heavily muscled, stomach definition perfect. It would be interesting to sleep with him, in the ordinary, every day sense of the word, and see what sorts of moans he could coax from Damon’s throat.

Pants come off last. They’re cheaper than everything else, but well-cut. Damon folds them at the crease like it’s a habit, and adds them to the pile. He hooks his thumbs in his boxers, and raises his eyebrows at Alaric.

Alaric shakes his head. “Not right now. Maybe later.”

Damon stands, waiting, and Alaric just looks at him, enjoying the view. Memorizing his body an inch at a time. Three minutes pass, five, and Damon starts to look flustered. Irritated.

“Are you going to start? I have places to be.”

“No you don’t. You’re mine until the club closes. And I’m in no hurry. Do you always sub?”

Damon nods.

“You’re not very good at it.”

Damon grins. “I’m not exactly a natural. I understand why people do it, but I don’t need that.”

Alaric nods. “Interesting perspective. Do you ever switch?”
Damon shakes his head. “No interest, and the money’s better subbing. Do you want the ball gag?”

“Debating it. Take off the boxers.”

Damon hesitates, but not for long. The boxers, he kicks aside. “Do you want me hard?” He closes his hand around his limp penis, and raises his eyebrows.

“No need. Stand against the rack.”

Damon does as he’s told. It’s action. He stands facing the rack. He likes having something to do that doesn’t involve waiting.

“Other way,” Alaric says, and Damon turns around, raising an eyebrow. He was expecting to get fucked that way, from behind, pushed against the center strut.

It’s the fact that he doesn’t like waiting that makes Alaric take his time.

Damon tries to behave, and then tries not to look bored, and finally, looks like he’s about to speak. That’s when Alaric takes the ropes from the drawer, and stands in front of him.

“Arms up over your head,” he says, and Damon complies instantly. Alaric ties a simple knot on each side, just enough to hold his wrists to the frame. He’d prefer something more intricate, but not for a first time – if he needs to untie them quickly, he doesn’t want it to be a big deal.

He stands back to survey the scene. Damon looks beautiful, bound. “Are you alright?”

Damon nods.

“Speak, when I ask you a question.”

“I’m fine,” he says, cocking his chin back. “Dandy, even. And you?”

“Reconsidering the ball gag. Maybe I don’t need you to speak after all.”

“What are you going to do?”

Alaric considers for a moment, and then reaches out, flattening his hand against Damon’s stomach. “I just want to touch you.”

“Some Dom. All this laid out for the taking, five grand on the table, and you just want to touch?”

“Mention the money again and we’re done.”

“Don’t like remembering you’re paying for this?”

Alaric turns, calmly, and takes the ball gag out of the drawer, slips it out of the plastic wrapping. “Do you mind?”

“I told you,” Damon says. “You’re the boss.”

“Consent is everything, in here. You can stop talking, you can take the gag, or I can leave.”

Damon opens his mouth. Alaric puts the ball between his teeth, and fastens the strap behind. Damon actually looks relieved. Perhaps now that he can’t mouth off, he feels less likely to drive away a potential meal ticket? Who knows.
Alaric gets back to doing what he was doing. He runs his hands over Damon’s stomach, down his sides. He explores the contours of muscle on his arms, and slips his fingers into Damon’s, just above the ties. Damon squeezes feebly back, which is interesting. His eyelids swell. His dick shows an interest, bobbing at half-mast. He tries to speak, as if he’s forgotten the gag.

“Do you need to say something?” Alaric closes his hand over Damon’s balls. He can’t understand the current trend of hairlessness, but whatever.

Damon shrugs.

“Answer me.”

Damon hesitates, and shakes his head, redistributing his weight on his feet. Alaric nods, satisfied, and grips Damon’s cock loosely around the base.

Damon groans, fully hard now.

Alaric returns to the drawer. A simple flogger. Possible to do real damage with the things, but not necessary. “Are you still okay with this?” he asks, cupping Damon’s face in his hand and forcing eye contact. Damon nods confidently.

On the count of three, Alaric lashes out, swiping the flogger over Damon’s upper leg. Damon flinches, but not badly. Alaric pauses.

“Did that hurt?”

Damon nods.

“Did it hurt enough?”

Damon pauses, and shakes his head.

Good. He’s getting it. Another, and another, harder this time, and it’s impossible not to notice that Damon’s cock is leaking a slow stream of pre-come, as his thigh pinks up.

“Still doing okay?”

Damon nods, but his eyes fall closed. Alaric steps closer, and cups his chin again, looking into his eyes. There is barely a ring of silver around the edge. He’s slipped deep into subspace, and he barely even knows. Perhaps it’s never happened to him before. Alaric lets his chin dip, and casts the flogger away, reaching around his head to unfasten the gag.

“Hey,” he says, as he removes the ball, ignoring the thick string of saliva that dangles from Damon’s lip. “Hey. Are you doing okay?”

Damon barely nods.

Fuckity fuck. Alaric reaches above Damon’s head to untie the first rope and release his arm, settling it over his own shoulder as he reaches for the second. Damon is almost limp against him. How the hell did this happen? When he releases the other arm, he almost staggers under Damon’s dead weight. He pulls back, to look at his face, and is shocked to find it wet with tears.

The kiss is unintentional. He only wants to offer some kind of comfort. But Damon presses into it, and Alaric tastes salt.

He half-drag Damon to the couch, and lays him out on it. He crouches on the ground near
Damon’s face.

“You’re not alright at all,” he says.

Damon tries to curl into the fetal position. Fuck, he’s freezing. Alaric pulls a blanket from the bottom of an unobtrusive dresser in the corner, and lays it over him, soothing over the curve of his spine. “Why didn’t you say something?”

Damon is shaking. Tears still trickle from his eyes. “I didn’t… I didn’t know,” he says, and scrunches his eyes closed.

“So you need water?”

Damon doesn’t respond.

“Damon.”

He nods, and Alaric fetches him a glass, and helps him to sit up enough to drink it.

“You want me to hold you?”

Damon shakes his head, and tries to sit up, which only results in him falling back down, and dropping the glass. “You don’t need to do that. I should get a taxi.”

“Not in this state. Damon. Do you want me to hold you?”

Damon scrunches his eyes shut, and nods, and Alaric slips beneath his shoulders, letting him slump like a rag doll. He soothes over Damon’s back with his hand, plays with the ends of his dark hair, the tendrils that sit over the nape of his neck. He traces the shell of Damon’s ear. Anything non-sexual. Eventually, Damon calms.

And then he falls asleep.

Alaric waits an hour to make sure he’s alright, and fast asleep, and then he hits the intercom, calling for Kelly.

She arrives looking every bit the Madam, and pushes the door shut behind her.

“What did you get me into, Kelly?” Alaric asks.

She huffs a little. “Just your type. Mouthy and needy. Probably used to something a little rougher than what you were offering. I’ll put him in a taxi when he wakes up.” She has a challenging look on her face. Alaric gives her a withering glare.

“Who does he live with? Where?”

“Alone, in a studio the size of your guest bathroom, on the other side of the city.”

Alaric looks back at the couch.

“He can’t be alone. I’ll take him home with me, my driver can take him home in the morning. Kelly, I could wring your neck. He has no training…”

“He claims he does.”

“He’s lying. He needs money enough to do anything to get it. Why?”
“I’ll let you ask him yourself some time. How long do you need? That pretty blonde driver of yours waiting somewhere around the block?”

Alaric takes another long look at Damon, in an emotionally induced coma on the couch, and nods. “I’ll let her know to come in a few minutes. Don’t imagine we’re not talking about this again.”

Kelly stands on her toes, and leans to kiss his cheek. “Of course not, darling. We’ll do lunch next week, oui?”
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The fact that Damon barely remembers anything of Alaric helping him to dress, leading him out to a chauffer-driven town car out by the entrance, or taking him back to his own apartment, is something he thinks he’ll be grateful for, the whole of the rest of his life – which ideally could end before he actually has to face Alaric ever again.

Damon lies on a bed which reminds him too much of the one he had in his father’s house. Big, clean, comfortable. Blinking at the sun streaming in a window that runs the full length of the room, high above most of the city. The goose down blanket is heavy, and he’s warm, though it’s been snowing most days this week and he’s accustomed to waking up freezing cold.

He’s more or less expecting to find Alaric in bed beside him, ready to finish what they didn’t last night. He’s definitely earned it. Damon will even keep his mouth shut, if it means they never have to discuss what happened – or even so much as acknowledge it. He feels alright. He feels good, actually. A mild ache in his arms, and a sort of memory or imprint on his thigh, of the flogger, that’s all. Clear-headed, even if his eyes are still rimmed in red.

When he rolls over, Alaric will know he’s awake. They can finish this off, he can go to the bank, get a cashier’s check, take it to the hospital… he’s bought himself some more time. But this mattress. He yawns, he stretches, he rolls over.

Alaric is asleep on an armchair, in jeans and a t-shirt. He looks absurd like that, like a real person. Damon sits up. He could just sneak out now.

Alaric stirs, and seems to remember where he is, resettling himself on the armchair. He rubs his eyes.

“Good morning. Are you alright?”

Fuck, Damon feels young. He shrugs, airy. “Dandy.” He should, he thinks, apologize, but he has no real idea of how to go about doing that, so he skips it. “Should I go, or do you want to fuck me first?”

Alaric flinches. “Fuck you? No. Do you remember what happened last night?”

Damon rolls his eyes, and stretches out, hands under his head. “I remember enough to know I’m probably not going to get another call from Kelly Donovan ever again,” he says, and it sounds flippant, but actually, he’s thinking that whether or not Alaric fucks him, he is fucked.

“You have no training. You were totally unprepared for anything that didn’t involve bracing for the worst.”

“All I hear is blah, blah, blah. If we’re done, I’m going. Where are my clothes?”


Breakfast. Hot breakfast. Fuck, but that sounds good. Damon hesitates, salivating. “I could eat. Fully clothed,” he adds, remembering the way it had felt to have Alaric watching him the night before.
Alaric points to the chair where, Damon sort of remembers, he himself dumped his clothes the night before. Not even neatly folded. “Bathroom’s through there,” he says, “if you want a shower.”

He pulls the door closed behind him, with a soft, expensive-sounding click.

Damon takes his time. He hasn’t had a shower under good water pressure since he sold his apartment and moved into the rented studio, and that was over a year ago. He washes his hair with products he remembers, but can’t afford. He manages to avoid singing. He dries his body on fluffy, fluffy towels, machine dried by someone Alaric probably pays quite well, and rather than put on yesterday’s clothes, he wraps a bath robe around himself and ties it around the waist, before he heads out of the bathroom.

Alaric is sitting at a table, sun streaming through the windows, reading the newspaper.

“Can I borrow this robe?”

“Of course you can,” Alaric says. “At this point in time you’re a guest. Use what you need. Spare toothbrushes are in the bottom drawer in there. You look better.”

Damon drops into the seat opposite Alaric’s, and reaches for a piece of crispy bacon, still hot, from the serving dish in the middle. “I’m fine. So what do you do?”

Alaric folds the paper, and sets it aside, pouring coffee. “I’m a developer. Started out in historical landmarks, rebuilding history, but I’m not that discerning anymore.”

“Should you be at work?”

Alaric gives him a hard look. “I wasn’t gonna leave you on your own after last night. You seem fine. My driver can take you home when we’re done here.”

“We?”

“You, then. Have your breakfast, and you can go.”

“I don’t need your permission. I’m not on the clock.”

“You’re not big on permission when you are on the clock.” He doesn’t say that like it’s one of Damon’s most amusing and endearing qualities. “Last night was a train wreck.”

Damon feels ill. “I was… tired.”

“Do you want to tell me why?”

“No. Am I still getting paid?”

“There’s a check on the coffee table. You can write your own name on it, or whatever you need. And Kelly’s been paid separately, so she won’t cut into it. Listen, Damon. You shouldn’t be doing this. You know that, right?”

Damon rolls his eyes, and reaches for a strawberry, and stands, crossing to the window. The city is stretched out forever. Cloud gather around the tallest buildings. Maybe this is all that America is now. The city, from sea to shining sea. “Average job, I get tied up, fucked in both ends, maybe slapped around a little, and sent home. Easy. I don’t know what the fuck you were doing. Maybe you’re the one who needs training.” He bites into the strawberry. “That was some very weird stuff.”
Alaric isn’t offended, or even annoyed. He looks amused. “That was weird? Huh.” He chuckles, and then his face gets serious again. “You’ve never experienced subspace before, have you.”

Damon’s heard the word, but it has always sounded theoretical. Not applicable to the commercial transaction that passes for sex in the club. And he didn’t like it. He’s never cried in front of a client unless they’ve asked for it. He stares out the window. Subspace.

“Is that what that was? Fun. Remind me not to do that again.”

He looks up in time to see Alaric’s face turn serious, and turn away.

“Do you have a girlfriend? Boyfriend?”

Damon shakes his head.

“Job?”

“I tend bar, a couple of nights a week. Work in the club when I can. You know this is out of line, right?”

“You don’t have to answer. What’s going on in your life that you need a lot of money, and don’t care what you have to do to get it?”

“That, I won’t answer,” Damon says, dropping back into the chair.

Alaric is silent a few moments.

“Eat your breakfast. Lots of orange juice,” he says, as he stands up, and heads back to the bedroom.

It’s so quiet, in this lavish apartment. It’s distinctly a home – shelves full of books on the walls, though they look odd against all the white furniture, which was clearly picked by someone other than Alaric himself. Damon’s studio is never quiet. The walls are paper-thin. People argue, there’s traffic noise all the time.

Damon serves himself bacon, eggs, toast that’s almost cold, and sets about filling his stomach.

When Alaric emerges twenty minutes later, he’s wearing an immaculately cut suit (which Damon suspects he hates) and his hair is tidy, business like. It’s shocking, in a way.

“When you’re ready to leave,” he says, “tell the doorman. Just the button by the elevator. My driver, Caroline, will take you wherever you need to go.”

He slides a laptop into a briefcase, and nods once. “Thanks for an interesting night,” he says, and he’s gone, and Damon feels strangely empty.

--

The blonde, Caroline, is not what Damon was expecting. She’s… well, she’s adorable. Bubbly. She opens the back door for Damon, but when he makes a face, she lets him sit in the front.

She doesn’t speak, but Damon thinks she wants to.

“You’re boss is a weirdo,” he says. “Very odd guy.”

“No,” she says. “He’s the best. I’ve been driving him for… four years. He gives me six weeks of leave a year, pays me better than almost anyone, and I have my own little apartment in the
building.” She smiles brightly, and executes a terrifying maneuver, crossing three lanes of traffic, and seems to revel in the brake screeches and horn honks around them. “Oops. Are you a friend of his?”

“No,” Damon says, with a scowl.

“Too bad for you. He’s good to his friends.”

Damon doesn’t care.

“Why is he single?”

Caroline laughs. “He might be a good boss, but we don’t braid each other’s hair and talk about boys. He’s rich, he works, he doesn’t have time.” Another daredevil stunt has then narrowly avoid getting stuck behind a bank of stopped cars. “I know he was married, once, to some artsy goth girl. Not goth. A thing, I don’t know.” He pulls back into a center lane.

Damon fights off a smile. “Actually, can you take me to Mercy?”

“The hospital?”

He nods.

“Not a problem,” she says. Damon doesn’t white-knuckle it all the way, but it’s a near thing. Forty minutes later, they are pulling up to the door.

Damon meets Caroline’s eyes, but only for a moment. Any other day, he’d be trying to talk his way into her pants, and probably succeeding, but he’s off balance. He doesn’t feel like himself.

“You need to smile more,” Caroline says.

Damon tries not to snort. “Thanks for the ride,” he says, slamming the door shut.

He hands the check over, endorsed to the hospital. He’s bought himself about six weeks. No, four, he owes two weeks already. The manager holds it up to the light, as if to make sure it’s real.

“Oh, please,” Damon says, crossing his arms. “Why would I bother with a fake? I need time to get more together. You can’t throw him out, now. Right?”

The manager puts the check aside, and takes a seat, encouraging Damon to do the same.

“You’re delaying the inevitable.”

Damon bites the inside of his cheek. “This is his home. He’s getting better.”

“He’ll never get much better. The truth is he probably won’t even know he’s not here anymore.”

“I have to work. I can’t leave him alone. I will get your money,” he says, standing up. “Now, I’d like to see my brother.”

The manager crosses his arms, and shakes his head, almost kindly. “You can’t. He had a very bad night. He’s sedated.”

Damon can’t handle it. Not after last night. He feels tears burn his eyes. He drops his elbows onto the table and holds his face. He doesn’t want to hear what happened. It’s what always happens. He gets upset, he gets confused, he has no idea where he is. He lashes out. They have to calm him
down, and Stefan is not a little guy. Even after two and a half years of this he’s still strong enough to throw the average nurse across the room, when he’s upset. Damon stands, and heads for the door of the office.

“Four weeks, Mr. Salvatore.”

Oh, fuck him. Fuck him. Damon crosses the room, slams the heels of his hands against the desk, and snarls. “My brother is a fucking hero,” he says. “He is a fucking hero. You should feel privileged to be helping him. So fuck you.”

He avoids the eyes of the nurses as he heads out the doors, and half-sprints, half-falls in the direction of the gates. He has over a mile to walk to the station. He should be feeling better by then. Hopefully. As he’s buzzed out, he hears a horn beep.

He turns his head. Caroline. She winds the window down, and he jogs across the driveway. He crosses his arms, leaning into the car.

“Ride home?”

“I catch the subway.”

“Yeah… about that.”

Damon stares her down.

“He was very specific that I should take you wherever you wanted to go, and then home.”

“He wants to know where I live.”

“He wants to make sure you get there, that’s all. I won’t tell him. Get in.”

And he’s viciously grateful, because he can’t be penned in on the subway, not today. So he climbs back into the front seat, and tells Caroline where to go.

They’re silent for a long time. “Who were you visiting?”

Damon throws her a look.

“Fine, fine. I won’t tell. You just look upset, is all.”

Damon rolls his eyes. “My brother.” And somehow, the whole story comes out.

Stefan was barely seventeen when it happened, and their father had been dead a year. They’d both been in Virginia, finalizing the sale of the family estate. And Stefan had been out walking, wanting to memorize Mystic Falls. Damon only wanted never to see it again.

They’d had to piece the story together from scraps, because Stefan couldn’t tell much of it, other than the evidence he wore on his body. A car had driven off the bridge, and he’d dived in after it. He’d pulled a girl out of the back seat. Elena Gilbert. Their families knew each other, but only in the most cool and informal way.

She’d woken on the shore, and found him not breathing on the ground beside her. Bleeding. His head half caved in. No one had ever been able to explain how the hell he’d managed to save little Elena’s life, or how either of them made it out of the water. On top of the head injury, Stefan had a spinal injury. The next several days had involved half a dozen surgeries, and no one had been optimistic about his survival. Damon could barely remember any of it. But he remembered the
moment when they’d presented him with his account.

They had health insurance, he’d told them, but they’d assured him it had disappeared with their father’s death.

It didn’t matter. There was Giuseppe’s bank accounts. But until that week Damon hadn’t known that Giuseppe had died up to his eyeballs in debt. The balance of Damon and Stefan’s trust funds was all that was left.

He’d paid the bill, almost two hundred grand, and that had left them with little.

Stefan was moved to long term care in the city. Damon sold his apartment. Little by little the funds dwindled, until he was barely scraping the money together a month at a time – he sold his car, the remaining stocks that were in his name, or Stefan’s. He couldn’t find work (should have finished college, fuck it). A month at a time became a week at a time, and now…

Caroline is silent for a long time.

“That’s awful,” is all she manages. “Can he get better?”

They tell him every week – tiny bits of progress, that’s all he can hope for. Damon likes denial.

“He will,” he says. “Look, thanks for listening. Don’t tell your dearly beloved boss a single word, or I’ll find you and cut off your hair and make you eat it.”

“Hello imagery,” she says, trying to smile. “Is this your building?”

He can’t even face it.

“Yep. Goodbye.”

This time, he knows, she’ll go. He’s alone again.

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Damon survives Friday and Saturday nights at the bar, but he’s never felt so lonely. The customers are meaner than usual, or maybe he is craving something different.

Sunday, he spends a distressing hour with Stefan, who is in pain, though no one can work out where, and has to be sedated again.

“Is he getting worse?” Damon asks one of the nurses. He needs a lie.

“No,” she says. “But he’s not really getting better, either. One on one care might make the difference. But this place, as expensive as it is – we can’t do that.”

He wants to know – how much? What magic number would fix this? But he doesn’t ask, because it might as well be a million dollars a day. He goes home and drinks an entire bottle of bourbon, and sleeps through most of Monday.

--

Tuesday, Kelly calls. Damon can’t answer the phone fast enough, even though his hangover is so bad he wishes he was dead. Maybe she’s reconsidered. Maybe he can rely on a night or two a week. It wouldn’t fix it, but it would help.
“Quite a mess you made, sugar,” she says, that voice making him feel so small, when he can’t shrink any more on the couch.

“Are you calling to berate me? Because I’ll put you on speaker and go back to sleep.”

“No. I’m asking you to come in tomorrow night. Appointment’s at nine. Be here early, wear something nice, and for goodness sake, sugar, comb your hair. Have you seen your brother?”

“I’ll see you tomorrow night,” he says, and ends the call. Relieved beyond the telling of it.

--

The following day he spends a good long time getting himself ready – basically preparing himself not to burst into tears, or fall asleep in a client’s lap. He doesn’t visit his brother, because he can’t do that and hold it together for the night.

He doesn’t wear aftershave when he’s working. Clients are picky, and the last thing they want is for a sub to smell like someone they’re afraid of, or to go home to their wives or girlfriends smelling like someone else. He even combs his hair.

He stops for a kebab before switching lines. It’s good. The lamb is tender, the vegetables are fresh. He drinks three pints of water, and yeah, if he’s honest, it feels good. Clean.

It’s only three blocks from the station to the club, and it’s a nice walk, even if it’s been snowing for days, and he can feel his cheeks pink up, his lips go numb. It’s better than midsummer when the sidewalks are sticky and his apartment starts to smell. There is a purity to cold.

He nods at the security guards on his way in the door. He enjoys their thinly-veiled contempt. It will keep him present tonight.

He heads into the bar, and sweet talks a double Jack Daniels out of one of the guys. He throws it back fast. Should have done that last week. And then upstairs to Kelly. He knocks, and waits, and she invites him inside.

Damon is anticipating a lecture. He’s been practicing explaining how he was all vulnerable, and Alaric was a complete freak, and he’s fine, and it’ll never happen again. He’s not expecting orange juice (why is everyone always pushing orange juice on him?) and a discussion about his vaccinations, his last round of tests for HIV, hepatitis, chlamydia.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were going to offer me regular work,” Damon purrs. Eyes wide. Meow, he’s a cat, pet him. “I accept.” It’s approaching nine o’clock, so he stands.

“Not so fast,” she says. “Sit.”

“Time is money, mistress lushypants. By the way, you are really fuckable in those.” Yeah, he feels better. Balanced, centered. Back to pure Salvatore seduction. He’ll be fine.

“Your client – no. Your potential client – is meeting you here, any minute. Damon.”

She sits on the edge of her desk, and fuck, there goes his equilibrium.

“You’re being paid very well to have this conversation. But that’s it. You have no obligation to take it any further. Don’t agree to anything you don’t want to do.”

He’s heard too many fucking ugly stories involved knife play, broken teeth. He’s instantly tense.
“This had better be someone you’re vouching for.”

Kelly catches Damon’s jaw in her hand. “You’re a very beautiful man, Damon Salvatore. And absolutely. I vouch for him.”

There is a knock on the door. Kelly leans forward, and presses a kiss to the corner of Damon’s mouth.

“I’ll talk to you later,” she says. “Be good.” And her leather-clad ass disappears out the door, and Alaric is leaning against the door jamb.

Damon is instantly tense. He’d said goodbye. Right? It was quite clear.

“Hmm. If you’re hoping for a repeat performance, I’m all out of crybaby,” he says, standing. Fists at his sides. It would be easier to face down someone who’d hurt him than deal with this right now. “What are you doing back here?”

Alaric looks different. The first night, he’d come from an office. Tie off, but still very much Mr. Saltzman. The next day, he’d looked entirely like himself. A fucking t-shirt. Damon wondered if his shareholders knew he owned t-shirts. But this… nice sweater, fine wool. Smart slacks and a leather jacket. It’s strange. Like seeing your doctor in the grocery store, looking like a real human being.

Alaric closes the door behind him, and sits down. He holds Damon’s eyes.

“Sit,” he says. “Please.”

“No,” Damon answers.

“Fine. Stand.”

Damon sits. “I’m technically on the clock,” he grumbled, “so…”

Fuck. He wasn’t anticipating this.

Alaric nods appreciatively. “Thank you.”

“For sitting?”

“For seeing me.”

“If I’d known it was you, I wouldn’t have come.”

Alaric laughs. “And you claim you’ve had training as a sub? Please.”

… fair enough.

Damon sprawls, thinks better of it. This is the richest guy he’s ever met. Frankly, if he gets paid a grand a week to cry on him, it’s probably a good deal.

“You want to head downstairs? Planning to fuck me this time?”

Alaric rolls his eyes. “How about you let me do the talking.”

Damon concedes, and crosses his ankles.
“I’m offering you a more long-term arrangement,” Alaric says. “You’d live with me, Monday night through Friday night. At my beck and call from the time you arrive, at seven sharp, until one of us leaves in the morning, and not later than eight a.m. You’d be available to me the entire time you’re in my apartment – all negotiated in advance, and don’t give me any shit about no hard limits.”

Damon’s heart thuds so loudly in his chest that Alaric can surely hear it. He can’t do this.

“How much?”

Alaric nods. “Ten thousand a week. I’ll pay Kelly a finder’s fee, of course, but your salary would be ten thousand a week.”

This makes no sense.

“I’m the literal worst sub in the history of prostitution,” Damon says, incredulous. “Why?”

“Because you interest me,” Alaric says, guilelessly. “And by the end of the first month, you’ll be the best.”

Damon feels a sick tightness in his throat. He can’t afford to say no. Even if he only survives a month, he’s buying time.

“I need Friday and Saturday night for the bar,” he says, and it’s the first time he’s realized he’s saying yes.

Alaric shakes his head. “No. No more bar.”

“If this goes south, I need a job–”

“If this goes south, I’ll give you one. Full time, somewhere in one of my companies. Not ten thousand a week. But a good salary. And I promise you’d never lay eyes on me.”

“You’ve thought about this way too much.”

It’s supposed to embarrass Alaric, but Alaric is unfazed. Damon uncrosses his legs, and leans forward in his chair. “You’re paying me to be your boyfriend.”

“No. I’m paying you to be my submissive. Emotional entanglement is a hazard,” he says, reaching for a glass of mineral water on the desk. “But it’s unnecessary, and I’m prepared to deal with it as it comes.”

He can’t say no to ten thousand dollars a week. He stares at his knee. These pants are about to wear through. It doesn’t matter how careful he is – in the end, things fall apart.

He pictures Stefan restrained, physically and chemically, calling for their father.

“When would I start?”

Alaric nods. “Tomorrow night. Caroline will collect you, if you like. She’s available to you when I don’t need her. You’ll stay with me Thursday and Friday night, take the weekend to consider. If we decide it’s gonna work, if you decide to stay, we’ll settle on a trial period of a month. From there… we’ll see.”

“You’re going to want sex, right?”

Alaric meets his eyes. “Yes.”
Damon is mildly embarrassed to find himself anticipating it, instead of dreading it. He nods again. “Fine. Everything negotiated, right?”

“Everything.”

“Negotiated being the operative word. If I say no to something—”

“It’s a no.”

“You’re not going to suddenly decide you want to pee on me, and offer me an extra grand for the week.”

Alaric makes an incredulous face. “No. Not going to happen. I’m only interested in one kind of bodily fluid and I can promise you, it’s not urine.”

Damon finally nods.

Alaric stands. “I’ll see you tomorrow night,” he says. Damon stands as well, unsure.

Alaric takes a step closer, two. He cups Damon’s face in his hands, and examines him a moment. And then he leans in, and presses their mouths together.

It’s not a silver screen kiss. But it’s memorable. Damon will remember it. His body responds almost immediately, and he’s suddenly grateful that Alaric’s hands are holding his head steady.

Alaric ends the kiss, and takes a step back. He looks so calm, so confident. It can’t just be money that does that – Giuseppe was a miserable bastard, hunched and twisted.

“Will I send Caroline?”

Damon nods dumbly.

“Tomorrow,” Alaric says again, and he’s out the door before Damon can say another word.

Chapter End Notes

There you go, bbies. I have two more chapters almost ready to go. I’d love feedback; if this isn’t working for anyone I’ll let it die a dignified little death.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Damon arrives at Alaric’s apartment for the first night on the job.

Alaric is reading the paper when Damon arrives. Alaric hears the elevator opens at five minutes to seven, and a moment later, there he is, opening the door, in his expensive clothes that are two years out of style, carrying a gym bag. The gym bag is a mild annoyance. He needs something more suitable. Or clothing here in the apartment. That would be better.

Damon hesitates, and flushes, before stepping into the room and closing the door behind him. He looks combative. Alaric wonders for the ten thousandth time why he’s doing this – why he wants to do this. He’s been imagining finding Damon’s best self, happily submissive, lapping up praise, but the truth is – the guy is prickly, and there’s always the possibility that he’ll never be anything but prickly. This experiment might fail.

“Forgot how big this place was,” Damon mutters, by way of greeting.

“Do you really plan to address me like that?”

Damon grits his teeth, and forces him to relax. “You haven’t been very specific. Master? Sir? Daddy?”

“Don’t ever say the word Daddy in this apartment again,” Alaric says. “Call me Alaric, if you need to address me, unless I ask you to use something different. But that’s not what I meant. You arrive here, you say hello. You’re a guest in my home, until we sign off on this arrangement, and even then, I have rules. This won’t work without them.”

Damon stands awkwardly with the bag. Across the vast empty space that makes up the majority of the apartment. Alaric loves the sense of space, but Damon looks deeply uncomfortable. Alaric folds the paper, and sets it aside.

“What’s in the bag?”

“Change of clothes,” Damon says, still clutching it. Alaric nods.

“There’s an empty bedroom,” he says. “Down the hallway, on the end. Put it in there.”

Damon waits for a moment. Looking for more complicated instructions, Alaric supposes, but off he goes. When he comes back, he looks tense.

“What’s the matter?”

Damon shrugs, and says nothing.

“When I ask you a question, I expect you to answer it.”

Damon shifts from foot to foot. Alaric rolls his eyes, and pats the couch. Damon crosses the room, and sits on the corner cushion. It’s a good choice. They can see each other’s faces. They have
negotiating to do, and Alaric would rather they did it from a position of equality.

“We have things to discuss,” he says. “Have you eaten?”

Damon hesitates before nodding, and Alaric raises an eyebrow.

“I forgot,” Damon says. “I was…”

“Nervous?”

Damon shrugs.

“This will go a lot better if you’re honest.”

“Fine. I was nervous. I still don’t know what I’m doing here. I have no idea why a guy who can probably buy Canada wants to pay me for what he could get for free. I’m seriously considering asking for the ball gag on a more or less permanent basis because I think we both know it’s only a matter of time before I say something that’s gonna end this little arrangement very abruptly.”

“So why are you here?”

“Because I need the money.”

Alaric nods. Good. Honesty. “Are you attracted to me?”

Damon cocks his head. “Do I need to be?”

“No. But the exact nature of this arrangement will depend on your answer, so again, be honest.”

Damon slumps a little against the cushions. He makes eye contact for a moment, and nods. Okay, good. He’s attracted, even if he’d prefer not to be. Even so, his lack of enthusiasm is irritating.

“Why do you need the money?”

“Do I have to answer that?”

“No, you don’t, but it might be easier if you do. I’d like to know.”

Damon tenses, and there is real pain on his face. “Ask me in a week, if this works out.”

Truth is, Alaric could make one phone call and know Damon’s entire life history inside an hour, but he’d prefer not to intrude that way. He stands, and takes a step.

“You coming?”

“Bedroom’s that way,” Damon says, pointing his thumb over his shoulder and sticking out his bottom lip. “That’s what I’m here for, right?”

“Right. But this way is the kitchen. You need to eat, and I’m gonna make you a fucking sandwich, if you can avoid mouthing off at me for ten minutes.” There’s a fondness in his tone, though, and he hopes Damon can hear it. Damon steps lightly away from the couch, and follows. The kitchen isn’t really separate. It joins with a less formal living area, light-bathed in the sunshine, but a little dreary at night or in dull weather.

Spectacular in a storm, with lightning, furious, and the rain beating down hard against the glass.
“Take a seat,” Alaric says, pointing to the stools, and Damon obediently sits. Elbows on the counter. Bright eyes watching curiously. Alaric had been a great cook, once. Perhaps he could be again, but for now – he hadn’t made anything more complicated than a sandwich in years. So easy to get everything delivered. The restaurant on the second level has a Michelin star and always takes his calls, and there is no shortage of good home delivery in the area – whether he feels like a three course French feast or a three dollar shawerma. His housekeeper always makes sure there is enough fresh food in the fridge to manage a sandwich, though, and a few interesting things in the freezer.

A sandwich, for now. He pulls a loaf of fresh sourdough from the bread box, vegetables and charcuterie from the fridge. “Any allergies? Anything you don’t like to eat?” He pauses to wash his hands.

“No.”

Alaric nods, and begins the slice the bread. They have a task. This will make it easier for Damon to listen.

“What I said the other night remains. I will never humiliate you. I’ll never break your skin. I will never do anything without your express consent.” Neat slices of tomato. It smells slightly sweet, and slightly acidic. “If you’re uncomfortable with anything, I expect you to let me know.”

“As long as you’re paying I’m fine with anything.”

“Not how this works. And as far as I’m concerned, once you’ve eaten this sandwich and drunk some water, your apprenticeship starts. You claim you’ve had training and I don’t believe it for a second.”

Damon looks sheepish, if defiant. He watches as Alaric assembles mixed lettuce leaves and prosciutto with the tomato. A little light mustard. He cuts the sandwich in half, and puts it on a plate, pushing it across the counter towards Damon’s eager hands.

It occurs to Alaric that he might actually be hungry. The sort of hungry a person learns to ignore. Maybe tomorrow he will make that call, find out about Damon’s life. Maybe. Might be safer.

Damon eats with an appealing enthusiasm, and Alaric watches, wondering how far he’ll take things tonight. Not far, he thinks. Not too far. He wants to gauge the strength of the attraction, find out what makes Damon moan. He cleans the chopping board while Damon eats, and pours a glass of mineral water.

“Where do I sleep?” Damon asks, when he’s done with his food. He wipes his fingers on a napkin. Something about the way he does it suggests breeding.

“Depends,” Alaric answers. “My preference is for you to sleep with me, but you don’t have to, unless I’m concerned about you emotionally.”

Damon looks to be about to snarl that that will never be the case, but perhaps he remembers bursting into tears at the club, and he just nods.

“But other than that – your decision. That bedroom’s… very nice.”

It’s enormous. It’s almost the same size as Alaric’s, and has the better view – but Alaric likes to have an attached bathroom. Damon seems satisfied with the answer. Alaric takes the plate, and places it in the dishwasher.
“What do you like? What do you actually enjoy?”

Damon chews slowly, thinking, which is a good sign, better than mouthing off that he’ll do anything. He swallows, and shrugs. “I like it pretty rough,” he admits. “I like pain, until I don’t. Restraints, any kind. I don’t know. No one ever really asks.”

Alaric isn’t surprised. “Ever been blindfolded?”

Damon frowns. “No. But… that could be… interesting.”

“Toys?”

“Everything’s a toy, if you know how to play with it.” He smirks, which is sort of out of line, but Alaric sort of likes it, anyway. “Plugs, dildos… no double penetration, no fisting. I’d like to still have control over my sphincter when I’m forty.”

“That’s fine.” Never really been his thing, anyway. Damon finishes the sandwich, and the talk a little more, and then he pushes the plate away. Alaric takes it, and puts it in the dishwasher.

“Ready to start?”

“Thought you’d never ask,” Damon says, stepping lightly off the stool. “Do you want that strip tease this time?”

“No,” Alaric says. “I want you to go to my bedroom, take off all your clothes, and get on your knees on the bed. Facing the pillows. Ass in the air.”

This, Damon can manage. He offers a ballsy little salute, and disappears.

Alaric takes his time, wondering how long Damon can wait in that position before he starts complaining, or asking how much longer. But it wouldn’t be a good start on his first night so maybe, just maybe, he’ll behave. Alaric feels his cock stir and the thought of the sight he’s about to encounter. He can do this. He can help Damon find himself, learn to love being looked after. He’ll fuck the guy raw and then whisper in his ear for half the night, play with his hair, until he’s not sure if he’s asleep or awake. He closes his eyes for a second, standing with his palms on the countertop, and remembers the way Damon looked when he spaced out the other night. Face suddenly smooth, eyes dark and shining. Fucking gorgeous, until he fell apart.

It’s been long enough. Alaric pauses at the light control board on the dividing wall and turns off all the lights in the apartment except the one in the bedroom. That one, he turns down, softening the light with a slight gold tint. He checks the time – it’s not even eight thirty. Time to explore a while, cuddle for a while, and get a good night’s sleep.

He stands at the bedroom door for a while, just watching. Silently. Damon’s body is glorious. Firm and honed. He’s centered on the bed, positioned exactly as Alaric asked him to be, and more still than Alaric had thought he was capable of.

“Very nice,” he says, quietly, and Damon shivers. “Comfortable?”

Damon nods.

“Speak.”

“Comfortable,” Damon slurs, cheek against the pillow.
“Spread your knees a little further apart.”

After a pause, Damon complies.

“How do you feel about spreader bars? Not tonight.” Alaric sits on an armchair, and unlaces his shoes, setting them aside. Socks next. No rush. “In general. Don’t make me remind you you’ve agreed to be honest.”

Damon twitches. “I like them.”

Interesting. For someone who’s so sure he’s not actually a natural sub, he seems to have some very unusual preferences. Alaric unbuttons his shirt, cuffs first, and then down his body, casting it aside. Damon stays very still. Pants next. It’s good to have them gone; his erection is getting distracting, trapped against the zipper and the inseam.

He lays the pants over the arm of the chair, and it’s just his boxers. They can stay a moment. He walks around the bed, evaluating Damon from every angle.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Always. But I might not answer.”

“Are you attracted to me?”

Alaric smiles, and sits on the edge of the bed. He lets his fingers play over Damon’s shoulders, and Damon relaxes with a sigh.

“You wouldn’t be here, if I wasn’t,” Alaric says. “Very attracted.”

Damon lets out a quiet murmur as Alaric’s hands explore. The nape of his neck, the flesh over his sides – Damon chokes out a gasp, as Alaric finds the right place, the right pressure. Damon’s cock, already stiffening, starts to bob under its own weight. Alaric runs the back of his fingers over the silken flesh, and Damon’s hips buck forward involuntarily. Demanding little shit. Alaric likes him. Yes, he’s attracted, and in the next few weeks, he’ll shape Damon, form him into something better.

In the meantime…

He reaches into the nightstand for the lube. He’s done enough taking his time tonight; he wants to fuck, and the way Damon curves his body against the bed, displaying himself, spread wide, he is pretty confident Damon wants the same.

He pours a little lube over his fingertips, and runs one finger lightly over Damon’s rim. Not even enough for a tease. Damon makes a noise like he really, really wants to complain, but he doesn’t.

“Something to say?”

“If I say ‘just fuck me already’ will I get spanked for being a bad sub?”

“And not in the fun way,” Alaric agrees. “You’re not good at waiting.”

“No.”

“Grip the bedhead,” Alaric says, and obediently, Damon reaches out in front of him, tangling his fingers through the wooden slats. He grips tight. Handcuffs next time. Alaric is setting up a list in his head, everything they’ll do together, and what order. He sincerely hopes this is going to work out. “Do you need anything?”
“Other than a thorough fucking?”

Alaric bites his lip to stop from laughing. “Watch your mouth.”

Damon is silent for a moment, until Alaric presses his finger more determinedly against the ring of muscle. He doesn’t breach it, not yet. “Kiss me.”

Alaric smiles, cocking his head. For no reason he can think of, the request seems odd. But he shifts on the bed, lying alongside Damon, faces aligned. One hand still curved over Damon’s ass, flicking against his rim. Damon’s face slackens every time he does it, slackens and twitches again. His eyes are wide and dark.

Alaric leans to kiss him. Just gentle, just a brush of lips. That’s the plan. But Damon’s mouth is so fucking appealing. He leans into the kiss, and Damon strains forward, sort of desperate, needy. Their tongues meet, and Alaric is giddily satisfied that they find their own rhythm quickly, despite the fact that Damon already looks a little spacy.

“You ready?” he says, when he’s done.

“I’ve been ready forever,” Damon says, with just a hint of a whining complaint.

Alaric lines up behind him, and with no further warning, slips one finger into his ass. He curls it around to find Damon’s prostate, and Damon forces a huff of breath out from between his lips, arching into the touch. Alaric moves his finger in and out, and quickly makes it two. Damon’s hips begin to jerk. Another day, he’ll tell him to be still, but right now he wants to find out what he likes. Three fingers, and he forgets to grip the boards, tries to reach back.

“Did I tell you to let go?”

Damon’s hand shoots out in front of him, and he grips tightly again. Alaric can just see the way his lips fall open, the subtle twitches of his eyelashes. He grins, and returns his focus to Damon’s ass. Such a nice ass. Even nicer, now it’s stretched out and ready for him. Damon bites his lip. Anticipating. Alaric has to wonder if he’d been expecting to actually enjoy himself; he assumes probably not. Seems a pity. There’s been something amiss for Damon since he stumbled face first into this world. A lot of so-called Dominants who are looking for someone they can abuse, and that’s not what this is supposed to be about.

Alaric pulls his fingers away. Loose enough, but not loose. He wants a nice tight fit. He traces the curve of Damon’s hip, and down over the back of his thigh, watching, waiting for Damon to start getting pissy again. But he behaves.

Alaric climbs off the bed, and pushes his boxers down over his hips. He retrieves a condom from the drawer.

“I’m clean,” Damon says, and he almost sounds insulted. “You have my papers. And I have yours. You can bareback.”

“You’ll get a more… thorough blood test from my own doctor first,” he says. “You prefer bareback?”

Damon is still a moment, and then says, “Yes.”

Alaric gives himself a couple of unnecessary tugs, and slips the latex over his length. Yes. Bareback, but not yet. He doesn’t take risks, not like that. He leans to press a worshipful kiss to the divot at the base of Damon’s spine.
“I think you pay me so you don’t have to bother with the romantic bullshit,” Damon drawls.

“Says Mr. ‘Kiss me’. I don’t do things I don’t want to,” Alaric says. “Not in my bed. No one does things they don’t want to do in my bed.”

Damon shifts, still gripping the slats at the head of the bed, and Alaric lets the blunt head of his cock bump up against Damon’s well-stretched hole, teasing. He can barely prevent himself from sinking into that sweet heat, but watching Damon push back, so needy, is a treat he won’t deny himself either.

“Please,” Damon chokes out, and it’s too much. Alaric pushes into him, biting his lip, letting his eyes fall closed. Halfway, and it’s not enough, and Damon pushes back to meet him. There’s a long pause, while Alaric lets himself become accustomed to the feeling, and even then he doesn’t begin to thrust, just rocks against Damon’s ass, keeping him full. Feels so good.
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Damon doubts he'll survive the month without getting himself fired. This would be a hell of a lot easier if Alaric would throw him around a bit.

By the time Alaric really starts to move, Damon has begun to wonder if he ever actually plans to; and he’s decided this job is going to be cake. This isn’t even the real deal. He’s been spitroasted and beaten and passed around at a party, tied up and humiliated, and he’s borne it all with classic Salvatore grace, laughing all the while about what dear old Giuseppe would say if he could see. This guy just wants to fuck him, boss him around a little; hell, if he wants a live-in boyfriend, Damon can deal with that. This is the sort of money that means Stefan will never need to leave the hospital, his cards, the nurses and physical therapy he needs –

– and Alaric has such a fantastic cock, thick and long, and Damon thinks he could cheerfully black out –

Damon figures he’s just too busy to find himself someone to date for real, and maybe despite the stink of money and the people who probably spend their days trying to get close to him, maybe he’s a little socially awkward, too, probably uses the fake Dom act to make it seem like he needs something he can’t easily get from the average singles club.

Seems a pity; because now he’s really moving, Damon thinks this is about as thoroughly as he’s been fucked in as long as he can remember. Anyone should be so lucky. His brain bashes against his skull and he can’t do anything but press back, mouth falling open as the pressure builds in his lower body.

He starts babbling incomprehensible syllables as Alaric speeds up; and though the pace is brutal, and he is definitely feeling the burn of the stretch, somehow it’s easy, relatively comfortable. If Damon forgets the financial side of this altogether, he can tell himself he’s just been picked up by a hot stranger in a bar, and is having the night of his life, when Alaric says, suddenly, “Don’t come.”

Okay, he can wait. He thinks. Maybe. A while.

But his body revolts. Without permission, he suddenly wants to come. More than he has in forever. He grips the panel of the headboard and whines audibly. Maintaining his focus. And Alaric keeps going, gripping Damon’s hips hard enough to bruise, and there’s a sudden stutter to his hips, and he freezes, fully seated inside Damon. Damon wants to see his face, the face that goes with that satisfied grunt; but more than that, he wants to come.

Orgasm denial has to be the dumbest kink ever.

But the money. And that was still a lot of fun.

Alaric puts one hand high up on Damon’s shoulder, and runs it down his back.

“So good,” he says, and Damon is instantly tense. Is he supposed to respond to that? Also, is Alaric ever going to pull out?
“So fucking good,” Alaric says, again, tracing the bumps of Damon’s spine. Damon feels himself instinctively arch into the touch, even as the words continue to make his skin crawl.

“I don’t need that,” he says.

“I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone who needed that more. How often does anyone tell you you’re doin’ good?”

Damon is about to snap and say something that would get him fired, when he realizes the need to come has actually subsided. As Alaric pulls out, he feels suddenly empty, and he eases himself down onto the bed, listening as Alaric heads for the bathroom to deal with the aftermath. Maybe he’ll sleep in the other room. But it’s… nine thirty. Fuck.

Alaric climbs onto the bed, stretched out alongside Damon, and keeps stroking his back. Playing with the ends of his hair. Propped up on one elbow he eases Damon’s hands out from between the slats in the bed head. Damon had almost forgotten they were there, but his fingers ache. He rolls over, and holds them up, watching as the circulation returns. Alaric takes them in his own, massaging gently, and Damon’s skin starts to crawl again.

“I don’t need this,” he says. “All of this… whatever it is you’re doing right now.”

“Aftercare?”

“Whatever, I don’t need it, and that wasn’t even… well, it was just good rough sex. If you’d picked me up in a bar you’d have booted me out by now.”

“I wouldn’t have, actually. And I didn’t pick you up in a bar. We’re buildin’ our working relationship, here, and part of that is you learning how to let yourself be looked after. Because sometime soon, we’ll be doin’ that with you tied so well you can’t move, and after that, you’re gonna need some serious coddling.”

Damon flicks his eyes towards Alaric’s. That sounds… actually, that sounds really fucking good, and he’s ready to start that right now, but Alaric looks like he’s definitely done for the night. His cheeks and chest are still flushed, and if Damon doesn’t think too much about the ‘looking after’ aspect of the hand massage, it’s actually really nice, especially when Alaric pulls a bottle of oil from the top drawer of his nightstand, and starts working that into his skin.

“When?” he asks.

Alaric grins. It’s not smug, it’s not cruel, he just looks sort of pleased with himself.

“One thing at a time,” he says, switching his attention to Damon’s other hand. “What you’re used to… that’s not what I’m about. I won’t do anything like that until you trust me, and I’ve worked out what the fuck makes you tick, because you’re impossible to read, and you don’t like to talk about your own needs. So. Slow.”

And he makes it sound so reasonable. Damon scoots closer on the bed, craving the affection he had been hating only moments before. Alaric open his arms, and Damon drapes himself over his body, ear to his chest. He feels sort of stupid and sort of awesome all at once, although deeply irritated by the fact he hadn’t been allowed to get off. The ache in his balls hasn’t quite subsided yet.

He can definitely handle this. This will be easy.
Friday morning, Damon gets the most thorough physical he’s ever experienced, and starts to wonder if the doctor has some unexplored kinks of his own. Apparently money really does make the world go round, because by four o’clock, he has a clean bill of health and a certificate to say so. He thinks as he walks back to the apartment that he might get it framed for Alaric’s bedroom wall, but he decides it’s probably a little too… what was the word? Mouthy.

Friday night, Alaric is late home, and looks exhausted. Damon has been sitting on the couch for a couple of hours, reading, wondering what the night will hold, and hoping like hell that he’ll be allowed to come. If that’s going to be a thing, it’s going to be a problem.

When the door opens, Damon stands, unsure of what he should be doing. Alaric gives him a gruff smile.

“Have you eaten?”

No. He forgot. Again. He shrugs, and when Alaric gives him the look, he says “No.”


“I don’t care.”

Alaric looks annoyed, but it doesn’t feel like a big deal. It’s just food. And then Damon realizes; he wasn’t asked what he preferred, he was asked to choose. Fuck, he has to think about everything these days. “Indian,” he says, still standing.

Looking satisfied, Alaric pulls out his phone, speed-dials a restaurant and places an order, and disappears into the bedroom. Is Damon supposed to follow?

He hears the shower, and opts to sit down and relax, instead, waiting for whatever will come next. Alaric takes fifty years in the shower, and isn’t there when the food arrives. But Damon has no money; he’s down to a couple of hundred in the bank, and ten on him now.

The guy standing in the doorway doesn’t gawk at the size of the penthouse, the luxurious fittings, which tells Damon he’s been there before.

“Can you wait?” he asks. “I don’t have any cash…”

“It’s taken care of,” the guy says, and hands Damon two bags full of food that smells so good Damon is salivating already. He steps back into the elevator, and Damon is left with a dilemma; initiative? He could make up a couple of plates. Or, safer option, he could leave the bags on the kitchen counter. How long does it take a guy to shower, when he sits in front of a computer all day?

Fuck it. Initiative wins out. He searches through cupboards that are so neatly arranged that it has to be some service that does all the cleaning; no human does things this neatly. Except possibly Damon, and he doesn’t have enough stuff for it to make a difference. He pulls out a couple of plates and piles them high with rice and meat and vegetables, and arranges samosas and pakora on another plate with the little pots of hot sauce and raita.

The shower shuts off.

Damon looks in the fridge – bottom shelf, there’s beer, and that sounds perfect. He bites his lip. They’ve never discussed alcohol. He has no idea if it would be alright.

“Fuck it,” he mutters under his breath. Surely he’s allowed to screw up a bit in the beginning? And either way, he’ll be blowing the last of his cash tomorrow night getting completely wasted and
forgetting he’s signed up to be a live-in prostitute.

He really doesn’t like the thought of going back to his flat tomorrow. It already feels like a long
time ago that he was there.

“Domestic suits you,” Alaric says, appearing from nowhere and startling Damon so he nearly drops
the bottle. Wearing a Duke Athletics t-shirt that looks about a hundred years old, and a pair of
jeans that make Alaric’s fairly spectacular ass look even better.

“Is this alright?” Damon asks, in return, indicating the beer.

“Fine,” Alaric says, reaching for the one on the counter, already open, and taking a long pull.

“Rough day, darling? Want to talk about it?”

Alaric gives Damon a withering look, but he doesn’t actually look too annoyed. “We’ll eat at the
table,” he says, balancing the plates and his bottle.

Alaric eats quietly, mulling something over in his head. This is boring, and annoying, because
Damon wants to actually get to know him a little; if this arrangement is going to work out, he needs
more to go on than ‘property developer with a taste for kink’. So, he tries again. Without the
‘darling’.

“Do you wanna talk about it…?”

Alaric shakes his head. “Work stuff. I’d rather clear my head.”

Hopefully, that means Damon is about to get laid, so he shuts up. Eventually, Alaric makes a
satisfied noise and pushes his plate away. “Could you rinse those and put them in the dishwasher?”
he asks. “I’m gonna get the rope.”

Damon’s heart starts racing, but he nods, and deals with the plates, already anticipating what might
come next. When he gets back to the lounge room, Alaric is sitting on the enormous couch, which
a coil of very expensive look silk rope. Black.

“You want the strip tease this time?” Damon asks, sing-song, striking a very enticing pose.

Alaric smiles. “No. Clothes on, for now.” He pats the seat beside him. “Put your arms out.”

Dammit. Whatever the hell this is, it’s not what Damon was hoping for. But he tamps down his
disappointment, and sits down, holding his arms out, wrists together.

Alaric starts with a simple knot, and then begins to wind the rope, pausing on every second coil to
knot it again. It’s rhythmic, almost ritual, and Damon first feels a spike of panic, realizing how
impossible it would be to get free; and then the weirdest calm he’s ever felt.

“You alright?”

He looks up, meeting Alaric’s gaze, realizing that his eyelids feel heavy. He nods, and then
remembers. “Yes.”

Alaric searches his face for any lie, and doesn’t find one. “If it gets too uncomfortable, or if you
want out – just ask, and it’s done.”

It really would be easier, if Alaric would just act like a proper Dom, push him around a bit. Damon
would find his spine. But he’s always so reasonable about everything, making Damon be a part of
it, instead of a body he’s bought and paid for. But Damon says nothing, just watching as Alaric ties off the ends.

“Now what?”

“I’m tired, and I just want to watch TV.”

What?

“With your head on my lap.”

He’s so weird. He reaches for the remote, and Damon thinks for a moment. It’s not actually all that easy to get into position, without the use of his hands, but he manages eventually. Feels odd, but it’s not bad. His bound arms rest in front of him on the couch, and once Alaric has the channel settled, he rests his hand between Damon’s shoulder blades.

Nothing happens for about a million years, except the occasional chuckle. Okay, the movie doesn’t suck. Damon finds himself smirking more than once, but never for long. He’s starting to feel a little strange.

Alaric’s hand starts to move, tracing patterns over Damon’s back, over his shoulder, down his arm. He plays with the ends of Damon’s hair, settling against the nape of his neck – always guaranteed to make him purr, how does he do that?

Damon is starting to feel distinctly weird. Having trouble focusing on the screen. Alaric’s hand seems so heavy.

“What if I need something?” This seems very relevant, because if he was tied up for the purposes of sex, it wouldn’t need to be for long, but this feels like it could go for hours.

“Ask,” Alaric says, wearily, “and you shall receive. Do you need something?”

Damon thinks about it for a moment, but thinking ruins his mellow high, so he stops. “No,” he says. “Just…”

Alaric cranes his neck to see Damon’s face, and smiles, just a little. “Just what?”

“Just what?”

“It’s nice,” he says, and relaxes again. And it is nice. For a while, it’s absolutely fucking lovely. Alaric’s hand, Alaric’s fingers, the occasional tremor when he laughs. And then Damon starts to feel uncomfortable. That feeling returns, his skin crawling. He ignores it. This is a job.

“So good,” Alaric says quietly, as if he’s sensed the struggle, and then it’s intolerable. Because he’s not good. And he doesn’t have the space he needs to fake it, not here. He’s not good.

He’s not.

He suddenly pulls away, struggling to sit up, and Alaric catches him, helping to wrangle him into position. “I can’t do this,” Damon says, a full-blown panic attack threatening to overwhelm him. “I can’t. Don’t say that. Please.”

Alaric is supposed to be untying him, but instead, he’s got his arms around Damon, easing him into an embrace which is shocking enough to curtail the panic; for now. He rests his head on Alaric’s shoulder, and says it again. “I’m not good. Stop saying it.”

Alaric says nothing; but this is a consent issue, right? Fuck, his brain is a mess. Alaric’s hand is
sifting through his hair, and it curtails his anxiety somewhat; not much. His heart is racing.

“I’m gonna kiss you,” Alaric says. “Okay?”

This is such bullshit. Alaric should be untying him and sending him on his way. But Damon nods, and Alaric pulls back, not far, tilts his head and presses their lips together. It’s definitely a memorable kiss, this one, and Damon is definitely feel better; because he forgets five times that his hands are tied, and tries to return the embrace. His tongue slips past Alaric’s, and Alaric’s teeth close over his bottom lip, which elicits the neediest sound he’s ever heard from his own throat before.

It feels so real. He doesn’t feel like he’s being paid to kiss like this, and he wishes his brain would stop reminding him he is. When it ends, he lets out an embarrassing keening noise.

Alaric holds his shoulders, and then cups his neck, thumbs running over his jaw.

“This is why we go slow,” he says. “I’m not looking for a sex toy. That’s not what submission should be about. I wanna take care of you, and you need to learn how to let me, or this isn’t gonna work out for either of us. Now, you want to be untied?”

Does he?

Fuck, why is this so complicated?

“N- no,” he says. “Just get back to the movie.”

Alaric waits for him to change his mind, but he doesn’t, and they resettle, and he lets himself float away.
A delivery, a contract, and a run in Central Park; Alaric misses Damon already.

Alaric doesn’t even notice, when Damon falls asleep. He stops responding to the touches, at some point, lets himself enjoy them, and then he’s simply limp. Alaric wonders for the fiftieth time this week what the hell he’s doing.

And then he thinks about the kiss, and he thinks about the challenge he’s set himself, and there’s really no question of stopping. Monday, they’ll sign the contract, and he’ll be committed.

It’s close to midnight, and Alaric is tired, so he wakes Damon up. Damon looks confused, and mussed, and sort of adorable, but happy enough to be wrangled into a sitting position, Alaric unties his arms, little by little, exposing the marked skin underneath, the imprint of the rope. It’s beautiful. He leaves Damon looking dazed on the couch, and fetches the massage oil, gently working it into the welts. Damon watches, calmly, doesn’t object, or insist he doesn’t need this.

Alaric doesn’t think he’s ever know someone so unaware of their own needs in all his life. But he suspects if they can stick with this, he’ll make it work, and the rewards will be…

He pushes the hair away from Damon’s eyes, and Damon blinks at him. The rewards will be more than adequate.

“All right?”

Damon nods blearily, and then remembers he’s supposed to answer questions out loud. “Yeah.”

Alaric stands up, and takes Damon’s hand, leading him away from the couch. “Do whatever you need to do, and I’ll be there in a minute,” he says, watching as Damon rubs his arms, and heads for the bedroom.

He turns off all the lights, and the television, and stands for a moment in the dark. Already used to having someone around, it will be strange, to have the place to himself for the weekend. But the days off are entirely necessary; for Damon, this is a job, and one he’s not finding easy.

Damon is slipping under the covers in tight boxer briefs when Alaric enters the bedroom. He pauses, and raises his eyebrows.

Alaric shakes his head. “No sex. Sleep,” he says, and heads to the bathroom to relieve himself, and to put on moisturizing cream (fucking air conditioning is killing him, in the building he spends most of his days in; and he’s smart enough to know he has to look after his looks. He’s not twenty-five anymore). He strips down to nude, and climbs into the bed, to pull Damon against his chest. Damon tenses momentarily, but relaxes quickly enough.

“How’re your arms?”

“Fine,” Damon says. “I hope that’s not the extent of your rope work.”
Alaric smiles, and kisses his shoulder. “It’s not.”

“Thrill me.”

“You’re fuckin’ mouthy, you know that?”

“Worst sub in history,” Damon agrees, yawning. “Goodnight.”

--

Alaric wakes to find Damon kissing his way down his chest. Initiative. Nice. “You know you’re officially off the clock, as of… half an hour ago,” he says, resting his hand on the back of Damon’s head. “Now you get the weekend to think about it, and… oh, fuck. Oh, fuck.”

Damon’s mouth was made to suck cock, apparently. He does so very well, coaxing Alaric’s half-hearted morning wood to full glory with perfect suction, and an enthusiastic tongue. Alaric watches, scratching through Damon’s hair, trying not to just fuck up into his face, because that would be bad form on or off the clock. He moans appreciatively as Damon works his lips up and down his shaft, hand still tangled in that soft, dark hair. He could let it go on forever, but he doesn’t. The moment he feels the heat coiling low in his gut, he lets go, and Damon swallows enthusiastically, cleaning up the remainder with his mouth and his tongue, before moving to collapse onto the bed again.

Alaric rides out the aftershocks, feeling entirely pleased with himself, watching Damon stare at the ceiling, looking equally content.

“What was that for?”

Damon shrugs. “Just felt like it. Is that allowed?”

“Encouraged,” Alaric says, with a chuckle. “So what are your plans for the weekend?”

Damon stills, looking suddenly flat, somehow. “Something will come up.”

They lie silently for a while, and Alaric turns his head again. “Monday night, if you’ve decided to stay, we sign the contracts. Do you think you’re going to?”

Damon gives a half smile, then returns his attention to the ceiling. “I am.”

“Why?”

There’s a long silence.

“I need the money. And… I like you. The sex is good. I don’t think you’re gonna pull anything too freaky on me.”

It’s not quite the answer Alaric was hoping for, but it’ll do for now.

“Caroline will take you home.”

Damon closes his eyes, looking suddenly deflated. “Home. Yep.”

“You ready to tell me why you need the money?”

Damon sits up. “Next week,” he says. “I’m off the clock.”
And he disappears into the shower.

--

The apartment seems very empty without him, and it’s strange, because it’s only been a couple of days. Alaric reads the newspaper and eats French toast, spends a couple of hours answering email, and stares out the window for a long time, looking out over the city that earned him his ridiculous fortune.

Emotional entanglement. It’s almost inevitable. But it can be dealt with. He’s done that before, though not at such close quarters. He is concerned that he feels a stir already. Nothing to be done for that but get on with it. Work with it, and past it. Once Damon has learned his place, knows how to behave himself, they’ll be alright. If they get that far. One month, that’s what they’ve agreed on. One month to decide whether or not this arrangement can work out.

One month. They fly by, and this one will be more pleasant than most, though he has no doubt it will be challenging, as well.

There is a buzz at the intercom. The doorman, the new guy, Lockwood. Sharp looking kid. Alaric likes him, so far. Caroline seems to like him more.

“Mr. Saltzman. A delivery for you. Two large boxes. Will I send the delivery man up, or would you prefer me to bring them myself?”

“Send him up. Hate to con him out of a tip.”

“Right away, sir.”

The delivery guy looks like he might pass out when he sees the scope of the apartment, and again when Alaric tips him. “Thank you,” he says, closing the door to the tiny vestibule.

He sets the boxes down by the couch, and unseals the first with a pen knife. Brand new equipment, a good investment. Spreader bars, several different sizes. His heart quickens at the sight of them. The thought of Damon spread out for him and waiting is overwhelming. Rope; lots of silk rope. Easier on the skin than anything else. Lots and lots of rope. Alaric bites his lip just thinking about it. A ball gag, a blindfold, good quality rubber, total blackout.

Handcuffs, leather straps with D-rings. A collar he’s not sure about yet, but bought on a whim. Damon will learn to trust him. It’s time, and attention, and the thing people forget; trust has to be earned. You gain someone’s trust by being trustworthy.

A few plugs, different sizes.

Alaric feels dizzy just thinking about it all.

He can do this. If they survive the month.

--

The afternoon is spent with the contract, drawn up discreetly by his personal lawyer. Susan Kennedy (no relation, though when she says ‘no relation’ she always somehow says it in such a way that people are convinced she’s descended directly from American royalty and playing it down). She has a square jaw and eyes such a dark brown they look black, in low light, the sort of messy curls that require an hour a morning in front of the mirror (though, for today, she has her hair swept back in an untidy knot which is somehow even more appealing). A tiny waist, thick
thighs. Very sensual body, and if Alaric didn’t rely on her in so many aspects of his professional and personal life, he might have asked her out by now.

She views this no differently to any other employment contract. The nature of the work itself might be different, but the language is the same. And she doesn’t mind working on a Saturday. Not for him.

“Do you want me to be here for the signing?”

Alaric shakes his head. “No need.”

“If you terminate before the end of the month —”

“I’ll pay it out. And whenever it ends, I’ll find him a job, somewhere. At half the pay, two year contract. Out of my personal accounts, not company funds.”

“Sounds like a good reason for him to leave.” She shrugs. “Are you sure about that? Five thousand a week is still a hell of a salary.”

Alaric thinks about it a moment, staring out the window. “The money’s the reason he’s here. I don’t want it to be the reason he stays.” He turns back. “He’s spectacular looking. I’ll find him something in PR.” Something where he doesn’t actually have to talk, preferably, since public relations generally requires a more amiable personality, and some enthusiasm about the product.

She doesn’t understand, but it really doesn’t matter. “I’ll have it couriered on Monday. It’ll be on your desk by noon.” She shakes Alaric’s hand, and gives him what might have been an envious look from anyone else, and heads for the door, in six inch stiletto pumps.

“Susan. Wait.”

She turns, eyebrows raised expectantly.

“You still work with that private investigator?”

“Of course.”

“Tell him I want a file on Damon. Everything he can find out. I don’t even know if I’ll ever read it, but I want it. In case I want it.”

She pauses, and nods. “You know,” she says, “sometimes I don’t even think you act like a rich man, Alaric. And then other days…”

Out of line. “Don’t finish that sentence.”

She nods. “You’ll have it by the end of the day on Monday, unless he runs into trouble. Have a nice weekend.” And she’s off, with her mobile office in tow, the secrets of the city in a wheeled suitcase not much bigger than a breadbox.

Alaric meticulously puts the new toys away in a wide, low chest of drawers in his bedroom which will otherwise remain locked at all times. He spends another ten minutes staring out the window at the city he’s helping to build every day, and then heads out for a god, hard run in Central Park.
Damon’s weekend sucks balls, and not in the fun way.

Damon isn’t even sure, really, why he doesn’t accept the offer for Caroline to drive him home. Probably because it would only take forty minutes or so. And he’d rather it took hours. Outside on the street, he looks back at the building, eyes sweeping up until he’s trying to work out if it’s possible to see the penthouse from here. It makes him dizzy, and he’s pretty sure he can’t see, and it’s not home. It’ll never be home.

Still. Maybe he could stay the weekend. Just bring a couple of books, a couple of bottles of bourbon, and some junk food to the guest room, promise to be quiet. Selflessly offer up his body in case of dire need.

He adjusts his overnight bag on his shoulder, and sets out for the subway station.

His apartment looks foreign. And smaller than Damon remembers. He sits on the corner of the bed, cursing the chill in the room. He breathes heavily into his hands, trying to warm them, rubbing them together. The radiator feels cold. How the hell is he supposed to sleep here tonight? Probably wearing every item of clothing he owns, wrapped in layers of blankets, maybe, maybe, but has it ever been quite this cold before?

He stares out the window, trying to think up things he can do to use up the rest of the day. How will he know if he’s ‘emotionally entangled’? Probably, he’ll get a letter from one of Alaric’s lawyers, terminating his contract.

In the laundromat, Damon feels himself shaking. Not badly. As if he’d been drinking heavily a couple of days before. He takes his time, washing everything on delicate cycle, but the knee of his favourite pants has finally worn through.

Repairing them feels pathetic, when soon, there will be money (and by the way, how soon? He can’t wait a month. Might be worth mentioning that on Monday, before he signs the contract that will essentially render his body property of Alaric Saltzman).

He scratches at the hole in the pants, and neatly deposits them in a trash bin.

When his laundry is done, and dry, and ironed, and neatly hung away, Damon wonders if it wouldn’t be a good idea just to set fire to it all. At the very least, he should find somewhere better to live.

A niggling voice in his head reminds him it’s a one month trial. Another part tells him he’s been promised a job after that, and the two voices debate whether he could actually work for someone who’d fired him as a hooker; and he lets the voices argue for a while, as he methodically cleans the apartment. Clean, smelling lemon fresh, it’s still ugly and depressing and faintly musty, as if the walls are conspiring to keep him miserable. Yeah, either way, he’s moving.

He stops at an ATM and withdraws fifty dollars. It doesn’t matter how low that takes his balance.
He reminds himself yet again that it is all going to be okay. The money is coming.

He’d like to get some lunch and sit in the park, but it’s too cold, so he sits in a deli, eats his sandwich as slowly as possible, a cup of coffee to warm him a little, and then he sets out for the hospital.

--

Stefan has been crying.

He refuses to get out of bed. He hasn’t had a shower in two days, and Damon can usually persuade him to do this, but he lies on the bed, refusing to make eye contact.

One of the nurses comes into the room. Damon glares at her briefly.

“Is he in pain? Did he hurt himself somehow?”

“We don’t think so,” she says. “But it’s hard to tell, when he won’t talk. Have you worked out what you’re going to do with him? I heard… I heard he’s leaving next month. I…”

Damon feels frustration snap through his body. “He’s not. I got a job. A good one. More than enough money. I’ll be talking to Hammond about one on one care.”

She’s silent for a few moments. “That’s great,” she says, though she doesn’t sound optimistic.

Damon grits his teeth. “Really good money,” he says. “Can you go?”

The door closes softly behind her, and Damon climbs up on the bed. Pulls Stefan into his arms, the way he did when they were kids, but it’s so different now. Stefan is so much bigger than Damon. He speaks quietly. Memories. Good moments. The day Damon taught Stefan how to throw a curve ball. throwing a football in the enormous grounds of the plantation house where they grew up.

Somewhere in there is the seven year old he was once upon a time. That’s who Damon appeals to. Simple words. Promises of cartoons and jell-o. Eventually, Stefan relents.

Two nurses escort him to the shower, and Damon has to stay in the bathroom or he gets frustrated and starts to complain, and Damon tries not to think about the fact that Stefan is nineteen years old physically and acting like a toddler, just keeps his mouth closed and his eyes on Stefan’s face and wonders how much difference this one on one care might actually make.

--

He finds a bar on the way back to his apartment, and hunches at one end of it, refusing to make eye contact with anyone but the bartender. He buys a packet of cigarettes - it’s been weeks since he did this, because honestly the money is an issue, but now - who cares. He chain smokes with his long fingers wrapped elegantly around nip after nip of the second-cheapest bourbon.

Around nine, he stumbles out the door. It’s getting busy and he doesn’t want to be pawed at. The thought of being touched by anyone at all is suddenly sickening, which is strange, because any other week he’d be determined to get laid; sex, he’s discovered, is an effective anesthetic. He finds a liquor store and buys a cheap bottle of bourbon, calculating the balance of his account. He’ll ask for some cash tomorrow when he gets back to Alaric’s apartment.

No, not tomorrow. Monday. It’s almost forty-eight hours away. Fuuuuuuuuuuck.
It’s several blocks back to his apartment, and Damon manages to avoid unscrewing the cap from the bottle until he’s safely ensconced in the ice cold air. He turns on the television, and wraps himself in layers of blankets, curling up on the couch.

The apartment tonight is no worse than it was on Wednesday. Right? He’s just adjusted his standards, quite abruptly. All Alaric’s fault. What’s he doing right now? Probably being hand-fed oysters by the weekend guy.

It’s a weird and horrible image.

The bottle is more than half empty when Damon falls asleep, still wrapped up tight, television still murmuring in the background, and a distinct lump in his throat.

Sunday is no better. By Sunday afternoon, Damon is starting to wonder what might be the worst thing that could happen, if he showed up at the apartment, asked to spend the night in the guest room. Wishing he had asked for Alaric’s cell number. Wondering if there is any chance Kelly would give it to him. He could go to the club, sweet talk her. Although it would be faster to go straight to Alaric’s.

He checks the time.

Two o’clock in the afternoon.

He sighs, and wraps the blankets tighter, and waits it out.
When Alaric arrives home from work close to seven thirty on Monday, it is with a sense of anticipation and a smile on his face. When the elevator door opens, he steps into the apartment, ancient leather satchel dangling from one hand (it’s not the most professional looking briefcase. He usually carries a boxy black one, but this has the contract in it, and it feels right to carry it in something more personal), the tails of his woolen coat trailing behind him.

The apartment is extremely warm, and Damon is taking up the least amount of space possible in the corner of the couch, staring out the window into the dark night. Lights down low in the room. Feet bare, which is strangely appealing, although perhaps not in quite the way Alaric has been anticipating. He’s wearing a knitted sweater which is probably just a little too big for him.

He turns to meet Alaric’s eyes, slowly, long eyelashes batting once.

“Hi, honey,” he says. “You’re home.”

Alaric has to bite back a smile. “Honey?”

Damon shrugs. “I told you I wasn’t good at this. But I ordered dinner, so don’t fire me yet.”

“Initiative,” Alaric says, slipping his coat off over his shoulders and hanging it on the coat rack. “I’ll go and take a shower. It’s warm in here.”

Damon tightens his arms around his knees, and Alaric frowns, crossing the room to lay a hand over his forehead. “You’re not sick, are you?”


Oh, they have so far to go. Alaric swoops to kiss Damon’s temple anyway, and heads off to take a shower. A very long one. He feels terrible, some days. As though every decision he makes professionally leaves a layer of grime on his body. By the time he’s much more casually dressed in jeans and a v-neck sweater (and feeling something close to human) Damon is arranging plates of pasta on the table.

Pasta. It’s been a while. Damon has that cautious, questioning expression on his face again. Alaric gives him a soft grin, and a nod, and pours himself a tall glass of the mineral mater on the table.

“You look uncomfortable,” he says. “Speak. What’s on your mind.”

Damon does the thing where he tries to glare, and say nothing, a technique which has probably worked well for him for his entire life. Doesn’t cut it in here. Still, he’s hesitant.

“Difficult weekend.”
“Cold apartment.”
“… yes.”
“Something else.”
“I’m eating.”
Yeah, of course, and besides, he hasn’t signed his contract, yet. Alaric lifts his fork, and they eat silently.
“I was half expecting you to hand feed me.”
Alaric chuckles. “That’s why the pasta? Tryin’ to put me off? Doesn’t appeal, much. Is that something you like? I’m always open to trying new things.”
Damon shakes his head, and Alaric laughs again. “We’ll go through your contract, tonight. Sign, if you’re signing. And take it easy.”
Damon actually looks disappointed. Alaric promises himself he will learn to recognize the expressions on his face; until he gets used to talking when he’s expected to, those twitches and flashes will have to serve in place of more direct communication. It’s okay. Alaric is reasonably patient.
“Do you need anything?”
A shake of his head which is not exactly convincing, and definitely not a verbalized answer, but Alaric elects to let it go for now.
Damon clears the plates away without being asked to, while Alaric sets out the contract, and lays a pen out alongside it. Damon sits beside him, arms crossed over his knees. He looks better. Sort of. Still looks cold in a way that suggests it has seeped into his bones. Pity; Alaric had intended to have him lounge around naked tonight. Maybe tomorrow.
“Would you rather read it yourself, or do you want me to take you through…?” It’s huge.
Damon narrows his eyes. “I can read.”
Alaric stands, rolling his eyes, heading to the bar to pour himself a bourbon. He watches for a few minutes as Damon struggles through the first couple of pages, and then sighs heavily, sitting down. “So?”
Damon slumps. “Fine. Show me.”
Alaric takes him to the relevant pages. His hours, his pay, termination of contract. “This is the base salary. This is your tax rate, okay, so this is how much you actually get paid. If this doesn’t work out, you have a job at half the salary for at least two years. Is that enough?”
Damon stills, but he’s doing calculations in his head. “Yeah,” he says, though he doesn’t sound convinced. Time Alaric knew what he was spending this much money on. He thinks about the second file still tucked in his briefcase, Damon’s life summed up in a surprising thick envelope. Still sealed. For now.
“Okay. Responsibilities,” he says. “This part of the contract is sealed. Show the outermost limits of what we will do. Are you comfortable with it all? If you’re not, or if you change your mind, I can
always scale back as we go, but I’d rather you were upfront now…”

Without hesitation, Damon signs the bottom corner of the page.

“Here, too.” Alaric points next to the first line. “I want that acknowledged separately. If I ask you if you need anything, you answer, and you answer honestly.” He can hear Damon’s eyes roll as he initials it.

It all takes well over an hour to go through every section so Damon doesn’t wonder later if he’s agreed to be buried in the foundation of the city’s next great high rise if it all goes south, but even at the end, he looks hesitant.

“What about days?” he asks.

“They’re your own. I’d rather you didn’t do anything that wears you out to much to perform when you’re needed…”

“No. I mean. Can I stay here?”

Alaric frowns. “You would want to?”

“Don’t make a big deal.” Damon pushes the pen aside. “I told you, my apartment’s cold. It doesn’t matter.”

“It obviously matters, and you’re welcome to stay here through the day,” Alaric says, slipping one copy of the contract into an envelope and handing it back to Damon. “Just show me the usual respect for priv- actually, you know what? I’ll keep my office door locked.” Damon leans back against the couch, with a smug, slow smile on his face.

“So what are we doing tonight?”

Alaric shakes his head. “Nothing,” he says. “Cuddling right here because it’s a Monday, and I like to pace myself.”

“Cuddling. Big bad Dom,” Damon says, but he doesn’t resist when Alaric turns on the television and pulls him against his chest, reminding himself over and over, this is a process.

--

Each night, Alaric steps it up, just a notch. They have sex on Tuesday night, just ordinary sex; Damon looks stressed, initially, as if he’s anticipating the carpet being pulled out from underneath him, but Alaric actually learns what his face looks like when he comes; the very memorable combination of ecstatic and then bone-lazy, after a brief moment when he looks to be in serious pain. Deeply satisfying.

Alaric holds him until they’re both fast asleep, and sneaks away on Wednesday morning, unwilling to wake him up. The sex-hair is glorious, and the lines that decorate his forehead, the deep worry, are completely gone. Alaric kisses the divot at the base of Damon’s spine before he slips out the door.

Wednesday night, Alaric makes it home before Damon is in the apartment. For no reason he can think of, Alaric had completely failed to mention the gyms inside the apartment block; but with membership arranged (remarkably easy to do when you own the penthouse, and developed the property) Damon had looked to be quite pleased to have somewhere safe (and more significantly, warm) to work out. He arrives at the top floor dripping sweat and alarmed to find Alaric sitting on
the couch; his eyes seek the ornate wall clock on the dividing wall.

Alaric raises a hand. “You’re not late. Go and take a shower.”

Damon nods, without saying a word, hunching slightly as he heads for the bathroom.

“Damon. Dry your hair properly.”

“Yessir,” he calls over his shoulder.

“And come back naked.” Alaric reaches for the remote, and tries not to react, as Damon pauses and turns back. “Please,” he finishes.

Damon grins, and raises his eyebrows, and comes back half an hour later looking every inch lickable, confident and pleased with himself. “One of these days,” he says, “you’ll ask me for that strip tease.”

“Maybe I will. Come here,” Alaric says. “I have a present for you.”

Damon struts to the couch. He doesn’t exactly have the submissive posture down, yet, but he’ll get there. He’s too cocky. Alaric pulls out a pair of leather cuffs. Very soft leather, with a D-ring attached to each. Damon perches on the edge of the couch, and holds out his wrists, and Alaric buckles them on.

“Too tight?”

Damon flexes his wrists. “Nope.”

Alaric takes a small length of chain, and latches one end to each D-ring. About three inches. He meets Damon’s eyes, and smiles. “Are you warm enough?”

“No.”

Alaric nods. “You’re gettin’ better at that.” He stands and walks to the console on the dividing wall. Lights go down, heat comes up. Just a few degrees. It’ll be warm soon.

Damon hasn’t moved from his place on the couch. “Let me guess. We’re watching television again.”

“No television,” Alaric says, taking his seat again. “C’mere.”

Damon straddles Alaric’s hips, relaxing against him; as much as he can, anyway, can’t be entirely comfortable, but that’s partly the point. Damon is strong, beautiful to look at. Nice to touch. More muscular than he looks when he’s fully dressed, particularly his arms.

After a moment he loops his arms loosely around Alaric’s neck, hands resting close together on the couch behind Alaric’s head.

“This is a little weird,” he says, holding Alaric’s eyes.

“You think so?”

“Yep. You can do whatever you want to me, and you just want to sit around naked cuddling. Definitely weird.”

“I told you. I’m getting you used to me,” Alaric says, running his hands over Damon’s back.
“Besides, tomorrow night will be intense. So. Rest up,” he finishes, adjusting Damon’s body until he is almost slumped, cheek on Alaric’s shoulder.

“Do I get a preview, or are you going to surprise me?”

“I’ll give you a hint, if you like.”

“Thrill me.”

“I bought a brand new set of spreader bars. And I plan to spend hours with them.”

He mistakes the new tension in Damon’s body, for a moment, until Damon turns his head and nestles his face into Alaric’s neck, and kisses the skin he finds under his mouth. “How long?”

“I bought a range.”

Damon shivers, and sits up, and his eyes are dark, and his cock is starting to swell, pressing into Alaric’s stomach. “You like that.”

“Just don’t like to think of you not getting your money’s worth. Speaking of…”

“Yes?”

“I’m broke,” Damon says, bluntly. “When do I…”

“I’ll give you some cash in the morning. Your first month’s pay should go in by close of business. That okay? Relax,” he says, but Damon struggles, now, forcing himself back into position.

“Fine. And go get the spreader bars. What’s wrong with now? Now suits me.”

“Eager little thing.”

“Please, I’m not little.”

“No. But I think I want to fuck you, nice and slow, right here, in this position. Go get the lube.”

Damon’s knees seem to want to give out on him, but he struggles to his feet, and disappears to the bedroom, depositing the tube by Alaric’s side. Alaric has taken the opportunity to take his clothes off, dumping them in a haphazard pile by the couch.

“On your knees,” he says, fondly, reaching to stroke Damon’s face, cock beginning to rouse. Half-mast. Not for long. Damon complies, awkwardly; it would be easier to manage with his hands freer, but once he is settled between Alaric’s legs, he decides to get creative, swipes his lips along the inside of Alaric’s thigh. Alaric murmurs in response.

“Give me your wrists.”

Damon sits up, looking surprised, but understands when Alaric unclips the cuffs and re-clips them behind Damon’s back. He shrugs, and returns to his task, but as Alaric watches, he seems to forget five times that he can’t move his arms far.

He licks a messy stripe up Alaric’s cock, a thick string of saliva dangling from his already swollen lip, and Alaric reaches to rough his hair encouragingly. It’s delicious, watching Damon struggle to find the right angle to take him deeper, and Alaric loves it, loves watching him try.

“So good,” he says. “You’re so good to me.”
Damon flinches at the words, but he doesn’t stop, and Alaric’s eyes roll into the back of his head as Damon shifts again, throat opening around Alaric’s considerable length and girth, completely hard now, hard as nails, and Alaric pushes gently against the back of his head, before catching Damon’s chin, pushing him away.

“Turn around,” he says, and it takes Damon a moment to understand; his eyes are wide and dark and a little shocky. He stumbles as he moves, and Alaric helps him, easing him down until his ass is in the air, and his cheek rests against the soft carpet. He dribbles a little lube over Damon’s hole, relishing the moment of shock as the cold pulls Damon out of his near stupor.

“You get yourself ready,” he says. “I’m gonna watch.”

“Better than TV,” Damon slurs, shifting himself, struggling to manage with his body in this strange position.

“Do you need help?”

“No.”

Alaric stays where he is, slowly stroking himself - there’s no way he’s coming, not yet - and watches, as Damon simultaneously tries to pull away from the intrusion of his own fingers, and press further into himself. It’s fucking fantastic to watch. One finger, then two, then three, working in and out. Damon makes strange, needy groaning noises, and they are eaten by the carpet.

“That’s enough,” Alaric says, and he stands up to help Damon get to his feet, and settled back onto the couch. Damon lowers himself clumsily – keeps trying to use his hands, and he can’t, but Alaric guides him, and he sinks himself down on Alaric’s cock.

Alaric groans loudly. Feels fucking fantastic, hot and wet. Yes, this’ll do for tonight.

“Can’t balance,” Damon complains, and Alaric shushes him.

“Lean against me. I gotcha.”

And Damon leans, still awkward, as Alaric’s hips start to move almost of their own accord. Damon mumbles something.

“Louder,” Alaric says. Has to be loud to be heard over the rush of blood in his ears.

“I’d rather be able to hold you,” Damon says, against his neck.

Since he’s actually asked for something for once, Alaric pauses, and reaches around to unclip the chain, shifting lower on the couch as he does it. Damon wraps his arms around him, and triples the enthusiasm, which is fantastic. They won’t last long, but Alaric doesn’t care, because Damon’s hands are suddenly everywhere – and they’re kissing, and there’s a rich fondness to it. Alaric runs his fingers through Damon’s hair, grips a good handful, and abruptly pulls it, jerking him back and exposing his neck, which is begging to be nuzzled.

“Fuck, Ric…”

Apparently hair-pulling is a turnon. Good to know. Damon comes spectacularly, all over Alaric’s stomach, and Alaric only last a dozen more thrusts before he follows suit.

The couch will need cleaning tomorrow. Oh well.
Alaric eases Damon back into his arms.

“So good to me,” he murmurs, and Damon tenses, but he doesn’t object, just lets Alaric run his hands over his back.
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

After a slow week of easing onto their new working relationship, Friday night gets intense.
Warnings for the chapter; heavy bondage, use of spreader bars, an intense D/s dynamic.

On Friday, Damon wakes alone. Ass aching a little, but it’s a good ache, and it’s a reminder, and he stretches himself out on the bed, enjoying the peace and quiet. He doesn’t want to think about going back to the apartment tomorrow; the ten minutes he spent there on Wednesday changing clean clothes for dirty were depressing enough. He yawns, and wonders if he could somehow soundproof the other bedroom. Hide there all weekend, unseen. This apartment is enormous. Maybe there’s another bedroom, somewhere, up the spiral staircase, where Alaric’s home office is.

After a long time soaking in a bubble bath (shut up. He loves a bubble bath) he finds the makings of breakfast in the fridge, and makes himself a bacon and egg sandwich.

On the table is an envelope with a thousand dollars in it. “Yes,” he says, under his breath. Priority; clothes? Clothes. And lunch in a decent restaurant. And a haircut, and a professional shave, because he misses that. He contemplates going to see Stefan, but decides against it. Tomorrow. Today he plans to spend in keen anticipation of actually sceneing tonight, wondering what it will entail, and whether he can keep himself calm enough to not fuck up and get himself fired.

He’s looking forward to it. It’s afterwards that he’s dreading. Alaric’s hands soothing him, he can handle, sort of, but he still can’t bear to hear that he’s good. He’s not. He’s fucked up so spectacularly for so many years, and without selling his ass, he can’t even provide for the only family he has left; his brother, locked up in a hospital, hardly able to remember who he is.

He buys a couple of pairs of decent pants, and three new shirts, and flirts heavily with the flustered-looking girl in the menswear store who has the blissful good fortune of catching Damon shirtless. Lucky girl, made her whole month, probably. He almost falls asleep as the hairdresser’s apprentice washes his hair (the guy is tall, and built, and has enormous hands, and Damon lets himself imagine it’s Alaric, and wonders; if he asked, would Alaric wash his hair?

… bet he would. The guys has some very odd kinks. And he’s got that whole ‘ask and ye shall receive’ philosophy. Problem is Damon doesn’t even know how he’d ask.)

With his hair cut back into style, and his face the cleanest shaven it’s been for months, he finds a restaurant, and eats alone at a table by the window, watching the world go by.

When he gets home –

(It’s not home.)

When he gets back to the apartment, he works out in the gym for an hour and a half, thoroughly
enjoying the adrenaline, and wondering if flooding his body with endorphins now might stop him from spacing out later.

Probably won’t happen. That spike of fear he always gets, that something might go wrong, that he might get hurt… that will stop it. Right?

He takes a long shower, afterwards, and settles in his favorite corner of the couch with a book, to wait out the rest of the day.

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Alaric arrives home a little after seven, and Damon sets the book aside. “Hi, honey,” he says. “You’re home.”

Alaric grins that lazy grin that Damon is beginning to be too fond of, and shakes his head. “That’s already gettin’ old,” he says. “I’m goin’ for a shower. You organize dinner.”

“What do you want?”

Alaric leans over the couch to kiss Damon’s temple. That still seems weird, to Damon, but he’s getting used to it.

“Surprise me.” He pauses. “You got your hair cut.”

“I’ve got a sugar daddy to impress.”

Alaric’s lip quirks, and he runs a big hand over Damon’s very smooth cheek, but he says nothing more, just heads off to shower.

Damon leafs through a pile of takeaway brochures, wondering what will arrive fastest, and be easiest to eat quickly. He sighs, and orders Chinese, because Alaric never wants to rush things.

--

They’ve already settled into a rhythm over dinner in the evenings, talking quietly about things of no import. Afterwards, Damon rinses the dishes and puts them in the dishwasher. He never sees anyone run the thing or put the dishes away, but Alaric seems to have an invisible team of pixies who do all of that for him, because the kitchen is always immaculate. Not that Damon has ever seen a bowl of milk put out, and from memory, that’s how you attract pixies… or is it honey? Still, this seems the most plausible explanation.

He hears music build. Quiet, probably in the bedroom, and his heart speeds up suddenly. He turns, and Alaric is waiting near the counter.

“Music,” Damon comments.

“Helps you remember time’s passin’,” Alaric says, with a nod.

“No television tonight.”

“No. Are you ready? Need a shower?”

Damon shakes his head, and remembers he’s supposed to speak, and he says “No, I showered this afternoon.”

Alaric beckons him with one finger, and Damon assumes he’s going to follow him to the bedroom,
but instead he stops him, hands firmly on his hips.

“Remember your safe word.”

“It’s an easy one to remember. That’s why I picked it. Peanuts. Sort of cute, too, and unlikely to come up naturally in your average dirty talk.” Okay, it’s mouthy, he’s being inappropriate. But he’s feeling horribly insecure all of a sudden. He lets himself imagine rolling around on the floor on a huge pile of cash, and wonders if Alaric was always this tall.

Alaric waits another moment, and Damon wants to drag him off – so they can get started, or so he can get it over with, he’s really not sure. Could be a little of both. His body feels tense, anticipatory, but he holds Alaric’s gaze, and melts against his body when Alaric leans to kiss him. Oh, he kisses well. Thorough, and needy, and as long as he’s not talking, it’s perfect.

“Let’s go,” he says, turning them around, guiding Damon towards the bedroom.

Damon doesn’t speak, not when Alaric unbuttons his shirt; something in his expression tells him Alaric’s noticed it’s new, but has elected not to mention it. He feels mildly buzzed, mildly uncomfortable as he pushes his jeans over his hips, and sets them aside with the shirt. Boxers next, and he sort of wishes Alaric would take something off as well, just to even the playing field a bit; but that’s up to him.

He wants the playing field totally skewed, and he’s signed up to pay Damon ten thousand bucks a week to let him do just that.

Alaric walks a slow circle around him, admiring the view. Damon has never felt so seen, and he feels a slight tremor.

“You could take a picture,” he says. “It’ll last longer. Cost you extra, but I know you’re good for —”


Damon shivers, and his cock finally starts taking an interest in the proceedings, bobbing at half mast. He forces himself to relax.

Alaric opens a deep drawer Damon has never registered before in a tallboy that is either extremely old and well-preserved (it really doesn’t fit the rest of the furniture in here at all) or designed to look that way. He pulls out a very large pair of cuffs, like the ones Damon was wearing on his wrists the other night, wide leather, nicely lined for comfort, each with a D-ring embedded in the side. “Spread your legs a little further apart.”

He kneels at Damon’s feet, and fits the first one just about Damon’s left knee, buckling it precisely. “Too tight?”

Damon says, “No.”

Satisfied, Alaric does the other, and presses a nearly worshipful kiss to the side of Damon’s knee. Damon lets out a needy groan, and only barely resists the urge to put his hand in Alaric’s hair. But the urge is quelled by Alaric returning to the drawer, and coming back with a smaller set of cuffs for his ankles.

“Beautiful,” he murmurs, when he has them both attached, and has checked the fit, and Damon has to bite back a smart comment.
When he stands again, he closes his hand around Damon’s cock, barely long enough for a tease, and kisses Damon’s cheek. “Alright?”

Damon says, “Yes,” but the truth is even though they’ve barely started, he’s beginning to feel a little spacy.

“Last, but not least.” The pair for his wrists. He flexes; they’re fine. He’s not going to get gangrene and end up handless (though imagine the settlement from that; Alaric would support him and Stefan for the rest of their lives, just so Damon would keep his mouth shut).

“Where do you want me?”

“Lie down. Head on the pillow.”

Easy. Cushy. Resisting the urge to drape himself like a pin-up girl, Damon lies where he’s been told to, dragging one pillow into the center so he’s not resting his head between them, and then he sees it.

A chain, hanging from the ceiling.

He blinks, once, twice. “Was that always there?”

Alaric sits on the edge of the bed. “The hook was always there. Not the chain. Nervous?”

Damon thinks about it; it’s never occurred to him that Alaric might have scened in this bed before, and he feels suddenly, horribly jealous, and judged, and wonders how long the last one worked out for. He wants to ask. He wants details, and a photograph, and a report card, and an annotated comparison of the two of them. His stomach twists.

“No,” he says, and holds his wrists out. He’s not expecting Alaric to kiss his palm. Doesn’t mean he doesn’t like it. He shivers again.

“You keep shiverin’. Are you warm enough?”

“Yeah, I… not why I was shivering.”

Alaric nods, and runs his hand down Damon’s cheek, over his chest, down to his hip. Traces a line down the vee of muscle, palms his cock, his balls.

“Are you going to fuck me tonight? Or is this just another one of your tiny steps?”

“That’s the plan. Unless something goes wrong.”

“What could…” And then Damon remembers crying in the club, and shuts his mouth.

Alaric returns to the drawer with two spreader bars. They look to be a little long, but he’ll cope. The first is attached to the cuffs above his knees. There’s very little movement when he tests them. The second goes between his ankles. It’s impossible not to notice the D-ring smack in the center of the thing. A chain is looped between his wrists, and then Alaric sits on the edge of the bed again.

“Alright?” He has a little smile Damon sort of wants to lick off his face. “I’ll let you adjust.”

“Adjust to what?”

“The exposure.”
Whatever. Damon is an exhibitionist from way back. It doesn’t bother him at all. He lets his hands rest on his chest, and stares at the chain. Exposure. What does it really mean, anyway? He’s naked. He’s also an aficionado of one night stands, all of which are spent thoroughly naked, not to mention the club. And Alaric has seen him naked plenty, now. He’s not bothered.

This is nothing.

Until Alaric stands by the side of the bed, for about five minutes, watching him. Ten minutes. Jesus fucking Christ, how long has it been?

It starts as a mild, itching discomfort between his shoulder blades. This would be a hell of a lot easier if he was being spit-roasted by a pair of Japanese businessmen in leather, and waiting for a riding crop across the thigh. Why does Alaric have to be so weird about everything? Before long, it’s unbearable, and he starts to move, tries to close his legs, forgets he can’t.

“Shit,” he mutters, entire body twitching once, suddenly, as if he’s trying to jump out of his skin. “I can’t…”

“You’re okay,” Alaric says. “You’re safe.”

Oh, shut the fuck up. For a moment, Damon thinks he might safeword out, or else have some sort of psychotic break, and then there’s a hand on his cheek, and Alaric is kissing him again.

Damon finds himself embarrassingly eager, pressing into the kiss, starving for the touch. Alaric pulls away just far enough to speak, and his eyes are the darkest Damon has ever seen them.

“Submission isn’t about bracing for the worst,” he says. “It’s about trusting me to look after you. You’re always safe here. Always. You can always give me your safe word and I’ll have you out of restraints in minutes. Do you hear me?”

Damon wants to believe it. He nods. He actually gets away with nodding. He still feels horribly exposed, and suddenly wonders if Alaric would ever bring a bunch of friends around to play pass-the-gimp, but no, actually, he really can’t imagine that. He forces himself to relax, and lets his eyes close, trusting Alaric’s hands.

“Pull your feet up. Draw back from your knees.”

He feels Alaric helping, pushing against the bar. His cock aches, his balls ache, and his muscles are beginning to complain. Only faintly. He feels his wrists clipped to the bar between his ankles, and when he opens his eyes, the chain dangling from the ceiling. He has almost no movement available anywhere. He tests it, but not much. Mostly, he’s thinking that his ass is rolled back up off the bed, winking obscenely, if Alaric is looking.

“Are you comfortable enough?”

Strangely, the answer is “Yes.” He thinks about it another moment. It’s good. He’s acutely aware of every part of his body, every straining muscle, every place where his body is touching the bed. “I assume I’m not going to be here for too long.” He hopes it doesn’t sound too much like a complaint.

“Not tonight.”

Again, there is that strange thrill of uncertainty, and desire. Not tonight. Every time Alaric plays some variation on that theme, Damon feels a spike of lust, and a bone-deep fear.
He whimpers as Alaric runs his hands over the backs of his thighs, and punches out some reckless variation on ‘fuck yes’ when he feels a tongue make its way across the pale, sensitive skin, and then there is nothing. And he can’t see a damn thing, because his arms and legs are in the way.

Panicky. “Ric.”

“I’m here.” A zipper, and the reassuring thud of shoes landing on very expensive carpet. Okay, he’s okay. He’s fine. When Alaric moves to the head of the bed and touches his cheek again, he relaxes muscles he hadn’t even known were tense. “Alright? If you want to safeword out –”

He could.

Alaric keeps saying this is a process. Maybe he’s done enough for tonight. But. No.

“No. I’m alright.”

“And you haven’t mouthed off at me since I got the cuffs on. Must be a record.” He says it fondly, though. “I’d like to blindfold you. Is that alright?”

No, no, it’s not, that’s too much. Can he actually say that, though? Alaric says all the time, consent is fundamental, blah blah blah like he’s with the Ad Council, but Damon doesn’t quite trust it. When he manages to say, in a voice that sounds like it’s coming from a long, long way away, “I’d rather you didn’t,” the kiss on the corner of his mouth is a relief.

“Another time.” And then hands, again, disorienting, and sometimes it could almost be two sets, and his eyes are closed, and his skin is hot and flushed, and his stomach is sticky with pre-come. He murmurs, again, head rolling back on his shoulders. It’s too difficult. It’s all too fucking hard, this near-worship of a body used to debasement.

The last thing Damon is expecting is Alaric’s mouth against his hole. He groans obscenely, trying to press into Alaric’s face, as Alaric licks messy and wet and then presses the point of his tongue against Damon’s barely-yielding sphincter. He’s always loved this, but no Dom he’s ever worked for as ever shown much interest in his own pleasure, and it’s remarkably difficult to convince someone who’s looking for one night of mind-numbing bliss to get anywhere quite this intimate. He forgets five times that he can’t move his hands, so desperate he is to get them on Alaric’s head, but eventually, he gives in to the sensation, realizing his entire body and letting his head loll on the pillow again.

It’s devastating when it’s over, except that the mouth is replaced by a hand, two slick fingers pressing and probing into him. He rocks against the fingers, or tries, and grits his teeth, and moans, a pathetic, reedy sound. Alaric’s answering chuckle makes him smile, when from anyone else it would have upset him horribly.

“You’re doing so well,” he says, and Damon barely flinches. “So good to me.” Damon lets his eyes close – he can barely participate anyway, might as well hang here (HA. Hang.) and enjoy it. When Alaric removes his fingers, and starts pushing his huge cock past the beautifully abused ring of muscle, Damon has to bite his cheek.

It’s that almost-brutal pace again, but this time, it’s a lot harder to take; he can’t brace, he can’t push back, all he can do is trust Alaric’s hands on his hips, pulling and pushing, to keep him participating. He opens his eyes, and stares at the chain, he closes them and focuses on the fireworks; and his muscles scream. That’s all there is.

He feels tears pour from each eye, and wonders distantly why that’s happening. He’s not sad. He’s
a really long way from his body, some curl of smoke hovering somewhere in the room, and suddenly he feels Alaric’s hips stutter, his entire body go rigid as he comes.

He doesn’t pull out. He just stays where he is, resting his forehead against one of Damon’s legs, and kisses it.

“Jesus Christ, Damon,” he says, and nothing else.

Damon closes his eyes, and floats the rest of the way away.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Alaric takes his time, easing Damon out of subspace, and Damon is beginning to get the hang of it. Later, lines begin to blur.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Removing the restraints is as much a ritual as putting them on; or so Alaric has always thought. It’s just harder, with a body so thoroughly flooded with endorphins. But Damon is past the point of discomfort, so he busies himself.

He holds the bar between his ankles as he unclips the chain, settling Damon against the bed again, hands resting against his chest. He touches Damon’s cheek.

“All right?”

Damon opens his eyes, and he’s so far under he can’t respond. A trail of tears runs from each eye, but he isn’t sobbing, so there was some sort of emotional release. Maybe he needed this as badly as Alaric did. Alaric kisses the corner of his mouth again, shifts to his jaw, holding his face in one hand. His throat, that spot beneath Damon’s ear that makes him go all hazy.

“You did so beautifully.” Alaric’s voice is low, husky, unusual for him. Feels strange. He unclips the bars, one at a time, and returns them to the drawer. Damon doesn’t move until the cuffs are gone as well, and then he only rolls onto his side.

He doesn’t even object when Alaric returns from the bathroom with a warm, wet hand towel to clean him up with. Just lies there, limp. Alaric can’t help but smile; maybe he’s getting it. For a moment, he admires the stretched-out hole, and considers giving Damon a plug, nice wide one, holding him open until the morning.

Next time, he tells himself, because they went an awfully long way tonight, and the last thing he wants to do is scare the guy off. In the bathroom, he uses mouthwash, because the taste of ass is one thing when you’re flooded with hormones, and another thing entirely in the morning, and besides, he wants to kiss Damon’s mouth again, thoroughly, and it seems a little unfair.

He climbs onto the bed, and pulls Damon across his body, pulls the blanket up over them both. Damon wraps his arms around Alaric’s waist, burrowing into his chest, and Alaric kisses the top of his head, and settles in to wait. He runs his hand from Damon’s ass to his neck, slow and soothing, over and over, until Damon appears to have turned into a rag doll, if rag dolls can purr.

“You did so well,” he says, and Damon doesn’t even object. “So good to me. You just let go.”

This is the part Alaric loves the best: having driven someone so far down into subspace, drawing them back out again makes him feel powerful in a way he’s never been able to explain satisfactorily to himself. Damon clinging to his body like this… it’s addictive, it’s a drug. He loves
it. He tangles the fingers of his free hand with Damon’s, and closes his eyes. He won’t sleep, yet. Not until Damon is back. So it’s hands, and flesh, and light touches, for as long as it takes.

Sometime close to two in the morning, Damon rouses. Alaric has been dozing, on and off, but mostly just watching and waiting. Damon yawns, and stretches, and he looks adorable with his hair all mussed and his eyes still so dark. Gorgeous. Quite unexpectedly, he straddles Alaric’s body, hands pressed against his chest.

“How are you?”

Damon blinks slowly. “Spacey as fuck.”

“Is that good or bad?”

“It’s good,” Damon admits, but he’s horny, too, grinding down against Alaric’s cock.

Alaric puts one hand behind his head, and circles Damon’s wrist with his other hand. “Need something?”

He nods. “Need to come.”

Maybe fifteen minutes later, he does, halfway down Alaric’s throat, with his hands gripping the slats in the headboard, and his spine arching up beautifully off the bed. It’s been a very good night all around.

--

In the morning they shower together, slow, exploratory, with no power dynamics to make it something it isn’t. Lazy sex, just rubbing against each other under the hot water. Damon is like a seal, slippery in Alaric’s arms. It’s nice. He seems to be in some discomfort; sort of inevitable. There’s some bruising, but it’s not too bad. His inner thighs, mostly. “You feeling okay?” Alaric asks, scrubbing Damon’s back. “Not too sore?”

“Feel a bit used up. Not bad.” And Alaric kisses his neck, and pulls him close, and sort of loves him, a bit, which is not the same as emotional entanglement, so it’s fine.

A long, slow breakfast with the paper, and Alaric doesn’t even have the heart to point out that Damon is off the clock; he must realize. Maybe he doesn’t have plans.

“So what’s on for the weekend?”

Damon shrugs. “Nothing much.” His eyes tell a different story. It’s okay. Not Alaric’s business. He puts his elbows on the table, and leans forward.

“Listen. Are you ready to tell me what you need the money for?” The file is still unopened, sitting in a locked drawer in his locked office.

Damon points to his bare wrist. “I’m off the clock. Ask me next week.” But he grins, stuffing toast in his mouth. Alaric reaches across the table to tap his wrist affectionately, and returns to the paper.

There’s a brief kiss before Damon swans out the door, and Alaric lets his mind run a reel of everything they did last night, a high definition, perfectly rendered and exquisite film, just for a few moments before he says goodbye.

--
It’s an aimless sort of weekend, which is good. Alaric works out, calls his parents, promises he’ll be home for Christmas, since he didn’t make it for thanksgiving. They don’t need the reassurance. He just needs to give it to them. He pokes around the apartment, he dozes on the couch, he wonders if it’s a bit too much, sending Damon away after a scene that intense, and maybe they should renegotiate the days? He sits in his office, with the unopened envelope in front of him on the desk, and locks it back up in the filing cabinet, because in the end, all that matters is it’s not drugs, it’s not illegal, and a man’s business should be his business.

Saturday night, he has dinner with friends.

In typical fashion, they are a party of seven, at Alaric’s favorite restaurant. Three couples, and himself. Meredith is hugely pregnant, and though she’s glowing like a goddamn fairy of some kind she’s still bitter about the lack of unpasteurized cheese and raw fish and wine in her life, and promising the second the kid is born, she expects someone to be there with a bottle of wine and a bendy straw.

"Shut up," she says, when Alaric opens her mouth. "Shut up. I’ll feed the kid formula."

"Wasn’t gonna say a… I wasn’t!" he argues. Last thing he’s going to have an opinion on is how someone else should do their kid-wrangling. "Just wondering what day, that’s all."

"Couple of days before Christmas," she says, settling back against her husband’s arm. And they look so happy, and briefly, Alaric wonders what it would be like if he brought Damon here, if they met him. What would they say? We met at that BDSM Club in Manhattan? Please.

"Oh, my god," Meredith says, frowning at him. "You’re…"

"What?"

"You got laid."

What’s more offensive, the fact she felt the need to comment at all, or the fact that she looks so fucking incredulous? He rolls his eyes. "Don’t get excited. It’s really not that difficult."

And she wants to say, who was it? Was it more than once? Who is it? Are you seeing someone? But she’ll get the same answer she’s been getting for five years, since their brief and aborted attempt to date seriously. He just doesn’t have time for that sort of entanglement. His career comes first. So she doesn’t even try. And she doesn’t take him aside later on to tell him if he doesn’t do something about his own happiness, he’ll wake up and discover he’s seventy, and still alone, and making friends out of money and papier-mâché glue.

"You look happy," she says instead. "Content."

"Just drunk," he promises, and the night rolls on without incident.

--

Alaric aims to establish a pattern, and the next week starts much the same as the previous one did. Gentle. Maybe gentler, because Damon looks tired, and sort of miserable. Alaric stretches out on the chaise longue to read, and Damon just drapes himself across his body, arms around his waist. Though it’s warm in the apartment, he’s wearing three layers of clothing, which seems odd, and his cheeks won’t seem to warm up.

"Want me to turn the heating up?"
“Will that involve moving?”

Alaric thinks. “Only for a few seconds.”

“Forget it, then.”

“Then I’m pouring a bath, because you’re freezing.”

“Better be bubbles,” Damon says groggily, and it earns him a swat on the back of the thigh.

Tuesday is Italian food, a bottle of Australian Pinot Noir, and Damon with his wrists and ankles cuffed, stark naked, resting in Alaric’s arms in front of the television while Alaric gives him the slowest and most torturous hand job in the history of hand jobs, and afterwards, wrapped in a blanket, he purrs and purrs until Alaric seriously reconsidered the collar.

Wednesday, Alaric is in a shitty mood, and doesn’t get home until nine.

“You can have Friday night off,” he snarls. “Or… I don’t care, I’ll be home by midnight, but I’ll be in a really bad mood, and probably not going to want to do anything remotely… entertaining.”

“Hi honey,” Damon says, drily. “You’re home. Hungry?”

Alaric shakes his head, and drops onto the couch. Desperate for a shower, but he’s held fast by irritability. His suit feels stifling, but he doesn’t want to move. He scratches his forehead. “I ate. Pour me a drink, sweetheart?”

Damon snickers, but he does as he’s told, and Alaric takes the opportunity to enjoy the sight of that gorgeous ass in those ridiculous jeans, and he decides the jacket has to go after all.

“Tell me your worries,” Damon sing-songs, “while I mix you a martini.”

“You’ll make someone a lovely wife, one day. No, look, it’s stupid. There’s a guy in town, venture capitalist, and if he likes me, there’s a billion dollar resort in Palm Springs in it. So I have to take him out Friday night.”

“Gentleman’s Club? Chucky Cheese? Oh. Private party right here? Snorting cocaine off strippers? I could have that organized for you by noon Friday. Just say the word. Here’s your martini.” He pushes a glass of bourbon into Alaric’s waiting hand, and quite unexpectedly straddles him on the couch.

Asshole really knows how to cheer a guy up. As he nuzzles into Alaric’s throat, Alaric sips the bourbon, and feels some of that irritation begin to seep away.

“You’re so good to me,” he murmurs, letting his free hand slip up under Damon’s too-small t-shirt. Damon barely flinches, but he takes a little of the flesh of Alaric’s neck between his teeth.

… one day, Alaric will actually sit him down with a dictionary definition of ‘submissive’. Sometime when he’s not enjoying himself quite so much.

“You’d better be joking about the cocaine,” he growls. “But… I wish. No, he’s straight down the line. And a huge fan of classical music, which I am not.” Damon pauses, and leans back. “My assistant got us tickets to some… Steve… something.”

“Stephen Hough?” He looks dumbstruck. “At the Performing Arts Center?”

Alaric has to think; he’d been so blinded by irritation that he’d barely heard the details. “Sounds
right,” he says. “You like…?”

Damon shrugs, but like there’s actually some real pain there.

“I used to play,” he says, dismissively.

“Used to?”

“Sold my piano. Cheer up, it could be worse.” He looks jealous, but Alaric can almost see the moment where he pushes it out of his mind, and focuses on his tie, instead, the thousand dollar noose around Alaric’s neck. “If you can cope with the lack of acoustic guitar and mournful lyrics, you might even enjoy yourself. He’s very good.” Damon takes the glass, and steals a sip.

It would be completely insane to take Damon with him. So far beyond insane. It’s not possible. No doubt someone would get a photograph, which would appear in the society pages over the weekend, and he’d have to explain, somewhere down the line.

“Do you want to come?”

The words are out of his mouth before he’s even sure he’s let them form.

“Hi, society, meet my rent boy.” Damon cringes at his own words, and passes the glass back, unbuttoning Alaric’s shirt. There’s something about the way he says it, like it’s a pain so old he can’t look it in the eye anymore, and Alaric remembers that there was a time Damon had real money.

“I’m serious.” He can’t shut himself up. “Do you own a tux?”

Damon stops, hands brushing over Alaric’s stomach. “I owned my first tux before you made your first million.”

“I made my first million pretty fuckin’ young. Do you own a tux?”

“This sounds like very blurry lines, to me,” Damon says, quietly. “I can get a tux.”

“It probably is,” Alaric agrees. “Get a tux.”

There’s no power play in the way they wind up making out on the couch for next hour, nor in the way Damon works himself open with his fingers and rides Alaric’s cock like it’s the main attraction at a goddamn carnival; but Alaric really can’t bring himself to care.

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Friday night, Damon is well behaved, and charming, and describes himself flippantly as a man of leisure, implying a hefty trust fund. He charms the asshole’s wife, and the asshole himself, and in the final act of Liszt’s *Years of Pilgrimage*, a tear runs down one cheek, and Alaric starts to think he might be thoroughly and utterly fucked.

Chapter End Notes

I know I said I’d get these out a few days ago, but thanks to the fact that I’m both overworked and preparing to move house, I was too tired to do them justice.
Next couple of chapters are underway. Christmas is nearly here, and Damon is not prepared for his time off.
Thank you to everyone who has been reading and commenting and tweeting, etc! Much appreciated ;) You guys are spurring me on.
I would tease you with a couple of upcoming plot points... but like Alaric, I like making people wait.
**Chapter 11**

**Chapter Summary**

Damon visits Stefan in hospital, to arrange more intensive care.

The trek across town is difficult because it is so fucking cold Damon can hardly feel his face, anymore. But he needs to see Stefan, and he has a meeting with a doctor to talk about one on one care, and he has a fat bank account, and if he’s honest, he’s still buzzing from a night listening to good classical music and sleeping in Alaric’s arms. So, he goes. He could have asked Caroline, but she’s so cheerful about helping that he feels guilty, sometimes, since her weekends are supposed to be her own. Plus he’s not entirely sure he trusts her driving on roads so icy.

The hospital looks hideous. In a nice way, he supposes. Decorations made by patients with shitty motor control. Paper angels with bright sequins and colored scraps glued to their skirts. An oversized Christmas tree. He hasn’t brought presents. Shit. There’s still a few days. He feels sad, and stupidly, embarrassingly hollow when he thinks about spending Christmas in his ugly flat while Alaric is in Boston.

Maybe he’ll get a hotel room.

There’s no good reason that he hasn’t found himself somewhere better to live. Unless he counts the fact that he’s assuming he’ll eventually lose this job, and a few years down the track there will be no more savings left to keep Stefan in this hospital, and he’ll be right back at square one. Can’t have that, no way, so, apart from his collection of brand new clothes, he hasn’t spent much money at all; and besides, he only has to sleep there a couple of nights a week.

Ugh, why think about that place right now? He’s warm, in the visitor’s lounge, waiting to be called for the appointment. Wearing a few layers. The heating is turned right up, and that’s very nice indeed. He has to force the super to do something about his radiator. Urgently.

“Mr. Salvatore?”

Damon forces himself to stand, and follows an unfamiliar nurse down the corridor to a doctor’s office. The doctor looks more like some old newspaper editor. Like a hound dog. Tufts of grey hair in his ears. Jowls and eyelids drooping. He looks kind, but deeply incredulous, and he offers Damon tea, coffee, a piece of biscotti.

Damon accepts tea, and a few moments later he’s curving his hands around a warm mug. He doesn’t even care about drinking it. It eases the ache in his fingers, and it feels wonderful. He tries to sit like he once would have, like a man with all the money in the world and nothing better to spend it on, but he’s different, now, and he still doesn’t know if that’s good or bad.

“New job? Mind if I ask what you’re doing?”

“Yes,” Damon says. “I mind. I’m working for a developer. All you need to know. So I want one on one care for Stefan. Someone with him all the time.”

The doctor nods, and leans back, looking for words. Damon knows what the words will be. More
or less. *Won’t make a difference. This is a lot of money we’re talking about.* He won’t even know.

“Whatever you’re going to say…” he enunciates each word, eyes flashing dangerously, “don’t say it. I don’t care. And you don’t know. It might make a difference. And right now, he’s definitely not getting better. So. Tell me what you’re going to do, and give me whatever it is you need me to sign, so I can go feed him his lunch. Do we understand each other?”

The doctor nods again. “Of course. Here’s what I think…” And he’s talking about doubling the physiotherapy, and he’s talking about fine motor skills training, and he says something which sounds far too optimistic, about digging around in Stefan’s brain to see if they can get out the last few shards of his skull; but Damon can’t bear the thought of Stefan’s brain being exposed again, not when he’s been told the surgery is just as likely to kill Stefan as do him any good, and the anesthesia is dangerous, and, and, and. No.

He tries to imagine Alaric in the chair beside his own, offering support, another opinion, but he can’t.

The bill is astronomical, but some quick calculations tell Damon he can afford it; if he keeps saving, even if he loses his job, and the replacement job after this, for several years, barring inflation and Stefan getting worse. He ignores the voice in his head that says Stefan might not live that long. Stupid voice. It knows nothing. It sounds like Giuseppe.

He shakes the doctor’s hand, and follows the same young nurse back into the hospital. She’s pretty, and friendly, and she says Stefan is lovely, when he’s calm, and *so good looking, isn’t it a waste,* and Damon is sort of beyond shitty with her because good-looking is at the very bottom of his brother’s best qualities, and no one here knows it.

*Go away,* he thinks, really hard, and then she is leading him to Stefan’s favorite spot in the day room. Stefan is sitting with his physical therapist, who is helping him to squeeze a pair of foam balls in his fists, and getting frustrated because the right hand simply won’t clench properly.

Damon watches for a few moments. The therapist’s name is Steve. He’s always seemed competent, and kind to Stefan, but he looks at Damon like he’s sizing him up for a meal. As tall as Alaric, much broader across the shoulders. Damon crosses his arms, and shifts his weight to his left foot, until Stefan looks up and gives him a brilliant, if lopsided, smile, immediately forgetting the ball in his hand and reaching out.

“Damon,” he says. That’s not entirely unusual. Sometimes, he says it so clearly and so distinctly that Damon lets himself believe there’s been some kind of miraculous progress made and he will be himself again one day.

“Stef,” he says, taking the last few steps, and reaching down to wrap his arms around Stefan’s shoulders. He feels thin. Maybe he’s refusing to eat, Damon should really ask. He doesn’t hug back – he never hugs back, but he leans heavily against Damon’s body like he’s craving the touch. Damon rubs circles into his back, slowly. “Hey, brother.”

Stefan mumbles something unintelligible into Damon’s chest, and Damon pulls away, searching for a chair.

“I’ll leave you to it,” Steve says, eyes boring holes into Damon’s body, head to toe, and Damon has the urge to announce he’s seeing someone, and the eyefucking can cease right now; but he doesn’t, because the last thing he wants is for his rebuff to cost Stefan a competent and familiar carer.
And he’s gone, now, anyway.

Damon catalogues Stefan like there might be some change. The bare skin, scarred, on his head, from the injuries, from the surgeries. The slowly wasting muscles. His hazel eyes. Why didn’t Damon get those eyes? Because Stefan was the favored son.

He pushes one of the foam balls into Stefan’s hand, encouraging him to squeeze.

“Big changes, little pal,” he says, feeling sort of stupid, because Stefan won’t answer him. Stefan smiles and nods. Like he always does, when he thinks he’s expected to answer.

“Any big parties this week?”
Smile, nod, shy glance at Damon.

“Get laid?”
Smile, nod.

“Things’ll get better,” he promises.

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Lunch takes forever but Stefan is happy, and the calmest he’s been in the last few weeks, so Damon doesn’t care about the mincemeat that ends up on his new shirt, the tomato paste on his pants. Stefan is so present, and so real, sitting close with his knee bumping against Damon’s leg. He makes vowel sounds, and gets annoyed, slumping against the chair, until Damon grips his chin and tells him to stop being a spoiled shit because he’s not five anymore. But the world is still grossly unfair, so there’s that.

From across the table, a girl who can’t seem to move anything below her neck stares at them, and Damon wishes there was somewhere else he could take Stefan. But Stefan doesn’t see the profound brain injury. Only the fact that someone is looking at him. He smiles and nods and lets Damon feed him the last of his lunch.

Damon feels something catch in his throat and coughs. Once, twice. A fit of them, coughing almost doubled over. It’s a cold. He’s getting a cold. Yeah, if Alaric won’t let him stay at the penthouse over Christmas he’ll stay in a hotel. Eat breakfast in bed at four o’clock and entertain a parade of pretty girls and boys from the bar downstairs (though, ha, he’s so thoroughly owned right now that there is almost no chance of that happening). It’s only a week.

“Sick,” Stefan says, wisely.

“Not sick,” Damon insists. “Seriously, I think my lungs have just frozen. Wish I could take you outside to make snowballs. You remember snowball fights, Stef? Or making snowmen? Stealing Nonno’s old pipe?”

Stefan’s eyes go blank, and Damon sits up. This is not a nod and a smile. “Stef?”

“Snow,” Stefan repeats, slowly. “Yeah.” His hand closes over nothing, over a snowball he made ten years ago, and Damon holds it between his own, for a long time.

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If he’s thoroughly drunk, he’ll never notice how cold the apartment is, so Damon finds a club, and
dances, and dances, hips grinding, the center of attention, exactly the way he should be. The music is loud, and he’s drunk by midnight, and vaguely considering taking someone home with him for some no strings attached sex.

Fuck it, why not?

Sometime around three, he’s staggering down the block with his arms around the shoulders of a guy with sandy hair and an appealing scrap of hair poking out of the top of his shirt, and eyes that sparkle even if he’s at least as drunk as Damon is. He pins Damon to the roller door shuttering a pawn shop and kisses him hard, and Damon tries to get into it, he really does, but it feels so wrong.

And his chest tickles.

He’s suddenly bent over by another racking cough. The guy helps to hold him up (fuck, what is his name? It was too loud in the club), and when it’s over, he takes a step back, hand still on Damon’s shoulder.

“You okay?”

Damon nods. “Yeah, fine.”

“You’re not really into this,” the guy says. It’s not a question. “Got someone in your life?”

Damon shrugs. “Ish,” he allows, pulling his jacket tighter around his body. The guy just shrugs.

“Well, another time,” he says. “Let me get you a cab. Cough sounds nasty. Probably don’t need your germs anyway.” He’s kind, and considerate, and Damon rethinks it all; a pity fuck, maybe? But he looks too much like Alaric, and maybe that’s why Damon picked him and maybe it isn’t, but he lets himself be bundled into a taxi for the twenty blocks to his shitty apartment and finds he can’t much regret it.

He walks up far too many flights of stairs, and lets himself into his apartment, which actually seems to be colder than it is outside. He adds a couple of layers of sweaters, and rolls himself up in every blanket he owns, and falls asleep in no time at all.

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Sunday afternoon, he stares at his phone for an hour, and finally calls Alaric. He has nothing to say, so he hangs up before another coughing fit can hit him. It’s worse. Painful. Maybe he is getting sick. Maybe it’s more than a cold. What would that mean? Time off without pay? He only has Monday and Tuesday before Alaric leaves for Boston anyway. When Alaric rings back, ten minutes later, he still has nothing to say, but he answers the phone anyway.

“What’s going on, Damon?”

Alaric sounds concerned, and there’s nothing Damon wants to do more than beg him to send Caroline. But he hesitates, aching hand wrapped tight around the phone.

“Do you need something?”

“No,” Damon says. “Just wondering if you want me to come tonight. Since you’re leaving Wednesday.”

Alaric is silent for a few moments. “It’s the weekend,” he says. “You should see your friends, have some fun.”
And fuck him, where has he picked up the ridiculous idea that Damon has friends? Damon hasn’t had anyone he could call a friend in years. And he’s cold, and his stomach aches, and his chest is beginning to hurt from coughing. He rubs the heel of one hand into his eye, and sighs. “Yeah, you’re right,” he says. “See you tomorrow. Seven.” And he hangs up before another paralyzing bought of coughing can force his skeleton out of his body whole.

He sleeps some more. No, he dozes, that’s all. In and out of consciousness. It eventually gets dark. He crawls out of his cocoon to fetch water a couple of times, legs shaky, head aching, and wonders if he should maybe go to the pharmacy down the street, but he’s too. Fucking. Tired.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Damon's little cough was a lot more serious.

Chapter Notes

Warnings for this chapter: hospital scenario and illness.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s eight o’clock on Tuesday evening and Alaric is mildly irritated, and wondering if a good long session with the riding crop might teach Damon how sensible it is to be late to work; two more nights until Alaric leaves for Boston, that’s all, and besides, he hates to have his routine disturbed. He bristles with irritation. He calls, but Damon doesn’t answer the phone.

So he calls Caroline, instead.

“Yeah, boss?”

“Damon’s late.”

“Want me to go and kick his butt? I think that could be fun.”

“That’s my job. I want you to go and pick him up, though. I know you’re off the clock.”

“No problem, boss. Call me if he shows up in the meantime,” and Alaric smiles as he hangs up, and flicks to another channel, practicing his pissed off face. Though if he’s honest, he is a little worried. Just a little. Damon hadn’t exactly sounded happy that Alaric hadn’t wanted him the previous day. But it feels like they break another rule every minute they spend together. Friday night could only be described as a date.

A date. Complete with a photograph in the society pages on Saturday; Damon and Alaric in the background behind some starlet Alaric has never heard of. Still, there have been two phone calls already, which he has deflected with the certainty of someone who’s had too much money for far too long.

He lounges in a t-shirt and jeans, one eye on the television as he reads over a contract that was pushed into his hands just before lunch, and has no intention of signing without the eyes of a dozen overpaid lawyers scouring it first. Besides, it’s Monday, and it’s nearly Christmas. There’s nothing urgent about it.

Three quarters of an hour later, his phone rings, and it’s Caroline.

“I can hear his phone ringing,” she says, sounding anguished. “In his apartment. But he won’t come to the door.”
If not for the town car sitting on the curb, already ticketed (not a tow-away zone, thank fuck) Alaric would have assumed he was in front of the wrong apartment block. It’s dingy, ancient, looks like it should be condemned, and he’s struck with a pang of guilt so overwhelming he wishes he could go back in time a day or so and bring him to the penthouse. He buttons his coat as he overpays the taxi driver, and follows Caroline’s directions, walking up about a hundred floors (the elevator, evidently, isn’t working). He finds her arguing with the building superintendent, who won’t open Damon’s door, and she has tears running down her face.

“Bribe him,” she commands, and Alaric gives her a withering look before a single kick to the sweet spot by the sub-par lock sends the door flying inward. The super starts shouting, promising to sue, and Alaric ignores him.

“It’s freezing,” he says, walking inside, and touching the radiator. “I think you’ll find Mr. Salvatore will sue you. Has he complained about the heat?”

The silence speaks volumes.

Alaric finds Damon on his bed, wrapped up in layer upon layer of blankets, face an alarming shade of blue, and barely breathing, and the world stops on its axis for about six seconds. There is mucous almost frozen on the sheet in front of his face, and his lips are cracked, and he doesn’t wake up when Alaric shakes him, says his name, checks for a pulse.

“Call Mount Sinai,” Alaric says. “Tell them we’re on our way.”

Caroline rushes around, collecting Damon’s phone, charger, and wallet, checking for anything that looks like it may be really valuable, before actually hissing at the now silent super and telling him they’ll have the rest collected in the morning, and it had better all be there when they do. The super remains silent, but with people sticking their heads out of doors all along the corridor, he looks resigned to spending the night sitting in the doorway and protecting Damon’s worldly possessions (what the hell is he spending the money on? Why is he still living here?) from the neighborhood junkies and parole jumpers.

Alaric has Damon bundled in his arms, carefully navigating the stairs, trying not to lose his shit, and internally beating himself up. Really thoroughly. Really, really thoroughly, Fuck the riding crop, he’s beating himself up with a cat of nine tails, and not the trendy type, either.

He sits in the back of the town car with Damon’s body draped over his lap, arms wrapped tight around him. Trying to share body heat, as far as he can, but Damon is so cold it’s hard to believe he’s still alive. Only the occasional flutter of his eyelashes, the near-inaudible whistle of his lungs, has Alaric convinced.

At the hospital, there is an immediate flurry of activity, and Damon is taken away, down a corridor where Alaric is not allowed to follow.

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Hospitals are fucking depressing. There is a reason Alaric has invested significant money into ensuring his parents can stay on the home he grew up in until the bitter end, or the sweet one, perhaps; his mother, who no longer recognizes him, still knows how to get to the bathroom, and the kitchen, and his father has access to pain relief at any time of the day or night. It’s all he can do. He has offered to move them here countless times, but his quiet, kind father insists on staying, and when Alaric says he’ll take a couple of years out to be near them, Ed says no; they want him to live
his life.

Hell, they want him to meet someone. They don’t understand what his life is like, the sheer impossibility of that.

They are elderly, had him very late, never anticipated a son who could almost print money, whose insane ideas at twenty one and twenty two would build him an empire in New York City. A far cry from the quiet life of academia they’d envisioned for him. He knows one day he’ll get a call to say his mother is gone, and his father will die as soon as he’s had a chance to say goodbye.

He is not ready for that. And he’s certainly not ready to say goodbye to a twenty-six year old he’s only just met, no matter how much he is complicating Alaric’s life. It seems to take forever for someone to come and talk to him. A young doctor, a resident, who looks too tired but no less compassionate for all of that.

“Pneumonia,” he says.

“How would he get pneumonia?”

“Won’t know that until we’ve run some more tests, maybe not even then. There are a lot of causes. Probably, he picked up strep, or some fungus…”

“His apartment. It’s a hole. And freezing cold.”

“So he’s spent the last day or so breathing more and more shallowly, getting sicker and sicker. A few days in the ICU. He’ll be alright.”

Alaric feels Caroline’s hand curl into his own. It feels tiny. And unfairly warm.

“Could I look after him at home?”

“It’s not practical. But it might take him a while to get better, and a cold apartment isn’t the place to do that. I’m inclined to let him leave earlier if I know he has somewhere safe to recover. I’m sorry to have to ask, but does he have insurance?”

Alaric nods. “Very generous insurance.” Well, it’s utterly run of the mill, but he also has a very wealthy benefactor, and Alaric doesn’t want them thinking about money when they treat him.

“He’s a friend?”

Alaric reaches up to scratch his forehead with his free hand. “Does it matter?”

“We need someone who can make medical decisions on his behalf.” Guy looks exhausted. His scrubs look exhausted. His eyes are as red as his cap. Is he even fit to be working?

“Damon doesn’t have any family. He doesn’t have anyone. I’m his employer.” Caroline grips Alaric’s hand tighter. Fierce little thing. He can’t help but wonder how much she knows, and how much she suspects she knows. He pictures her snarling at the self-important super, closer to Alaric’s height than her own, and he’s grateful for her presence.

“Can I see him?”

“Not tonight,” the doctor says. “You can’t do anything until he’s stable. Go home and get some sleep. It’s late. You’ll need to talk to someone in accounts about his insurance, when you can.”

There’s a gruff nod, and the doctor turns on his heel, and Alaric stares down the corridor. He could
make a nuisance of himself. He’s rich, he’s well-connected. But instead, he takes a seat on one of
the plastic bucket seats in the waiting room, and rests his elbows on his knees. He wishes Meredith
was there, but Meredith is at home waiting to go into labor.

Caroline takes a seat alongside him.

“You should go,” he says.

“I should,” she agrees, reaching for a three week old copy of *Woman’s Day*.

Hours might pass, or only minutes, and Alaric looks up again. “He called yesterday, offering to
come over. I told him to spend the day with his friends.”

“I’m not entirely sure he has any,” Caroline admits, putting the magazine aside. “Seems kinda
lonely, to me. Don’t you think?”

Caroline sees more than she should. Always. She's never questioned Damon's role in Alaric's life,
asked what exactly Damon's job is; she just does as she's asked, and keeps her eyes open, and takes
everything in like a sponge.

“I guess he does,” he says, leaning back in his uncomfortable chair.

Around them, people are crying quietly. Some have blood on their clothes. Hospitals are really just
so fucking horrible, and so is Alaric, sometimes.

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He spends half of the following day answering emails from the laptop Caroline has fetched from
his apartment, answering every fifth phone call, and waiting for permission to see Damon. Ignoring
the looks of irritated nursing staff who don't like his temporary office, and hoping no one will
recognize him and ask any questions. He's careful, about his identity, though sometimes he's not
sure that he's careful enough. But as day becomes evening, again, he is asked to go home, and he

goes.

The apartment looks different, but it's not. Also, he's supposed to be flying to Boston, tomorrow,
and it's just not right. Alaric stares out the window, looking out over the city he is still helping to
build, for a long time, before he finally takes a long shower, and collapses into bed.

The following morning, around ten, Alaric calls his father, and explains he can't make it. Sick
friend, he says, and Ed shushes him, and promises it's only a day, and Dianne won't know either
way;

"But," he says, "come soon. Your mother isn't well."

Sometimes, Alaric thinks the weight of his guilt over his parents might break his back, but Ed
always says he's proud, and Alaric calls once a week and it assuages that guilt; besides, he reasons,
his parents have each other, and their nursing staff; Damon has no one.

(Upstairs, in a locked drawer, is the file, and Alaric has never been more tempted to open it, and
find out if it's really true; still he doesn't.)

He takes the subway back to the hospital, and catches the eye of one of the familiar nurses, who
gives a tired nod and goes away to find a doctor, and he pushes the doctor a little harder than he
probably should, and finally, wearing a surgical mask to prevent Damon's miserable lungs from
getting any more germ-ridden that they already are, he's allowed into the room.
Damon is asleep. Too pale, but better than he was, and wearing an oxygen mask, which looks reassuringly scientific. The room is warm, but not stifling.

Alaric has absolutely no idea how he is supposed to behave. Like an employer? Like a friend? He has seen Damon naked and stripped back to raw nerves, and yet never this vulnerable before. He sits for a few minutes, listening to the beeping equipment, the soft hum of the oxygen tank. Wondering if Damon is actually in pain.

He stares for a long time at the hand resting on the hospital blanket – they’re funny things, they look so light and airy, but they’re so warm – and wonders how he’s never really noticed it before. Their relationship is about Alaric’s hands, mostly. The things Alaric’s hands can do. Alaric’s hands are rougher than most would guess, considering the work he does. They are strong, slightly calloused. Broad, square fingernails. Damon’s hands remind Alaric of the pianist he says he once was. Elegant. Long fingers. Broad knuckles. Alaric moves his chair a little closer to the bed, and reaches out, slipping Damon’s hand into his own.

Monday nights, Damon is always so cold.

Now, Alaric knows why.

A few minutes later, there is a stirring, and Damon grips back weekly, before his eyes snap open and he reaches for the mask. Alaric stands, and knocks the hand aside, resettling the mask.

“You don’t need to say anything,” he says. “You’re sick. You’re in the hospital. Mount Sinai. You have pneumonia. And you’re not goin’ anywhere, right now, so just lie there and look pretty.”

Damon looks confused, and relieved, and his eyes close, and he goes right back to sleep, in time for Alaric to be ushered away by a very tall nurse with a severe gray ponytail and strong arms. She looks practical, and capable, and that’s the only reason Alaric lets himself get kicked out.

Later in the day, Damon is transferred out of the ICU and into a private room, and Alaric sits with him for a few hours. Sits with a laptop on his knees, until Damon wakes up again, and then he sets it aside, and stands, grasping at the weakly offered hand. He doesn’t bother to argue when Damon pulls his mask off, again. A few minutes won’t kill him.

“Am I fired?” Damon croaks.

“Don’t be an idiot,” Alaric says, fondly. “Why are you still living there? No, don’t say it. You need the money. We’re gonna have a conversation, in a few days. Not while you’re this sick.”

“What day is it?”

“Wednesday.” Damon’s body lurches in panic, and Alaric pushes gently on his shoulder. It’s like a conditioned response, now; Damon looks calmer, and hopeful, and a little spacy, the moment Alaric exerts any kind of control. “Shh, ’m not goin’ anywhere. Told my pop I’d be visiting in a few weeks. Couldn’t leave you here.”

“You treat all your employees like this?” It’s followed by a weak cough, so Alaric settles the mask back over Damon’s face.

“Please, Damon, you’re the worst sub in history,” he says, with a warmth in his eyes he hopes Damon’s addled brain will recognize. “Forget the rules – you can never remember them anyway – and get better. Takin’ you home in a few days,” he adds, and Damon looks so resigned Alaric wants to yell at him. “Not your place. You’re stayin’ in the penthouse until we find somewhere better. Or until you’re well, anyway. I can find you a hotel on the weekends, after that, if you want,
until we do. Your stuff is at my place already. That’ll do you for now.”

Damon nods, looking exhausted, and closes his eyes. He needs to sleep.

Alaric lets go of his hand, resting it on his stomach, and reaches for his coat. Damon must almost sense it, because he’s pulling the mask away again.

“Hey, hey,” Alaric says, trying to resettle it. “You need something? Want me to get a nurse?”

“Stay,” Damon says, half muffled by the mask.

Alaric lays his coat across the back of the chair, and settles in to wait, wondering how the hell things got this messy, and worse; why he can’t bring himself to care.

Chapter End Notes

I know this one took three weeks guys but I am still really flat out in RL, getting ready to move. The good news is I’m actually interstate for most of the next two weeks, and then moving, so I will be in a better position. Also should have more time to write while I’m away because I can’t do anything much else from the other side of the country!

Thanks for all the lovely reviews and the enthusiasm. I have the next chapter started, and the next six or so sketched out roughly. (Though our boys always seem to take me by surprise, so...)
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

Damon is a really terrible patient. But it's Christmas, and Stefan is waiting for him.

The next few days go by in a bit of a blur. When Damon wakes on Friday, Christmas Eve, feeling better than he has in days, he asks to be discharged, and a nurse laughs in his face.

“You nearly died.” She looks like a complete bitch, and it’s obviously not a case of bad first impressions because she should be saying yes, yes, it’s a day for family, of course you can go, here’s a nice Santa hat, and instead she’s standing there with her little clipboard making stupid notes. So fuck her.

He is pretty exhausted, though. He already misses the rich oxygen that used to come through the mask. He rolls onto his side, and stares at the wall intently, but it doesn’t burst into flame, no matter how vicious the glare.

He doesn’t move when he hears Alaric stride through the corridor and sweep into his room.

“You should be on your back,” he says, touching Damon’s arm. Damon jerks it back. “There’s that attitude. Glad you’re feeling better. Something you want to say?”

“Yes,” Damon says, rolling onto his back (because fuck everyone and everything but it really is easier to breathe that way). “I need to get out of here. Even if it’s only for a few hours. Today. Tomorrow, if it has to be, but… I have to leave.” He doesn’t look at Alaric. He grits his teeth, and stares at the ceiling. It doesn’t burst into flames, either.

“Christmas plans? Whoever you want to see,” Alaric says, adjusting the blankets, the pillow, unnecessary and unwelcome primping because can’t he see Damon’s upset? “They’ll understand. Or they can come here for a while.”

Stefan. Watching family pour in for everyone but himself? No, no, he won’t understand at all. He’ll get upset, he’ll hit a nurse, maybe he’ll work himself up to a seizure, finally be free of his poor broken body. Damon feels his eyes burn for a second, and grits his teeth.

“Family?” Alaric wants to know. “You’ve never said much about yourself.”

“You’ve never asked.”

“I ask all the time,” Alaric answers, unflappable.

“Just because my body is bought and paid for doesn’t mean you get to poke around in the rest of my life,” Damon says. “It’s not your business.” When he forces himself to meet Alaric’s gaze, he’s annoyed to see that instead of the hurt he was expecting to see, Alaric looks amused.

Fuck him. And fuck everything else.

Alaric crosses his arms. “Perhaps you’re right. I’ll go.”
“No,” Damon says, already regretful. “Don’t. Just… you don’t understand. I have to go. I have to. Am I contagious? No. Pull some strings, buy them a new x-ray machine, something. Please, Ric, I have to go. For… at least a couple of hours. I’ll keep warm, I’ll… goddammit.” And he coughs, for several seconds, and it’s not until he stops that he realizes Alaric is holding him upright.

“Oh, you’re not goin’ anywhere. Unless you want to be in here for another month. I’ve got your phone. Make some calls. Anyone who cares about you is gonna understand you can’t run around in New York in December with pneumonia.”

There should be parents.

Damon’s mom should be able to see Stefan every day, she should sit with him and smile at him and see past the scars and the hands that won’t curl up right and won’t straighten out, either. He should be able to call her, and tell her what’s happened, and she should be able to make Stefan understand. Even his father, who would blame Damon somehow for being sick… he’d go, because Stefan was always his favorite. But their mother has been dead too many years, and their father died just in time to be no fucking use at all, and all there is in the world is Damon. He closes his eyes, and the tears he’s been blinking back roll down his face.

“Now would be a good time to tell me, don’t you think?”

Damon has no defenses left. And he might not want to tell this story, but he’s going to tell it, because it’s time, and because no matter how fucking pathetic it is, Alaric might be his only friend in the world; even if it is a paid arrangement.

“My brother,” he says, “is living out the last of his days in a rehabilitation hospital. He can barely talk, he can’t walk far by himself, he doesn’t understand ninety percent of what’s going on around him. And no, he’s not going to understand why I don’t visit for Christmas. Not when everybody else has family, and presents. He won’t understand because his head just doesn’t work any more. And it costs so much money, Ric, I…”

Alaric rubs circles into Damon’s back, until he lies back again, and then he sits on the edge of the bed. It’s hopeless and useless. Damon is hopeless and useless.

Giuseppe was right about so fucking much.

“And that’s why you took this job.”

Damon nods, and tells the rest of the story, haltingly, punctuated with so much coughing Alaric wonders out loud if he should still be on oxygen. Damon shakes his head. If he starts slipping backwards, he’ll never get out of here.

“Now you know everything about my pathetic life, maybe you can see what you can do about getting me out of here for a few hours?” He sounds bitter. Well. He is bitter, so that makes sense. He’s thinking vaguely that he’s really not supposed to talk to Alaric like this but he also reasons that it’s Friday, it’s well after eight in the morning and it’s nowhere near seven in the evening, so he’s off the clock. Right?

Besides. He’s sick.

He realizes in one horrible second that he already misses the structure, the boundaries. He closes his eyes, and tries to summon the calm only Alaric has ever been able to give him. He wonders if Alaric would bind his wrists, if he asked. Just gently, under the blankets, just to make him feel safe again.
“I need this,” he says, weakly, because at least that never changes. Alaric always tells him to say what he needs.

Alaric sighs, and takes Damon’s hand for a minute. “I’ll see what I can do,” he says. “Don’t do anything stupid while I’m gone.”

What Damon does is wonder about his empty apartment. He can imagine the boxes set neatly inside one of Alaric’s extra bedrooms, the big one downstairs, most likely. Packed by who? Caroline? Not Alaric. Probably someone Alaric paid to do it. He finds he hates the thought of anyone sorting through his meager possessions. He hates that it probably took half an hour to do. That anyone would have touched the photograph of Damon and Stefan and their mother at Virginia Beach when Stefan was only two, and she wasn’t yet sick. Laughing at the fact his entire kitchen comes down to a couple of pots, a couple of plates, a handful of mismatched cutlery and three mugs. Pushing his clothing into a box without folding it carefully.

No, they wouldn’t have done that. Besides, knowing Alaric, it’s all been laundered and is hanging in a closet right now.

Damon pulls the cover over his head, suddenly burning with shame.

Alaric eventually returns, looking grim.

“They don’t want to discharge you yet. But. If you think you can put up with a wheelchair, and we’re at Stefan’s hospital no more than an hour… I can take you tomorrow.”


“You’re welcome, idiot, and they’re more worried about what you could pick up there than what you could pass on. I’ll bring clothes tomorrow. Anything else you need?”

There is, actually, but Damon doesn’t even know how to ask. He opens his mouth, and closes it again, and shakes his head, and Alaric gives him a wilting glance, and takes a step further.

“You have to get this through your head if we’re ever gonna make any kind of progress here at all, Damon. You tell me what you need. You let me take care of you.”

“We’re not scening. I’m not on the clock. Don’t do that.”


Damon forces himself to meet Alaric’s eyes for a second. Why is it so hard? Because he’s been looking after himself since his mother died, and it’s been awful, it’s been damn near impossible, but he’s managed. He doesn’t want to give that up.

“I didn’t get him a Christmas present.”

Alaric nods. “What did you want to get him?”

Last year, it was Star Wars figures, because Stefan had spent a couple of months obsessed with Star Wars again, the way he had when he was ten. The year before, it was hand puppets, because he’d been refusing to do anything with his hands at all, wouldn’t even feed himself.

The year before that it was a leather bound journal, a Mont Blanc pen, and the complete works of
Rudyard Kipling, and the thought breaks Damon’s heart all over again.

“I don’t know,” he says.

Alaric nods. “Just get some rest. I’ll work something out. I have to go for a few hours. You gonna be okay?”

After a moment’s hesitation, Damon nods. Alaric crosses to the bed to kiss his forehead. “Couple of weeks,” he promises, “and you’ll be fine. Get some sleep.”

The day’s been too much already, so Damon closes his eyes, and he’s off in just a few moments.

--

By the time Alaric arrives the following morning Damon has thought up a hundred reasons why he doesn’t need a wheelchair. But by the time Alaric has helped him into his clothes (all new, which is sort of weird; he can’t imagine Alaric buying him clothes. But who else? And they all fit perfectly, and the trousers are hemmed, and who else knows Damon’s body so well?) and is tying up his shoelaces, Damon is so tired he could fall asleep again. And he’s humiliated by how much help he needs. And though he’s not coughing a lot, every time he does he feels like he’s being hit with a wall. The wheelchair has an oxygen tank on the back, and evil bitch nurse (who Alaric, for no apparent reason, seems to like) is showing him how to turn it on. She doesn’t look like she approves of the outing at all, which gives Damon a vicious glee. He nods off in the taxi (Alaric has four cars, including the one Caroline drives, and not one of them will fit a wheelchair; the rich have different problems to the rest of us), and when Alaric gently shakes him awake, he’s completely disoriented for a few moments.

“Did you get…”

Alaric passes Damon a shiny white bag with a big red ribbon, and inside is a collection of brightly wrapped packages. He doesn’t care what’s in them. Stefan will be happy with anything, unless he’s having one of those days.

Alaric wrestles with the wheelchair, and then helps Damon into it.

“We’ll be an hour and a half,” Alaric tells the driver, paying him. “Be back here then and there’ll be a good tip in it for you.”

An hour and a half? Alaric’s such a rebel.

The driver, who probably has eight kids at home, on Christmas day, waiting for dad to come home, nods. Or maybe he has no family. Maybe that’s why he’s working on Christmas day.

As Alaric pushes the wheelchair towards the hospital doors, through the gently drifting snow, Damon reaches back to pat his hand. Why? Comfort. Thanks, perhaps. Something like that. When Alaric takes him home, he’ll show him exactly how grateful. Alaric shifts his index finger, brushing against Damon’s hand, and doesn’t say anything.

Inside, a nurse rushes to fuss over Damon. One of the girls who always fawns over him. He thinks, for a second, that he’ll tell her that Alaric is his boyfriend, get her off his back for good, but Alaric probably wouldn’t appreciate it, much.

“I’m alright,” he snaps. “Pneumonia. And I’m not allowed to stay for long, jailer’s taking me back in an hour and a half, so if you could let me through to see my brother?”
She draws back, embarrassed, and presses the button that opens the doors. Can’t have doors opening easily in a place where the patients might wander off and get lost in the streets.

“Say something,” Damon says, as Alaric pushes him through to the common area.

“Something,” Alaric says. “Where is he?”

Damon looks around, and it takes him a moment. Stefan is staring intently at the tree, but as if summoned, he turns his head. He’s delighted, for a moment, and then he’s alarmed. He shuffles towards them, eyeing Alaric (new people are not to be trusted) and stares in abject horror at Damon’s chair.

“Sick,” he says, with that same wise, weary tone.

“I’ll be okay, brother.”

Stefan puts his forehead on Damon’s shoulder, waiting to be hugged, and Damon reaches around him, the lummox, patting his back.

“I’ll leave you to it,” Alaric says. “I’ll be in the waiting room. Merry Christmas, Stefan.”

Damon misses him right away, hadn’t realized he was hoping for a buffer.

“Gifts,” Damon says, and then a racking cough takes him over for a moment. “Here.” He hands over the bag, but Stefan is still staring unhappily at the wheelchair. His eyes slide away, but he brings them back every time.

“It’s not forever,” Damon says. “Sit down and open your gifts.” He can’t, of course, his hands won’t cooperate properly, but he tries, and each time, he hands the gift back to Damon, waiting eagerly to see what will be inside. It’s puzzles. Damon wonders briefly who bought them; Alaric, or Caroline? But it’s smart, it’s a smart gift, puzzles that would challenge a kid of about eight, and Stefan starts trying to unlink colorful plastic links right away.

He should be in college. He should be at Stanford on a football scholarship, doing pre-law studies, and instead he’s stumped by a plastic puzzle.

Damon is exhausted. His lungs exhaust him, Stefan exhausts him, life exhausts him. Somehow he manages to sit up at the table with a couple of dozen happy families and eat a plate of Christmas cheer anyway.

--

Back at the hospital, Damon is asleep almost before Alaric is finished helping him change back into his shitty hospital pajamas. When he wakes in the early evening, Alaric is still sitting in the chair, reading a book.

“Don’t you have anywhere better to be?”

Alaric snickers. “Mouthy and needy. Kelly really pegged you.”

“No, but she threatened to a couple of times.” He rolls over a little. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Forgot to give you your gift,” Alaric says, handing over a slim package. “And I just wanted to make sure you were okay. After today.”

Damon holds the package a moment. His first Christmas gift since his father’s death, since Stefan’s
accident. “He’s not going to get better.”

“So I gathered.”

Damon stares for another moment at the gift. Everything is a bit easier, when he’s not alone, even if ‘not alone’ only means spending Christmas night with a guy who pays to tie him up and fuck him. He tears off the shiny red paper.

It’s a watch. A Rolex.

“I had one of these, once,” he muses.

“Sell it?”

“One of the first things to go.”

Alaric is silent for a moment. “Don’t sell that one,” he says, and leans to kiss Damon’s forehead again, and what was annoying as hell a few weeks ago has become oddly comforting. “I should go. Let you get back to sleep.”

He reaches for his coat. He looks tired too, Damon realizes, and doesn’t ask him to stay.

“Merry Christmas, Damon,” he says, from the door.

It’s the best one he’s had in years, which is so pathetic that all Damon does is nod.
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Damon is back in the penthouse, and it's time things got back on track.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Back in the penthouse at last, Alaric counts out the last of Damon’s antibiotics (only three days left, and he isn’t going to forget one), checks the oxygen tank, and stands for ten minutes at the door of his bedroom, watching Damon sleep. He though fifty times about that phone call — was it only ten days ago? — Damon’s ‘offer’ to come back a day early. And he beat himself up, over and over. He thought about the envelope, all the details of Damon’s life, sitting in the filing cabinet, upstairs in his study.

Damon stirs, rolls over and opens his eyes.

“You need anything?”

Damon shakes his head.

“Is that how you answer me?”

Damon hesitates. “No,” he says. “Happy?”

They need to get back to their usual rhythms. There’s slack, and there’s sloppy. This is entering the realm of sloppy.

Alaric turns off all the lights, and strips down to boxers. “You warm enough?”

“Will be, when you get in.”

Alaric slips between the sheets, curves himself around Damon’s back, and holds him close. “You really are the shittiest sub in history,” he says. “’night.”

It’s not quite right, but Alaric smiles into the flesh between Damon’s shoulder blades, and drifts off to sleep.

--

The next couple of days are difficult. Damon is a terrible patient. prickly and surly. He snaps at Alaric more than once, and Alaric lets him, because he’s sick. But Thursday night, he’s close to losing his temper, and the riding crop beckons him from its place in the locked drawer in the bedroom.

“What do you feel like for dinner?”

“I don’t care,” Damon says, wrapped in a blanket on the couch. He’s still pale, dark shadows standing out under his eyes, but Alaric can’t tolerate it anymore. He takes the remote, and turns off
the television, crossing his arms as Damon starts to splutter.

“You don’t speak to me like that.”

Damon, eyes narrowed, pushes against the back of the couch. “I’m –”

“Sick, I know. But that doesn’t mean you get to be an asshole. It’s time we got back to normal.”

“Great, I’ll get the rope. Maybe the ball gag in case I start coughing.”

“That’s not what I mean,” Alaric says. “When I ask you a question, you answer it. Out loud. When I ask you if you need something, you answer me. I pay you very well to stick to some very basic rules, and if you don’t start following them – we are gonna have a problem, Damon.”

“I answered. I don’t care what we eat. Done.”

He’s impossible.

“I’ll rephrase. Choose what we’re eating for dinner.” Alaric is not smiling. Arms still crossed over his chest. Frankly at this point he’d eat a sandwich and be happy just to have something in his stomach, but in a battle of wills, he always has to come out on top. Here, anyway.

Damon’s face crumples, for a moment, and then something strange happens. His eyes darken. Pupils just a little more dilated.


That’s more like it.

Alaric hands back the remote control, nodding, and heads off to make the call.

They eat dinner quietly, and just one glass of wine each, and Damon clears the table (not something Alaric had anticipated; but an appreciated return to form) while Alaric puts the leftovers in the fridge. Roasted mushroom risotto. It’s damn good. It will get eaten, and neither of them touched the linguini.

He’s too tired, and the mood is too irritable, to do anything but watch television. So Alaric stretches out on the chaise, waiting for Damon to join him and choose a film (and he will be choosing a film). But when Damon comes back, he’s holding a length of silk rope between his hands.

“We’re not scening. You’re still sick.”

“I know,” Damon says, and he looks like he wants to say something he’ll very quickly regret, but he sits down alongside Alaric and hands him the rope. “Just my wrists?”

Alaric catches Damon’s chin on the tip of his finger, examining his expression. Embarrassed and wary. Something else there too, the usual neediness, but with a strange edge to it.

“Alright,” he says, and he begins the ritual of binding Damon’s wrists together. As he gets further up his arm, Damon begins to relax, and by the time Alaric is tying it off, he looks completely stoned.

On the coffee table are their wine glasses. Alaric reaches for Damon’s. Damon could manage by himself, but Alaric brings it to his lips, tipping it until Damon is able to take a sip. A little spills out the side, dripping down over his chin. Alaric leans forward to catch it in his mouth, tracing the route to the corner of Damon’s mouth with his tongue. It’s the closest they’ve had to a kiss in
thirteen days, and it makes Damon slump forward against Alaric’s body.

“I’ve got you,” Alaric says, wrangling him into place, head on Alaric’s thigh. He tucks the blanket around him, slips his hand briefly between Damon’s hands. “What do you want to watch?”

Okay, it’s a test.

Damon sighs. “Something with superheroes.”

He doesn’t exactly sound enthusiastic, but it’s good enough for now.

--

When Alaric has finished massaging Damon’s arms, and they have brushed their teeth and the medicine has been taken, when they are once again curled up together under the heavy blanket, and Alaric is whispering endearments in Damon’s ear, Damon doesn’t even object.

Alaric is almost asleep, when Damon murmurs, “New Year’s Eve, tomorrow.”

He’s supposed to be going to a charity dinner. Fireworks afterwards. Tickets were booked in March. Most of the Board of Directors is going to be there. He hasn’t even arranged a fake date. He groans, and kisses Damon’s throat. “So it is. Go to sleep.”

Damon drifts off quickly, and Alaric considers his latest conundrum for a good half an hour, listening to the slow, easy breaths and wondering again how the hell this got so complicated.

--

When Alaric wakes, morning wood nudging up optimistically against Damon’s ass, he rolls away, after a brief kiss to Damon’s shoulder. Damon reacts instantly, rolling towards him, and straddling his hips.

“What are you doing?”

“What do you think I’m doing?”

Alaric points to his bare wrist. “You’re off the clock. Saturday.”

“Call it a freebie for letting me spend the weekend,” Damon growls. “It’s been two weeks. There are very few perks to prostitution, but a John who knows what he’s doing is right up there.” He lowers himself onto Alaric’s body, rubbing against him.

“One day, I’m gonna get you a shiny new composition book and make you write out the dictionary definition of submissive over and over until it’s full.”

“You’re making me hard.”

“I’m gonna make you do it with a huge dildo firmly secured up your ass.”

“Now I definitely need a good fucking.”

Alaric presses hands gently to Damon’s chest. “You’re sick. There’s time. You want Caroline to take you to see Stefan today?”

Damon’s expression shutters, and he stops the maddening rocking. “You’re planning to fire me, aren’t you.”
“I’m not. Look, you’re off the clock. We can talk on Monday.”

Damon stares for a moment longer, there’s nothing legible on his face, nothing Alaric can discern. He shrugs, and rolls off, curling up again.

“Fine,” he says.

Alaric rubs his eyes.

“Damon…”

“Don’t make me worry about this all weekend. I need to know.”

Fuck, he’s learning to use the magic words. Alaric shakes his head. “We’ve crossed so many boundaries, here,” he says. “I don’t know how it happened. There are rules, and I’m not… I’m not enforcing them. Not enough. And it’s not just since you’ve been sick.”

Damon turns to face him, eyes still blank, like he’s bracing for pain.

Alaric thinks. Last night was better, last night was… well, it wasn’t progress. It’s never progress. It’s just an improvement. Damon learning what’s expected of him. He still doesn’t understand, doesn’t know what he’s doing, why it matters. He doesn’t understand what he gets out of it, probably can’t even see it.

Alaric reaches out to cup his cheek.

“Monday,” he says. “Let’s just enjoy the weekend, treat each other like…” The word that almost slips from his mouth is ‘lovers’, but what he says, instead, is: “… friends.”

Damon nods, and is caught by a brief, racking cough. “Friends don’t let friends miss out on bacon and eggs for breakfast,” he says, reaching for the glass of water on the nightstand.

“Have a shower,” Alaric says. “I’ll order.”

Alaric skips New Year’s Eve. Because the brief moment where he’d considered taking Damon with him had scared the shit out of him. Because lying on the couch with Damon tucked up against him, watching the ball drop on television instead of in real life…

Monday, things would be different, but for now, the blurred lines really weren’t bothering him that much at all.

--

Having been in and out of the office so irregularly for the last couple of weeks, things are pure chaos when Alaric arrives at eight o’clock on Monday morning. Every minute of the next three days has been scheduled; he won’t be getting home before nine o’clock any night soon. He finds himself answering email from the back of the town car, and Caroline is smart enough to keep her mouth firmly shut. When she picks him up from a meeting in Queens (redevelopment of a low-income apartment block which has been stymied by the fact it was originally built with some of the least safe materials ever known to man, and therefore dangerous to demolish), Alaric says to her, “You’re not my personal assistant. You’re my driver.”

“Got it, boss,” she says, cheerfully. “But what do you need?”

She’s a smart cookie. “I need another apartment in the building. Nothing big. Two bedrooms. Find
out what’s available?”

“Got it, boss,” she says again, executing what can only be described as a Forbesian maneuver to bypass two stopped lanes of traffic and swing back around onto Central Park West before anyone can scribble down her license plate. “For Damon?”

“For Damon.” She says nothing. “What?”

“Though he might be going to live with you,” she says. “Oh, come on, he’s cute, you obviously like him, and…”

“Out of line, Caroline,” he says, and actually hears her roll her eyes before she settles back to the sensible, cheerful chauffeur she usually is. “Look in on him, will you? I won’t be back until late. I’ll get a taxi.”

“Got it, boss,” she says, and pulls up in the loading bay outside his office block, to an angry chorus of horns.

How she still has a license, Alaric doesn’t know, but he’s very appreciative all the same.

--

He’s home by about ten o’clock, and Damon is huddled on the couch, with an iPad on his knees.

“Hi, honey,” he says, with a small smile. “You’re home.”

Alaric says nothing, just kisses the corner of his mouth, and heads off to wash away the day’s sins. He collapses on the chaise half an hour later, and Damon watches quietly for a few moments.

“Bad day?”

“Bad week, I think,” he says. “This is just day one.”

Damon slinks to the foot of the chaise. “Want to talk about it?”

“Nothing to talk about. How’re you feelin’?”

“Better. Hardly coughed all day.” He shifts to the foot of the chaise, until he can take one of Alaric’s feet on his thigh, and grips it in both hands, working his strong thumbs into the tired, painful pad of the ball of his foot, working hard. Alaric closes his eyes, and lets himself enjoy it.

“Submissive,” Damon says, quietly. “ready to conform to the authority or will of others; meekly obedient or passive. Or, inclined or ready to submit. Unresistingly obedient.”

Alaric opens his eyes, and fights a smile.

“Marked by, or indicating, submission.”

Damon shifts his hand down, working over the heel.

“I’m trying.”

Alaric is about ready to drift off, the massage feels so good. But what Damon is saying is too important. He stays silent, waiting, listening.

“This doesn’t come naturally to me.”
Alaric sighs. “Do you still believe that? Really?”

“Oh, you’ve said it yourself, I’m the worst sub ever. I don’t understand it. I don’t get the rules. I’m trying…”

“Forget the rules for a minute,” Alaric says. “I mean, don’t forget them, but don’t focus on them. Think about how you feel.” His voice sounds a little rough. He’d better not have picked something up from Damon. Fuck, does he not have time for that. “Take off your shirt. Kneel in front of me. Will you be warm enough?”

“It’s warm in here,” Damon says, and raises his eyebrows, pulling his shirt over his head. He really is beautiful. Alaric leaves the room, comes back with a pair of handcuffs, because he doesn’t have time for the ritual of the rope right now. And a mirror, which he sets aside. Roughly, he takes Damon’s wrists, fastens them together at the small of his back, checking the fit. He sits on the couch again, and watches Damon’s face for a moment.

Damon looks deeply resentful.

No, Damon looks like he wants to look deeply resentful. Alaric rubs his thumb over Damon’s bottom lip, again roughly, and Damon’s tongue darts out to wet his lips, anticipatory.

“You’re anticipating a throat full of cock,” Alaric says, “aren’t you?”

Damon starts to nod, but he speaks instead. “Yes.”

“You were in the hospital for over a week,” he says. “With pneumonia. Chest infections, barely breathing. When I found you your lips were blue. And you think I’d threaten your air supply right now?”

Damon’s expression shutters again.

“Answer me.”

“No,” he says. “What are you doing?”

“I’m teaching you something new. This isn’t always about sex. Thought you got that by now. Shuffle forward, relax. Rest against my legs.”

Damon does it, or tries; he’s certainly not resting. Alaric strokes his hair, his shoulders, over his back, and eventually, Damon slumps, resting against the couch, between Alaric’s knees, forehead resting against Alaric’s thigh.

He doesn’t mouth off, and Alaric starts to think maybe he can’t.

“Still warm enough?”

There’s a muffled sound of agreement.

“You brought me the rope yourself, the other, night. You needed something.”

Damon tenses, and nods, catching himself in time to say, “Yes”.

Alaric reaches for the mirror, lying face down against the upholstery, but continues to stroke, until he hears a soft keening sound come from the back of Damon’s throat.

“You’re so good to me. Sit up,” he says. Damon struggles, but he sits up, and Alaric angles the
mirror so Damon can see himself.

“Look at your eyes,” he says. “They’re huge, black. Look at your whole face. See how relaxed you are? You’re a prickly son-of-a-bitch, and you’re always lookin’ for something to say, somethin’ that’ll give you the upper hand again. But like this, you’re different. Look,” he says, because Damon seems to be trying not to, or at least, not to take it in. He tangles his fingers in Damon’s hair, and pulls just far enough, just hard enough, to shock him, and Damon lets out another sound, lets his eyes close.

“It would be easier for you,” Alaric says, “if I was cruel. If I hurt you. You would brace for impact and tell yourself this was all about the money. That’s not who I am. Submission means you let me look after you when I say you need looking after. And when you know you need lookin’ after. Look at your eyes again. And tell me you don’t need this.”

Damon tries not to, but he looks, and his face slackens further. And after a few moments, he relaxes again, forehead on Alaric’s thigh.

“Ric?”

“Yeah.” Alaric grips his hair again, but doesn’t pull back, just scratches his nails over Damon’s scalp, over his neck, down his back.

“I had to be shirtless for this little life lesson?”

Alaric smiles.

“No. I just like pretty things.”

Chapter End Notes

Hi guys! Sorry about the wait. After two weeks interstate for work, I’ve just been moving house, and I’m completely worn out and obliterated. So I didn’t want to correct and post these chapters until I had some brainspace.

Anyway; coming up next, time for some more sex ;)

Thanks again for all the encouragement and lovely reviews!
Damon, frustrated as hell at the lack of momentum in the ‘working’ relationship and worried he's going to lose his job, goes to see Kelly Donovan. (If you need to picture James... just think Sebastian Stan.)

Alaric is gone before Damon wakes up in the morning. He lounges in bed. He misses those hands. He feels shaky and disoriented and he can’t say why. The sight of his face, slack and relaxed, in the mirror, haunts him.

He’s not naturally submissive. Right? This is a job. What does Alaric see that Damon can’t? Is he just a blind optimist, or is Damon missing something fundamental about himself? Nothing makes any sense at all. Damon needs someone to talk to. Who? Stefan’s not particularly helpful. He’ll smile and nod, or he’ll throw things. Caroline doesn’t look like the kind of girl with a lot of experience getting tied up and fucked to within an inch of her life, or handcuffed and petted until she’s almost unconscious, either.

He has damnably few friends.

He pulls a pillow over his face. He can’t ask Kelly. On the other hand, he doesn’t have a whole lot of choice. Fuck his entire fucking life. There was a time when he had friends… goddammit. Even back then, he couldn’t have talked to anyone about this. This is... this is way too much.

He doesn’t want to lose his job because the money is ridiculous. But so much worse; he doesn’t want to lose his job because he’s beginning to recognize how badly he needs Alaric’s gentle hands, and his rough hands, too. It’s been two and a half weeks since Alaric fucked him and he misses that worse than he can admit to himself. He misses waking up with well-lubricated fingers in his ass, the way his body wakes up so completely and suddenly as Alaric eases himself in. He misses the noises of approval when he takes initiative and straddles Alaric’s hips, or wakes him with his very able mouth.

He misses being kissed stupid. He’d been enjoying the increasingly creative rope play, and the way Alaric eased him down afterwards. He curls into a ball, and reminds himself over and over that this is all for Stefan. He wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t for Stefan. He’s not naturally submissive. It can’t possibly be true, because he’s been scrapping his way through life for twenty-six years, fighting for every inch, dragging pretty girls and boys out of dance clubs and bars, and for what? To find out all he’s ever actually needed was someone to pat him on the head and tell him what a good boy he is?

Further under the blankets, and he wraps them around himself like he might never be spotted by
anyone ever again, if he just hides well enough. Not by Alaric and his stupid magic hands. Not by anyone.

Fucking Kelly Donovan.

Around two in the afternoon, he heads out into the world. Neatly dressed (no more old clothes – though he needs to go shopping again, soon, there’s still not much), and then rugged up in a warm coat a couple of sizes too big for him, a couple of scarves, gloves, the works. He needs to get better, and quickly. He stops for a light lunch of grilled salmon and crispy steamed asparagus, and a glass of white wine, not enough to make him tipsy, but hopefully enough to loosen his jaw enough so he can actually open his mouth and talk.

He arrives at the club a little after four, hoping Kelly will be working on the business side of the business, and he hits the jackpot, finding her tucked away in her office in a pair of skinny jeans and an ancient Ramones t-shirt (rumor has it… never mind).

The office is overly warm, for which he is grateful.

“You look like shit,” she says, looking up. “Are you ill, sweetheart?”

“I’m fine.” He pushes the door shut, and takes off Alaric’s coat, hanging it on a coat rack by the door.

“What are you doing here, child?”

“Don’t call me child, it makes you sound old. I have no idea what I’m doing here,” he says, slumping into a chair. “I don’t get this shit. I don’t understand it, I still don’t even know if I like it.” Well, that last part is bullshit, but if he has no defenses at home, he needs something here to protect him from Kelly’s knowing gaze. “I’m definitely not doing it right. If I hadn’t…” he grits his teeth. “If I hadn’t got pneumonia and nearly died a couple of weeks back, I probably would’ve been fired by now. The month is well and truly up, and I’m burning through the overtime. I’m fucked, Kelly.”

He clasps his hands on his lap, and hunches forward.

“Oh, so by fine, you mean not dying anymore? Damon.”

He says nothing.

“Okay, fine,” she says, templing her fingers on the table. “So you’re here because…?”

“I need someone to explain this stuff to me. In a way that actually helps me to understand.”

Kelly smiles, and nods.

“So all that training you claim you’ve had…”

“Don’t tell me you ever bought that crap. I came here cap in hand because I’m pretty and I have a nice ass and the money here is better than regular hooking. Safer, too. Kelly…”

Damon’s puppy dog eyes are his very best weapon, and he’s not afraid to use them. Pity Kelly’s such a hard-ass. She shakes her head.

“You won’t learn this by talking, sugar,” she says. “But maybe I can help. Come back tomorrow. Say, two o’clock? And be prepared to expand your mind. Now shoo. Time is money. And
Damon?"

He pauses by the door, eager to leave before she can change her mind.

She stands, crossing her arms. “You’re sick, sure, pale as a damn ghost. But you look well. Stable. Well, stable for you. Stable-ish. Something must be going right.”

He doesn’t answer. “See you tomorrow,” he says, with a suggestive smile, and a tip of an imaginary hat, and he begins the trek back to the penthouse and Alaric’s familiar hands.

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He’s back in Kelly’s office at ten minutes to two o’clock the next day. She is leaning against the window frame, looking out over the cold, gray city, and her guard is down; she looks beautiful, like that. Damon clears his throat, and she turns.

“You came,” she says, with a smile. “I wasn’t sure you would.”

Damon frowns. “I came to you looking for help. Why wouldn’t I?”

She smiles one of her secret smiles, and slips a hand around his elbow, leading him down the stairs. There’s almost no one here. The club is closed. Technically, the rooms used for scening – the dungeons, most people call them – can be booked for any time of the day, but most people don’t decide lunchtime on a Tuesday is a good time to tie someone up and beat them with a riding crop; it’s just not usually a daytime activity. So there is a cleaner, one security guard, a guy stocking the bar, and not much else. It’ll start to pick up after work. The bar, at least.

“Please tell me I’m about to see the dominant side of Kelly Donovan,” Damon drawls. It’s an intriguing thought.

“Please, Damon, no matter what you’re getting paid now, you couldn’t afford me.”

Ouch. “So…?”

“You’re going to meet the dominant side of yourself. Hope you slept well.”

That’s an even more intriguing thought, enough so Damon’s step falters. “Slept very well,” he complains, because Alaric is still insisting he’s not well enough for anything but some seriously vanilla, non-penetrative sex, and he’s just about sick of it. Pretty soon he’ll resort to saying he needs it, that’s how sick he is of being this dissatisfied.

He steps into the room, and there’s a guy standing idly against the wall. Pretty. Dirty blond curls and watery blue eyes, a dimple on his chin; if things were different, if they’d met in a club, Damon would have sweet-talked him over a dozen shots of tequila and taken him home. He stands straight, and doesn’t say a word.

“Damon, meet James,” Kelly says, pushing the door closed and taking Damon’s jacket, to hang on the coatrack. “James is new here, worked for a friend of mine in Portland for a few years. James, this is Damon, the luckiest asshole in the business.” She coos, and tugs lightly on his shirt. “He’s a live-in sub to one of the most attractive and wealthy men in the city, and he doesn’t have a clue what he’s doing.”

James’ eyes open wider, and he regards Damon with envy.

Damon, for his own part, is starting to flip out, internally at least. What is he doing here? This was
a massive fucking error in judgment.

James nods. “What do you need from me?”

Kelly smiles.

“I need you to take all your clothes off, and lie up here on the bench.”

James nods. No flair, no comment, he just does it. He’s not wearing shoes. He pulls his shirt over his head, and drapes it over the arm of the couch. He steps out of his jeans. As he’s folding them, Kelly says, “tell Damon how we met.”

James smiles. “I was part of the decoration at a party,” he says, putting the jeans on the pile. “Completely tied up and immobile – love that Shibari – and placed on a plinth not far from the bar. People came by, touched me… A few pinched me, or… whatever, it was an incredible experience.” He slips his boxers down over his hips. Damon can’t help but enjoy his body. He looks after himself. Very little hair anywhere. There are fading bruises down one thigh, and up over his ass.

But the thought of being tied up and helpless in a room full of people… Damon feels ill. It’s one thing to be at Alaric’s mercy, or the mercy of a couple of people he knows have been vetted by a club… but a party? All those hands? Nope.

Whatever this is about, he needs it to be done, and over, and he wants to hightail it back to the penthouse and be a model sub from now until the end of history.

“He looked amazing,” Kelly says, sighing. “James loves submission. He revels in it. Don’t you, honey.”

James smiles. His eyelashes are so pale, but so long. He stands with his arms at his sides. “So, you’re struggling with it,” he says, and not like it’s a question. Like Damon has the words ‘defective submissive’ stamped on his forehead.

“It’s a job,” he says, defensive. “I don’t have to like it to be good at it.” Not that he’s good at it. Why is he bothering to argue?

James gives him a knowing look. Like they’re equals, like they’re colleagues. They’re not.

James climbs up onto the bench, and lies face down. The bench is custom built to be just the right height for someone to be tied up with their ass in the air. Damon is well acquainted with it. It’s fine. Close your eyes, think about the money.

“I’m not fucking him,” he says, to Kelly, through gritted teeth.

“That wasn’t the plan. But I’m intrigued, Damon. Why? He’s gorgeous.” Kelly scratches over James’s back with her ludicrously long fingernails, and James shivers.

Why. It’s an annoyingly good question. What he almost says is ‘because I’m in a relationship’, but that would be ridiculous. What he says instead is, “I don’t think my employer would appreciate me trawling for strange meat.”

Kelly raises her eyebrows. “You’re off the clock.”

Damon says nothing, just returns her gaze and waits.
“You’re going to tie him up,” she says, pulling open a drawer. “James? Rope or cuffs?”

“Rope, please,” James says, sounding quite calm.

Great. Damon takes the rope, scowling. “How should I do this?”

“How would your employer do it?”

Why has Damon never really paid attention to the process? Probably because he’s floating away but the time Alaric finishes. He bristles in irritation, fuming at the rope. “Put your hands behind your back,” he says, and James complies.

Clumsily, Damon ties a simple knot at the wrist, and then tries to remember. Alaric twists the rope around twice, and then ties it again, so Damon does that.

“Tight enough?” Kelly asks.

“No,” James answers. Damon is failing at something six-year-olds master when they learn to tie their shoelaces. He readjusts, and continues halfway up James’s arms.

“Better?”

James tests the bonds. “Thank you,” he says, and Damon feels a strange prickling between his shoulder blades. By the time he finishes, James’s shoulders are wrenched into a very awkward position, and the rest of his body is utterly relaxed.

“Does that hurt?” Damon asks.

“It’s uncomfortable,” James answers. “It’s about perfect.”

It’s deeply upsetting that Damon knows what he means. Enough pain to keep him present, make him feel every part of his body. What would Alaric do now?

Shit fuck balls, he wishes he hadn’t come.

He puts his hand on the back of James’ neck, stroking gently for a moment. Down between his shoulder blades. James lets out a tiny keening noise, and Damon moves his hand to his hair, tucking it behind his ear.

James lets out a breath, punchy and audible.

“You’re doing really well,” Damon says, quietly, shocking himself, though his jaw still feels tight. They’re not his words. But James presses back against his hand, and opens his eyes, looking up hopefully.

“Yeah?”


Kelly clears her throat, and Damon steps back in alarm. “Forgot you were there,” he says. “Kelly, what am I doing here?”

“A half-assed job of tying up my handsome friend James. Legs next.”

“How should I… I told you I’m not going to fuck him.”
“You don’t have to. But tie his ankles to the legs of the bench. Go on.” She speaks like he’s a disobedient child. Maybe she has a point.

This is ridiculous. But Damon ties off a piece of rope around James’ left ankle, and secures it to the leg of the bench. And then the right, And James’ hole (bearing signs of fairly recent and thorough use) is exposed. James is exposed, completely vulnerable.

Damon can’t help rolling back through a million memories of scenarios just like this one. Bracing himself for brutal sex, or the riding crop. Never sure what might happen next. And more recent memories. What would Alaric do?

He puts his hand on James’ thigh, stroking reassuringly. “You’re doing great,” he says again, and his voice sort of cracks.

“Are you sure you don’t want to?” James asks, and Damon snickers.

Kelly nudges Damon with her hip. “He needs something. You’re supposed to take care of his needs. Right? There he is, all trusting, tressed up – good job, by the way – and there’s something missing for him.”

“Kelly, I’m not gonna fuck him! Think I made that pretty –”

Kelly opens the second drawer, and Damon raises his eyebrows. Okay, not a bad idea.

“Do you want a plug?” he asks, feeling somewhat ridiculous, but have a foreign object inserted into your asshole without warning is something he knows from experience isn’t exactly fun.

“Yes, please,” James says, voice sounding weak and watery, and more than a little keen.

Damon reaches for the lube, and a small black plug, sanitized and sealed. He lubricates it well, and then pauses.

With one hand, he holds James’ buttocks apart, and with the other, he pushes the plug in. James grunts, and his body goes rigid, as the widest part stretches him, and sighs loudly as it settles into place, nestled neatly between the cheeks of his ass. Damon gives it a pat, and James whines.

“Great. You know the average John who comes in here and rents your handsome friend for a couple of hours doesn’t give a shit what he needs, right?”

“Of course not. But a regular, someone he was building a working relationship with – they would, because if it’s unsatisfying for either of them, it’s not going to work out long term, is it? So over time, they’d adjust to each other – James might learn something different that he actually likes, and so might the client, and they’d find ways to address anything one of them needed that the other couldn’t provide… James here is gay, but two of his regulars are women. He’s learning to love the strap-on, aren’t you, James?”

James says nothing, just lies with a smile on his face.

Damon moves to the other end of the bench, and smoothes over James’ cheek with his hand. James open his eyes, and Damon crouches down.

“Why?” he asks.

“Because I need to know someone’s looking after me,” he says, bluntly. “There’s the pain… the flogger, brutal sex, whatever, but after… I need to know someone’s looking after me.”
“You don’t get that here, though,” Damon says. “These dicks don’t know the first thing about aftercare.” God, even the word is weird, coming from between his lips.

“No,” James says. “But I get it at home. So I’m with Kelly. I’d say you’re the luckiest guy in the business.”

What? “You have a boyfriend?”

James nods. “Yeah. I do. We don’t scene, but he looks after me.”

“This doesn’t bother him?”

“No.” He opens his eyes, and holds Damon’s gaze. Damon has missed something. What Would Alaric Do?

He licks his lips.

“What do you need?” he asks.


“And if I was?”

James thinks about it. He wriggles a tiny bit, as if he’s testing the rope.

“That’s not even the right question. Question is, if you were lying here… what would you need?”

Damon averts his eyes. He has no idea if this has helped at all. Maybe later it’ll start the make sense. Right now, his skin is burning, and he feels sickly jealous of James, tied to the bench so awkwardly. So maybe Alaric is right. Maybe Kelly is right. Maybe he just needs to find it.

James speaks, and Damon doesn’t even hear. “What?” he asks, suddenly, forcing himself to snap out of it.

“If you’re done… I’d like to be untied, please.”

Please, thank you, all that polite stuff… Damon doesn’t know if he can do it. But something feels different, anyway. He unties James’ ankles, first, and then his wrists, slowly, the way Alaric does it, rubbing the skin to get the circulation going. He helps James to sit up, and pointedly ignores the semi James is sporting – seems rude to acknowledge it. James shudders when he sits up, the plug probably hitting his prostate deliciously.

Damon realizes how badly he misses this.

He reaches for a bottle of massage oil – this place is well stocked with everything anyone might need, and works it into James’ arms, soothing the skin where the rope was biting into it.

“He does this for you? Your Dom?”

Damon blinks. “Yeah.”

James shares a look with Kelly, and Damon wonders if they’re right. Maybe he is the luckiest asshole in the business.

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Kelly walks him to the door.

“What was that supposed to achieve?” Damon says.

“What did it achieve?” is her answer.

“I know I’m no Dom,” Damon says. “I don’t think that was what you thought I’d discover about myself, though, was it?”

“Go home, Damon. Go home, and when you do, remember this. See what happens. I’ll bill you.”

He kisses her cheek, pulls on Alaric’s coat again, and sets out into the cold.
When Alaric steps out of the elevator at eight that evening, before he even opens the door to the penthouse, he is met by the scent of onions, garlic, tomatoes. Italian. Damon must have ordered. But no, there he is in the kitchen, feet endearingly bare, tasting the sauce he obviously made himself.

“Hi honey,” Damon says, looking up. “You’re home.”

“You can cook?” Alaric says in wonder.

“My mom taught me. Go wash the day off and I’ll serve.”

Alaric kisses the corner of his mouth, and heads off to shower.

Damon surprises him on a regular basis, but this… yes, he’s surprised. Pleasantly. He can’t remember the last time someone cooked a meal for him. Without being paid. Well… okay, Damon is paid, but not for this. When he sits at the dining table, there’s a glass of wine to the right of his plate, and the pasta looks, and smells, amazing. Some spicy sausage in the sauce, and a fine linguini, spinach and herbs, and Damon looks remarkably placid.

“This is incredible,” Alaric says, as he swallows his first mouthful. “Really. Incredible.”

“And how was work, dear?” Damon asks, with a smug little smile. He looks pleased with the compliment.

“Work-like. What did you get up to?”

“Not much.” But there’s something he wants to say, Alaric can see that.

“Damon?”

Damon puts his fork down. “It’s time to get back to it,” he says, simply. “Please. I’m better, I’m fine. I haven’t so much as coughed in the last couple of days. So. I want to get back to it. You know, it’s my job.”

It is. And Damon is right. They need the structure again. “When?”
Damon hesitates. Alaric can see that he wants to say ‘right now’, or some more demanding version of that, but instead, he says “as soon as you want to.”

Which is pretty impressive for Damon.

And yes, he’s right, it’s time. And so what if it’s early in the week, and he was planning a quiet night? He stands up, and walks through the apartment to the bedroom. He unlocks the drawer, and hunts around until he finds the collar.

When he gets back to the table, Damon is sitting up straight, wary and anticipatory. When he sees the collar, his eyes go very wide.

“Is this alright?”

Damon nods, and catches himself. “Yes,” he says, putting his hands in his lap, waiting. His voice trembles just a touch. Something is different, and Alaric can’t put his finger on it.

The collar is made of very fine, soft leather, lined with close-cut sheepskin. Alaric takes his time, finding the right place to set it, the right hole for the buckle. When it’s secured – but not tight – he settles his hands on Damon’s shoulders, and kisses the top of his head.

“Tonight,” he says. “Finish your dinner.”

Damon reaches up to touch the collar, still looking stunned, a little shocky. “How do I look?” he asks.

Alaric thinks for a moment.

“Like you’re mine,” he says, and returns to his meal.

Damon rinses the dishes, and puts them in the dishwasher; there are leftovers, which he puts in a plastic container he finds in one of the cupboards (Alaric is surprised – he didn’t know he had anything like that. Probably, having actually cooked a real meal here, Damon knows the kitchen better than Alaric himself does, after four years). He hesitates over the pot.

“Leave it,” Alaric says, so Damon pours so water into the bottom to stop everything from sticking, and turns around. He looks so calm and docile, and a wave of need passes through Alaric’s body, so strong it’s almost physical. “Come here.”

Damon steps up close, close enough so that Alaric can settle his hands on his hips. He looks into that waiting, anticipatory face, and leans to kiss him. Just a brush of lips, but Damon’s eyes close for a moment.

“We’ll take it easy tonight.”

“No,” Damon says. “Please, I need…”

Alaric waits. What the hell happened today?

“I don’t want to take it easy.” Damon’s teeth are gritted, and he looks fierce, barely holding onto his control. “I don’t need that. I get it, I got sick. But I don’t need to take it easy. I need to do this.”

“Is that right. What is it you need, then, Damon?”

And now he’s stumped again, but trying, so hard.
“Tie me up.” He closes his eyes, and opens them again. “Tie me up, and fuck me. Hard, thoroughly. Leave bruises down my thighs. I’m yours, remember? This is what we do.” Alaric is ridiculously turned on, and Damon is staring at his mouth. “So do it.”

Alaric is already half hard in anticipation. “Alright,” he says. “I don’t know what the hell happened today, but I like it. Come on,” and he leads Damon to the bedroom.

A remote control turns on the quiet music, and Damon starts to look relaxed again. He takes off his shirt—it’s new, it’s nice. He’s not wearing a belt, which is unusual, but they’re nicely cut pants. They come off next, and he folds them at the crease and drapes them over the chair. He hooks his thumbs in his boxers, and raises his eyebrows in question.


Wearing nothing but the collar, and half hard in anticipation, Damon is a thing of beauty.

Alaric takes the soft leather cuffs from the drawer, and secures them around Damon’s wrists. He links them with a small chain. Damon trembles, and his eyes are very dark. A second chain is hung from a discreet hook in the section of wood that joins the top of the bed posts, at the foot of the bed. He joins the chains, so Damon’s arms are secured above his head, facing away from Alaric.

“Does it feel okay?”

“Yes,” Damon says, still docile. Alaric rubs his hand over his back.

“Warm enough?”

“Yes.”

The cuffs for his ankles are collected next, and Alaric drops to his knees, securing them. One spreader bar, not too long, is secured between them.

“Still okay? Do you feels like you might fall?”

“No,” Damon says. “I’m fine.” His voice sounds weak. Alaric loves it. He’s behaving so well he deserves a treat. So Alaric reaches with both hands, and spreads the cheeks of his ass, and licks from his perineum to the tidy pucker of his hole, licking and kissing wetly.

Damon lets out the most obscene sound Alaric has ever heard, but he manages to stay on his feet, even if his knees buckle somewhat. Alaric forces his tongue into a tiny point, breaching Damon’s sphincter, and Damon yelps. He tongue fucks Damon until the sounds coming from his throat don’t sound human and then he does it again until Damon is fighting against the chains, one hand reaching around to brush fingertips over his dick. Damon cries out, desperate for some friction, and swears, and groans Alaric’s name, caught between the desire to stay still and enjoy the thorough tongue-lashing and the desire to fuck up into a grip that isn’t even there.

It’s a wonderful sound.

Alaric gets to his feet.

He steps into the bathroom to rinse his mouth and give Damon some time to wait. Damon simultaneously loathes and loves being made to wait. He’s tense, at first, and then irritated, panicky, and then he slips into the most beautiful calm.

When he comes back, Alaric spends a minute or two just watching. Damon’s face is relaxed,
though he must be getting uncomfortable by now. His eyes are closed, his face is slack, and he’s sort of swaying. A puddle of pre-come on the bedspread completes the tableau nicely.

Alaric reaches out to touch his face, and runs his hand over the collar, reminding Damon that it’s there.

“You’re doing great,” he says quietly.

“Yeah?”

It’s such an unexpected response that Alaric is momentarily jarred.

“Yeah,” he says.

Damon licks his lips.

“You wanted me to mark you.”

“I… do you want…”

“I want you to spend all day tomorrow unable to sit down without remembering tonight. Do you want the riding crop, or the flogger?”


Not just yet, though.

He lubricates his fingers, and runs them over Damon’s hole, slipping one inside quickly, and working it in and out. Two fingers. Stretching him. Damon shudders when Alaric finds his prostate, and when Alaric reaches around his hips, he finds him rock hard, twitching in Alaric’s hand. He smiles.

From the drawer, he fetches a dildo on a harness.

“Gonna keep you wide open until I’m ready for you,” he says. “Is that alright?”

“Fuck yes,” Damon says, and his head falls forward. “Yes. I wish…”

“What?” He returns his fingers to the task, stretching and kneading and spreading Damon out.

“I wish you didn’t ask about everything.”

Alaric lets out a quiet breath. Another step. Another day. Not today.

He takes his time – the dildo is long, but it’s not too thick, and he takes to opportunity to move it in and out a few times, making Damon twitch and rock back against the sensation. When it’s settled, it’s designed to press against the prostate, so that every time Damon moves, fireworks will go off. And he’s going to move a lot. He clips the harness around Damon’s upper thighs, and then around his hips, and gives it another nudge.

“Jesus Christ, Ric,” Damon growls. Alaric kisses his shoulder.

“You’re amazing tonight,” he says. “You’re gagging for it.”

“I’ve been gagging for it for days,” Damon amends. “You were too busy being a nursemaid to do
anything about it.”

“Watch your mouth.” But when he thinks about it... when the rest of the rules are being followed, he likes Damon a little mouthy. He nudges the dildo one more time, sending a spasm through Damon’s body, eliciting another string of profanities, and smiles.

He fetches the riding crop, and stands for a moment, drinking in the sight. Damon looks incredible. Shaking slightly, partly with need, partly with the effort of standing with his feet apart and his arms over his head. And with his hole being thoroughly made ready for the very thorough fucking he’s going to receive when Alaric is done with the crop.

“Ready?”

“Yes,” Damon says, and he braces.

He takes the first caning across the back of his thigh, and shudders, and the dildo shifts inside him so he gasps, pleasure and pain mingling in a messy swirl in his head.

“Hard enough?”

“Yes,” Damon gasps, dropping his head.

“Don’t try to be quiet,” Alaric says. “Don’t hold it back. I want to hear you.”

A second, and a third, catch him across the buttock, and he cries out, and Alaric smiles. He waits a few moments, watching as the white skin refills with blood, where tomorrow, Damon will be bruised and sore. He runs his fingertips over the burning flesh, following the lines.

And he steps back. No warning, this time. *Thwack.*

Damon cries out again, and slumps forward. Alaric steps closer, gripping his hair, pulling his head back. “Stand straight,” he says, and Damon forces himself to hold the posture, though he’s shaking harder, now. He’s so beautiful like this. Another step back.

Another line across the back of Damon’s thighs, and another cry, and Damon forces his knees to lock and hold him up.

Again and again, until the messy red lines begin to criss cross, and Alaric is done. Not quite twenty. Damon is a wreck, but he makes a small sound of disappointment when Alaric returns the crop to the drawer. But Alaric is done, definitely done, and starting to feel a little spacy himself.

He drops to one knee again, and unclips the spreader bar from between Damon’s ankles, but after a moment’s consideration he leaves the straps where they are. He reaches up to unclip the chain between Damon’s wrists from the chain hanging down, and Damon staggers. Alaric pulls him close, arms wrapped around him, supporting most of his weight.

“You were amazing,” he says.

Damon is silent for a moment, arms looping around Alaric’s shoulders. “Thank you,” he murmurs.

Alaric leads him around to the side of the bed, helping him up onto it. He is pliant, and exhausted, but settles with his ass is the air and knees beneath him, arms out in front. Alaric could make him wait, but he doesn’t want to, not now. He carefully unbucks the harness, and eases the dildo out carefully. Damon shudders, over and over, and his mouth falls open, and he’s beautiful. And he’s wide open, begging to be stuffed full.
Soon, but not yet.

Alaric takes his clothes off, slowly. Just jeans, a sweater and t-shirt, and he leaves them on the armchair, and climbs up onto the bed behind Damon. He pours a little extra lube over his cock, settling the bottle aside. He bumps the blunt head against Damon’s well-stretched hole, teasing a little, until Damon whines in his throat and pushes back insistently, and then he pushes inside, not slowing until he’s bottomed out, balls smacking lightly against Damon’s perineum. He doesn’t start slowly. He starts with a ferocious pace, right off the mark. Damon tries to reach for him, forgetting over and over that his wrists are linked. He groans loudly.

For fuck’s sake, whatever has gotten into him, Alaric approves. It has to hurt, Alaric’s pelvis slapping against his abused skin, even the hands which grip his hips as Alaric drives into him, over and over again. It doesn’t last long, not after two and a half weeks with no sex, and with Damon behaving like this.

He reaches to grip Damon’s hair in his hand, and he wishes he could see Damon’s face; he can only imagine the way his mouth has fallen open in ecstasy, and wonder if there are tears.

“Don’t float away,” he says. “Feel it. Feel everything.” He slaps the sensitive skin of Damon’s thigh and Damon cries out again, one hand darting out suddenly to grip the slats of the bedhead, dragging the second along with it. Alaric releases his hair, returns his hands to Damon’s hips, focusing on that brutal rhythm.

Alaric comes with a shout, feeling an overwhelming relief as his balls tighten suddenly. He doesn’t move, not for a long time, just rocking against Damon’s hips.

Oh, dear god, did he need that. He brushes his hand over Damon’s lower back, once, twice, soothing already, and gentle over the bruising which has begun to blossom on his ass, on his thighs.

Alaric would very much like to stay there forever, but already his cock is softening, and he can’t. He withdraws, and eases Damon down onto his side, lying down alongside him.

Damon’s face is still slack, and there are tears pouring out of his eyes, which look black almost to the edge of the irises, just a sliver of blue framing the enormous pupils. He blinks slowly, eyes on Alaric’s face, but stays quite still.

There are things Alaric wants to say, but they can wait.

He forces himself to head to the bathroom, find something to clean Damon up with. A warm face washer, perfect. Sitting on the edge of the bed, he washes gently between Damon’s legs, and still Damon doesn’t move.

He removes the cuffs from Damon ankles, and then from his wrists. The ankles look fine but the wrists are red, and sore. Alaric rubs massage oil into them, taking his time, meeting Damon’s eyes every few moments. Damon never looks away from him. He finds aloe vera cream in the bathroom, and puts a little on the welts, on his ass, rubbing carefully, soothing the bite of the crop. Damon flinches, a few times, but he’ll be glad when it’s not so bad in the morning.

All the while, he speaks quietly. You were amazing. You’re so good to me. You just let go, didn’t you. He’s still distantly aroused, but it’s more like an imprint than anything else. And he’s feeling a little out of it himself. No, that’s a lie, he feels thoroughly out of it, needs to settle back against the pillows with the weight of Damon over his body.

Alaric kisses his cheek, and adjusts the bedding around him. Damon makes no move to help.
Alaric pulls Damon into his arms, Damon who moves like a rag doll, only reacting when Alaric tangles their fingers together.

He strokes over Damon’s back, over his hips, gentle over the bruises on his ass. Damon shivers, and closes his arm over Alaric’s waist. And at some point, Alaric realizes that Damon has drifted off to sleep.

He could follow. He should follow, but along with the exhaustion of his body, he’s buzzed, enjoying every sensation, the soft puffs of breath against his chest, Damon’s warm, heavy flesh. He presses his lips to Damon’s hair, and settles back to wait it out.

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The intention is not to sleep, but he rouses when Damon starts to move anyway, so sleep obviously happened at some point. Damon hisses, air taken quickly between his teeth, and swears quietly. Alaric feels himself smile, and lets Damon wriggle out of his arms and lie back, hissing again when his ass meets the mattress.

“How does that feel?” he asks.

“Hurts,” Damon answers, smiling, and his tongue darts out to moisten his lips. Alaric can see it in the glow of the bright night through the oversized windows. “Feels good.” He stretches, hands up over his head, and tents his knees. Nope, uncomfortable. He snickers as he drops them again. “I used to hate that.”

Alaric reaches out to stroke his knuckles over Damon’s chest, and Damon touches his hand.

“So what changed?”

Damon says nothing, and lies still, for a few moments; and then he climbs over Alaric’s body to settle on the other side. He wants to be spooned, but he wants the bruises up off the bed. Alaric complies, wrapping arms around his beautiful body and kissing his shoulder, pressing against the curve that starts at his ankles and ends with lips, and hair.

“Ask me tomorrow,” Damon says.

Alright. “Do you need to come?”

Damon shakes his head, and they go back to sleep.
Next morning, they wake in stages, and Damon doesn’t comment on the fact that Alaric is probably late for work. They shower slowly, bodies pressed together and mouths touching every time they come close. Alaric gives Damon’s ass a squeeze, right over the worst of the bruising, and Damon shivers deliciously.

He really will feel it all day. The fucking and the flogging. Any time his sits down. He smiles as Alaric’s arms go around him from behind, a weird fluffy sponge thing rubbing Alaric’s sandalwood body gel over his stomach. He’ll smell that all day. Remember who he belongs to.

Maybe he’ll wear the collar Alaric finally removed before they climbed into the shower. Limp around town in it. Go show off to Kelly.

They eat a slow breakfast before Alaric puts on the public persona he clearly doesn’t like too much.

“I want to show you something,” he says. “Get dressed.”

Damon drags jeans over his hips and pulls on a t-shirt, a black v-neck sweater. Steps into a pair of shiny black wingtips. “Do I need a coat?”

“No.”

Down the elevator to the ground floor, and up another down to the 32nd. Alaric is wearing a smile Damon doesn’t recognize. He feels a thrill of apprehension as Alaric leads him down a corridor.

“Please be a dungeon,” he purrs, crossing his fingers at the door.

“It’s not a dungeon,” Alaric scolds, and unlocks the door. “It’s an apartment. Your apartment. You’re better, now, you don’t need to spend all weekend with me, hang out in the penthouse all day. You need your own space.”

Damon freezes.

It’s furnished. Of course it’s furnished. By the same stylist who did the penthouse. Which is nice. The half-dozen boxes stacked neatly in the living area are uniform and neatly labeled, the rest, in the bedroom, just the same. Did it really take twelve boxes to pack up his stuff? The oversized bed, with its expensive sheets, matching side tables; it looks like it was summoned just so from a furniture catalogue. The kitchen is a dream, if you like to cook, and Damon likes to cook. A second bedroom is an empty palette. A study, if Damon was the type. Or somewhere for a friend to stay, if Damon had a friend.

“What do you think?”
It’s beautiful, but that’s not the issue. His mouth opens, and closes. “It’s great,” he says, tightly, already wanting to crawl under Alaric’s covers and die. Why does this feel like a demotion, after his best night’s work so far?

Alaric leans to kiss him. “Consider it a fringe benefit. I gotta go. I’ve got a meeting in an hour across town. Make it your own,” he says, handing over two sets of keys, and after a quick swat to Damon’s sore thigh, he disappears out the door. Damon looks around, stares out the window at the incredible view over Central Park. And heads back upstairs to sulk.

He sends a text message while Alaric is en route to work. Sits and stares at his phone for twenty-five minutes until the little status message changes from ‘delivered’ to ‘read’. And he wonders, what did Alaric think when he read it? Is he already making plans?

(Simple little words.

[text]: I have a safe word for a reason. I don’t want to consent every time.

Damon sincerely hopes Alaric understands it.)

He lounges on Alaric’s couch for a couple of hours, on his back despite the ache, because he doesn’t want his own apartment. He doesn’t want to go there during the day, or on the weekends. He wants to stay right here in this penthouse. What difference does it really make? The last few weekends, they’ve been together, why does it have to change? Alaric is different on the weekends. Acts more like a boyfriend. It could be better than that. Lazy couch sex with no power dynamics, Sunday afternoon in a bar listening to music (does Alaric ever go out when it’s not for work? Does he slip on one of those dark sweaters and his jeans and sit somewhere with peanuts on the bar? No one would recognize him. His name is barely known, except by people who need to know it. His face would just be his own… handsome, stubbled and anonymous).

He wants to stay here. It’s the first place that’s felt like home since he sold his own apartment, well over a year ago.

But he drags himself and his new keys down two sets of elevators, and wanders in the halls for a minute trying to find his own door again, to unpack.

It doesn’t take long.

Damon misses his books. But the best of them had paid for two and a half month's rent a few months back, first editions and rare copies, things his mother had treasured. He wonders, briefly, about trying to buy a few of them back, but it’s unlikely that he could even find them again. It hurts to think about them. Even the novels he’d traded to a second hand shop looking for new stuff to read, their total value decreasing with each transaction until they’d finally dwindled to nothing. The empty bookshelf against the wall looks mournfully at him.

When he has finished unpacking (it takes less than an hour) he slouches on the couch. It’s the most comfortable thing in the world, maybe, like a cloud brought down to earth and given some solidity. It holds him gently, but it doesn’t do anything about the irritation he feels at essentially being kicked out of the nest.

(Is that fair? Probably not. Damon doesn’t care.)

He drags his ass down into the streets to find some lunch. He is determined not to fill up the fridge. He eats dinner with Alaric, and breakfast when he can be bothered, and he earns half a million dollars a year before tax and he’s not making sandwiches for lunch. He finds a deli, and
sits by the window, watching people pull their jackets tight, and wondering, as New Yorkers always do in January, whether it will ever be warm again, if the snow will really melt, if there will honestly be a day that is so hot all you can do is sack out in front of the air conditioner.

He has nearly finished his pastrami on rye and is eyeing the chicken noodle soup on the menu when his phone buzzes with a message.

[text]: Understood. Better find yourself a safe gesture, too.

A safe gesture. In case he can’t speak. The thought sends twin flashes of fear and want, equally delicious, through Damon’s body, and he licks his lips, wondering what he’s just signed up for.

He doesn’t want to face the pristine apartment, still so empty, just yet, so he heads for the subway to cross the city and see Stefan.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry it's been so long, folks; after the big move, I've had a frantic travel schedule, a leak in the shower, and a severe lack of ability to sit down and focus. But the next few chapters are sketched out and I hope to get back to posting two chapters every second fortnight.
Don't hold me to it, but I promise I will do my best.
PS I have had a couple of prompts for things people would like to see happen. Some might, other might not but they have at least got me thinking a bit. Happy to receive any such requests here, or if you'd rather be anonymous, drop me an anon ask on tumblr (please-be-kidding).
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Alaric’s job is driving him insane, but Damon is a more than adequate distraction.

“Mr. Saltzman?”

It’s rare for Alaric to let himself get sucked into daydreaming at work but at the moment, his people have produced nothing but utterly run of the mill ideas for weeks, and he is thinking about his parents, and needing to see them, and what exactly he might do to Damon when he gets home. That fucking message. What a mess. I don’t want to have to consent every time. Like he can read Alaric’s mind. Whatever’s changed, the last few days, Alaric likes it way too much. He pictures Damon’s bruised ass and thigh, the way he’d curled up so gingerly the night before, trusting and needy, and…

“Mr…?”

Fuck, he’s doing it again.

“Don’t call me Mr. Saltzman,” he says, loosening his tie. “This is… this is shit, you guys know that. Right? I tell you I want a project that will be a signature for the company, and you bring me…”

He looks around the room at each of the faces, all embarrassed, not a one disagreeing.

He stares at the PowerPoint presentation up on the wall. Photographs of a crumbling art deco apartment block somewhere in midtown. Empty, and in need of tearing down, the existing owners having declared bankruptcy and the site going fallow. The hotel being built in Chicago which will look exactly like fifteen other Chicago hotels was the last one up. Next up? Please, let it be a sleazy looking resort on Virginia Beach. Ooh, no, even better, a casino in Atlantic City, that would be original.

He puts his hands behind his head.

It feels like a million years since he had a project he could really get excited about. Maybe back when he sold his soul for his first major apartment block. Or the hotel in Las Vegas, which put his name on the Fortune Five Hundred list at last. Only a handful of years ago, now, and how strange is that? Who does this? He gazes out the window of the boardroom for a long time.

“Do you want the status on the Florida project…?”

“No, Paul,” Alaric says, without looking up. “I can read. They’re breaking ground next month.”

He stands, and crosses the room, one arm folded against the window, staring out at the view of the city he loves.

“Maybe if you were more specific,” says Louis, a rat-faced man Alaric has no great love for but who has, at times, proved almost prescient, jumping in on a deal so quickly Alaric has to wonder sometimes if he’s completely above board. “Signature project. See when I hear that, I think, ooh,
boutique hotel, exclusive apartments, and that’s exactly what they brought you.”

They. So careful to exclude himself from this round of disappointments.

But Alaric can’t be more specific. There’s something missing, and he has no idea what it is. He’s not excited about anything. Not at work. This has sustained him for so many years – meteoric rise, they called it, when he found himself the focus of some feature in a business journal, or worse. He doesn’t do interviews, and feels pleased when all they can call on for images is the standard commons-licensed photographs in the press kit on his website, a handful of grainy cell-phone shots from parties he’s been spotted at.

(He has his reasons for keeping private.)

“You can go,” he says, and after the silence of hesitation, there is a flurry of activity behind him, and everybody scrambles to leave. Already cooking up new ideas. Nervous as hell, because Alaric is the type to encourage, and he’s failed in that today, and it makes them nervous. Maybe they need firecrackers lit under their asses.

He spends the rest of the day listlessly answering emails and signing things he barely reads, dreaming of that signature development which is always just on the other side of some soulless project he’s already neck deep in.

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He sends Caroline a message to say he doesn’t need to be collected, and catches a cab to Midtown to see Meredith, and the baby. She looks tired, and happy, and the apartment (it’s nice; they’re both doctors, Meredith’s husband the chief of cardio-thoracic surgery at Mount Sinai, and they want for nothing) smells like sweet milk. How much things have changed in a year.

“You look…”

“Don’t finish that sentence,” Alaric says, leaning in to kiss Meredith’s cheek. She thrusts the baby into his arms, which is a shock – are they always this small? – and Alaric steps inside, totally overwhelmed, but intrigued just the same.

“He’s cute,” he says. “Lucky for him he’s got his mom’s face. Am I holding him right?”

“As long as the head is supported,” Meredith says, but it’s crazy; already she wants her hands on him. She’s madly in love. She’s supposed to be taking three months off. Can she really go back that quickly?

Time will tell.

“I was going to say you look like you’ve had a bad day.”

Alaric hands the baby back (too small, too breakable, and he really wants a drink).

“Not bad, just not good. I… this job is… it’s soulless. No, that’s bullshit. What I’m doing lately. That’s soulless. Eye on the bottom line all the time. Shareholders, and a board, and nothing to make me want to get out of bed in the morning.”

“Poor baby,” she says. “I prescribe an early retirement and a relationship that lasts longer than a week. Ever think that’s it?”

“What?”
“Your job isn’t what’s empty. Your life is.”

If she only knew. Still, Alaric says nothing.

“I saw a photo of you in the paper, just before Christmas,” she says, carefully. “With someone I didn’t recognize…”

“Just a friend,” Alaric says, because it must have been at the piano concert (concert. Ha).

“Everyone’s just a friend, and even your friends don’t see you enough. And have you seen your parents lately?”

“I didn’t come here for a lecture.” And yet, she’s the only one who gets away with giving him one. Every single time. “I came here to be inspired.”

“Oh, Ric,” she says, staring into the baby’s face again. “You really don’t listen. You think work comes first, and everything else has to fit around it. It shouldn’t be like that.”

“Says the woman who works eighty hours a week in the emergency room.”

“Not eighty. And look at me now. Ric. Your life is going by. So damn fast. One day you’ll look up and you’ll realize that a handful of people know you as the guy who built… something, but there’s no one to spend your weekend with. Do you really want that?” Big brown eyes, tired and happy. She’s the most beautiful she’s ever been, with this baby in her arms.

“Not everyone you meet is going to turn out to be Isobel,” she finishes, wisely, and Alaric flinches.

“I should go.”

“Ric, no. Stay for dinner.”

He forces a smile. “I’m expected somewhere.”

“Unless it’s a date, cancel it.”

He imagines Damon stretched out over the couch in the loft, bare toes waggling, face in a book or dozing with music playing softly in the background.

“Not exactly a date,” he says. “I should go.”

He hasn’t even taken his coat off. Makes it easier to beat a hasty retreat. He kisses the baby – Oliver, it’s Oliver, on the forehead, and Meredith on the corner of the mouth.

“Did you get my gift?”

“I did,” she says, at the door.

“I didn’t pick it,” he admits. “Is it nice?”

“I know you didn’t pick it. And it’s very nice.”

“Caroline.”

“Tell her I said thanks. And Ric? Please, think about it. Please. I don’t want you to be lonely. I have this friend…”
“It’s good to have friends,” he says, mocking lightly. Himself, mostly. He smiles, gruff, and pulls the door shut behind him.

It takes nearly forty minutes to get across town to the apartment, and the air temperature has dropped considerably by the time he arrives, close to nine o’clock. Damon is not on the couch with his toes waggling. Alaric double checks the time as he pulls the door closed behind him.

He doesn’t speak. He stands silently for a moment in the low light.

Damon’s in the bath.

Sort of a delicious thought. Alaric walks silently through the living room, pausing to deposit his briefcase by the sideboard. Into his bedroom, where the lights are low, and the music plays softly. Not Alaric’s music. He doesn’t recognize it. Nice, though. He crosses to the bathroom, and leans against the jamb.

Damon is stretched out against the side of the giant tub, and he straightens his head, and opens his eyes. The smile is too seductive by miles, and his pale blue eyes look out at Alaric from under long black eyelashes. There is a mountain of bubbles in the bath, which is strange, and amusing. And a little regrettable, because most of Damon’s body is obscured.

“Hi, honey,” he says. “You’re home.”

Alaric says nothing, just spends a long moment enjoying the view, and then heads back into the bedroom to undress. He hangs his suit, and leaves his shirt and boxers in the hamper with the sensible socks he resents with unearthly passion some days. Nude, he returns to the bathroom, and Damon’s appreciative expression. He slips into the hot water, letting it cushion his tired muscles, and lets out a soft sigh.

“You bought bubble bath?”

“A bath this big and you don’t have bubble bath,” Damon purrs. “You really don’t know how to live, do you?”

“I do alright.” Alaric closes his eyes, only opening them when he feels the water move, Damon moving across the spa to press against his body.

He lets himself be kissed, and then his arms are around Damon’s back, and he’s kissing back, pulling him closer.

“You look stressed,” Damon says, when their mouths part. “You want to talk about it?”

Alaric snorts. “No. Why would I bring that to this?”

To his surprise, Damon looks hurt, for a second, but only a second. Damon reaches between their bodies and wraps his hand around Alaric’s cock, stroking slowly under the water until he’s half hard.

“I used to be rich, you know,” he says. “I do know a thing or two about being rich and miserable about it. My father was a pro. I might actually be able to help.”

Alaric smiles. “You do. Just… a little harder.” Damon obliges cheerfully, licking his lips, and Alaric drags his fingernails up the column of Damon’s spine, making him shiver. Up over his neck. Up into his hair, fingers tangling, and then he pulls back suddenly.
Damon lets out a shocked sound, wrenched from somewhere deep in his throat, and his eyes roll back, and his body starts to go limp. Alaric watches as his shoulders roll forward, and though he does a good job of keeping his hand moving, he’s already looking a little lost. When Alaric releases his hair, he lets out a tiny mewl of something like disappointment, and leans until his head rests on Alaric’s shoulder.

Alaric scratches down over his spine again, and Damon curves against the sensation, the movement of his hand jerking roughly, now, and no way in hell is Alaric coming in the bathtub but he’s a long way from needing to worry about that. So his hand travels further south, giving Damon’s ass a squeeze – such a nice ass – and slipping between the…

His head snaps up, and so does Damon’s, eyes glazed, but looking far too fucking pleased with himself.

“Are you wearing a plug?”

It’s a stupid question, because Damon is definitely wearing a plug.

“All ready for you,” he purrs, and this wasn’t even on the cards tonight, but it is now. Tonight Alaric only wanted to sack out on the couch and read, listen to music, but that plan has been obliterated.

“Out of the tub,” Alaric growls, and Damon pushes away from him, smirking, to pull himself over the edge and into the bathroom. Alaric can see the black silicon nestling between the cheeks of his ass like the world’s best promise, and he climbs out after him. Like he is prey. A forgone conclusion, which he is. Owned. Damon is barely in the bedroom when Alaric pushes him to the ground, and he goes unresisting, water dripping into the carpet; it’s fine, it will dry, and Alaric wouldn’t care either way. A hand on the back of Damon’s head.

“Don’t move.”

He wants him restrained, but urgency prevents him from being able to take his time with rope, or the leather cuffs and their chains, so handcuffs it is; he grabs them from the drawer, not bothering to close it again. He pulls Damon’s hands roughly out in front of him, around the leg of the bed, and snaps the cuffs firmly against his wrists. Too firmly? Damon’s eyes are wide and flat when he looks up at Alaric, mouth slack, trying and failing to prop himself up on his elbows.

Alaric crouches behind Damon, and pats once firmly over the plug, making it move inside him, making him cry out and roll his spine again.

He carefully grips the end of the plug, nestled so neatly against Damon’s ass, and gives an experimental tug which has almost the exact same effect; Damon cries out, and his upper body presses into the carpet, and he just wants so badly. Alaric gets a better grip.

Damon is hard as nails, leaking on the carpet (damn, better get it cleaned), when Alaric pulls hard enough to get the widest part of the plug free, and Damon’s head actually snaps back, pain and pleasure mingling in his already short-circuiting brain.

The plug is large, much larger than any of those Alaric purchased, and long, and the fact he knows Damon bought it himself, worked himself open with those pianists’ hands, lubed the thing up and settled it inside himself, ready for Alaric, makes this that much better. He pulls it all the way out, and sets it aside.

“Went shopping for me,” he says, taking a moment to squeeze Damon’s thigh, the deep bruises
there. Damon lets out a yelp, and curves his body again. Gagging for it.

“For you,” he agrees, forehead pressed against the carpet.

Alaric wastes no more time; he pushes the head of his cock past the abused ring of muscle, and Damon sucks air through his teeth. He pushes forward until he bottoms out, and then, just to be torturous, he stops, just rocking gently.

Damon forgets his hands are tied, and whines somewhere low in his throat when he can’t reach back. But he doesn’t complain.

Alaric pulls back, just far enough to make Damon moan when he slams back in, and then again, and again, faster and rougher until they are both sweating profusely. He reaches around Damon’s hip, and closes his had around Damon’s cock.

“You’ve been waiting to come ever since you put it in,” he says, voice disjointed from the effort. “Haven’t you.”

Damon doesn’t answer, but he jerks forward into Alaric’s hand. He really does need to come. Alaric plans to let him. The heat and friction continues to build, and Damon pulls against the cuffs over and over. Alaric feels carpet burn on his knees. He doesn’t care.

Damon comes hard, spilling over Alaric’s hand, onto the carpet, and Alaric still doesn’t care. He forces Damon’s knees a little further apart – his muscles must be screaming – and continues the brutal rhythm, for several more minutes. Time loses meaning, but somewhere in the back of Alaric’s foggy head he is aware that the song has changed twice.

At last, his hips stutter, and he feels the tension begin to melt low in his body. He comes with a shout, hips still snapping, and finally falls onto Damon’s body, covering him, weighing him down, lips pressed against his shoulder.

“You’re so fucking good to me,” he says, and Damon turns his head, so Alaric kisses his warm cheek. “So good. Christ, I’m glad I found you.”

That’s a little too intimate, but Damon only blinks, that familiar smirk on his lips, and waits.

Alaric forces himself to withdraw, which sucks, and get to his feet, which is nearly impossible, and he crosses the room to the drawer to fetch the keys. He can hardly get the key into the tiny lock, his hands are shaking so badly, but he removes them, and Damon stretches his wrists, rolls onto his side to finally rest his body. His eyes are nearly black, and his face is relaxed. No trace of his usual smug.

Alaric helps him to his feet, and back to the bathtub, and lowers him into it. When they are both there, he settles on one of the seats, and pulls Damon against him, Damon’s back to his chest.

Damon relaxes, purring, head tipping back against Alaric’s shoulder. Alaric lightly strokes over his body.

“Cheered up yet?” Damon asks, with a ballsy little twist in his voice. He reaches up to brush fingers over Alaric’s throat.

“Somewhat.” A kiss to Damon’s shoulder. “You’re the best.” Damon doesn’t even argue. He’s loose-limbed and pliant in Alaric’s arms, happy. He curves back to let Alaric kiss his throat. The bubbles are gone, and the water is cooling, but they need to rinse off, and they do it slowly, enjoying.
“Like the apartment?”

Damon stiffens, for a moment. “It’s great,” he says, but flatly. “Thanks.”

No telling what the tone in his voice is about, so Alaric lets it slide.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

It's a date. No, it's not.
It might be, sort of, a date.

The week goes well. Damon is unable to goad Alaric into anything more adventurous, but it doesn’t bother him, much, and besides, Alaric obviously has things on his mind. And he doesn’t really mind watching television with his head in Alaric’s lap, having his hair played with. It’s nice. Rope burns and Alaric massaging oil into sore wrists.

Saturday morning, they enjoy a lazy breakfast together, and Alaric points out that he’s off the clock. Damon ignores this fact for as long as he can manage.

“Fine,” he says, around eleven, when the breakfast is gone, and the newspaper is finished, and Alaric is giving him a bemused smile. “I’m going. Have to see Stefan.”

And then he kisses Alaric goodbye. It’s intended to be the sort of kiss that leads Alaric to suggest he could come back tonight, but Alaric is wearing a businesslike sort of expression on his face, and Damon doubts he’ll get that particular call.

He does his best not to pay any real attention to his apartment. Though he squints; has it been cleaned? It’s been cleaned. Weird. He dresses in workout gear and heads to the gym on the thirty-fifth floor. It is quiet, this time on a Saturday. He picks out a stationary bike, wincing when the bruises on his ass and thighs complain about the seat. Still the bruises are slowly fading, and he could use something to get out some of this nervous energy.

As he cycles, watching the screen in front of him, which wants him to believe he’s cycling across Arizona, he plans the following week.

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Stefan is in a good mood, which is a relief. He is responsive to Damon’s hug, and tries to string together a few sentences. He notes, as he has several times, now, that Damon is not sick, and it makes him wonder just how much of what is going on around him Stefan actually does understand. More than anyone would believe, he thinks. He is learning to make a narrative of his world again. Damon sits with him at the small table in his private room, playing with the plastic puzzles he got for Christmas.

“Any big parties this week?” he asks.

Stefan smiles, and nods.

“Get laid?”

Stefan smiles, and nods, and Damon reaches out to cup his head. Behind him, a nurse clears her throat.

“Gimme a minute, Stef. One of your girlfriends needs to talk to me.” He follows her away from the
small table, and waits. It’s going to be amazing news. Stefan started typing. Stefan tied his shoelaces. Stefan sat up and demanded a copy of ‘Gravity’s Rainbow’ to read, or declared a major.

“Lay it on me,” he says, feeling expansive. It’s the redhead. Truth be told Damon can hardly keep their faces and names straight in his head, but from memory, he likes this one. She is dressed, the way they all dress, in the top half of a set of scrubs, and jeans. She looks strong and capable and she has a knowing smile on her face.

“Week two,” she says. “So, not a lot to report. But the new physiotherapist – it’s a man, just so you know, because you know Stefan can get a little aggressive when he’s upset – has taken him outside a few times, which he likes. But they’re concentrating on fine motor control. The speech therapist has had him for an hour a day but you should know, she’s not optimistic. He likes nodding. He talks to you more than anyone else and we really don’t know if it’s because it’s difficult, or because of his brain injuries.”

“Me?” Damon shifts his weight from foot to foot. “This is the most he talks?”

She nods.

Damon looks back at Stefan, waiting, trying to straighten out the puzzle pieces with his curled-up hands.

“Stef. You giving your girlfriend the silent treatment?”

He looks up. And smiles. And nods.

“Always what he thinks we want to hear,” she says. “You look better.”

Damon bristles. He’s not sure he’ll ever quite get over having been seen being wheeled around in a chair with a blanket over his lap. Ugh, embarrassing. “Fine,” he says.

“The guy with you. Your partner?”

Damon shoots her a look. “None of your business.”

“He’s my boss. And this conversation is done,” Damon says, encouraging her out the door with some demonstrative hand gestures. “Thanks for the update.”

He sits and helps Stefan with his puzzle. “Stef. Why aren’t you talking?”

Stefan says nothing, but his expression shifts enough so Damon know he understands.

“Look at me,” he says, And Stefan forces himself to, eyes sliding away in a few moments. He tries a second time, a third, and begins to get frustrated. “Why don’t you talk? I swear, I told mom once that she should never have taught you, because you never shut up. Does it hurt?”

Stefan doesn’t acknowledge that anything’s been said. Maybe there were too many words in a row for his poor injured brain to cope with.

“Stef. Why don’t you talk?”

Stefan presses his palm to his forehead, and Damon suddenly understands; it’s easier to cope with being misunderstood when you never try to make anyone understand.
Damon feels the same way himself, sometimes.

He spends a couple more hours with Stefan, and then treks back to the subway, to head back to his soulless apartment.

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Sunday, Damon spends a long time slouched on the couch and staring out the window. Nursing a hangover, but not as bad as he suspects he probably deserves. He rolls onto his back, and stares at the ceiling, wondering exactly how far he is from the penthouse. And whether it might be worth calling and pretending to be all needy and vulnerable. On a Sunday. Alaric is probably out. Not doing the groceries, nothing so prosaic, but something. Having a woefully polite business lunch with other people who need more in their lives than just their jobs.

He opens the newly bought laptop, starting it up, and makes himself a cup of coffee from the equally new Keurig.

With one foot up on the dining chair, he meanders through a few websites, what’s on in New York City today. Craving live music. He really can’t be bothered going far, but hell, from here, there must be a million things on.

He scrolls listlessly until he sees a blues band he knows, and he perks right up.

He spends a good long time in the gym, thinking that his ass doesn’t hurt all that much anymore and sort of missing it. He thinks about the strange calm he’d felt with the riding crop slapping across his flesh, over and over again, and decides he will find a way to make that happen again ASAP. Monday night. Not that Alaric is generally up for all that much on a Monday night, but it’s worth a try. Just a matter of finding the right motivation.

He showers, back in his own (ugh) apartment, and dresses smartly in new jeans, an ancient t-shirt, v-neck sweater and his leather jacket. It’s not so cold today. He’ll survive. He adds leather gloves, and a couple of scarves, and heads for the elevators.

It’s shocking and cool to run into Alaric at the front doors. Alaric is on his way back from a run, sweaty and oh so delicious, and Damon damn near purrs to see him like that. They are awkward, a moment, and Damon follows him inside.

“You look nice,” Alaric says. “Seein’ friends?”

Damon doesn’t roll his eyes, although the thought is there.

“Blues band,” he says, hands firmly in the pockets of his jacket. “You should come,” he says, boldly, holding Alaric’s eyes. Alaric laughs.

“Not exactly dressed for it,” he says.

“I can wait.”

Damon’s heart thumps once in his chest. He has, essentially, just asked his boss on a date, and despite how much sex they’ve had in the last few weeks, it does feel kind of radical. Alaric only smiles, and heads for the elevator.

Dammit. Damon waits a moment, watching Alaric go, the deep vee of sweat on the back of his sweater. And miracle of miracles (definitely, definitely picked the right sweater) he turns around, and comes back.
“Is this bar big? Popular? Full of rich people?”

“Doubt you’d find more than a handful of college graduates,” Damon says, cheerfully enough. “It’s a rough one. Expect peanut shells on the ground, and the miasma of stale beer. But the music will be good.”

Alaric looks around the foyer. No one is paying the slightest bit of attention. He reaches for Damon’s arm, and checks the time on the shiny new Rolex.


Damon raises his eyebrows, and gives a nod, watching as Alaric slips around the corner to his elevator. It amuses Damon no end; that Alaric designed this building, had it built, and decided… I want the penthouse, and my own private elevator. It’s strange to imagine. The Alaric Damon knows might have money to burn and a penchant for restraints but he is, for the most part, remarkably down to earth. It makes him wonder. Did Alaric grow up rich? And why doesn’t Damon know that? In some ways, they know each other so well, and in other ways, Alaric is as much of a mystery now as he was the day they met.

He settles into one of the lounges in the foyer to wait, staring out the window. New York is best when it’s drab.

Alaric arrives with damp hair, dressed for the cold. Wearing the soft leather jacket Damon loves to touch and doesn’t see nearly often enough. Damon gives an approving smile; he’s allowed to, he’s not on the clock. And Alaric looks to be about to say something, but he doesn’t, for the same reason. Without a word they head out into the street, and Damon hails a cab.

The bar is, as he promised, fairly grotty, and to their mutual satisfaction it’s neither too busy to find a booth, nor so quiet they are especially visible. Damon orders beer while Alaric looks around somewhat nervously. He must still feel exposed.

“Here’s what I want to know,” Damon says. “How many people would actually recognize you? And more to the point, what would happen if they did? Ooh, there’s that rich guy, with someone I neither recognize nor give a shit about.” He’s philosophical about his own anonymity. “You worry too much.”

Alaric says nothing, just smiles a little, pale eyelashes suddenly catching the light. Damon forces himself to look away, and suddenly, people are descending on the table. Alaric is alarmed, for a moment.

It’s just the band. Damon frowns, because he only met them that once, and they were all so drunk he can’t quite remember all their names. Still he shakes everyone’s hands, withstands a shoulder hug from the overgrown double-bass plucker, and vaguely refers to Alaric as a friend; it’s over almost as soon as it starts, and they are left alone again.

“You’re friends with the band?” Alaric asks. Probably, it’s just something to say, but Damon is suddenly irritated.

“You say things like that,” he says, shaking his head. “All the time. Weekends, you refer to time I should be hanging out with my friends. You ask if I’m seeing friends. Am I friends with the band. What gives you the idea that I have friends? Have I ever mentioned one?”

Alaric is silenced, a second, cocks his head, as if things are beginning to fall into place. Damon shakes his head. “Forget it. I’m just not the type to accumulate friends. I’m a prickly sonofabitch,
remember?”

Alaric’s eyes are still on him when a waitress brings a bowl of spicy onion rings and a bottle of Tabasco. Alaric eyes them for a second, probably trying to think about the week’s fat intake, but evidently it’s satisfactory, because he reaches for the bottle, giving a liberal sprinkle before he stuffs one into his mouth.

“Nothing to say to that? Not going to try to convince me that I’m sweetness and light? I’m almost disappointed.”

Alaric swallows the onion ring, and reaches for his beer. He looks like he’d prefer to have a bourbon in his hand. Next round. “It surprises me,” he says. “All of it. I mean, you’re good looking, you’re interesting, you’re intelligent. I get that your life was derailed, but still. No friends makes no sense to me. The fact you’re single makes no sense to me.”


Alaric doesn’t even react, beyond a withering glance.

“I’m your friend,” he says, quietly, as the guitar player strums an experimental chord; they set up earlier, apparently, but as far as Damon can tell, a last minute sound check when everything is already perfect gives the band a chance to say HI, WE’RE HERE.

Damon snorts. “If only that was true.”

Alaric taps his foot under the table. “What was that supposed to mean?”

Damon reaches to brush his hand over the elbow of a passing bartender. “Bring us a couple of bourbons? Doubles. Top shelf. Please,” he adds, turning to Alaric, unsure who the please was actually directed at. “Much as I would like that to be true, it’s not.”

Alaric freezes with a second onion ring halfway to his mouth. “Listen, just because… of our arrangement doesn’t mean you can’t talk to me about… things. You confided about Stefan.”

“I confided about Stefan because it was that or miss Christmas with him. And anyway, that’s not the point. The point is I might be messed up and antisocial… maybe I can count the number of relationships I’ve had that last longer than a week on one hand. But even I know friendship works both ways. So. Drink your beer and enjoy the show.”

Alaric doesn’t move, not for a long time.

“You really feel that way?”

Damon looks up. Alaric is inscrutable; Damon imagines it’s one of his work faces he’s wearing, right then; a mask, which is ridiculous, given that they are actually veering into emotional territory for what might be the first time in months.

Damon, ever eloquent, shrugs, and holds Alaric’s eyes, and then he decided it’s all way too much work.

“Forget it,” he says. “This is probably five kinds of boundary violations. Not looking for friends. We have a good working relationship. All we need.”

And they do, right?
Alaric still has an onion ring in his hand. A dollop of the strange tomato chutney drips onto the pock-marked table top, and he hurried to clean it up, frowning. Twice, his mouth opens, and closes, as if he still can’t decide what the hell he should try to say to make this better. Or whether he should even be trying.

And then he eats the onion ring, fairly precisely, and settles back in his seat.

The band is great. Damon likes the blues. Wanton women and empty bottles. Murder ballads and, for your more discerning, modern blues band, the odd specter of a carnival freak show. The lone girl on the stage, dressed somewhat like a considerably hotter Calamity Jane, sings and plays percussion with a chain against a washboard. That’s new. Damon abandons the beer when the bourbon arrives, feeling the music seep into his pores and relax him. And half an hour later, the first set finishes.

“They’re great,” Alaric says, clapping, and leaning in; it’s busier, now, and darker. Inside and out. The sun is nearly gone. Feeling bold, Damon bumps against his shoulder, because he might be blunt to the point of rudeness and he might be a hooker but he’s still fond of his boss, no matter how lopsided the relationship might be.


Damon raises his eyebrows, slowly. No sense scaring Alaric off with an overly enthusiastic facial expression.

“Truth is, the last few months it’s been… shit. I’m not workin’ on a single thing I actually care about. Just… hotels and apartments and office blocks I can hardly keep straight in my mind. I started out actually making things I was proud of, and now it’s just feedin’ the machine. Shareholders and the board, and…”

He looks flustered. The thousand yard stare is interesting. Damon elects not to interrupt. Was this what he meant, when he decided he wanted Alaric to talk? He supposes so, though he’s already feeling off-kilter.

“First step into this game, I found this old train station, about to be torn down. Beautiful building, mostly structurally sound – I had no fuckin’ clue but a friend was a structural engineer, and he checked it out for me. I had no money, no experience, no sense, but I paid a friend from art school to draw the place all done up; first the building, restored to glory, with a museum, and a restaurant, a café… then we imagined a hotel, and then on a whim in the presentation I suggested a golf course, and the next thing I know, I’m actually doing it. Only a few million bucks, until they added the hotel, but by then, the site had paid for itself already and I was lookin’ for something else to do. So I say, yeah, great, hotel, and I hire an architect with practically no cash resources and I say I’ll do this if you’ll back the restoration of a courthouse I’ve half fallen in love with, help me turn it into a museum.

“And the train station, the hotel, turns into the hottest location in Massachusetts to get married in, or spend a weekend at. The restaurant goes five star, and even I can’t afford to eat there, and one of the guys who backed me says hey, kid, I like your attitude, come and tell me why my apartments suck.

“And… so I do that. I have no relevant qualifications, no cash, and this huge name. So I pull back. Start the company, hire a few people, a few more when I need ’em, contract the rest. And the whole time, I’m talkin’ about buildings that need to blend in historically with their surroundings, honor the people who were there first. And then, eventually…”
He raises a hand at the bartender, pointing at his glass.

“The money got so good you stopped caring what you built.”

Alaric looks embarrassed. “I still cared. But in two years I went from a dozen staff to three hundred. Year after that I took over a failing development firm and kept almost all of their staff, and all of their projects, and bang, it’s double that. Things changed. Now we’re two thousand full time employees before I even look at the construction side of things, the subsidiaries.”

Damon lets it go, and shifts imperceptibly in his seat, because whatever the hell he was anticipating, it wasn’t that. He sweeps his eyes sideways, re-evaluating the lines of Alaric’s face; because this story is stupid, it’s insane, people don’t do these things. And what’s the problem again?

“And now you’re bored.”

“Something like that.” Though there’s more to it than that. Alaric actually looks distantly terrified. Of what? Failure? Of boredom itself? Maybe that his star can actually only shine this bright for so long?

Alaric nods at the bartender, bringing another round of drinks, and crosses his arms on the table. He’s about to say something else, when the lights dim, and the music starts again.

Damon watches surreptitiously, Alaric trying to focus on the band, and turning the glass in his hand, and he doesn’t even realize the day is quite gone until the door opens briefly and no light sneaks into the bar. Winter. Needs to be over. He’s ready for long, warm nights, days stretched out in front of the air conditioner, cool air on hot skin. Ice cubes over stomachs and thighs.

Maybe it’s a bit of a turn on, to hear Alaric talking to him like they’re equals.

He moves, very deliberately, to sit closer, leg resting against Alaric’s, and he lets a hand settle on Alaric’s knee. Alaric glances at him. This is not the way they’re supposed to be. But he doesn’t object.

By the time the final set is over, the bar is packed, and Alaric is getting antsy.

“We should go,” he says. Damon nods, and slips out of the booth. He bids the band farewell and follows Alaric out the door, and into the cold night.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

There are rules for a reason, but it is, after all, Sunday night. And Damon is off the clock.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alaric feels deeply unsettled, as they step out of the taxi and approach the building. Not his anticipated Sunday afternoon. Evening. And fun, but here they are again with their dynamic all different. Why does it matter to him that he and Damon are friends? Why did he even go there? He’s not friends with his lawyer, or his housekeeper. So why Damon?

And yet, it is different. He know it is. The intimacy is necessary to what they do. The trust is essential. This bleed into other areas is not. He’s breaking all of his own rules.

He glances at Damon, walking alongside him, and can’t actually make himself care about any of it, in anything but the most clinical and intellectual terms. He imagines taking Damon’s hand, or even draping an arm across his shoulder, but it’s so fucking impossible, and it’s not the way they are supposed to be.

Back inside, back to safety, and he turns as they approach the elevators. He pauses, hands in his pockets.

“Well, I should go,” he says. “Leave you to the rest of your evening.” It’s early. He has no idea what he’ll do himself. A couple of contracts he could read over.

Damon shrugs, and raises his eyebrows. “Or you could come up.”

Alaric is about to reply with an automatic no, but he can’t really think of a reason why he shouldn’t. He hesitates, and shrugs, and follows Damon to the main elevator. So strange to think he had a hand in developing the whole site, but he only ever spends time in the penthouse, and the gym a few floors below. A couple of the restaurants on the lower levels. Damon swipes his keychain over the sensor, and they ride smoothly to his floor.

Alaric looks around the apartment; it looks good, unpacked, although he cringes at how Spartan and modern the furniture is. He should have asked the stylist to do something more homely. It looks like a miniature version of his own place. Too much white. Doesn’t suit Damon at all. He could, he supposes, offer to change it, but he thinks Damon would say no.

“All unpacked,” he says, hands still in the pockets of his jacket.

“Not that there was much to unpack,” Damon says, heading to the kitchen. It’s so bare. He opens a cupboard. Nothing in there but booze. No, look. Pretzels. Alaric grins, just slightly. Truth is if it wasn’t for the housekeeper his own kitchen would look just the same.

Damon pulls down a bottle of bourbon, and a pair of tumblers which have to be new. For one, they match. Alaric doesn’t say a word, but he accepts the drink pushed into his hand gratefully; it’s a
Kentucky Straight he doesn’t recognize. He takes a sip.

“This is nice,” he says.

“It’s good to be able to afford to be a complete snob again,” Damon replies with a smirk, raising his glass to Alaric’s. He takes a sip, and sets it aside, taking a step towards the CD player. It’s old. This place needs a better stereo.

… not Alaric’s business. Not his business at all, and he has to stop thinking of it that way. Damon strips the cellophane off a brand new CD – by the looks of the pile, he’s been doing some shopping, good – and slips it into the slot. Alaric stands awkwardly, waiting for a cue. Sit? Stay standing? Shit. In his own place they’d have their patterns to fall back on. Here, they do not. He looks around again.

“You’re uncomfortable,” Damon says.

“Not exactly.”

“Exactly. Uncomfortable.”

Maybe he’s right. Alaric says nothing, but takes another sip of his drink, and licks his lips.

“So I’ve been thinking about your problem,” Damon says, as the music starts up. “And I know nothing, and I’m completely full of shit. So you shouldn’t listen to me, but since we’re being all friendly.” He dangles the glass between his fingers. “Why not switch it up completely. Build a hospital, build a string of children’s clinics. Do it for the kudos. You don’t need the money.”

“Hospitals.” Alaric has to smile. Damon Salvatore, remote philanthropist. It’s cute. “What do I know about building hospitals?”

“Probably about as much as you knew about building apartments, the first time you did it,” Damon says, taking the glass from Alaric’s hand and setting it on the countertop. He takes Alaric’s hand, and settles it on his hip. Alaric smiles, bemused.

Damon sets his own right hand on Alaric’s shoulder, and takes the other in a tentative grip.

“What are you doing?” Alaric asks. Damon shrugs, moving closer as he starts to move with the music. “I’m not much of a dancer.”

“You’ll do.”

Alaric tries to find a rhythm, and instead he finds himself blushing, unsure where he’s supposed to put his feet. He starts to pull away. “This is a bad idea.”

“No, it’s a good idea,” Damon says, pulling closer again. He shifts his focus from Alaric’s eyes to his mouth, and back again.

“You’re off the clock.”

“I know.”

Their bodies find a rhythm at last, and Alaric feels an odd tightening between his shoulder blades. He’s about to make another protest when Damon’s mouth closes over his own, firm, insistent. A well-placed attempt to shut him up, and it works, rather spectacularly. Alaric’s hand moves to the small of Damon’s back, and he pulls them closer. This kiss has a different sort of feel to their usual
fare. A push and pull to it, an odd sort of battle which is still disorientingly sweet.

“What are you doing?” Alaric asks again, when the kiss breaks for a moment.

“What does it feel like I’m doing?” They’re still swaying gently to the music. Alaric faintly recognizes it, but can’t quite place it, even when the piano begins a crescendo and some memory threatens to reveal itself, there in the back of his brain. A dirty cover of some long-forgotten pop band, he thinks.

“Crossing lines. Breaking boundaries.”

“It’s what we do, Ric.” This is unfortunately very true. “I’m trying to seduce you.”

“I did mention you’re off the clock.”

“If I was on the clock, I wouldn’t be trying to seduce you. I’d be waiting for directions. Is it working?”

Alaric bites back a smile, and tries to force himself to shake his head. Damon’s cool blue eyes are wide and bright. He looks the best he has in weeks. He also looks utterly sure of what he’s doing, which at least makes one of them.

Alaric hesitates, again. Yes, it’s working, it’s working too well. Damon knows exactly how to play this, so that Alaric has no chance of getting out of here without his entire brain scorched. Damon squeezes his hand, licking his lips again (he has to know what that does to Alaric), and lets his hand move to the back of Alaric’s neck, pulling him down for another kiss.

He should just go.

“It’s working,” he says, instead, wondering if he should suggest they head upstairs. Maybe not, this is different. Everything about this feels different. In a way, Alaric feels weaker. In another, not insignificant way, he feels stronger.

Is it possible to cross lines like this and still keep their usual weekdays the way they are supposed to be? He has no idea. Is that even where Damon is going with this?

Fuck. They should negotiate.

“Ugh, I can hear the cogs in your brain turning,” Damon says. “I swear to god I just heard you think the word ‘negotiate’.”

… score one, Damon Salvatore. “Should we?”

“We just went on a date. And now I’m conning you into sex. Trust me, by any normal calculation, this has been a very good night.” He purrs against Alaric’s throat, nosing up to his ear, and Alaric shivers. “I’d ply you with more bourbon, but I really want to fuck, and I think that might be counterproductive.”

Alaric laughs. “Romantic.”

“Very.” Damon pulls away, tugging Alaric’s hand, eyes flashing dangerous beneath heavy brows. Alaric’s brain makes one last shuddering protest, and stops suddenly, quiet.

Fuck it.

He lets himself be pulled towards the bedroom, still holding Damon’s eyes, still wondering if he
can bring himself to pull the plug on this before it gets in the way of their day to day life. Turns out, he can’t. Damon pulls him towards the bed, pulls him down, body already rolling eagerly against Alaric’s. Alaric crowds him on the bed, kissing hungrily, messily, thrilling to the feeling of Damon’s hand in his hair, tugging lightly. He nuzzles against Damon’s neck, grinding against him, sincerely wishing they’d paused to remove clothing. Damon realizes the problem at the same time, and they spend an inelegant minute or two pulling at clothes and kissing when they can.

Somewhere, the song changes.

Damon and Alaric have fucked in every position Alaric can think of. Brutal penetrative sex with Damon tied up so he can barely move. Lazy morning sex rocking into each other’s hands. Alaric has eaten Damon’s ass until he’s come with nothing much more than the brush of Alaric’s fingers over his cock. They’ve sucked and fucked and rolled around for over two months, now, and yet, every moment of it has been overlaid by a power dynamic Alaric relies on.

It keeps things professional.

There is nothing professional about the way they are touching now. There is no power play, just bodies pressed together in harmony. They know where to touch each other, even without ropes or chains, without need for a safe word or rules. They kiss aimlessly for a long fucking time, rubbing against each other like schoolboys, until Damon rolls over with a groan and pulls open the top drawer of his nightstand.

Alaric doesn’t need to be told twice.

And the fact that Damon has lube in his apartment is not lost on him.

He unlocks Damon’s body with two fingers, and with exquisite care, long and slow and cautious, until Damon is impatient, pressing back hungrily.

“Enough,” he breathes. “Just…”

Damon kneels on the bed, ass in the air. Alaric slips into him like it’s something more than habit. Needy. He reaches out, gripping Damon’s hand even as Damon clutches at the sheet. His grip is strong, determined, and for the final time on this miraculous night Alaric feels a faint thrill of fear that this might not be something they can come back from.

He starts slow, eyes closed as he rolls against Damon’s hips, and after a long moment staring at the strangely vulnerable looking bumps of Damon’s spine, he changes tack, gently rocking back and forth. And then less gently. Snapping his hips as Damon kisses the backs of his fingers. After everything they’ve done, this is somehow more intimate, more important. Alaric bites the inside of his lip when Damon clenches suddenly and unexpectedly. He finds himself murmuring Damon’s name. Strange endearments he hasn’t uttered since he was married.

Everything is slowed down and intensified, somehow. Every touch more intense, more dangerous. And yet there is a glorious feeling of normalcy about it all. When Damon comes, head rolling back suddenly on his neck, Alaric doesn’t grip his hair and pull; he brushes his fingers over Damon’s cheek, trying to stave of his own orgasm for as long as he can manage.

Afterwards, Damon lies contentedly on the bed, resting a hand on Alaric’s chest. Alaric traces patterns over the back of it with his fingers, and stares at the ceiling, trying to gather his thoughts. His thoughts insist on wandering untethered through the night sky outside the window.

“Nice, no?”
Damon’s words shock Alaric from his thoughts, and he turns to meet those beautiful blue eyes, grinning with one side of his face.

“Shut up,” he says, giving Damon’s hand a squeeze. “I should probably go.”

Damon rolls his eyes, and it takes everything Alaric has to prevent himself from reminding him that there are rules. There are no rules, on Sunday night. None at all. “Why?”

“Because this is supposed to be your space.”

“I invited you in. Basically tricked you into it, if you think about it.” Ah, fuck. Damon sounds pleased with himself.

“Because I have to work in the morning. And all those expensive suits and the crap I put in my hair; that’s all upstairs.”

Damon raises an eyebrow. “It’ll take you three minutes to get up there in the morning. *Maybe* five.”


“Alright,” he says. He swings reluctantly off the bed and slips into the living room, to turn off the lights. Habit. By the time he is back, Damon has climbed under the blanket, and is propped up on one elbow. Alaric slots in alongside him, reaching one arm out to gather him close.

Damon doesn’t argue. If there is one thing fundamental to their dynamic, it’s big spoon/little spoon. Alaric kisses the back of Damon’s ear, and reaches to turn off the bedside lamp.

With Damon held tight in his arms, and no need to watch to make sure he’s alright, Alaric has the best night’s sleep he’s enjoyed in months.

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Alaric wakes without need of an alarm clock at six in the morning, sharp. It’s actually sort of awful, leaving. Damon barely stirs and certainly doesn’t wake. Alaric wishes he could sleep as heavily. Every little thing seems to wake him, these days. Most nights, anyway.

Upstairs in the penthouse getting ready for work he berates himself, and wonders how much work he’ll have to do to get Damon back into role tonight at seven. As he dresses, he rehearses lines; *That will never happen again. It was a mistake*. Words of that ilk. He also practices offering to terminate the contract, maybe try dating, but the thought sets off ripples of terror which take over his entire body a wave at a time.

He needs this. And he doesn’t have the emotional capacity for anything more complex right now.

Caroline has the car idling on the curb when Alaric reaches it, and he climbs into the back, nodding his hello into the rear view mirror.

“Nice weekend, boss?”

Alaric gives a tight smile, and another nod. “How about you?”

“I had a date. With the new doorman.”
She looks so pleased with herself that Alaric has to chuckle. “That’s why he looks so cheerful this morning, I guess. Good girl.”

Caroline has a question in her eyes, but she doesn’t ask it, and Alaric is glad.

--

Ten in the morning, the senior team is once again assembled around the long table in the board room, looking alternately terrified, optimistic, and disappointed. Alaric does, if he’s honest, feel guilty. He’s never ruled them through anything like fear but after last week’s Monday meeting, they must all be wondering about their jobs.

He sits for a moment, watching them. Some sit stock still, staring at the table, or out the window. Some flick through papers they probably spent all week preparing. Others look at Alaric, waiting for him to make the first move. Louis answers emails on a tablet. (Or, equally possibly, plays angry birds on a tablet, angling it carefully so no one can see.)

“Wow. I really have you all this nervous?” Alaric says. “Wish I’d brought donuts or something. Macaroons from that place around the block.”

One of the youngest and newest members of the team, the very pretty Selena, all husky voice and long eyelashes, hair a tortured blonde, laughs.

“Not unless you’d ordered them last Monday, Ric.”

He nods gruffly. “Maybe next Monday, then.”

He breathes. Is he really going to do this? He has shareholders, a board. Yeah, he’s really going to do this.

“I was given a radical idea on the weekend,” he says, clutching his hands ahead of himself while behind him, one of the assistants pours cups of coffee, and starts to bring them around on a tray. “Possibly a crazy one. Definitely an expensive one. But I think the payoff will be worth it. Eventually.”

Maybe.

Louis abandons Angry Birds.

“In two weeks, I want a list of hospitals all over the country that are either recently closed or facing closure. Not just hospitals. Clinics, free clinics. And anything with long term residential care,” he adds, thinking suddenly of poor Stefan and his wonky hands. “Children’s hospitals. Veteran’s services. As much detail as I can get. I know, two weeks. It’s enough for a start. Monday week we’ll take the day, go through them as a team, and get ready to work up proposals. Find partners, people. Any desperate hospital administrator who’s facing the closure of their emergency room. Anyone who’s been told they have to downgrade facilities.”

Louis raises his hand, like a pompous eight year old.

“Louis.”

“Has this been cleared with the board?” Maybe if Alaric sticks a nice camembert in that too-wide mouth it will shut him up. He looks pissed not to have come up with something so different on his own.
“It will be,” Alaric says. “By Thursday, Lisa will need travel itineraries for anyone who needs one. Don’t get excited, you’ll be accounting for every minute you’re out of this office.” He opens the folder in front of him, ignoring the wide, shocked eyes around the room. “Now, I want reports on everything that’s already underway. Starting on my right. Talk to me about Florida.”

--

News is all over the building by three in the afternoon, and board members start to light up Alaric’s phone half an hour after that. He says the same thing to everyone he makes the time to speak to, which is perhaps a quarter of them.

“I’ve never failed to make this company money, and I won’t now. But if you think I’ll be satisfied with designer hotels and boutique apartment blocks for the next forty years, you’re on the wrong board. I’ll have proposals, five year projections and ten year projections by the end of February. You’re welcome.”

Go away. Don’t forget that once upon a time there was a twenty-three year old smartass kid with moxie and an idea, and you bankrolled him.

Don’t forget who I am.

--

And at seven thirty that evening, Alaric steps into the apartment to find Damon in the kitchen, making risotto with truffle oil, pancetta and what smells like a very old parmesan cheese, wearing nothing but an apron and his collar.

“Hi, honey,” he says, his lip curling dangerously; and before he can finish Alaric pins him to the counter, pulling him close, devouring his mouth. Biting at his jaw until Damon is twitching helplessly in his arms. He pushes the apron aside and takes Damon’s half-hard cock in hand, and Damon’s eyes close as his head rolls back.

“I’m home,” he says, voice low and half caught in his throat, when his eyes catch on Damon’s, wide and shocked.

I’m home.

It’s never been so true before.

Chapter End Notes

The song, if you're curious, is Ryan Adams covering 'Wonderwall'.

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I'm sorry there has been such a long break, folks. This month is NaNoWriMo, and I've been focusing on original fiction. But rest assured, this will be completed. I think it's a bit past the halfway mark (but I can be a wordy fucker, so who knows). There is some terrible angst ahead, but that's not all. I have the rest of the story mapped out and I do know how it will end.

December and January should be quieter months for me, and I hope to publish more frequently.

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PS: I will get to responding to the reviews ASAP, especially those with questions and suggestions, and I plan to incorporate some of them. Sorry I've been so slack. I do love every one of you so dearly and I appreciate the time you take to review!
Chapter Summary

Alaric is away, and Damon is miserable.

Chapter Notes

Warning for mild subdrop.

Alaric is in Boston and everything sort of sucks. Damon mooches around his apartment, or Alaric’s, reading, watching movies, doing basically anything he can to distract himself.

And he feels sick.

He can’t decide if he’s hot or cold and he feels distinctly uncomfortable in the gym. One of his favorite pastimes has, historically, been jacking off; and he can’t seem to even get hard. He heads to the doctor on day three of nine and the doctor declares him fit as a fiddle, prescribes rest and exercise (how can those things be anything but mutually exclusive?), no booze, no drugs (just when he was starting to think they might actually be a damn fine idea), lots of vegetables and lean meat. He’s grateful he’s not asked to strip down, because this morning he noticed in the mirror that his most recent bruises, cross-crossing over the right cheek of his ass and down his thigh, are green and yellow in most place but still a delicious shade of purple in others and he doesn’t really want to talk about it.

He visits Stefan, and that’s difficult, because Stefan has fallen into a slump no amount of cajoling will get him out of.

And Damon can’t find the energy for much cajoling.

He sits on an easy chair by the side of the bed and watches his brother glare at him, only his eyes and nose visible, covered in blankets. He really doesn’t smell great because he bloodied his physical therapist’s nose yesterday when he tried to coax him into the bathroom for a shower, and today the growling kept them from even trying.

“Pretty gross, Stef,” Damon says, but his heart isn’t in it. Stefan closes his eyes tightly for several long seconds, and then opens one a fraction, squinting through it. He doesn’t look pleased that Damon is still there.

They stare at each other for a very long time across the widest void Damon has ever felt between them. Damon only leaves when Stefan’s hand reaches out and he pulls a blanket across the rest of his face.

Damon lies in bed, alone, unable to decide if he is hot or cold; a difficulty he attempts to conquer
by turning on the electric blanket on one side of the bed and rolling back and forth between the warm and the cold side until there is really no point in continuing to try to sleep. He stalks around his apartment. He flagrantly ignores doctor’s orders and pours himself a large glass of bourbon, settling in to watch a marathon of *Freaks and Geeks* on Netflix.

Sometime close to dawn he feels his throat swelling, which is alarming. The pneumonia? Coming back? Can’t be, right, he’s fine, been fine for weeks. And then a tear rolls quite unexpectedly down each cheek and he stops still, horrified, because he’s not a crier and he’s never been one.

Perhaps he is losing his mind? Probably long fucking overdue, actually. He stares in horror and confusion at the tears he has mopped from his face with his thumb, and pulls the blanket over himself, there on the couch. Maybe Stefan has the right idea.

What does a person do, once tears have started showing up? Is this a therapy thing? Should he call someone? He clutches his phone in his hand and debates calling Alaric (well, who else is there). But it’s not even eight in the morning, and he’s a little bit tipsy, and it sounds like a really bad idea.

Instead, he drags himself to Alaric’s bed, which feels far too big and far too empty without Alaric in it.

--

Day five Damon is shaky, and that can’t possibly be alright. Blood sugar? He orders too much food and doesn’t want any of it, feels irrationally angry at the delivery guy for making him get off the couch to accept it. He wanders aimlessly between his own apartment and Alaric’s penthouse and he picks out books he can’t seem to read more than five pages of. He heads out in the evening to listen to music and though it occurs to him that he is deeply lonely and desperate for comfort, company, any kind of human attention at all, anyone who so much as smiles at him gets a glare that might actually cause eyeballs to melt and drip out of their sockets.

Alaric calls, about ten that evening. Apologizes, straight up, for disturbing him, and politely asks how things are going.

Damon clutches the phone like it’s a lifeline and tries to get comfortable on the couch.

“Not doing anything you could disturb,” he says, just as politely.

“You alright? You sound –”

“I’m fine,” he lies. “Just reading.” The same page he was reading half an hour ago, he thinks.

“You sound sick. Staying warm?”

Stupid fucking question because how can he be warm when he has to sleep without Alaric’s arms around him? Alaric is an idiot, biggest idiot ever born. “Yep.”

“Alright, then, well… look, I know this is shitty timing.”

Damon’s stomach falls.

“I have a disaster brewing in Florida. A hotel. Supposed to be breaking ground next week but there’s some industrial dispute, so I’m flyin’ there first thing Monday.”

Damon closes his free hand into a fist and bites his tongue. Fuck this, fuck everything. He needs
taking care of. This is complete bullshit. “When will you be back?”

“Uh… Wednesday, if things go well. Friday night at the latest.”

Fuuuuuuuuuck.

“Cool.”

“Damon, are you sure…?”

“I’m fine. How are your parents?”

“Old.” Alaric is quiet a few moments. “I’m sorry about…”

“Do you have enough clothes with you? I can pack a suitcase if –”

“No, no, I’m fine. The hotel has a laundry service.”

“Of course.”

Damon swallows past the lump in his throat.

“Hey, I… I miss you.”

Three little words and Damon actually starts to feel a little better. Not much. “Me too,” is all he can say.

“I’ll call early in the week. Have a good weekend.” And he ends the call, and Damon groans, and buries his face in a couch cushion.

The next day, armed with a ridiculous pseudonym and with a two-day-old burrito on a plate by his left hand, Damon hits the internet to diagnose himself; hey, these days everyone’s doing it. Problem is it could be literally anything, from cancer to a cold. Stupid. He wanders aimlessly, giving up on Doctor Google and trawling through online sex shops, debating new toys. Alaric had better be prepared for some serious coddling when he gets back. Damon won’t even argue with him. From a store selling punitive corsetry for men (jesus christ yes, he bookmarks it, so he can come back with his measurements later) he finds a link to an online forum for submissives.

He sits up straighter. Whole thing is locked up tighter than the Pope’s family jewels, of course, but it’s not like he has anything better to do, so he makes himself a new email account and ten minutes later, he’s perusing the threads.

Why it never occurred to him before that he should try something like this he has no idea. It’s anonymous, which takes out at least eighty percent of the humiliation associated with having no clue what he’s doing. He doesn’t have to look anyone in the eye.

Most of it is completely banal shit. Domestic disagreements (probably not exactly relevant to the average live-in hooker, but, live-in, so he does take a squint). *He takes me for granted. She’s going soft on me. I miss him.*

I miss him.

Fine, he’s a sap, but Damon clicks the link and reads, without even realizing he’s moving closer to the screen as he goes. Because what the fuck is this. ‘I miss him’ doesn’t equal chills and fever and a sore throat. Hot and cold and oh, the teary thing, what the actual fuck is this?
The post was made a couple of days ago, so there are responses. Unanimous responses.

Subdrop. Sounds made up. “Bullshit,” he growls, as if it’s the computer’s fault he feels so spectacularly shitty. “More likely to be cancer. Or a cold.” But he looks further. Subdrop.

Nope, it’s not that, because subdrop happens after high-impact scening. Mucho adrenaline, and then no adrenaline, equals subdrop. The cure is apparently cuddling, carbs and for the exceptionally odd, coloring books.

*What the actual fuck.*

But he keeps reading. And okay, there it is, people talking about subdrop lasting for days, missing the structure, missing the person that creates the structure, being unable to find pleasure in anything. Cure?

Less clear cut.

Damon taps his thumb against the tabletop and zones out for a moment, staring at the screen. He reaches for the burrito, which is cold again. And very unappetizing. He crosses to the kitchen and dumps it in the trash, and then stands by the window for a long moment, looking out at the emptiness of the city. Maybe he needs something to tide him over. Maybe he could go to the club, tomorrow. See if Kelly could get him a client for the night. Probably wouldn’t work. He’s too used to the intimacy of what he has with Alaric.

He presses his forehead to the cold glass, entire body flashing in irritation. This sort of shit is not what he signed up for. Christ, anyone would think he was in love.

Which is stupid.

--

For three days, Damon lounges in the spa, gorges on carbohydrates, drinks gallons of water. He feels better, somewhat better. Sunday afternoon. Alaric is saying goodbye to his elderly parents for the last time and heading for the hotel at the airport, to fly to Miami first thing in the morning. Out of nothing but curiosity (because it would be stupid, completely stupid, to show up at the hotel; ha, ha, ha, no, definitely a dumb idea, really dumb, not like he even knows which hotel, really, but look – there’s one only a couple of blocks from the site he’s developing, so that’s probably a decent candidate – five stars and all) he investigates flights to Miami.

There are more than forty a day. Damon closes the browser and slumps theatrically on Alaric’s couch again. Is there any feasible excuse to do this? There really, really isn’t, but is that going to stop him?

He re-launches the browser, and in ten minutes, he has a ticket to Miami, landing at seven pm the next day. At which point he may well find himself unemployed. Worth the risk?

… possibly.

He sleeps a little better that night, nonetheless, in Alaric’s enormous bed. Lies for maybe ten minutes staring at the hook in the ceiling and imagining himself trussed up like a Christmas ham. It’s reassuring, so he closes his eyes, and he’s out like a light.

--

He’s in a taxi on his way from the airport to his best-guess hotel when he starts to wonder if this
might not have been a spectacularly bad idea. But what’s the worst that can happen? It was a cheap flight. If Alaric tells him to leave he’ll spend the night in the hotel – not like he can’t afford it – and then fly home in the morning and wait it out. Or, fuck it, stay – take it as a holiday. Maybe he’ll get himself uncomplicatedly laid. He’s allowed.

Even at eight at night, it’s really not that cold. Hooray for the Southern states. He approaches the concierge.

“I’m looking for Alaric Saltzman,” he says, casual, bored. The concierge checks the computer.

“I can call up to the room.”

Damon purses his lips, and nods, looking around. There are three bars, two restaurants on the ground floor. What if he has a business dinner, something like that? He’s feeling anxious and he hates feeling anxious.

“No answer. I can take a message.”

He grimaces. “It’s fine. I’ll call his cell,” he says. “I’ll take a room. Something simple, whatever. One night to start with.” He hands over a credit card – still feels surreal to be able to do that again without being sent into a tailspin of panic about covering it at the end of the month, and a minute later he has a key. Simple as that.

He hands over his bag. “Can you send that up?”

A tip, and that’s it, it’s done. He’s being treated like he belongs. So, dinner, something to drink, and then… ten o’clock, he’ll call. He gravitates towards the nicest of the three bars, which still looks sort of tacky, but he supposes that’s Miami.

Alaric’s expression when Damon pushes through the doors is completely priceless. He only smiles back with one side of his face.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

This is the last place Alaric anticipated seeing Damon, but fuck it, he's missed him. And when did this get so complicated?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alaric’s entire brain actually shuts down, for a moment or two. He manages not to break the glass in his hand, which is great, but that’s probably a near thing. It’s a collision of worlds he hadn’t anticipated in a thousand years. And is Damon always that spectacular looking? Hair unkempt, clothes fashionably thrown-together, shoes gleaming. He looks like a million dollars. In fact, if not for the whole prostitution deal, he’d fit better in this world than Alaric does.

“I’m sorry,” he says, to the lawyer. “I just… I was listening. A friend’s just…”

And he’s approaching the table with a supremely self-satisfied smile Alaric is tempted to wipe off his face.

“Damon. What a surprise. Ah, Charles, this is a friend of mine. From New York. Who I definitely wasn’t expecting. Damon Salvatore. Damon, this is Charles Brandon, one of my lawyers. Tryin’ to untangle the mess of…”

His eyes are so pale, so glittering and dangerous, and Alaric is torn between taking him outside and berating him for being so stupid, sticking him back in a taxi to wait out the next flight, even if it’s not until the morning – and taking him upstairs to fuck him unconscious. Given it’s been what, ten days since they’ve seen each other, he thinks the latter might win out.

“Industrial action,” Charles supplies, offering Damon a hand. Damon shakes smoothly, well. How is he this calm? This was a completely insane thing to do.

“I was just going to get myself a bite to eat,” Damon says. “I’ll leave you to it.”

But Charles is standing up. “No, please, stay. I have contracts to go over with a fine tooth comb, and I really should be getting back to it. Mr. Saltz- Alaric,” he says, with an awkward nod. “I’ll call around seven-thirty, let you know what we’re doing.”

“I’ll be at the site by nine if you don’t call,” Alaric says. Good, this is good, focus on the job, don’t focus on the fact that the most conflicted and expensive sub you’ve ever met is standing there like five feet and nine inches of pure sex.

Charles collects his soft leather briefcase and, with one last nod, heads for the door. He turns back a moment later, reaching for his wallet and stuttering an apology, but Alaric waves him off.

“Don’t worry. Good luck.”

Smooth as silk, Damon takes the stool, leaning one elbow on the bar. “Have you eaten?”
Alaric shakes his head. “Damon… why… what are you doing here?”

Damon shrugs. There’s something in his eyes. Alaric can’t interpret it. But. There’s something there. “Had a week off work, sick of the cold, thought I’d give Florida another shot. I can go. There’s two other bars in this hotel.”

The obvious answer is yes, go. Alaric has things to do. But. Ten days.

“I need to eat. And then I need to work, so don’t get excited.”

Damon smirks, lazy and feline, and follows it with an insouciant shrug. “Suits me fine.”

It’s nice, actually, especially once they’ve moved across to one of the restaurants, and they’ve been served, salmon steaks on an Asian-fusion-noodle-salad thingie (which tastes better than it had sounded on the menu; they could have just said ‘spicy noodles’) and sipping wine. Under the table, their ankles bump. Damon looks too good. What’s he been doing the last week?

“Seen Stefan?”


Alaric knows better than to prod.

“You get a room?”

“Thought it was safer than the alternative.”

Little shit. “Good plan. You know I’m working.”

“I know. I also know you sleep.”

Alaric lowers his voice, and leans part of the way across the table. “You flew thirteen hundred miles to share a bed?”

Damon grins, almost viciously. “I hate to think you’re not getting your money’s worth. Diligent employee, here.” There’s no one sitting close enough to hear, but Alaric’s heart still does a little flip.

“Insubordinate.”

“Punish me. I brought the flogger.”

Alaric almost chokes on his wine. “You did?”

“No, but I wish I had, now.” Damon pushes his plate, almost empty, an inch or two away from the edge of the table. “How much work do you have to do?”

He’d planned to be up for most of the night, reviewing contracts himself, maybe throwing some numbers around. “Couple of hours at least,” he says, setting the fork aside.

Damon shrugs. “Fine. I’ll watch a movie, wait for your call.” He drains the glass with a wink, and reaches for a napkin to wipe his mouth. That mouth. That pout. Alaric wants to lean across the table and take it between his teeth.

“Bring rope?”
Damon only smirks.

“Come to my room in an hour,” Alaric says, fishing in his pocket for the extra key. “And try to be subtle about it?”

“My middle name,” Damon says, with a wink. He pushes the chair out from the table, and without a glance backwards, disappears. Alaric rubs his temples. He should be angry. He should send Damon back to New York right the fuck now but he’s here, so…

He watches Damon walk to the elevator, watches him glance over his shoulder, and Alaric’s heart goes into overdrive.

“Charge it to my room,” he says, to the waiter, and he takes his briefcase full of contracts and crosses the foyer. Damon sticks his foot in the door of the elevator, holding it open, and Alaric has his arms around him before the door even closes. Presses him against the wall of the elevator and kisses him, hard. Damon seems to purr against his mouth, body pliant and warm, one hand slipping indiscreetly under Alaric’s shirt.

“You really shouldn’t have come,” Alaric says, scanning his room key and hitting the button for his floor.

“And yet you don’t seem all that disappointed I’m here,” Damon answers. Alaric is pretty sure he’d have his legs wrapped around Alaric’s hips if the wall wasn’t glass, and therefore fucking slippery.

“I’m not,” Alaric admits, and actually it’s annoying when the elevator stops, and he’s forced to step away, take his briefcase. Damon looks pleased as punch, with his red mouth and his wide eyes, darkening to black, strutting down the hallway alongside him with an inexcusably smug expression.

In the room it’s back on, because he’s missed everything about Damon. This mouth, this body, his artfully untidy hair and eagerness to please. Smartass comments and all.

“I have work to do,” he says, as he pushes Damon onto the couch.

“So you’re going to tie me up and leave me here with an unsatisfied boner?”

“I think I just might.” But he has Damon’s shirt ripped open and his lips pressed to his sternum, nary a rope in sight. “And I might gag you.”

“Thought you might have missed my smart mouth,” Damon says, angling his body up so Alaric can work his pants down over his hips. His face, chest, even his arms are flushed red, and his dick is peeking up over the waistband of his boxer briefs, too eager to be contained.

“I have. I might gag you anyway. Christ, I’ve missed you. Don’t think I realized how much.” And Damon’s pleased expression is getting a little ragged by the time Alaric has him stripped naked on the couch.

He takes off his tie, and though he hadn’t been planning to tie Damon up with it, Damon’s wrists meet and it’s altogether too tempting. He doesn’t take his time, just winds it twice around his wrists and ties it off, and Damon smiles lazily as he settles against the couch.

“I thought you might fire me,” Damon admits. “But I was prepared to go home and wait and beg for my job back if you did.”
“And he’s still talking,” Alaric complains, as he takes off his belt and pulls his cock out of his pants. “Open that mouth one last time, Damon…”

And Damon does, and Alaric straddles him, moving until he’s almost directly over his face; Christ this is awkward, the bed would have been a better option, but Damon wraps his pretty mouth around Alaric’s cock and groans hard enough for Alaric to feel the vibrations right through the lower half of his body.

“Get it nice and wet,” he growls. “I don’t generally bring lube on a business trip.”

And Damon does; a wet, messy blow job not intended to end with a mouth full of come; enthusiastic, none the less, and he reaches his tied hands up to massage Alaric’s balls.

There is a very real chance he could fall on the guy so Alaric pulls back, reluctantly. He should take his clothes off.

Nah. It would take too long. And besides, there’s something about having Damon naked and laid out while he’s still in a three thousand dollar suit which appeals to him – probably appeals to Damon, as well, the kinky little shit. He pulls the jacket off, anyway.

“I have lube in my bag,” Damon says, when he has the use of his mouth back.

“You prepared to wait while I go and get it?”

“Nope.” He looks ragged. His mouth is red and wet and ruined and debaucherous and Alaric sort of loves him, which is really, really a bad idea but it’s true; and some days, a day like this, he thinks maybe Damon loves him too. Which doesn’t bear thinking about, because it means this is going to end in catastrophe. He leans back, enough to get Damon’s legs over his shoulders – he looks so vulnerable. He spits into his hand, and reaches for Damon’s hole, recently tragically underused, to work him open.

“Stop me if it hurts,” he says.

“I’ll stop you if it hurts too much,” Damon qualifies. “Wish I’d brought the flogger.”

“Shut up, or I’ll find a creative use for my belt.”

“If I shut up will you do that anyway?” Damon suddenly inhales past his teeth, as Alaric slips a finger into him, and follows it moments later with a second.


“I bet you did,” Damon says, slurring heavily, head rolling back as Alaric stretches him. Has to be thorough. No lube, it’s not a great idea, really, but this feels too fantastic. “Thought about you, too.”

This is such dangerous territory. Alaric pulls his fingers out, and lines up his cock, bumping against Damon’s hole, inadequately stretched, and begins to push inside. This body he’s gotten to know so well in a few short months, this brilliant addiction. He’s careful, slow, watching Damon’s face slacken as he must be really feeling that burn. When he’s seated deeply he lets out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding, and just rocks for a moment.

Damon makes as if to reach for him, remembering abruptly that his hands are tied, and relaxing again, even if his hips seems to grind back, trying to get Alaric to move in him. Alaric leans forward, bending him almost in half, and obliges. Quick, sharp thrusts from the hips that have
Damon punching strangled sounds from his throat, have him coming in thick stripes across his stomach before Alaric is prepared for it.

Still, happens, and he follows close behind, ten days alone and stupid, ridiculous, inappropriate und utterly overwhelming emotion getting the better of him. Damon is still bent in half when Alaric comes with a grunt, biting roughly at his lip, hard enough to bruise, hard enough to make him cringe.

Hadn’t meant that. He kisses the spot apologetically, but Damon doesn’t seem to notice, rubbing his cheek against Alaric’s with a needy mewl.

“How’d I get this lucky,” Alaric says, easing up, slipping involuntarily from Damon’s body as his spent cock begins to soften. He takes off his shirt and slips it under Damon’s leaking ass, rearranging them both so Damon can lie against him and enjoy the aftershocks, the deep, relaxed feeling he always gets after a thorough fucking. Damon grins, and sighs, raising his eyebrows and nestling in close.

Fuck. Alaric still has work to do. He rubs his lips against Damon’s ear.

“I bit your lip,” he says. “I’m sorry.” Damon reaches his still-bound hands up to touch it, and smiles.

“It’s alright.”

“Think I broke the skin.”

Damon’s pink tongue darts out to taste. “Think you’re right.”

“I am sorry.”

“Don’t be. I like you marking me. Don’t start talking about our stupid contract. I just flew thirteen hundred miles to see you.”

Alaric’s big hand travels over Damon’s body, down over his hip, and slips between the cheeks of his ass again, probing gently at his hole, and Damon shivers. “I think we’re past the bounds of a contract at this point,” he says, lazily. “Now tell me how great I am.”

Alaric grins, probing further, brushing against Damon’s prostate, nuzzling into his neck. “You’re fucking incredible,” he says. “So good to me. I –”

He freezes, and Damon turns his face until their eyes meet. “What?”

Fuck, that had been close. Alaric smiles tightly, regretfully. “I still have work to do.” He pulls his fingers out, and Damon winces. Has to be sore. “I really do. I’m sorry.”

“I can go back to my room,” Damon says, reasonably, but cautiously. He doesn’t want to be sent away. His eyes are wide and shocky and Alaric doesn’t think he really should send him away. He tugs gently on a tendril of hair on the back of Damon’s neck and shrugs.

“We can take a shower and you can just read, sleep, whatever. Came this far to share a bed, I’d be an asshole to send you away,” he says, just as reasonably, but he doesn’t miss the brief, miserable narrowing of Damon’s eyes. “I don’t want to send you away,” he amends. “It was crazy that you came this far, but fuck it, you’re here. I want you here.”

They sleep the way they always sleep, when Alaric finally sets his work aside and turns out all the lights; with Damon tucked into Alaric’s arms, the best-fitting little spoon he’s ever met. Alaric’s sleeps with a mouth full of nearly black hair, and a sense that all his carefully laid out rules might be so much scrap paper, blowing in the breeze.

He wakes early, and orders breakfast. He knows what Damon likes. Damon emerges from the bedroom, summoned by the scent of bacon, wearing hotel pajama pants that barely cling to his hips, an inviting patch of hair just above the waistband becoming the snail trail Alaric loves to nose up against. He moves his chair around the table so they’re sitting side by side instead of across from each other. He’s looking distinctly sore, and the nip on his lip has blossomed into a tiny bump and a dark bruise but he looks so thoroughly pleased with himself that Alaric elects against mentioning either. He sits gingerly on the heavily upholstered chair and dives enthusiastically into his breakfast.

Alaric checks the time. Seven fifteen.

“What’s on the cards for you today?”

Alaric grimaces, shrugs. “More being yelled at by Union bosses, more negotiations, more calculating whether we can actually find the pay rise they’re askin’ for. We lose money every day they delay, and there’s a tippin’ point, and I can’t just make the local builder hire a new crew. So. Me doing the thing I suck at worst, which is definitely diplomacy. I just want to wring this asshole’s neck, but I can’t, unless I’m prepared to shut the site down for a few more weeks – and I’m not. We’ve already had delays on demolition, on…” He looks up, and Damon is listening with bright eyes and more interest than he can possibly be feeling. “Cute,” he says. “But you don’t care about this, do you?”

Damon shrugs. “I don’t know. It’s more interesting than lying on the beach all day, quietly growing my first melanoma.”

“Get sun screen,” Alaric says. “Are you planning to stick around, then?”

“Do you want me to?”

Alaric’s phone rings, so he doesn’t have to answer right away. He takes the phone from the table, pacing through the suite, listening to Charles, the lawyer, give him the same bad news that he was anticipating – if he fires the builder now he’s up for hundreds of thousands in breach of contract, but the crew are within their rights to demand a pay increase from the local builder. Which Alaric will have to pay for, unless he wants the builder to go bankrupt and the site to go fallow. He groans, and returns to his breakfast.

“Stay,” he says. “Don’t pay for a separate room. Maybe I’ll come back with good news tonight and we can go to dinner.”

Damon, mollified, drains his coffee cup. “Since you insist,” he says, airily, following it with a nearly predatory grin.

But the day goes better than expected. Partly because the figures Alaric has run suggest that letting construction wait even another week to start would be counter-productive, and by three o’clock in
the afternoon, there is an agreement for an eight percent pay rise across the entire crew, staged over two increases over the next twelve months. Unanticipated, though, all the big wigs involved decide the best way to seal the deal is with dinner, in one of Miami’s best restaurants (on Alaric, of course, but fuck it, a few grand on dinner is no great hardship considering what he’s just avoided by dragging this out even another day). He finds a moment to call Damon with the news.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “But this sort of thing is par for the course. It might be a late night. I’ll come back to the hotel first.” He glances around, doesn’t need anyone eavesdropping. “I’ll make it up to you. I can probably get out of here Thursday.”

Damon is quiet, for a long moment. “I have a suit,” he says, at last. Alaric shakes his head.

“What?”

“I brought a suit. Just in case.”

“In case…” Alaric’s stomach twists up. “You want to come?”

“I’m your friend from New York, remember?” He sounds faintly bitter. “Promise not to act too much like a whore.”

That’s not the worry. The worry is that he’ll act too much like a…

Like a…

Fuck. Like a boyfriend. But. Damon’s well bred, he’s charming. He’s very charming, in fact, he’ll probably make an otherwise dull evening actually worth the small fortune it’s going to cost him.

Alaric should say no. They have rules, boundaries, for a reason. But what’s the worst that could happen?

Alright,” he says. “Remember this is Florida, though. No tie, as I just got reminded. I’ll see you in a few hours.”

“Wait. Can I wear a plug?”

Alaric snickers. “I’ll see you soon.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry for the long wait, guys. I know some of you are worrying that this fic will never get finished; I am here to promise you that it will. I needed to get past this hump in order to set up the next two big arcs (one for each of our babies) and December was just crazy.

I know these two chapters may feel a little spotty, but it's all really about setting things up for the big arcs, as I say. Get ready for some heartbreak ahead.
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Damon charms Alaric's colleagues, and then it's time to go home, and get things back to normal. Which probably means that at some point all this incidental boyfriending on the weekends needs to stop.

Chapter Notes

Chapter warning for rimming.

He's a big fat liar, and he doesn't have a suit with him. What he does have is a credit card and enough time to go and buy one. Proper Miami style, probably something he'll never wear again, but he wants to impress. He asks advice at the concierge, and walks the three short blocks to a tailor who seems unfazed by the rush, as long as Damon is happy to choose something off the rack and let him adjust it on the spot.

Sounds splendid.

By six o'clock he's showered and dressed and preening in front of the mirrored wardrobe. The suit is pale grey, the shirt he chose a pale green he's been promised is de rigueur in business circles in the city (ugh, there's a reason right there not to live in this hell hole). He has a glass of champagne bubbling away on the coffee table by the time Alaric gets back, close to seven, looking exhausted, but relieved.

"Hi honey," Damon says. "You're home." He pushes up out of the couch and crosses the room, tugging lightly on Alaric's jacket as he angles up to kiss him.

"You look like a million bucks," Alaric says, impressed, though he still looks unconvinced Damon should come along tonight. Doesn't matter. Once Damon is charming the pants off everyone at the table – probably almost literally – he'll forget he was ever unsure. "You really had that with you?"

Damon gives a sheepish smile and waves the question off. "Champagne?"

"Shower," Alaric says, with a tired nod, and disappears. He doesn't ask Damon to join him. Pity, a blow job might calm him right down.

--

They arrive at the bar in the vestibule of the restaurant, mingling for the last few moments before being brought to their table. Damon shakes hands, kisses cheeks when needed, and stands a respectable foot away from Alaric at all times. He refers to himself only as a friend of Alaric's from New York who thought he might take advantage of Alaric's generosity and enjoy a night on the town.
One man peers at him with too much interest. Damon feels somewhat the way a cell under a microscope must sometimes feel. He ignores it, until the man addresses him directly, standing a sconce too close.

“Have we met?”

Damon flicks through the rolodex of his altogether too-good memory bank. Works for faces, at least, less for names, though he missed the name anyway, so does it really matter? The main concern, of course, is that this guy might have, at some stage in Damon’s less than spectacular professional life, tied him to a rack and fucked him, or worse. But unless he did it wearing a mask, Damon doesn’t know him.

“If we’d met,” he says, dismissively, “you’d remember. So I’m thinking no.” And that’s it, for the rest of the night. The man barely glances at him again, but Damon can’t shake the feeling that he’s trying to place his face. Hopefully, if he’s right, it’s because he occasionally likes to mix things up and drink in dive bars.

Alaric barely notices the exchange.

Anyway; Damon has a job to do, tonight. He is charming. They are charmed. His trust-fund vibe, easy anecdotes, father with a logging company in Virginia, long dead and in no way missed, they all go down spendidly. He implies a heady lifestyle and won’t be drawn on whether he is looking to settle down and start a family.

Damon orders the most intriguing dishes on the menu and manages to prevent himself, somehow, from supplementing his meal by picking off Alaric’s plate, as he sometimes likes to; it’s too intimate.

Alaric looks relieved. This is most likely in part because it takes the heat off him, since he still obviously doesn’t feel exactly comfortable in this sort of company, but also because it steers the conversation right away from business. Whenever someone tries to talk about something salient they are shushed down, because the flavor of the evening is pleasure.

There are only two women at the table. One is in her fifties, though still very attractive, and the other spends half the evening undressing Damon with her eyes. He winks, but gives her no further encouragement, and she loses interest by the time they are choosing desserts. Damon’s sweet tooth has all but abandoned him, and he orders a selection of cheeses, only wishing he could put together a nice little arrangement of sliced melon and Roquefort on a wafer cracker and slip it past Alaric’s lips, watch his eyes close as he braces for the anticipated clash of flavors, and then open again in surprise as he realizes how nicely the flavors balance.

… though, maybe some time next week?

He bumps his leg against Alaric’s, under the table, and Alaric doesn’t react, or flinch. He just smiles with the very corners of his eyes, and methodically eats his lime sorbet and Iranian cotton candy, and sips his liqueur – he doesn’t seem to like it, much. Damon bought bourbon, in the early evening, just to be on the safe side, and he’ll pour them each a nightcap when they get back to the hotel – which needs to be soon.

Very soon. He didn’t come this far to sit around and talk about the stock market with a bunch of people he doubts even Alaric would socialize with by choice.

In the end, it’s the older lady (whose name will not stick in Damon’s mind, though her spectacular rack has inspired him to make at least an effort) who saves them. She makes the point that it is a
Tuesday, they all have work tomorrow (for her, of course, work is probably either bossing the maids around or a fund-raising ladies’ day at the golf club, but her husband has to be there to break the ground in the morning and is already facing a spectacular hangover). She ignores the people who tell her to stop being a stick in the mud, and kisses Alaric’s cheek before wrangling her intoxicated husband out the door.

“I might head off as well,” Alaric says, so carefully not looking at Damon as he says it, but neatly draining his glass. “You’re all welcome to stay, they’ll just keep charging it to my account. But I definitely need some… sleep.”

Damon doesn’t even smirk.

“Me too.” He says goodbye to everyone left at the table, mostly by name, and allows the host to help him into his jacket (why it is the rich can’t manage this themselves, Damon doesn’t know, but he sort of likes it). “We might as well share a cab,” he says, as Alaric holds the door open for him. “Seeing as we’re such good friends.”

Alaric laughs. He looks tired. Looks too tired, actually. He works too much, his parents are too old, and suddenly Damon gains some little inkling of insight into what it is that he is supposed to be doing, what his role is in Alaric’s life. He feels a curious chill down his spine, and almost without thinking, slips his arm around Alaric’s back, patting his hip briefly.

Alaric doesn’t react. He just watches as the doorman flags him a taxi, and off they go, back to the hotel.

--

It’s one of those nights, after that. Alaric is quiet, tired, happy. He pours them each a small glass of bourbon and sits up at the desk, reading and answering emails, for about an hour, while Damon has yet another shower (mostly an excuse to parade around with a towel hanging off his hips, silently coaxing Alaric to turn off his computer and come to bed). And then without a word, they sleep.

Alaric seems bigger than usual, wrapped tightly around Damon’s back. Possessive. Maybe grateful.

If things were different, one would murmur ‘I love you’, and the other would smile, and answer, ‘I love you too’.

But things are not different.

--

Damon wakes, disoriented, spectacularly turned on, and then as about as awake as it’s possible to be, when he realizes that the sensation that has woken him is Alaric, Alaric with his mouth spread wet over Damon’s hole, licking over his rim, pressing against the tight ring of muscle which is suddenly very motivated to relax. His entire body spasms, and he tries to reach back, but apparently Alaric found the handcuffs. Christ, but Damon can sleep heavily sometimes.

“Best… fuck. Alarm clock ever,” he says, through gritted teeth. “I should be paying you.”

He’s rewarded for the insubordination by a spectacular slap across the back of his thigh which sees his morning wood turn hard as diamonds, hard as bone, so he tries to get up onto his knees.

“Have you got a belt?”
“Of course I have a… fuck, Damon,” Alaric says, sitting up, slipping a nearly dry thumb into Damon’s ass. “Seems like a bit much before breakfast.”

“It can be my breakfast.” Alaric slaps him again, and Damon rolls his hips, his whole body aching with the need of something, anything. What day is it? Wednesday. They’ll go home tomorrow, get things back to normal, and maybe that corset will arrive Friday, and…

He cries out, as the belt hits him across the back of the thigh, rolling his body again as if he could fuck the actual mattress. The friction of the sheet rubbing against his cockhead is glorious. Another crack, and his body goes almost limp.

“That’s enough,” Alaric growls, and he’s working Damon open with long, slick fingers. “And you’re still having breakfast.”

He doesn’t take his time (well, he probably has to be at work in half an hour). He’s inside Damon in moments, hands gripping his thighs (Christ, it hurts, the way he grips the fresh-blooming bruises), fucking him hard. Damon bites the pillow under his face and strangles a laugh. Actual pillow-biter, Damon Salvatore. His father would beat him senseless.

It’s not long, before he feels Alaric’s body stutter to a halt, feels the barest sensation of warmth. Goddammit, he wanted to come, but he doesn’t ask. He’s too busy enjoying the ache and burn, twin sensations across his ass and his thigh. He feels sort of used, in a way that is not unpleasant.

Alaric unlocks the handcuffs and helps him lie down. On his stomach, so Alaric can kiss over the bruises on his thigh, up the column of his spine. He smiles lazily, eyes closed, and waits for the inevitable moment when Alaric will say it’s time to get up. He’s not anticipating Alaric rolling him onto his back, coaxing his flagging erection back with his mouth, with his tongue.

Alaric gives a spectacular blowjob. He should give lessons. Damon is fighting off his orgasm when he feels those fingers back in his ass, probing, stroking over his prostate, and the effort becomes pointless. His hole is wet and ragged and leaking a steady stream of come and he really sincerely wishes he hadn’t been joking about having brought a plug. He comes in Alaric’s mouth, and only wishes he could have kept his eyes open, to see Alaric’s long eyelashes fanning over his cheekbones, his cheeks hollowed out as he brings Damon over the edge.

Damon bites his tongue as he comes, and his body shuts down completely for a few seconds.

When he opens his eyes, Alaric is looming over him.

“I’d kiss you, but it seems a little unsanitary,” he muses, and nuzzles into Damon’s neck.

“No. I’m gonna get in the shower. Order room service, if you can move.” He cups Damon’s cheek in one hand, affectionate, and kisses the hinge of his jaw, instead. Big hazel eyes sparkling with amusement. Yeah, probably unsanitary.

Damon still wishes he’d done it.

--

They fly home Thursday, late, sitting together in first class. Damon is faintly surprised. Alaric seems to be getting used to him being around, in public, and he wonders if that’s good or bad (deciding, in a typically Damonesque fashion, that he doesn’t give a shit). They watch the latest Marvel blockbuster (yeah, alright, Damon watches the latest Marvel blockbuster while Alaric
reads about five thousand pages of something that looks painfully boring) and drink more than they are offered.

They take a taxi from the airport back to the apartment, because it’s far too late to call Caroline. Alaric looks relieved to be home. Damon thinks about suggesting a welcome-home session with a dozen yards of silk rope and the riding crop but he really does look too tired, and besides, Damon’s thigh is still black and blue; might be a good idea to let the bruises fade for a couple more days.

Alaric is gone before Damon wakes on Friday.

Damon rolls over, and goes back to sleep.

--

It’s past noon when they wake together on Saturday. Their lips rub lazily back and forth, tips of their noses brushing together from time to time. It’s barely even sexual. There is no power play. Feels real.

Distantly, Damon’s brain seems determined to remind that – in some ways, at least – it is real.

“’m starvin’,” Alaric says. “We should order breakfast.”

“I could make it.”

“You don’t have to.”

“I didn’t say I had to. I said I could.”

“You’re off –”

Damon reaches out and catches Alaric’s lips between thumb and forefinger. Alaric smiles, amused, eyebrows rising slowly, until he knocks Damon’s hand away.

“Fine,” he says. He rolls onto his back. “Forget I almost said that. It’s your weekend. If you want to spend it hangin’ out here, who am I to stop you. But I don’t think you can make breakfast when there’s nothing in the fridge, so let’s just order it, ’kay?”

They waste a good hour and a half over their breakfast, which is so late it’s not even really brunch anymore. They read the paper, barely speak. They drink a second pot of coffee. Damon reads the comics and Alaric reads the business pages and no one says a word about the clock.

Alaric is too tired for the dinner he was supposed to go to, so it’s one film after the other, Thai food and beer and what can only be fairly described as cuddling on the couch.

Sunday morning, Alaric doesn’t even mention the clock. They head out together for a run in Central Park, adequately hard and fast so Damon sweats enough to forget it’s still technically winter; but then, glancing around, seeing the bright points of color here and there, it’s enough to remind him that spring is on the way. Sunday afternoon with very little discussion they head out to a Jazz club in Queens to listen to some obscure string quartet and eat wasabi peas that set off the bright ale very nicely. Alaric doesn’t flinch when Damon tangles their fingers together under the table. It’s an interesting table. Pock-marked, burned by decades of poorly-handled cigarettes, engraved or scrawled upon here and there by decades of lovers, the odd wordsmith; and then, some time in the recent past (last time the place changed hands, if Damon has calculated correctly), needing to spruce the place up, some nostalgic soul in management made the very interesting decision to thickly lacquer the tables, instead of replacing them. All that history under a hard
quarter inch of clear sealant.

It’s appealing, even if Damon has always found the practice of writing initials in hearts a little tacky.

His eyes catch on an especially small contribution to the collage. He pushes the salt away, and taps the table, drawing Alaric’s attention. Small red heart, arrow passing through it. It’s nicely drawn, nicer than some of them. Balanced and symmetrical. And in the middle, it reads ‘DS+AS’.

Damon wonders how long ago it was written. He meets Alaric’s eyes for a second, and when he catches Alaric’s small, incredulous smile, he relaxes again.

Alaric excuses himself to head to the bathroom, and when he comes back, there’s no more hand holding. But they do sit close.

--

Monday morning, Damon is woken just barely after seven when Alaric kisses him. Already showered, dressed, smelling like shampoo and that sandalwood soap he likes so much.

“Seven tonight,” he says. “Back to work.”

Damon feels a thrill of anticipation. “Want me wearing anything special?”

“Honestly… I probably won’t be up to much,” and he sounds apologetic, which sucks. “But I have a board meeting this afternoon that I don’t think will go very well and I might just want to take it out on your ass when I get home. So rest up.”

Another kiss, and he’s gone.

Damon dozes for another couple of hours with a smile on his face that would make the average canary run away in fear.
Chapter Summary

A deeply unsatisfying week for everyone, until things start looking up on Friday. Time Damon got a chance to use his safe gesture.

Chapter Notes

If you feel you have a lot of triggers, it might be a good idea to scroll to the bottom right now and read the chapter-specific warning. Otherwise, go on ahead.

Tonight, he is determined, will be all business. Time to fix the dynamic. He has to stop acting like they are dating, and get back to being Damon’s Dom. And he’s had a spectacularly shitty day, and he needs to exert some control over something. Damon always fits the bill so nicely.

Caroline collects him from the office just after eight, and she’s sensible enough not to ask questions when Alaric’s expression is this stony.

When he steps out of the vestibule, and into the apartment, he finds Damon in the kitchen, heating up the meal he probably ordered for seven o’clock. Typical; he’d wanted to get the food out of the way as quickly as possible, see what Alaric has in store for him. Alaric acknowledges him with a nod, and heads off to take a shower, deliberately ignoring the slightly pained, confused expression on Damon’s face. But they eat, quietly, and Damon asks vague questions about the meeting he’d been anticipating.

Alaric shakes his head. “Nope. Not tonight. I really don’t want to talk about it.”

“They’re pissed about Florida?”

“Think I just said I didn’t want to talk about it.”

Damon clears the table, flinching slightly when he rolls against the bruises on his thigh. “How do you want me?” he asks, with his arms loaded up, pausing before he heads into the kitchen.

“Naked,” Alaric says, simply, and heads to the couch with an inch-thick proposal, one of the hospital projects, one of the more promising ones. “Except your collar. And quiet, please, I need to work.”

Damon obliges, heading to the bedroom to strip out of his clothes and slip the collar around his neck. Alaric watches from his place on the couch; he can just see Damon in front of the mirror, adjusting it carefully. Christ, that ass.

He watches as Damon, looking wary now, and slightly disappointed, comes back into the living room. Damon manages to contain his disappointment when Alaric coaxes him onto his knees in
front of the couch, head resting against Alaric’s leg, but he doesn’t complain, or let it register on his face as anything more than slightly sub-par enthusiasm. Alaric scratches through his hair, and tugs softly on the collar from time to time, but makes no other move to touch him,

After about an hour, Damon is quivering with need.

“If you need to get off,” Alaric says, without looking up from the document, “be my guest. You know where the bathroom is.”

But Damon does nothing. He still looks confused, and sort of hurt, but he stays where he is, barely mewling when Alaric’s fingers get up close to his ear.

“Thought we were scening tonight,” he mumbles.

“It’s a Monday. When do we ever scene on a Monday? And I have work to do.”

Damon returns to silence, but there is a tension in his shoulders which is impossible to ignore. Alaric does the best he can to ignore it anyway, and when he’s done with the proposal (now edging closer to a determination that this is one that will go ahead, even if he has to put his own money into it) he grips Damon’s hair, gently, and pulls his head back until he can see his face.

“What?” he asks. “Is there a problem?”

Damon mumbles something about Alaric taking out his bad mood on Damon’s ass. Yeah, he’d said that, true.

“You forget,” he says. “I’m the boss. We’re on my schedule.”

Damon seems to flinch, but collects himself quickly, and nods. “And what about the other side? If I need something, I ask, and you provide. Correct?”

Okay, he has a point. “What do you need?”

Of course, Damon has no answer for this. Alaric has a headache. It’s his own fault. Spent the last week treating Damon like a boyfriend, instead of a sub. He smoothes down Damon’s hair, and lets him rest again, settling himself back against the cushions and wondering what he can do tomorrow that can turn around the distinct unease the board seems to have at the moment. It seems insane, when they work on projects that can take two years or more to complete, that any one incident can cause so much distrust, but there you have it.

Alaric sometimes fantasizes about retiring. But what the hell would he do?

Damon shifts, settling his chin on Alaric’s thigh, draping one arm around his knee. “Am I doing something wrong?” he asks. “I was starting to think I was getting the hang of this.”

Alaric shakes his head. “Shitty day. That’s all there is to it. If you want to go, go. Stay at your own place.”

“I don’t.”

“Well, I need some sleep. So. We’re done for the night.”

They sleep the way they always do, with Alaric plastered against Damon’s back, and that seems to quiet his anxiety some. But it sets the tone for the week.

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Friday night, though, Alaric’s mood is somewhat improved. Enough so that he comes home with a bottle of their favorite champagne – Pappy Van Winkle’s Family Reserve, which is, in Alaric’s estimation, the best bourbon available in America today. Who needs champagne? Damon is reading on the couch. Could be mistaken by almost anyone for being casually dressed, but those are his skinniest jeans, made to show off the nicest ass in New York, and his t-shirt is at least a size too small.

His eyebrows rise, in stages, as he takes in Alaric’s expression, the bourbon in his hand, and the lack of an oversized briefcase full of work that might distract him all weekend.

“Hi, honey,” he says, for the first time all week. “You’re home.”

“I’m home,” Alaric says, leaning down to steal a kiss. A fairly promising one, he thinks. “Have you showered?”

Damon smirks. “Yes.”

“Order us some dinner. Something uncomplicated. How’s the bruising on your thigh?”

“Almost gone.”

“Good.” Alaric leans in for another kiss, and Damon relaxes visibly.

Over pizza, Alaric tries to make up for the lousy week they’ve had. He actually has to laugh about the pizza. Pizza? Damon is more keen than usual. “I’m sorry about –”

“Don’t be.” Damon grins weakly, and takes another bite.

“I am. But you know, this is part of the job. You…”

“I need to be what you need, when you need it,” Damon agrees, cheerfully enough. He’s drunk a pint and a half of water already, slowly, preparing himself. “I know.”

“Do you have plans tomorrow?”

Damon gives Alaric an incredulous look, and almost doesn’t answer. “No. When have I ever had plans on a Saturday?”

Touché. Alaric almost makes the point that some Saturdays are for Stefan, but he holds off. “You might need some serious coddling tomorrow, that’s all,” he says.

“Good. That had better mean you don’t have plans.”

“I do. They involve a lot of coddling.” Alaric closes the pizza box, and wipes his hand on a napkin. “I know it’s an issue. If we scene heavily on a Friday night, and you have to stay late Saturday morning…”

“Ugh, don’t.” Damon says. “I was very close to being a bit buzzed. Don’t.”

“You can take Monday night off, is all I’m saying.”

“You’re still doing it. If I wanted to leave, I would. Can we skip this?”

“No.” Alaric reaches across the table, and takes Damon’s wrist in his hand. “I’m telling you, you can take Monday night off.”
Damon holds his gaze. “And if I wanted to spend my Monday night off here, with you?” He must sense Alaric’s hesitation. “If I need that?”

Alaric gives up. “Fine,” he says, but he doesn’t release Damon’s wrist. “You remember your safe gesture?”

Damon clicks his fingers. Once. Looking smug. It’s a satisfyingly resonant click, the sort Alaric had tried and failed to master as a kid. Alaric holds his eyes, already darkening, his face relaxed and anticipatory.

“I saw your expression when you sat down. You’re wearing a plug, aren’t you.” Damon smiles, looking out from under those heavy eyebrows like he’s the one in charge and maybe in some ways he is; certainly Alaric is a goddamn junkie, can’t get enough. “Same one?”

“Bit longer,” Damon says. “Much thicker.”

“You’re basically perfect,” Alaric says.

“When I’m not talking?”

Actually, Alaric is half in love with the way Damon is incapable of shutting up when he really should. But that’s a whole other thing. So. “Yep.”

“Then it’s a good thing you have the means to shut me up,” Damon says, deliberately shifting on his chair so that Alaric can only imagine what he’s feeling, thick plug bumping against his prostate.

“Yep.”

“So, where do you want me?”

Alaric’s hand is still wrapped tightly around Damon’s wrist, but he brushes lightly over the sensitive inside skin with his thumb. “Bedroom. Don’t take your clothes off until I get there.”

Damon winks, and extracts his hand, and Alaric spends a few long minutes draining his glass, and planning the night in his head.

--

When Alaric reaches the bedroom, he has a glass of bourbon in his hand. He sits on his favorite overstuffed armchair and sips it. “Take your clothes off. No, I don’t want a striptease, but take your time.”

Damon looks amused, but still turned on. The way his eyebrows twitch tells Alaric he’d been a half second from telling Alaric for the… perhaps thirtieth time in four months that he has no idea what he’s missing. He pulls the t-shirt over his head, slow and showy, and Alaric reaches for the remote control, to play music just low enough to remind them both that time is passing. Damon peels his jeans off (they really are ridiculously tight, he could actually be stripping paint) and pulls them over his ankles.


Damon does as he’s told, and Alaric sets the bourbon aside. He leans forward, one hand spreading the cheeks of Damon’s ass, the other bumping deliberately against the plug, making Damon’s body shudder suddenly.
“That can stay until I’m ready, I think,” Alaric says. He stands up, maneuvering Damon forward a foot or two so he can go to the drawer of goodies and get the cuffs. One for each ankle, one just above each of Damon’s knees, one on each wrist.

“On your knees, on the bed. Facing the wall. I’ll get the spreader bars.”

Damon does as he’s told, docile, glancing up at the hook above the bed head. Alaric has to smile at that, though he is somewhat preoccupied with his own increasing arousal and thinking it might be about time to get his own pants off, before his dick rips straight through the zipper.

But for now, he fastens two spreader bars of equal length between Damon’s knees and ankles. They’re nicely secured, and Damon has to grip the bed head to keep upright.

“Spread your arms wider,” Alaric says. “Not quite as wide as they can go, but close.” It’ll be uncomfortable, but that’s part of the point. “Feel alright?”

Damon tosses him a baleful glance. “It’s fine,” he says, in the exact tone of voice a twelve year old uses when telling someone he doesn’t need a jacket.

Alaric chains the cuffs to the bed head. Secure, perfect. He’s starting to feel a little spacy. Anticipation and hormones, and the tantalizing glimpse of the plug settled neatly between the cheeks of Damon’s ass.

One last trip to the drawer, for a blindfold, ball gag, and the riding crop. Blindfold first. Alaric doesn’t ask if it’s alright. Damon can still safeword out, click his fingers; fuck, if he so much as says no, Alaric will stop. He tenses a little, but adjusts his head so that Alaric can secure it at the back. He doesn’t say a word, but when Alaric’s fingers brush over his lips, he trembles just a bit, kisses them lightly. Pressing his cheek to Alaric’s hand, seeking some kind of reassurance.

“You’re safe,” Alaric reminds him.

Ball gag, next. Damon will be able to grunt, but not much else. “Click your fingers,” Alaric commands, and Damon does it. Good, good and loud.

He sits back on the bed for a long moment. Unzips his jeans, watching the tension build in Damon’s body, and strokes his own cock for a few moments. He undresses silently, still watching as Damon tries to find his center, get himself into the zone where his body is Alaric’s and Alaric’s only. The first tentative footsteps into subspace. Alaric bumps the plug again, and Damon shudders. He brushes his fingertips over the last of the faded bruises, and Damon’s head drops.

“These need freshening up,” he says, quietly, and Damon turns his head a little way.

He gives no warning as the crop crosses Damon’s thigh for the first time, and it shocks Damon from his moment, whatever sort of moment it is. He tenses, the muscles in his ass clenching beautifully around the plug. Alaric waits, maybe a minute, maybe more, before administering the second. He hears nothing but a half-swallowed moan, and when he reaches around Damon’s hip, he finds his cock hard as nails and leaking steadily onto the blanket. He gives a teasing little brush over the swollen head, and draws back again.

“I might not let you come at all tonight,” he says. “I haven’t decided.”

Thwack.

Damon’s body jerks, and his hips roll, like he’s trying to fuck up into nothing. Wants Alaric’s hand, maybe his mouth. He’s getting neither, not right now.
“You want to, don’t you.”

Thwack. Thwack, thwack, thwack, thwack. Five lashes, each close on the other’s tail, and Damon tries to cry out around the ball in his mouth, and manages nothing more or less than a needy moan. He tries to shift, readjust his weight, but he can’t. Alaric smiles.

“You’re so good to me,” he says, leaning to kiss the divot just above Damon’s perfect ass, at the base of his spine. “Kelly was right, you know. You’re so fucking needy and I just want you to need me.”

Damon turns his head abruptly, and stops himself just as fast. Probably has ten thousand questions for Alaric the idiot who doesn’t know when to shut up. Alaric moves closer, bumping his erection against the plug, and cups Damon’s chin in his hand, biting his ear gently.

“Bet your mouth is all wet, now. Can’t close your mouth, can’t swallow easily. Sort of tempted to untie you and fuck your mouth. What do you think?”

Damon pushes back against Alaric’s body, head tipping back just enough to rest on his shoulder, and Alaric grinds gently against his ass.

“Maybe later,” he says, closing his hand over Damon’s cock and gripping tight, close to the base. With no warning, his hand goes into overdrive, jerking Damon almost to orgasm in only a couple of very intense minutes, and reaching with the other hand to grip his balls. Damon’s body locks up suddenly, fucking one last time into Alaric’s fist, and he comes hard, hitting his own stomach, chest, making a thorough mess of Alaric’s hand.

“I’ll take that as a thank you,” Alaric says, as he wipes his hand on Damon’s leg. “Has anyone ever seen you like this before? Not just tied up. Tied up and wanting.” He’s tempted to take off the ball gag, make Damon beg. At least listen to him mouth off about Alaric being all talk, but no, he leaves it. “You’re worth every fucking cent I pay you.”

Maybe it’s because he knows that Damon would have flinched at that; but Alaric wishes he hadn’t said it, as soon as the words have passed his lips. He kisses Damon’s shoulder, runs his big, callused hands all over Damon’s tight little body, presses flush up against him.

He shifts back, just far enough to work the plug out with his fingers. Still a fair bit of lube, there, but not enough. Still, Alaric plays with Damon’s loose hole for a few moments, enjoying the way Damon bucks against the chains.

“All mine,” Alaric growls, and reaches for the lube behind his foot, slicking himself generously.

He barely gives Damon time to adjust to the stretch (and yeah, it was a thickish plug, but not as thick as Alaric’s cock) before he sets a pace, brutal, one hand gripping Damon’s shoulder, the other his hip, pressing against the highest of the lash marks. For the first few thrusts, Damon pushes back against him, and then something changes. His body seems to go into spasm, and he clamps down hard over Alaric’s erection, the moans and groans that escape from around the ball gag suddenly pleading where they were helpless before. Alaric grips harder, thrusts deeper, snapping his hips. His eyes fall closed, but not for long.

There’s something wrong. It occurs to him far too late. Five, six seconds from his own monumental orgasm. Later, he’ll punish himself for this, the long moments it took for him to realize. Did he wait on purpose?

(He’ll never be able to be sure, and he’ll always wonder.)
Point is, he’s coming like he’s nineteen and bulletproof when he realizes that the only reason he can’t hear Damon clicking furiously, fast as he can manage, is because, as it turns out, he can’t click properly with his left hand.

It seems to take forever for Alaric to realize what is going on. He pulls out fast, though his body is still half helpless with aftershock, and turns to Damon’s right hand. It is limp, no finger moving, not making any attempt to grip the bed head. Damon is holding himself up by his left only and that makes it fucking hard to gesture.

And then another second or three pass before Alaric realizes that he has to get the ball gag off. He reaches for the quick release, and eases the ball out of Damon’s mouth, reaching for the blindfold. His hand comes away wet; Damon has tears pouring from the corners of his eyes, though he’s not sobbing. Probably doesn’t even know he’s crying.


Damon twists impossibly, and Alaric moves around to unchain his right hand.

“You dislocated my shoulder,” he breathes, groans, something, what’s the word when a voice is wrenched from the farthest corner of someone’s chest?

Alaric feels sick. He unchains the left, hands shaking, trying to plan the next ten steps in his head. The bar between Damon’s knees, the one between his ankles, and he takes Damon’s weight against his chest. Damon is like an injured animal, desperate to trust but not trusting. Hurt and scared and with tears still running over his face. The shoulder is swelling in front of Alaric’s eyes, shiny, blood pooling in the tissue.

“Jesus Christ,” he says. “Damon. I’m so… I didn’t see, I…”

“I know, shut up. I need ice, and the hospital.”

Alaric can’t move, can’t take his eyes away from the grotesque lump where Damon’s shoulder used to be. This is not the way it’s supposed to be, this is not who he is.

*Did he wait?*

Did he stop the *second* he knew something was wrong?


Chapter End Notes

*Chapter-specific warning for an accidental severe injury resulting from play that gets out of hand.*

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Please trust me to make this right, my friends. I have the next two chapters written and ready to go, I just want you to sweat over the fallout of this incident the way Alaric is right now, and ask yourself the question; do you think he stopped right away? Or did
he wait a few seconds? Could he decide to wait because, hey, it's not going to get any worse, right?

I guess part of the question is; are they both in love, at this point? And if so, could Alaric ignore Damon's pain for those few seconds?

I do promise to set this right, whether these questions are ever answered or not.

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As always, sorry for a bit of a delay in posting. As I say I have two more chapters ready to go, and I'll post them in a few days. After that I have outlines for the next four and I'm really excited about how much I am going to hurt you soon. Very amused by the speculations about what's going to happen but although a couple of you guys almost touched on things, no one has really guessed it right, to my great relief! Because if anyone did, I'd be compelled to go back to the drawing board. See you later this week!

Much love, PBK.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

When it comes down to it, the shoulder doesn't bother Damon as much as wondering what the fallout is going to be like.

Chapter Notes

Chapter warning for a hospital scenario.

In the back of the taxi, shivering cold in workout pants, a hooded sweatshirt they hadn’t managed to zip up and with a blanket wrapped around him – and of course, the sick, miserable, terrified body of his **employer** tucked up against him, trying to keep him warm, and keep his shoulder from resting against anything that might cause him more pain – Damon thinks about literally everything but the agony which doesn’t seem to be confined just to the joint, but shoots up his arm, crosses most of his back, seems to have paralyzed his neck. Partly because there’s nothing he can do about it and partly because if he lets himself think about it he might throw up, and if he has to sit around the hospital for hours (ugh, again) he doesn’t want to be covered in his own puke.

So he thinks about Stefan. About Stefan and the football scholarship he’d been offered two weeks before the accident. Quarterback baby brother, owning the football field in ten tons of body armor. He thinks about the singer he’d been planning to coax Alaric to see with him on Sunday afternoon. Torch songs. He’d slept with her, once. It had been strange, and sad, and unsatisfying for them both, but they had walked away on good terms, and this is the first time she’s playing in the city since, with the shriveled hippie who accompanies her on the piano.

In addition to the pain, what he pointedly doesn’t think about is Alaric. Because the fallout from this is probably going to be monumental, and he really doesn’t want to wonder what the fallout might be.

Alaric is still as a stone beside him, trying to buffer against the way the taxi lurches when it changes lanes, or jolts when they hit a pothole, but it’s not helping, much.

Damon closes his eyes and lets his head rest on Alaric’s shoulder. It’s better. Marginally better.

“I’m so sorry,” Alaric murmurs, trying to adjust the blanket without bumping him. “I didn’t realize…”

“Shut up,” Damon says. “You think I think you’d do it on purpose? Give me a break.”

Alaric either has no clue how much taxis cost or he only has a hundred in his billfold and no desire to wait for change. Either way, they are limping into the emergency room only a moment or two after the taxi pulls up, Damon still pressing his left arm protectively over his right to hold it still. Oh, god, he’s nauseous. And couldn’t he have dislocated his left shoulder? This is going to be a complete pain in the ass. How long does this sort of thing take to heal?
He hates the hospital smell. He hates the muted PA, the miserable family members hunched in the waiting room, all of it.

Although a dislocated shoulder isn’t exactly life threatening, Alaric seems to know how to get what he wants from anyone he meets. Maybe he slips the head nurse a nice fat bill. Either way, pretty soon, Damon has a bed, a fuckton of opiates in his system and ice to reduce the swelling, and they’re waiting for… a CT scan? An x-ray? He’s too stoned to really pay attention.

“Why don’t they just push it back in?” Damon slurs.

“Sometimes these things need surgery,” Alaric says, fingers brushing over the inside of Damon’s left wrist. “They have to make sure there’s no… okay, I wasn’t really listening. I still can’t believe I did this. I’m so… I’m so sorry.”

Damon doesn’t want to hear it. Sick of it already. What he wants to know is if this means he’s stuck in his own apartment for the week. Will this count as sick leave? Not like he needs someone taking care of him. This isn’t like the pneumonia thing. So will he be sent away to get better? Because he really doesn’t fucking want to be.

“Just shut up,” he says. “What are you sorry for? You didn’t do it on purpose.”

“I know. I just don’t know if…”

Damon turns his head, and meets Alaric’s miserable hazel eyes. “If…”

“If I stopped as soon as…”

“Oh…”

“I mean, I think I did. I didn’t realize until…”

“Don’t. Stop it.”

“Damon…”

“I said stop it. I need you to,” Damon says.

There are too many silent minutes, and then they’re whisking him down the hall, into radiology. It’s not until he’s there, and being helped into a paper dress, that it occurs to him that the entire right side of his body, and not just his arm, bears recent signs of serious abuse and he spends a good ten seconds debating complaining loudly that he should be allowed to wear his sweatpants.

But he relents. A very capable nurse (Alaric’s height, broader build) helps him with the pants, and Damon feels a brief flash of sick humiliation he immediately buries under six inches of pure swagger. The nurse looks like he wants to offer some sort of helpful brochure on intimate partner violence, or maybe call child protective services.

“Trust me,” Damon says. “It’s a lot more fun than you’d think.” He groans out loud as his shoulder is jostled, briefly, wishing Alaric was there to do this stuff but also relieved for the respite.

“Consensual, then?” the nurse asks, looking for a lie on Damon’s face. There is none.

“Made me wait all week for it.” Damon’s lip curls as he tries to gauge exactly how much of his ass is hanging out of the back of the robe, and how many times he’s likely to have to comment. “You don’t know me,” he finishes, tone dangerous. “So don’t judge me.”
“I’m not,” lies the nurse, who is a lying liar who tells lies. “Is that how you dislocated your shoulder?”

“You can mark that down as an accident,” Damon answers, holding the nurse’s eyes, his glance freezing cold. “And now this conversation is done.” He limps past the curtain, into the x-ray room, and lets himself be arranged on his back for the X-ray.

When he is returned to his place in the emergency room, Alaric is still there, hunched over and waiting. Guilty isn’t a great look on him. Damon thinks briefly about pretending to be asleep, but it just seems cruel.

“Did they say anything?”

“No surgery. Someone’s coming to…” he makes a clacking noise with his tongue. “Pop it back in.” He makes it sound like nothing. It’s going to hurt like hell. Why they won’t put him out for this he has no clue. Maybe Alaric would knock him unconscious. He boxed in college, told Damon so himself. Somehow Damon doubts the joke would go down all that well.

Alaric pulls the chair closer to Damon’s bed. He looks like he’s debating reaching for Damon’s left hand, but he doesn’t, he just sits there, brain whirring so fast Damon thinks he can actually hear it. Well, it’s better than more apologizing, even if it’s accompanied by a sort of dull ache.

Having the joint put back into place is actually, probably more painful than the initial dislocation, and Damon has to bite his tongue and the inside of his lip to avoid screaming like a banshee.

They sit in the emergency room until almost eleven the next day. They’re sent away with pain killers and ice packs, and instructions to get it checked out in a couple of days, wear the splint and a sling for the next ten days, start using the arm gently and sporadically on Tuesday or Wednesday. Damon doesn’t hear a word. Alaric takes everything down in his phone’s notes like he’s Moses on the mountain, with his face still gray and stricken.

Damon is silent most of the way home. Caroline doesn’t say a word when she picks them up at the hospital, and drives in a very un-Forbesian manner back across town, careful not to take any corners too quickly, avoiding potholes, slowing down at traffic lights instead of attempting to slip by on the amber.

There’s no discussion about where Damon might be better off; Alaric leads him to their private elevator and Damon is somewhat relieved. He enters the code to be taken to the penthouse while Damon watches, brain still an almost pleasant fog of pain killers, even if he’s still freezing cold.

Once inside he guides Damon through the apartment and eases him onto the bed, arranging the pillows to reduce the pressure on Damon’s shoulder. He rarely meets Damon’s eyes, but he talks quietly as he does it, mostly just to fill the silence; maybe to stop Damon from trying to fill the silence instead. As if he could think of a single thing to say.

“I’ll replace the ice pack,” he says, and Damon complains.

“Give it a rest, I’m freezing,” he growls, pulling up the blanket with one hand.

Alaric wants to argue, but he doesn’t. He fusses from room to room, making the pit in Damon’s stomach worse on every pass. Can’t just be the pain that’s making him feel this odd. He feels ill and empty.

“I should let you sleep,” he says, just barely brushing a finger over Damon’s left wrist. “Do you
Damon narrows his eyes. “Are you serious?”

Alaric breaks eye contact, but forces himself to make it again. “It’s too soon for the pain killers. Are you hungry?”

“No,” Damon says, and fuck, this is frustrating. What is Alaric even doing? Forgotten all the stupid rules? They’re his rules. Damon feels heat prickle his cheeks.

“Can I get you something?”

He’s not even asking right. Why won’t he ask?

“I need,” he says, teeth grit hard, and he can’t finish. “Fuck, Ric. Last night. High impact scene and then you dislocated my shoulder and I need some fucking coddling.” Angry tears absolutely do not prick his eyeballs, but they would, if they were allowed.

Alaric looks shocked. “Are you sure?”

“Come on. We might bust through a rule a week around but if I tell you I need something you give it to me. Thought that one was solid. Right?”

Because, fuck, last night was an accident but if Alaric withholds care right now Damon is out the door. In approximately ten days, when he can carry a suitcase, of course.

Alaric steps out of his shoes, and slips his sweater over his head. He hesitates over his jeans, and leaves them on, in the end. He shuffles awkwardly between the sheets, trying to find a way to curve his body around Damon’s; and in the end, Damon just rearranges himself, instead, stretched over Alaric’s body, shoulder immobile.

Alaric is awkward, but relaxes in time. Eventually seems to remember what he’s doing. His hand moves from the base of Damon’s head, up in his hairline, down over his back, stopping at his waist. Damon calms, eventually, half hypnotized, starting to nod off, but craving the gentle touch too much to let himself go. He nuzzles into Alaric’s t-shirt, wishing he’d asked him to strip off completely.

Despite the decidedly unpleasant circumstances of the last... sixteen hours, or however long it’s been, he’s slightly ashamed at how needy he is. And craving the words he used to hate hearing.

You’re so good to me.

But everything’s all fucked up, and instead, Alaric starts to apologize again, until Damon wants to tell him to stop.

He doesn’t let himself think about what Alaric said in the hospital, because the truth is, he can’t believe anyone so fundamentally nice and decent would prioritize his own orgasm over Damon’s pain. It just doesn’t seem plausible. He sets the entire concept aside as a bad joke, and slips into unconsciousness, there with has face pressed into Alaric’s shoulder.

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When he wakes, he finds that Alaric has packed away the toys, rearranged the bed, and is dozing on the other side of the bed. Probably hadn’t wanted to wake him. Damon cringes as he tries to sit up, bleary and thoroughly out of it.
“Come here,” he says, and Alaric gives a half-smile, slotting back into position. “Jesus, this is going to get boring. Stop acting like you beat me up and took my shoes. I’ll be fine in a few days.”

“I know,” Alaric says, kissing the top of his head. His voice says he’s alright. The hands where hands belong say it’s alright. Still Damon can’t shake the feeling that this is barely the beginning of some catastrophe he’s yet to be able to gauge.

He needs pain killers, and food, but he asks for neither, for the moment, just enjoying the feeling of Alaric’s body, Alaric’s arms. Alaric says nothing, but does cup Damon’s left forearm in his hand, fingers working over the flesh gently.

“You didn’t,” he says.

“What?”

Damon takes a breath. “You didn’t wait. It had only just occurred to me to try to click with my left hand. So whatever it is you’re thinking – stop it. Shit happens, we play a dangerous game. I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“You’re not supposed to be tryin’ to cheer me up,” Alaric says, murmuring against Damon’s hair. “I should have been paying better attention. And I don’t believe you can actually remember anything that clearly, anyway, so stop it, Damon. Do you need tablets?”

Damon doesn’t want him to leave, but he really, really does need something. “Yes,” he says. “And I’m starving.”

“Pizza okay? I doubt you could manage much else.”

Off he goes, grateful for something to do, making a call, fetching the tablets and a glass of water. Damon can’t help thinking bourbon might speed up the whole process, but he doesn’t say so.

Alaric helps him dress (uuuuggghhhhh, humiliating), helps him to the couch, and sticks the remote control in his hand to let him scroll through Netflix until he can find something suitably mind-numbing. When the pizza arrives, it occurs to Damon that it’s almost dark out. Must have slept for longer than he thought. Alaric passes him a glass of white wine, and helps him to get settled against the cushions, but he barely makes eye contact.

“You’re gonna fire me,” Damon blurts. “Aren’t you. Fucking hell.”

“I’m gonna fire you because I dislocated your shoulder?”

“You’re gonna fire me and tell me it’s for my own good, because this shouldn’t have happened, blah blah fucking blah.” Alaric meets his eyes, and shakes his head.

“I’m not. Just… focus on one thing at a time, Damon. I –”

And his phone rings. He pulls it from his pocket, flinching when he sees the name on the screen.

“Meredith,” he says. Meredith? Who’s that? “Shit. No, you’re right. I meant to call. Helping out a friend, he… dislocated his shoulder, not much good for anything right now. I’m so sorry. I know, twice in two weeks. I swear, next Saturday. No matter what happens. Nuclear war, hostile takeover, I’ll be there. No.” Pause. “No, Mere, you’d be the first to know, and yes, you can send ninjas to my place if I don’t show next week. I promise.”

He ends the call, looking guilty. Damon elects not to prod, though he really, really wants to prod.
More than anything. He wants to demand, even. Tell Alaric that what he needs is to know everything that's going on in his head and his life right now and most importantly, what impact it's likely to have on Damon. He stares at the screen, instead, and tries to ignore the sickening feeling that no matter what Alaric says, this is about to be over.

Later, in bed, he finds the words to say it. His tongue feels thick in his mouth. Booze and opiates, yum. “You’re thinking about firing me,” he says again. He’s not comfortable, though it’s as good as he can get, under the circumstances, with Alaric deliberately propping him up to avoid pressure on his arm.

“’m not.”

“Fine, rephrase. You’re thinking I should go, for some stupid idea about my own good. So think about this. You make me leave and I’m on my own again. You think that was working for me before?”

Alaric’s fingers brush over his good hand. “Get some sleep, Damon.”

Damon wants to snarl, throw things. Extract promises. All he can do – the only power he has right here – is the power to sulk, the power to be so goddamn needy he disgusts himself, so needy Alaric can’t let him go.

“You think this is the worst I’ve been hurt in a scene?”

“Damon…”

“It’s not.”

There’s a long silence. “You say you think I stopped as soon as I…”

“Oh, fuck, this conversation gets to be more fun every time we have it.”

“You need to think about it, Damon. You have to come first, here. I know the money means a lot, I wouldn’t just –”

“Ugh, can we not talk about money right now?”

“Then what do you want to talk about?”

What he wants to talk about is that no one has given a shit about him in years and it feels like Alaric does, even if he always picks the exact wrong moment to remind Damon that he’s a hooker.

“What if you’re wrong?”

Damon pauses. What if he is wrong? What if Alaric decided he was close enough, why the fuck not just finish and deal with it in a minute? It’s still far from the most fucked up thing that’s happened to him in a scene.

(And this is still the best thing that’s happened to him since Stefan’s accident.)

And he still doesn’t believe it. And he’d rather not, so who the fuck is Alaric to try to force him to? Is he really not allowed to make his own dumb decisions, to decide the money is worth the risk of getting hurt from time to time?

That… whatever the fuck this relationship is, that it’s worth the risk?
Fucking Alaric. Idiot. Like Damon has an abundance of people waiting in the wings who care about him, would open their doors and… alright, maybe it’s not healthy, but he’s done with being alone.

“You’d punish me, for getting hurt,” he growls, eventually. It’s the closest thing he can think of to what he actually wants to say.

“What? No,” Alaric says, and Damon can feel the way he wants to roll over and turn on the light and see what Damon’s eyes look like when he does that.

“Send me back to Kelly to get rented out by the hour to men who don’t give a shit about me?”

“Damon… no. I’d make sure you never had to work again. Can you listen to what I’m tryin’ to say here? I fucked up, I hurt you. ’m talkin’ about givin’ you the chance to just get out. Do whatever you want, look after Stefan, go to college, literally anything. You never have to sub again.”

And Damon thought Alaric was the smart one.

“After this,” he says, “do you think I could do without it?”

Alaric freezes, or maybe just stutters, and his fingers find the tendrils of hair on the back of Damon’s neck, and things feel alrightish, for a moment.

“You didn’t wait. You stopped. You didn’t do it on purpose and you’re not throwing me out of here. I’m sleeping. Shut up.”

Alaric is silent for few moments longer. “Tell me to shut up,” he growls, splaying his hand over Damon’s back again. “You’re lucky you’re not on the clock.”

It really doesn’t feel like any fucking thing is settled, but it’s better than it was ten minutes ago; and besides, he’s exhausted, so Damon lets the pain pills drag him on down to sleep.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

It never rains, but it pours. Suddenly, a dislocated shoulder and a needy, ambiguous sub are no longer Alaric's only big problems. How much straw does it take to break a camel's back, again? Damon sees an opportunity he's not prepared to miss.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It’s all he can think about, runs through his head every six seconds. The sequence of events. Trying to remember exactly what happened and when, over those seven or eight seconds. Did he see the fingers and keep going? Was he already coming? He barely sleeps, that first night, worried about jostling Damon awake by rolling against his arm. Smart thing would be to move him into the guest room for a few days, but he doesn’t want him that far away.

Sunday afternoon, when Damon says he wants to go and see some torch act in Queens, Alaric agrees readily, just to be doing something that might distract Damon from the pain in his shoulder for a few hours. He really shouldn’t be drinking on pain killers but Alaric isn’t going to stop him. Who cares if he gets trashed? As long as he’s not in all that pain. If only Alaric could take a few days away from work but there’s really no hope of that. Too much going on. He reminds himself to call Caroline, ask her to help Damon with lunch, getting to Stefan in the hospital, whatever else he might need, brain whirring until Damon looks suspicious and alarmed and Alaric forces himself to smile, pay attention, focus.

He settles Damon into the corner of a booth, so he’s properly supported.

“Listen,” he says, when he returns from the bar with a funny little red card that he’s supposed to use to put stuff on his tab – seems so old fashioned, but whatever; “we should talk about next week.”

“Let’s not, and say we did.”

“No, I mean it. Look, you’re not working, obviously.”

“Does that mean I’m kicked out of the penthouse?”

“No. Look, whatever you want to do, you know. I can come by in the evening, make sure you’ve got whatever you need, let you sleep.”

“Rather sleep with you. Or don’t you like that, when we’re not… you know.” Damon says, and the pain killers must be working alright because he’s the same cocky little shit Alaric’s half crazed about as he was on Friday night, pulling his t-shirt over his head and flexing every muscle in his stomach.

Alaric is tempted to say something about Damon’s incapacity for submission, when he remembers this is definitely off the clock.

“It’s up to you,” he says. “Just… think about it.” And the lights go down, and the spotlight comes
up on the stage. The woman is tall, probably as tall as Damon, with thick thighs and heavy breasts, a tight red dress showing off every curve to absolute advantage. Her blond hair has been collected into an asymmetrical knot, messy, threaded with pearls. Her false eyelashes seem to drag her eyelids down. Her voice has a range so wide Alaric can’t believe she’s in a dive bar like this, instead of a packed house somewhere. All that’s missing is a cigarette in a long, carved filter.

It’s nice. Alaric claps for two, while Damon reaches for his bourbon. The lights come up a little.

“I want to stay,” Damon says, seriously. “Promise I won’t be too demanding.”

He looks sort of miserable, but he manages to sound pissed off.

The lights are pretty low, and no one is paying attention to anyone but themselves, and the burgers slowly finding the right tables all around the room. Alaric slips his hand into Damon’s, giving it a squeeze.

That’s the whole plan. And yet, a moment later, his lips find Damon’s. It’s a proper kiss, not some apology, mouths opening just enough for their tongues to brush together, and Damon’s eyes fall closed for a moment or two.

“That was unexpected,” he says.

“I know,” Alaric agrees, and reaches for his glass.

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It’s a surprisingly easy week; Wednesday, the physical therapist Alaric arranged on Monday comes to the apartment to do a little work and report on Damon’s progress, stretch his arm out. Damon looks singularly unimpressed by this but Alaric doesn’t give a shit because there’s no way they’re ruining any progress Damon’s made by doing too much too soon, or not enough and too late. The guy is gone by the time their food arrives, and the rest of the night, Damon reads some trashy paperback with his feet in Alaric’s lap, while Alaric reads through hospital proposals.

“Look,” he says, waving one at Damon. “This is a hospital in west Maine, sounds like one like your brother is in. Facing closure in the next twelve months.”

Damon squints. “You’re doing the hospital thing?”

Has Alaric really not mentioned this? “Just look at it,” he says, and Damon, looking spellbound, takes it onto his lap, flicking through the first few pages. It’s obviously difficult with one hand, but his bright eyes are wide, eyebrows sitting up somewhere near his hairline. Spellbound? He actually looks a little shocky.

“I didn’t know you were doing this,” he says, barely taking anything in. “Fuck, that’s horrible. That’s the outside? Ugh, who could get better somewhere this ugly?”

Alaric thinks about it. Yeah, it’s true. The grounds at Stefan’s hospital are nice. He files the idea under ‘things my dumb ass probably won’t remember later’ – the grounds need to appeal to patients, rather than visitors – and takes the document back from Damon, who is still looking at him like he’s grown a second head.

Thursday, Alaric doesn’t so much as bring a slip of paper out of his bag. He sits on the couch with Damon’s back resting on his chest, flinching whenever Damon does at the pain in his shoulder and wondering when might be a good time to try to have The Talk again. Thing is, he wants to have it about as much as Damon does. Maybe they can put it off. Not as if there’s any sex in their
immediate future. They could put it off for weeks.

Damon tips his head back and kisses Alaric’s jaw, and Alaric smiles, maybe a little incredulous. They kiss briefly, but warmly, and yeah, that conversation can wait.

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Friday doesn’t go so well.

Friday at work, people look at Alaric like he’s grown another head, or worn last season’s tie (the latter is possible, but wouldn’t garner this much interest. He checks his reflection in the private room behind his office, but nothing seems to be terribly wrong. He probably needs a haircut. Actually, he definitely needs a haircut. But since there are no threatening emails from board members and he never bothers with office gossip, he simply returns to his desk and gets back to answering the twenty or thirty emails none of his assistants can manage.

At lunch time, his phone rings, and it’s Meredith. He’s slowly working his way through a BLT and investigating landscape gardeners who specialize in hospitals, not that there is any great rush. He puts the sandwich aside, and accepts the call.

“I promise,” he says. “I’m not bailin’, Mere, don’t worry.”

“Are you going to bring him?”

Alaric squints. “Bring…?”

“Your boy-toy.”

Alaric’s heart stops for a second, and starts again. “Boy-toy?”

“He looks young. Okay, not young-young, but… wow, Alaric, he’s gorgeous, and why is he a secret? Which he’s not, any more, by the way. I thought you said I’d be the first to know?”

Alaric’s skin feels very cold. “Not to distract you from the gushing, Mere,” he says, “but how did you hear…”

“You really have to start reading the society pages. They’re the best bit of the whole paper. Are you in front of your laptop? Stupid question, you’re always in front of your laptop. I’ll send you the link.”

Alaric’s fingers barely work, but he manages to click on the link, and there it is. Some celebrity gossip columnist he’s never heard of has written an article about him, and Damon. With photos. Shitty, grainy cell phone photos. One from Miami, of the two of them leaving the restaurant, looking cozier than Alaric remembers they were. Talking seriously in a bar – has to have been the day they saw that blues band. And last Sunday. Three of those. Damon with his arm in a sling, talking close, and the kiss.

Should be glad there’s none of him taking Damon to the hospital Saturday night. That would go down well. He rubs his temples, and when he opens his eyes, the photos are still there, Meredith is still on the phone and half of his staff are still eyeing him from the bullpen.

Alaric glances up at the window, and too many faces turn quickly from view.

“Meredith,” he says. “This isn’t…”
“Oh, I’ll tell you what it looks like,” she says. “Looks like you’re madly in love. How’s his shoulder?”

“Getting better. Mere, it’s really not…”

“Bring him, tomorrow night.”

“I don’t think he’d –”

“Oh, you don’t think?”

Alaric’s carefully constructed façade of anonymity starts to crumble in front of his eyes. He’s been an idiot. And Damon doesn’t need this, doesn’t deserve it. How long before someone recognizes him from the club, and outs him? Or blackmails them?

He rubs his eyes, and glances at the window again. “Excuse me,” he says, putting the phone down, and crosses to his door.

“Hey,” he calls out. “Anyone who has time for gossip isn’t workin’ hard enough and can pack up their desk. Get on with it, people,” he finishes, stern, and pulls the door shut. Heads go down, half a dozen people reach for their phones, and Alaric pulls his office door closed, returning to his desk.

“What’s his name?”

“Damon. I’ll talk to him, but I really doubt he’s gonna want to do this. Like I said, it’s not…”

“Damon. See you both at eight. Bye, Ric,” she says, and ends the call.

Alaric reads the article five times, six. He stares at the photographs. This is why there are rules. This is what he doesn’t have time for.

He has no idea how he’s going to fix this, on top of everything else that’s wrong right now, but he’s going to have to do it soon.

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And around three o’clock, Louis steps confidently into Alaric’s office.

“This is fantastic,” he says. “This is about the best thing that’s happened to us all year.” He takes a seat in front of Alaric’s desk, and puts his feet up on the heavy oak. When he sees Alaric’s expression, he drops them to the ground again.

“I hope to god you’re talking about the hospital plans,” Alaric says.

“No,” Louis says, tangling his fingers behind his head. “I’m talking about your appearance in the gossip pages this week. Could not have been timed better, and let me tell you why. Next week, nominations close for New York’s gay and lesbian businesspeople of the year, and you, my friend, are going to win. With this, and the whole hospital thing, and the way you handled the union issue the other week; you can win this. I’ll find you a stylist –”

Alaric holds a hand up. “Leave,” he says. “I am not having this conversation with you.”

Louis stands up. “Of course,” he says. “Someone in PR should do it, anyway. I’ll set it up.” Alaric is too exhausted to argue, but there is no way in hell this is happening. Louis tips an imaginary hat, and reaches for the door handle.
“By the way,” he says, “I didn’t know you used the club.”

Alaric’s heart fumbles for the second time that day.

“What?”

“At the dinner, in Miami, it was killing me, trying to work out where I’d seen him before.” He’s smiling, but the smile doesn’t meet his eyes. “He works at the club. Small world.”

Alaric gestures, blood rushing to his head, and Louis returns to the desk. “That is the last time you will ever say a single word about that. Ever again.”

“Is it an exclusive arrangement? Or can I book him some weekend?”

Alaric is painfully aware that there are people staring from the bull pen. Which is sad. Because he would like to beat Louis to death and throw him out the window, but it doesn’t seem prudent.

“If you ever so much as look it him sideways I’ll make you wish you’d never left Massachusetts,” Alaric says, with a smile.

“Exclusive, then. So what’s with the sling? Things get a little…?”

“Louis.”

“Not my business, not a problem. So that’s a yes, on the nomination?”

Alaric is silent, trying to tamp down the rage in his heart. “Why are you doing this?”

“Kudos, baby. And kudos translates to cash. Vincent St. James, the developer-venture capital guy with the crooked nose won that award five years ago and their stock went up eleven percent over projections in six months, thirty percent in three years. That’s too much dividend for me to ignore. So, yeah. I’m motivated to make you do this. Think of it like this. You want to do your little hospital thing? That’s a lot of extra cash just waiting to be snatched up and dumped on a nation of cripples, vets and bald kids.”

“And if I don’t?”

Louis smiles. He really does look exactly like a weasel.

“Get out of my sight,” Alaric says. “I’ll talk to you about this on Monday.”

“I’ll see about that stylist,” Louis says, and off he goes again.

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Caroline looks in the rear view mirror too many times to be coincidence, and Alaric finally says “If you have something to say, Caroline, say it.”

“I don’t think it’s so terrible,” she says, voice small. “I mean, you really seem to like him, and so what if people know? It’s 2015,” she adds, as if that means anything at all.

“Thanks for your input,” Alaric says, and gets back to staring out the window.

“I mean it. Nothing to be ashamed of, boss.”

“I’m not ashamed. They just got it wrong. We don’t have that kind of relationship, Care.”
“Not what it looks like to me,” she says, and finally falls silent.

The physical therapist is still there when Alaric gets home. Damon looks cheerful, if somewhat pained by the exertion, and Alaric reasons that he probably hasn’t seen the column. He calls for Indian food while the therapist helps Damon with the splint, and the sling, and he opens a couple of beers from the fridge.

“Anything in particular you want to do tonight?” he asks, bringing one to Damon on the couch. He sits down.

“No,” Damon says, and raises his eyebrows. “You really going to play this like that?”

Alaric grimaces. “You’ve seen it?”

“Yep. I think by now half the city’s seen it, whether they had any idea this morning of who you are or not.” Damon reaches up to palpate the tender flesh around his shoulder. He’s on less pain meds now than he was and he’s feeling it. Alaric resolves to get him nicely drunk before they go to bed. “Were you going to pretend you hadn’t? Lame.”

Alaric says nothing. He’s been reeling since lunch, barely done a thing. His conversation with Meredith flashes against his conversation with Louis the weasel and he can’t keep them straight in his mind. He rubs his temples.

“What’s the fallout?”

“My best friend wants to meet you. Tomorrow night. At dinner.”

“Groovy,” Damon says, airily. “Anything else?”

“I told her you wouldn’t want to go,” Alaric says.

“I do want to go. Anything else?”

“You want to spend the night posing as my boyfriend?”

“Posing? I’ll be your new boyfriend,” Damon says. “Can I eat off your plate?”

He’ll do it either way. “No,” Alaric says. “And –”

“Can I hold your hand?”

“No,” Alaric says, knowing full well if Damon reaches for his hand, he’s powerless not to hold it.

“Can I kiss you in front of all your fancy friends?”

“Damon…” Why does everything always happen at once?

“It’s settled, then. So, what else?”

Alaric takes a deep breath, and explains. Louis and his insane idea about the award, and his veiled threat.

“Fuck,” Damon says.

“Have you ever...”
“No. ugh. Think I’d remember that. Should have known that was where he knew me from, though.” Damon says, and the conversation is put on hold while Alaric accepts the food in the vestibule just outside the elevator door, and serves up spicy lamb and chicken biryani. Alaric tears Damon’s naan bread into manageable pieces, and tries not to think about how completely unrattled he seems to be.


“About as far as you could throw him with your bad arm,” Alaric admits. “But he really, really likes money, he’s made me a lot of it over the years – setting himself up very nicely in the process, he has a lot of equity in the company – and frankly, I think he’ll keep his mouth shut. It’s worth too much money for him to fuck this up. But that’s just him. What about the next person who comes along, Damon? The one after that? Someone who just wants ten grand out of a reporter to tell the world who you are, or wants to extort me for millions?”

“You could deal with these theoretical supervillains as they come,” Damon says, pretty reasonably. “If you think about it, you know what happened today? Famous recluse Alaric Saltzman got outed dating the hottest guy half the tabloids have ever been lucky enough to photograph. His undoubtedly slimy second in charge found a way to spin it into potentially millions for hospitals all over the country for the next decade and let him retire richer than anyone has any need to be. And if worst comes to worst, you can sell your way out of the company and find something to do that doesn’t make you work twelve hours a day and leave you incapable of a normal relationship. So,” he says, before Alaric is even done processing what he’s said. “Where are we going to dinner tomorrow night?”

“Leave the company I’ve spent my life building? Right, easy as pie, I’ll start something else. Maybe open a bakery.”

“Nooo. Early mornings and yeasty smell.” Damon pretends to shudder.

Alaric stares incredulously. “How can you be so glib about this? And you realize this could leave you stuck here, right?”

“Oh, bullshit,” Damon says, trying to wrap up a piece of lamb in the bread. Those long, elegant pianists’ fingers; they’re just not as agile as the fingers on his right. “If I wanted to leave, all I’d have to do is break up with you. Which I don’t intend to do. Maybe you’re the one who’s stuck.”

Alaric stares for long enough so that eventually, Damon is forced to meet his eyes. “I’m sorry,” he says, his jaw set in an angry line. “I don’t see how this is really all that bad. Is it me? It’s because I’m hideously ugly, isn’t it?” He snorts.

Alaric remembers Damon at the restaurant in Miami, charming everyone. That damn piano recital, months back, telling a sixty year old woman he thought her husband must be her father, she looked so young. Even walking down the street looking like he’d just been styled by GQ. There was nothing anyone could point at to say that Damon was anything but perfect stock, an excellent match.

“I have to be serious,” he says. “Your job is an issue. You’re… don’t make me say it. Can you see the headlines?”

Damon flinches visibly, and shakes his head. “You know, most of the time you don’t treat me like a hooker. And then you go and say something like that.” He wipes his fingers awkwardly on a napkin, and leans across his plate. “You need to spin this? I’m making it easy. I’m your live-in boyfriend, who you give a hefty allowance – as would anyone in your position who was, say,
keeping a mistress in an apartment downtown. You’re an adult, you’re not cheating on your pregnant wife, you’re not breaking the law. And by the way, despite the rules set out in your little contract, we’ve been dating. For months. Sleepovers in my apartment on Saturday nights? Sunday afternoons listening to live music all over the city? That’s called dating. Monday to Friday I might be your sub, but on the weekend… don’t pretend you don’t know it’s different. You know how long it’s been since you flat out asked me to leave here?” He takes his glass in his hand. “You have an entire PR department and an army of lawyers who could fix this if it went south. So I’m going to ask you one more time; dinner, tomorrow night.” He speaks low, determined, looking at Alaric from under a heavy brow line. “Where are we going? I need to know if I have to get something cleaned.”

Maybe Damon has missed the point.

Maybe Alaric has.

He reaches under the table, and settles his hand on Damon’s knee.

“Aquavit,” he says, and no, he doesn’t have a reservation yet, but he’s never failed to get one when he wants it. “So dress up. You know you don’t have to do this.”

“I know,” Damon says. “I want to. Can we please talk about literally anything else for the rest of the night? Bad enough I’m not getting laid. I don’t want to spend all weekend rehashing your shitty day, which significantly rivals some people’s best days.”

Alaric stares at the meal in front of him. If he ever needs to give Damon a job in the company somewhere, it’s definitely going to be PR. “I guess,” he says.

Damon is silent for a long moments.

“You got outed, though.”

“I got outed.” He’s glad Damon has said it because fuck, he’s valued his privacy since his name became well known in business circles and that’s all shot to hell. He feels sick about it. That stupid columnist. He imagines she’s in a bar downtown somewhere, toasting her grand success and planning a shopping spree Saturday with her fat bonus. It’s a violation that’s been overshadowed by everything that comes along with it, but that doesn’t make it any less a violation.

“You could sue her.”

“No, I couldn’t. That would make it look like I’ve got something to hide, something to be ashamed of.”

“So suddenly you’re not?”

Damon’s too good to him. Alaric doesn’t deserve this. He gives a tight smile. “Ashamed? I’m dating the… what did you say? Hottest guy in Manhattan?”

“Actually, I was implying the entire state, but that’s fine.” Damon puts down his fork and lets Alaric tangle their hands together. “Still. Outed. It sucks.”

Alaric regards Damon dolefully. “Sucks?”

“What do you want me to say?”

Alaric lets himself think about the first time he slept in Damon’s apartment. Slow dancing, fuck,
how long had it been before then that he’d danced with anyone? Maybe Damon is right, but he’s still missing the point; it wasn’t supposed to be like this.

“I don’t know,” he says. “How does your shoulder feel?”

“Like I need a big tough Dom to spend the entire weekend catering to my every whim,” Damon says, and smirks across the table. “Or maybe just a standard issue rich boyfriend. You choose.”

Alaric shakes his head, and returns to his meal, though he can’t quite stop turning it over in his mind, again and again. No matter what Damon says, no matter what PR gold Louis manages to squeeze out of this, it still feels like a disaster waiting to happen.

Chapter End Notes

Voila, guys. Do you ever think these two need couples therapy? Yeah, me too. So, Damon sucks at taking care of himself, and Alaric is thoroughly distracted. Recipe for disaster but at least they're doing a little better with each other for now. Next two chapters are underway, but I have a very busy week, so no guarantees about when they'll be out.

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PS I'm going to avoid reading reviews that speculate on the future, from now on, and come back to them at the end. I think it's awesome, amazingly flattering that you are so invested you're thinking about the future, but I'm worried I'm going to read something that influences me somehow. So to be on the safe side, I will avoid those, and hope you know how much I appreciate it anyway.

Until next time!

~ PBK
Fake dating will be a *breeze*. They have so much practice with the real thing.

The phone rings early on Saturday morning, and Damon startles, shifting his arm uncomfortably and groaning. Ugh, they need a way to get the first lot of pain killers into his system about half an hour before he wakes up. He scrabbles for the pills by the side of the bed, swallowing them with the remainder of the water in the glass, and closes his eyes, listening.

“A press release?”

He turns his head. Jesus fuck, Alaric’s job is ridiculous. Alaric rubs his temples, and Damon watches as his face goes from irritated to exhausted.

“Give me an hour,” he says. “And I’m not doin’ a press release. But I’ll make a statement. Do with it what you want.” He ends the call, and lies back, blinking at the ceiling. Damon still says nothing, just watching. Alaric reaches over, at last, fingers brushing over Damon’s side.

“Last chance,” he says. “If you have any – any reservations about this, pretending we’re…” He looks like hell. Anxiety plays havoc with him.

Damon rubs his shoulder, and closes his eyes. “Not much to pretend. Just do it.”

Every time he tries to examine that statement in greater detail, he finds he really can’t. It feels true, and that’s close enough.

“Hungry?”

“Starving.”

There’s actually the makings of a simple breakfast in the fridge, for a change, and Alaric toasts a couple of bagels, and pries slices of smoked salmon apart with a fork, with an expression on his face Damon imagines he usually reserves for crunching numbers and dealing with problematic clients. He scrambles eggs with a puzzled expression; probably been twenty years since he did it for himself. And then they are sitting up at the table, coffee and juice and Alaric’s dumb tablet for company, quiet.

Damon’s shoulder aches, and he is so fucking sick of it it’s a joke. And he’s feeling rather neglected, too, but under the circumstances, he can deal with that.

“What are you going to say?” Damon’s voice is light and sing-songy, patently artificial. But Alaric doesn’t seem to notice. He shakes his head, and sets the tablet aside.

“I have no idea. I don’t think anyone really cares what I say, they’ll spin things however they want to.”

Yeah, he probably has a point. Damon finishes his bagel, and pushes the plate aside, wondering how long it will really be before he can use his arm without a single twinge. It feels like it might
never happen.

The phone rings again, and Alaric reaches for it in irritation. But it’s not his PR person, it’s the weekend doorman. Alaric does the temple-rub again. Not a good sign. Damon decides to keep his mouth shut. He listens, but Alaric says little, and then ends the call.

“There’s a handful of reporters hangin’ around outside,” he says. “Fuck, you’d think this actually mattered. Sort of wish I wasn’t so private, now. They might not bother.”

“It’ll blow over,” Damon says, confidently, because of course it will. Why does anyone care? Unless Alaric does something a bit more entertaining, like, say, force some member of the paparazzi to eat his own camera. Or unless, of course, it’s revealed that his boo is some sort of hooker, which, let’s not think about it.

Finally, with the breakfast dishes put away, Alaric makes the call. “Got a pen?” he asks. “Okay. So here it is; I don’t see any need to defend myself against something that isn’t offensive. Yes, I’m seeing someone, and I don’t see how it’s anyone’s business. My partner and I deserve our privacy.” He meets Damon’s eyes for a moment.

Partner. Wow. In twenty-six years Damon has never been referred to as someone’s partner. Their favorite weekend, sure. Maybe even boyfriend, from time to time. But partner? Yeah, he likes that. Plus, this will no doubt serve as very useful leverage next time he wants something. He raises his eyebrows and waits.

“No, that’s it. I don’t want to give them any ammunition. I’m not goin’ after that columnist, she’d spin it into something… unsavory. No, fuck no, that’s no one’s business. Thanks, Nicole. See you Monday.”

And that’s the end of it.

The work phone gets switched off.

Damon has never seen the work phone switched off.

“Is this a good time to discuss a pre-nup?” Damon deadpans. “Because I’m rich, now.” Alaric smiles, but his amusement doesn’t stop him from glancing at the splint and the sling and making that so-disappointed-with-myself face. “For all I know, you might be after me for my money.”

“I won’t sign anything until my army of lawyers have examined it with a fine-tooth comb,” Alaric answers, trying to keep things light. “Listen, do you want to see Stefan today? Anything like…”

“I don’t feel inclined to push my way past a bunch of asshole reporters, if that’s what you mean. I’ll go tomorrow. Or Monday.”

Alaric nods, but doesn’t drop his gaze. He shifts his chair, moving closer, and reaches to cup Damon’s neck gently in his hand, his face. His thumb brushes over Damon’s cheekbone and Damon is struck by a rush of need so bad he briefly considers insisting Alaric take him back to bed, do something, do anything to make this feel like a normal day.

“You’re so good to me,” he says, and brushes his lips over Damon’s. Damon feels his eyelids get heavy, his heart thud once, twice. “You know that, right? You’re incredible.”

There’s an apology, another one, crouching in there somewhere, but Alaric manages not to let it get out.
="I’m pretty fucking great,” Damon agrees, leaning forward to bite Alaric’s bottom lip. “Bubble bath?”

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In the end, dinner becomes a feast delivered to the penthouse from an Italian restaurant Alaric loves which is only a couple of blocks away; because they don’t feel like being followed by idiots, answering questions, or getting arrested when Alaric loses his famous temper and breaks someone’s nose. Damon is faintly annoyed. No way is this better than his own cooking but since he really can’t do that with one hand…

Alaric wanders vaguely from room to room, making sure there isn’t anything lying around that might embarrass either one of them, and it occurs to Damon that although this place was clearly designed with entertaining in mind, he has never seen Alaric invite anyone here for social reasons. Seems a pity.

Damon paws through the clothes on his side of the walk-in wardrobe (Alaric doesn’t seem to have noticed that he’s taking most of a full side, now, and probably has no idea that all that is hanging in his own apartment is two t-shirts and a pair of grey slacks he doesn’t particularly like. Ha ha ha, and people say Damon lacks subtlety), trying to find something to wear. Alaric joins him, hanging back a moment.

Truthfully, Damon could manage himself, now, but there’s an intimacy to letting Alaric help him. He eases his arm into one sleeve, Alaric maneuvering the rest of the shirt, buttoning buttons with utmost concentration. They say little. Alaric checks, is this alright, does it hurt. Damon’s favorite, are you sure you’re up to this. The cautious touches, affectionate and solicitous. He really can’t get enough of it. He smirks like he’s had some sort of special training. He does, briefly, consider lace-up shoes, just to watch Alaric tie them up for him, but decides against it, in the end.

He ruffles his hair in the mirror over the large vanity.

“Hmm. This locked?” he asks, pulling open their super-secret drawer of kinky accessories, and it’s not. Alaric swears under his breath, and pulls the key out the top drawer in his bedside table. Damon just stares.

“You got rid of the ball gag,” he says, and feels Alaric freeze behind him. “And the blindfold.”

Alaric waits a second, two, before pressing himself up against Damon’s back, and slipping an arm around his waist. He kisses Damon’s neck. “Never again.”

Damon really isn’t sure how he’s supposed to feel about that; he actually sort of likes the ball gag, when he’s not in agony. But he takes the key from Alaric’s hand to lock the drawer. He hands it back, and turns for a quick kiss, before the buzzer goes off, and it’s time. The food arrives, accompanied by a waiter (seriously, Alaric?) and a cook. The rich are just different. This reminds Damon of parties at the plantation house, but those were for twenty or thirty people, not eight.

Damon doesn’t bother to watch. He swallows a couple of pain pills dry and pours himself a glass of wine.

Eight o’clock.

Friends. Look at that, Alaric Saltzman has friends. At least six of them. They come in pairs, largely quite married looking. And all very good looking, too, of course, Alaric has exceptional taste.
Everyone tries very hard not to scrutinize Damon too closely, and everyone fails completely, but Damon finds himself purring. He only wishes he didn’t have the stupid sling, still. At least he’s taken the splint off for the evening.

He shakes hands, kisses cheeks. Meredith is a bombshell. New mom, Alaric has said, and she’s got that tired glow; no sign of the kid, though, so it’s probably not going to be a late night.

“So you’re the secret boyfriend,” she says, looking at him as if she might be able to work out why he’s been a secret.

“I am,” he agrees. “And you’re the best friend. Nice to meet you.”

The urge to flirt outrageously with everyone in the room is strong. It’s what he does, easy as breathing, and it’s the weekend, right? He’s off the clock, and technically, at least, he’s doing Alaric a favor. And yet, there’s a part of him that is craving the structure of submission. He belongs to Alaric, in a way that has nothing to do with his splendid salary.

But Damon is still Damon, and no matter how a good little sub might behave, every time he opens his mouth some double entendre seems to drip from his tongue. He pointedly doesn’t watch for Alaric’s response. He purrs, he kisses hands and cheeks, he speculates he might be ready to leave Alaric for greener pastures.

He doesn’t comment on Meredith’s nursing-mother rack, which is better than an A plus, but that’s a very near thing.

“Alaric said you dislocated your shoulder,” Meredith says, almost hearing the comment that was almost made but (classy bird) changing the subject. “How did you manage that?”

Damon feels Alaric tense at his side.

“Weightlifting,” he says. “Bit off more than I could chew. I may be charming and attractive but I’m an idiot.”

“Well, you won’t be doing that again anytime soon,” she says, and he smiles a lazy smile, and directs everyone into the living room, where there’s about eight different kinds of expensive cheese, with accoutrements galore. Quince paste and crackers and almost transparent slivers of cantaloupe.

He pours wine, and takes a seat next to Alaric on the couch, stretching out, claiming the space. He turns and whispers theatrically.

“Do I have two heads?”

Alaric laughs. He really doesn’t look entirely comfortable. Damon wishes he could read minds. Is the flirting bothering him?

“No,” Meredith says, reaching for her husband’s hand. “We’re sorry, we’re being rude. It’s just that it’s been a really long time since we saw Alaric with anyone, and it’s… well, you’re…”


“Not on your life,” Meredith says, in a voice which suggests Alaric is not particularly good at saying no to her. “Where did you meet?”

“Club downtown,” Damon says. “Next?”
“Alaric was in a club?”

“It was a work thing,” Alaric says. “Are you done?”

“Nope. How long have you been seeing each other?” Meredith should run a game show.

“Since November.” Alaric almost splutters, and Damon smirks at him.

Apparently Alaric is in real trouble, next time he’s alone with Meredith. “November? I don’t believe it. Stinking liar, Alaric Saltzman.”

Hmm. Damon doesn’t quite, either. Well, there it is. He shrugs. “Anything else?”

“What do you do for a living?”

The embarrassment on Damon’s face is real, but he waves it off. “Trust fund brat. My main occupation is distracting Alaric,” and neither of those things are entirely false, even if one of them is no longer quite true. “Next?”

Meredith laughs. Apparently he has passed some kind of test. “Pour me another glass of wine,” she says, and somehow, miraculously, the conversation is steered in another direction. Damon stays quiet, gathering clues, barely noticing when his hand moves up to massage his aching shoulder until he feels Alaric nudge at his hip.

“You okay?”

Ugh, this might have been a mistake because it really feels so real. Damon gives a dismissive smirk and tosses his chin, and the conversation goes on around them, laughter and friendship and years of exactly this sort of thing and Damon wants so badly to really, truly be a part of it that his throat hurts a little. He had friends. He’s had friends. Months or years at a time until someone does something to someone and all that’s left is the nasty taste in his mouth and a handful of bridges that need burning. People. Sage, he was close to Sage, and definitely, someone fucked someone over, there; even back then, Damon hadn’t been clear on who did what even at the time. Let alone now. Others, over the years. Enzo, in college. He burned Enzo badly, right before he dropped out and never looked back. Fuck. What a legacy.

Around the large, formal dining table, with the music a little quieter, and everyone just a little tipsy, the conversation gets rowdy, and Damon decides he’s going to be a lot more comfortable if he just embraces his inner asshole. He unrepentantly steals tidbits from Alaric’s plate; Alaric makes no move to prevent him, but he does make a face that distinctly says ‘really, Damon? Really?’

Somehow, although there’s an unspoken rule, it seems, about avoiding talking about work, the subject turns to Alaric’s hospital plans, and Damon’s ears prick up. This is still a little surreal. He’d been talking out of his ass, that afternoon, and it had never occurred to him that Alaric might pursue it, and now here he is at a table with apparently three doctors discussing it.

Alaric turns to Damon. “Sorry,” he says, “we’ll get off this in a minute,” and he presses a palm to Damon’s leg. “We’re working up proposals for a dozen sites,” he tells Meredith’s husband (who, hilariously, is from Alaska; who is from Alaska? Is Alaska even a real place? Do they ride polar bears?). A dozen sites. Damon raises his eyebrows. Wow, he is so great. He’s done his part for mankind this year. One throwaway line and this is what comes out of it?

He is seriously going to have to spend ten minutes a day trying to hone this new found genius. Who knows what feats of magic he could accomplish? He tangles his hand with Alaric’s and raises his
eyebrows, and Alaric turns to him for a second with an incredulous look.

That’s two down, one to go. He’s going to kiss Alaric in front of his friends before the night is up if it kills them both.

He shifts in his seat. The bruises on his ass have faded, mostly, but it’s still uncomfortable to sit in one position for too long.

“I hope you’re getting help with that,” Meredith says, guilelessly.

Damon blanches. “With?”

“Your shoulder. You probably shouldn’t be drinking so much on pain meds, but since I’d be doing the same thing, I won’t say a word.”

Oh, ha ha. Right. His shoulder. “I think of it as augmenting their effectiveness.” He winks, and grins. He decides he likes Meredith. The rest, he can take or leave, even if they are pretty. She giggles – no, it’s not a giggle, but it’s not a chuckle, either. Some small, girly laugh. Damon glances at Alaric, who looks amused, and really, really fucking tired. “I have a physical therapist. I’m using it, just not much. It’ll be fine.” He doesn’t want Alaric making that guilty face again. It sucks, and it leads to nothing good.

Alaric pours more wine, and the subject changes, and all is well. Wine, wine wine. Everyone drinks more than they should.

It’s not until the waiter, who looks like he’d really like to call it a night, serves up dessert that Damon sneaks number three on his list, turning with a wicked grin to kiss Alaric on the mouth before he can object. He reaches for his dessert spoon immediately afterwards and doesn’t make a sound, but he can feel the weight of Alaric’s eyes on him.

So by the time everyone leaves (Damon had guessed right, it’s not even late) he’s feeling ridiculously smug, and exactly like a real boyfriend. He likes it waaaaay too much, and he likes Alaric’s arm resting against his back, the hand settled on his hip. He feels strange and calm and if he lets himself think about it for a second he feels submissive in a way he doesn’t, often, even with his arms tied, with a spreader bar between his ankles. Owned. He’s almost purring when the door closes and he and Alaric are alone again, the cook having packed up the last of his things and left immediately after serving dessert on Alaric’s own crockery.

“I’m an excellent boyfriend,” he says. Alaric is trying not to smile, but he’s really, really terrible at that.

“Can you open your mouth without flirting?” Alaric asks, with his eyebrows cocked, and only half a smile.

“Does it bother you?”

Alaric has to think about it, but not for very long. “No,” he says. “Makes me wonder, though.”

“Wonder?”

“Why you were on your own.”

Ugh, no, new topic. “Most people find a couple of months with me is enough,” he answers, drily; now, how is he going to get Alaric off this topic? Sex is a good plan. He straddles Alaric’s lap, wincing when he accidentally puts pressure on his shoulder.
“Be careful,” Alaric says. He looks reluctant, but yearning, too. “Seriously, you don’t have to do this. You’ll make your shoulder worse —”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” Damon purrs back. “It’s the weekend.” He settles his weight, and nuzzles into Alaric’s neck, and despite himself, Alaric moves his head, to give him better access; more yearning than reluctant, then, good to know.

“We should probably just go to bed.”

Most of the lights are off, and the room has a sexy glow to it. Damon doesn’t want to go to bed. He wants to fuck on the couch.

“Here’s fine by me,” he says, as Alaric’s hand finds the back of his head, and pulls him in for a kiss; the best kiss they’ve had all week, truth be known, deep and affectionate.

“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“So don’t.”

“I don’t think it’s that simple. Look, a few more days…”

“Now you’re the one asking for a ball gag.” Damon pulls back, deeply unimpressed. “Come on. I know you can be gentle. I thought for a second I was turning into a girl, the first night we did it in my apartment.”

That gets a laugh, but a sad one, and a shake of the head. “I’m not worried about gentle, I’m worried about careful.”

“I trust you.”

“Maybe I don’t.”

Well, that was inevitable. Alaric’s not done flagellating himself, then. Damon rolls his eyes, and climbs off Alaric’s lap.

“Fine, then. Bed.”
Some domestic schmoop, a brief, if necessary conversation, and a little needed renegotiation.

Alaric wakes with Damon tucked into his arms and the sun streaming in the window, so bright it hurts his eyes. And a semi pressing insistently between the cheeks of Damon’s ass. He spends a minute, two, breathing, and wondering if there is a way he can find out what time it is without moving, because he’s comfortable, he’s happy, he feels freer than he has in days.

He strokes over Damon’s arm, from aching shoulder, where he’s careful, to wrist, and when he reaches Damon’s hand, Damon tangles their fingers together.

“You’re awake,” Alaric says.

“So are you,” Damon answers, very deliberately pressing has ass back against Alaric’s erection, which is no longer what one would describe as tokenistic morning wood. He shifts Alaric’s hand, wrapping it around his own cock, and Alaric groans into his shoulder.

“I claim boyfriend privilege,” Damon says, little shit, but he barely needs to make the point; Alaric starts a slow stroke, applying just enough pressure, just under the crown, thumbnail flicking over the tip. Damon shifts his body, and winces, and Alaric stops.

“Don’t you dare,” Damon growls.

“I don’t wanna hurt your shoulder.”

“You won’t. Just… come on, it’s been a week, just…”

So Alaric starts again, grinding against Damon’ ass as he speeds up, trying not to jostle his arm. Kissing his neck, his jaw, wherever he can reach.

Damon tries more than once to reach back, forgetting he doesn’t have much movement in his arm.

“You stop that,” Alaric says. “Or I’ll stop this. Don’t hurt yourself.”

Damon answers by pressing back harder against Alaric’s body, groaning. Alaric speeds up again, and Damon’s body gets suddenly and horribly confused, caught between pressing back and fucking up into Alaric’s hand.

“Love it when you’re like this,” Alaric murmurs, close to Damon’s ear, unrelenting. “You just want it so badly, don’t you? Been a whole week.”

“Asshole,” Damon says back, through clenched teeth, and that’s all for a few moments, because apparently he’s using all of his energy to stave off his orgasm. Alaric slips his free arm around Damon’s shoulder, under his neck, pulling him closer. Watching his hand, thoroughly sticky and wet with pre-come, move over Damon’s dark, heavy cock…
He just wants to…

He could be careful, right? Stretch Damon out, fuck him right here in this position. He could be careful. He could.

Damon lets out a groan, hips stuttering suddenly, coming in thick streaks across his stomach, across Alaric’s hand. Alaric kisses his shoulder, still every color of the rainbow, gently, worshipfully, as Damon slumps against the bed, groaning quietly again.

Alaric breathes heavily into the warm flesh between Damon’s shoulder blades. His own need to come has subsided, somewhat; he’s floating on the scent of Damon’s body, faintly acrid smell of come, mild, clean sweat… they may be pretending but it feels real. And not in a way that makes him want to run a thousand miles in the first direction that takes his fancy.

“Sunday,” Damon says, and Alaric can almost hear that his eyes are closed again.

“Sunday,” he agrees.

“Want to go out this afternoon?” Damon doesn’t sound optimistic. Alaric brushes his lips over Damon’s earlobe.

“I don’t think it’s a good idea. I mean, you can. Obviously. Whatever you want.”

Damon rolls onto his back.

“How does this work Monday to Friday?”

Alaric rubs his eyes, and rests his hand on Damon’s stomach. “Nothing changes.”

“Nothing?”

There’s something in his voice Alaric doesn’t recognize. He’s looking for something. But things had been going… well, not perfectly, but they’d been going well, until…

No, they hadn’t. The entire week before the accident, Alaric had been… well. Maybe he was trying to tell himself it hadn’t happened because he was frankly ashamed of himself. Neglectful, snappy. One thing to be in a bad mood when someone can just walk away and give you space, but that hadn’t been fair.

“Won’t be like that again,” he promises, lying back on the pillow. “That was fucked up. Ugly.”

“Everyone’s fucked up and ugly sometimes,” Damon says, sitting up. He winces again as his shoulder complains, but reaches to pinch Alaric’s lips together when he tries to interject. “Just forget about my stupid shoulder for a couple of hours, so I can,” he growls, and slips into the bathroom to shower.

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Monday, Meredith sends a link to a gossip blog. Alaric clicks it without thinking, without paying attention to the address. She would have warned him if it was bad, anyway.

There is a knock on the door. Louis. With a woman in tow who can only possibly be the PR person he’d promised to lumber Alaric with.

“Just a minute,” Alaric says, holding a hand up, staring at his laptop screen. Louis knows he’s done enough pushing for now, has the good sense to wait. The door closes with a click.
Damon is dressed in a black winter coat Alaric vaguely remembers having seen once or twice. Two or three scarves. His hair is tousled as if he just got out of bed and, Alaric concedes, at almost any time of the day, this could be the case. It’s long, or at least longer than it is now, so the photo, while recent, is not new.

Alaric supposes he should be alarmed. But he can’t be, not yet. In the first photograph, Damon is blissfully ignorant of the camera, staring out into nothing, a little puff of white breath memorialized by the excellent shutter speed. Alaric could count Damon’s eyelashes. His skin is so pale, but in the cold air, his nose and cheeks are pink. The shell of his ear, peeking through his hair.

Alaric scrolls down. In a second photograph, Damon is looking up. Up high, as if his attention was caught by a bird, or a hot air balloon. The lines that bracket his smile make Alaric’s heart hitch in his chest. His eyes look heavy-lidded. A little tired.

In the third photograph he is looking almost directly at the camera, and his eyes are such a crystal blue. He could be any exceptionally attractive twenty-something in a city of beautiful people, but he’s not. He’s Damon.

Alaric doesn’t bother with the text. More speculation. He doesn’t like that the photograph was taken before the story broke; it suggests someone has been paying attention for too long.

But the photographs. He keeps the link so he can come back to them.

He waves Louis and the woman in. She has a distinctly knowing look about her which makes Alaric immediately uncomfortable, and has his nomination for not-heterosexual businessman of the year almost completed, and ideas about clothes that he doesn’t want to think about, but he listens. By the end of the week, there’ll be no turning back.

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He gets home late, and as has become customary, Damon is getting dinner ready. Smells like Indian. He’s microwaving plastic containers that probably arrived an hour ago, but he doesn’t look overly hungry or put out.

He’s wearing jeans so skinny they might be criminal, a black t-shirt which is at best a size too small, and his collar. The sight sends a shocks of need straight to Alaric’s cock.

“Hi, honey.” Damon says. “You’re home. Long day.” It’s not a question. He looks up, and there’s that half smile, and Alaric is drawn to his side like a moth to a flame. He slips both arms around Damon’s body, from behind, kisses his throat, just above the edge of the collar.

“Long day,” he agrees. “I’ll get changed.”

He’d usually take a shower, but he’s too hungry. For food, for Damon’s company. For the quiet hope of catching a glimpse of a scrap of flesh above the waistband of those jeans. He ignores the quiet panic scrambling the back of his brain; not an easy thing to do, under the circumstances.

When he comes back, Damon is trying to lift both plates. Alaric chastises him quietly, and takes over. He’s pushing his shoulder too hard, he’ll make it worse. Damon says nothing, but there’s a glint in his eye.

“Going to tell me what happened today?” he asks, when they’re sitting down to chicken masala and biryani.
“I feel sick about this nomination,” Alaric admits. “I can only hope I don’t get shortlisted.”

They’re sitting side by side, quite close. Alaric isn’t sure if it was deliberate or not, only knows they’re usually on either side of the little kitchen table. They never eat at the oversized dining table when it’s only the two of them. It feels stiflingly formal. But even here, there is usually a little distance. Not tonight.

“I still don’t understand why,” Damon says, sounding quite reasonable.

Alaric watches him for a moment, and then stands up, and leans to unbuckle the collar. Damon lets out a sound that isn’t quite protest, but nearing protest, and Alaric sets the collar aside. He pats Damon’s hand as he sits down.

“Not tonight,” He says. “Just… let’s just be us tonight.”

Damon frowns so briefly Alaric might have imagined it.

He rinses the dishes and packs the dishwasher, rather than let Damon strain his shoulder, and Damon clicks absently through the channels on the television. He looks pained and distracted, and Alaric guesses it has something to do with the fact that his pain pills ran out yesterday. He hasn’t actually said anything about it but the immobility and the throbbing ache must really be getting to him.

“Find something to watch?” Alaric asks.

“Nope.” Damon switches off the television, and turns on the stereo, lips pursed in a mild irritation.

“Shoulder bugging you?”

Damon shrugs, and flinches as he does it, so there’s that.

Alaric heads to the bedroom to find massage oil, and turns the heating up just a little way on his way back to the couch. Damon raises his eyebrows, looking a little skeptical, but he lets Alaric tease his shirt off over his head.

Alaric warms a little of the massage oil between his hands. “Just tell me if it’s too hard, or if it’s not helping, alright? It’s stiff. This might help.”

He’s really not sure. The bruising is mostly gone, but it’s still all mottled dark greens and yellows, with exotic black and purple streaks. Alaric kisses the shoulder once, as if for luck, and presses his hands to it, one on the back, one on the front, fingers brushing over his collar bone.

(As he does it, he can’t help but wonder if he ever going to stop wondering how fast he stopped, that night. Probably not. But he’ll never bring it up again. It’s own burden to bear.)

The skin warms under his hands, and he begins to carefully press his fingers into the stiff muscle. He feels, rather than hears, Damon inhale sharply through his teeth, and eases up.

“No, it was good,” Damon says, eyes closed, settled as comfortably as he can on the couch. “Hurts, but not in a bad way. Just keep going.”

The music is so quiet Alaric isn’t even sure what they’re listening to. Nice, though. Might be an old Leonard Cohen record. If he focuses on snatches of it, he can almost pick out the melody enough to hum along, but he doesn’t. Just focuses on the way Damon’s muscles shift and soften under his hand.
“Feel alright?” he says, quietly. Damon glances over his shoulder.

“Yeah. Can you go more towards my spine?”

Alaric does as he’s asked. Fuck, he’s missed this. Not, okay, not the injury, which he could definitely do without, but the simplicity of domestic partnership, even if this isn’t what that is. Coming home to someone every day. The simple intimacy of touch that isn’t necessarily sexual.

He never even really had that with Isobel. She was prickly. Didn’t like to be touched, a lot of the time, unless it was a prelude to sex; he learned to recognize when his touch was unwelcome, and after a while, he just stopped trying. Couldn’t hold her hand in public, couldn’t give her a hug for no reason without her patting him on the back like they were football buddies and extricating herself from his arms. Damon craves touch like Alaric does.

“I think that’s enough,” Alaric says, rubbing the last of the oil into Damon’s skin. “I don’t want it to be worse tomorrow.”

Damon glances over his shoulder again, and nods, before leaning back into Alaric’s body. He rearranges his legs so he can get comfortable, and Alaric slips his arms around him, settling back against the corner of the sofa.

They don’t say anything for a long time, they just breathe. Alaric is caught between his brain, which keeps flashing back to the day, the PR woman, slimy Louis, the stupid nomination, and, more pleasantly, the photographs of Damon wandering in the cold New York streets; and the considerably more enjoyable feeling of Damon in his arms. The massage oil smells earthy and sweet, mingling nicely with the sandalwood soap Alaric favors and Damon has taken to using.

He could fall asleep.

“If you get shortlisted, I’ll buy the most expensive suit I can find and go with you,” Damon purrs, and Alaric smiles.

“Those things are so boring.”

“Wouldn’t be.” He turns in Alaric’s arms, maneuvers them until Alaric is lying on his back and Damon is slouched over his body. “Told you I’d make an excellent boyfriend.”

“You do,” Alaric says, playing with the ends of his hair, kissing his crown. “Excellent boyfriend. Is boyfriend the right word? Am I too old to have a boyfriend?”

“Never too old,” Damon promises. “It’s a good word. Partner sounds so politically correct and gender neutral. Or businesslike. We’re not business partners.”

“You did get me started on the hospital thing,” Alaric answers, with a mild grin.

“I did. See, excellent boyfriend. Think I deserve a reward.”

“What’s that?”

“Sex,” Damon says, matter-of-factly.

“Any preference where? Bed? Couch? Italy?” A few more days, things should be better, Alaric thinks. Italy. Wouldn’t that be nice.

“Don’t make me choose,” Damon says, and they’re silent again.
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

A change in dynamics, and a visit to Stefan.

He lasts until Thursday, which is actually pretty good, he thinks. It’s been almost two weeks, movement in his shoulder is coming back since Alaric started massaging it in the evenings. The physical therapist is happy. Well, actually, the guy never seems happy, but he’s content with the progress.

Alaric has had a rough week. He’s actually been talking about it, too, which feels like progress. Not all the gory details, but enough so Damon doesn’t have that feeling of being left in the dark anymore. He’s stressed about a dozen different things, but overall it’s not much worse than usual; except the issue of Damon’s identity, which, to be fair, is an axe over both of their heads.

No point in poking at that unless it actually happens. So, they’ve skated around the edges of it, careful not to look too closely at the possibility. If it happens, they’ll deal with it then.

Thursday night, Alaric is upstairs in his study, working on something which had sounded so boring to Damon that he’d stopped listening about thirty seconds into the explanation. Damon is on the sofa, one eye on the television, one eye on the door to the study upstairs. He can just see it over the banister. It’s ajar, and from time to time Damon can hear the clacking of the keys, a sheet of paper being turned over. Occasionally Alaric makes a phone call, and Damon feels sorry for the people he’s calling, who are probably sitting at home watching late night HBO with their husbands and wives and wishing the phone would stop ringing.

It’s ten o’clock. That’s late enough.

Damon slips into the bedroom and strips down to skin. He stands in front of the mirror for a long moment, focusing mainly on his shoulder; it looks okay. A mottled yellow still mars his pale skin, but it feels alright. Stiff, but not too painful. Still shiny from the massage Alaric gave him after dinner.

He pulls back the blankets, and climbs to the middle of the bed, on his knees. He reaches across to the night stand, pulling the lube from the top drawer. He slicks his fingers well, and leans forward, taking most of his weight on his bad arm – doesn’t feel too bad – and spreads his knees.

He reaches back to brush his fingers over his hole, so tragically unused for almost two weeks. He takes his time, fingering over the tight skin, before he slips a finger inside and groans into the pillow. Jesus, that feels good, and better still when he finds his prostate, brushing over it, pressing against the tight bundle of nerves, eliciting a full body shiver.

It’s not enough. He pushes a second finger in alongside the first, working them in and out, over and over, stretching himself out. He’s vaguely aware of a low keening sound coming from somewhere deep in his throat as he hooks his fingers and pushes further.

A third finger, and he’s so desperate to be touched he thinks he might actually die. Well, maybe not die, but his body is tightly coiled and gagging for something better than his own fingers. He can
feel the weight of his erection bobbing between his legs, bumping against his stomach occasionally.

He hears a sharp intake of breath. For half a second, he thinks it might have been his own breath, but when he opens his eyes and wrenches his neck, he can see Alaric standing in the open doorway. His eyes are dark, his lips parted, just slightly, and his cock is outlined in his jeans very clearly and specifically.

“Jesus Christ,” he says, and Damon smirks; it’s actually probably a poor cousin to his usual smirk, but it’s a smirk nonetheless. As much as he can currently manage. “Is that hurting your –”

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence,” Damon growls.

“Oh, you’re begging to be spanked,” Alaric says, but he’s not going for the drawer, he’s dragging his pullover over his body and throwing it in the vague direction of the armchair he sits on when he’s tying his shoelaces. Damon only smiles, and keeps at his task, stretching his hole. “I wasn’t gonna…”

“I know you weren’t. Look, my shoulder’s fine,” Damon complains, and as if to prove his point, he pushes himself up on it.

And winces.

Alaric winces at the same time, so it’s not possible he missed it. Damon drops again, and Alaric finishes stripping off, lying alongside him on the bed. Cock thick and long, and purpling at the head. Damon is half expecting him to stop this, but apparently he’s too far gone himself, so there may be a god after all. He draws Damon carefully on top of himself, and presses his hand to the back of Damon’s neck, pulling him in for a kiss.

Careful not to put a lot of weight on his arm, Damon straddles Alaric’s hips; teasing as they kiss, rubbing himself over Alaric’s cock, rocking his hips in the sluttiest fashion he can manage (and sore shoulder or not, he manages to make it pretty fucking slutty). Alaric growls into his mouth, rocking up against him.

Alaric scrambles back on the bed until he’s almost sitting up, and Damon shuffles forward. He reaches back, guiding Alaric inside, groaning as he sinks down. He imagines he can feel every ridge and bump, every vein, as he stretches to accommodate Alaric’s cock. They pause, breathing hard, and when Damon opens his eyes (when did he close them?) Alaric’s eyes are almost black, his face flushed.

Alaric takes Damon’s bad arm, and curls it around his own shoulders.

“Try not to move it,” he says. “Because I swear to god if I hear you in pain I don’t care who has blue balls, I’m stoppin’.” And he leans in, pulls Damon closer. Captures his lips in a kiss that feels distinctly more like a boyfriend kiss than a naughty submissive kiss. Damon groans as he lifts himself off Alaric’s body, and back down again, finding a rhythm he can manage with having to hold Alaric any tighter.

The lights are low. Alaric has such pale eyelashes but in the golden glow, they cast long shadows over his cheekbones. Sweat builds on his forehead and drips down, following natural lines in his face.

Ugh, he looks so much better like this than stressed half to death in a five thousand dollar suit and a skinny tie.
The next kiss is slower, deeper, salty. Their eyes are open like neither can bear to miss a moment of this and Damon suddenly feels very odd. It takes some time to put his finger on it. Their foreheads press together, and Damon lifts his body again, seating himself down hard over Alaric’s erection as if the right pressure will make him drill a foot deeper.

So, it’s twofold. For one, this feels distinctly like weekend sex. Not just the kissing. This feels like Sunday night in Damon’s apartment with a little too much wine (but never so much they can’t get hard, because what would be the point of that?), like Saturday morning. But it’s Thursday night and he’s on the clock and, and this is the important part; he set the scene, he’s setting the pace, he’s in the driver’s seat, he’s definitely topping from the bottom here.

Feels good. Feels different.

He slows down, and Alaric slows down with him, rolling his hips luxuriously in response to Damon’s change of pace; Damon grips Alaric’s shoulder hard with his good arm and bounces on his balls like he’s riding a goddamn bull, and Alaric follows right along with him. He digs his teeth into the meat of Alaric’s shoulder and Alaric groans deliciously.

It’s like a drug. The power, sure, but more the other thing, the thing where the usual balance of power is tipped in Damon’s favor. He likes it. Not enough to give up what they have, but enough to try to wrest control a little more often.

Alaric’s hand is settled on the back of Damon’s neck. Damon reaches for it, wrapping it around his own cock instead, jerking encouragingly. Alaric complies cheerfully and well, applying expert pressure everywhere he knows Damon likes it. Harder and harder as their bodies move faster, and Damon is about ready to black out when he feels his balls contract suddenly; it’s been too long, he’s got about ten years worth of come stored up. The first streak hits Alaric across the stomach; the second paints his cheek, his lip, and it’s about the best thing Damon’s ever seen. Alaric looks glazed and shocked, so close himself, and Damon cleans his lip with kittenish licks, rubs against his cheek as Alaric groans and thrusts once more, twice, three times, filling Damon with a distant warmth.

Sort of fantastically debauched, for two men comfortable with handcuffs and spreader bars.

Their foreheads rest together again, their eyes meet. It occurs to Damon that neither of them has said a word in apparently forever. This is unusual for them, enough so he briefly considers mentioning it. He doesn’t, though, just leans in to brush their mouths together. He can still taste his own come on Alaric’s lip.

“Are you al –”

Damon shuts Alaric up with a sharp nod, and groans in disappointment as he feels Alaric slip slickly from his body.

He moves to lie half-slumped over Alaric, face buried against the broad chest, feeling smug and satisfied. Twice so, when Alaric kisses the top of his head. Oh, fuck, but he needed that. Seems Alaric did as well.

“We should have a shower,” Alaric says, though he doesn’t sound remotely motivated to get up, despite the ejaculate still cooling on his body, on his cheek. Should Damon apologize for the impromptu facial? Nah.

“We should,” Damon agrees, but he makes no effort to move.
“That was… different,” Alaric says, arm resting across Damon’s waist. Damon only smirks against his chest. Alaric smells good. Sweat and sex and musk. Damon bites gently at the nipple so close to his face. Alaric might as well be a girl, his nipples are so sensitive. He shivers beneath Damon’s body.

“Back to normal next week,” Damon says. Is it a request? A prediction? He’s not sure. Just that after the last three weeks he’s craving the structure of submission, and he’s ready to get back to it.

“Next week,” Alaric agrees, yawning.

It’ll make for a greatly annoying Friday morning, but they don’t make it back to the shower.

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It’s been two weeks. The shit has not yet hit the fan and the domesticity is rolling along nicely. And things are heading back towards normality, as well. Damon’s thigh and ass have a not unpleasant throbbing ache, courtesy of a disappointingly brief but still enjoyable session with the riding crop two nights previous when he steps through the entry doors to Mercy Hospital, looking for Stefan. He avoids the interested looks of the nurses who are still hoping he’ll provide something to fuel their imaginations – there are still stories cropping up about himself and Alaric every couple of days. And another photo or two have appeared.

Stefan is doing remarkably well. So well that Damon stands at the door of the day room for a full minute with his mouth open and staring. He’s back to his cards, intently laying them out one at a time, but without the usual pained effort.

The physical therapist gives Damon a nod and excuses himself for a break. There’s one advantage; that guy has stopped looking at Damon like he’s a potential meal.

Damon takes a cautious step, a second, a disbelieving smile creeping over his features. Stefan looks up at him, and he grins broadly, reaching out. Damon crouches to pull him into a hug, and while it’s not returned – Stefan still doesn’t seem to have worked out how that works – one hand reaches up to curl over his bicep.

Damon finds a chair, and brings it close.

“You’re looking well, little brother,” he says, and Stefan smiles again, and nods. “Any big parties this week?”

“Birthday party,” Stefan says, pointing at the wall, and sure enough, there’s a gaudy, depressing ‘happy birthday’ banner on the wall. Something twists in Damon’s stomach.

It’s bad, sometimes. Progress. Makes him think he might get Stefan back, one day, when he’s been told a hundred times, a thousand, that it will never, ever happen. The most they can hope for is that he’ll be able to be responsible enough to shower himself, to eat every day without a battle over vegetables and dessert. That he might manage a conversation that’s not too complex. Still, Damon enjoys the illusion. He watches as Stefan finishes laying out the cards – all in the correct order, which must be progress as well.

“Perfect,” he says. Stefan looks at him, and his eyes slide away, but he brings them back again; all he’s ever really wanted to do was make his big brother proud.

He reaches for Stefan’s hand, and Stefan doesn’t jerk it away.

“I wish we could talk,” Damon says, but this is already getting too abstract for Stefan; he’s fading
out, looking at his cards. He wants to mess them up again and start over. “There’s so much I want to talk about. I wish you could tell me what you’re thinking. I wish…” he tilts his head. “I’m in love with my boss,” he tells Stefan, and something in there makes Stefan look up. Probably the word ‘love’. Words with emotional resonance are the ones he usually picks up on. The speech therapist has noticed as well. Damon’s voice sounds distant even to his own ears. Maybe he’s experimenting, saying it out loud. Damon reaches for one of Stefan’s squeeze balls, and tucks it into his hand, but Stefan’s not in the mood. He drops it on the ground, and starts to mess up his cards. He hands the messy pile to Damon, who neatens the deck, cuts it, and shuffles the cards again with all the finesse of a Vegas dealer before handing them back so Stefan can start the whole process again.

“Dumb, right?”

Stefan doesn’t look up, but that doesn’t mean he’s not listening; it just means he can’t make sense of what he’s hearing.

“I mean, this guy could probably buy an island on a whim, and he’s paying me for… uh, well, I’ll skip that part, but the point is, he’s my boss. So, I’m dumb.”

Stefan sometimes can’t see the difference between spades and clubs, and he’s engrossed right now.

It’s the first time Damon has said it out loud. It’s probably the first time he’s let himself think it, really. It’s been tucked away in the back of his mind, making him do crazy things like fly to Miami, and buy himself punitive corsetry, and trawl through sex shops looking for the ultimate butt plug, even tolerate a dislocated shoulder. He crosses his arms over his knees, watching Stefan’s hands and wishing to god he had someone in his life who he could actually talk to about this stuff. He can feel the deep furrow in his forehead. It seems to make his entire face ache.

He watches for an hour. It might be longer. He shuffles the deck a few times. Stefan seems to like having an audience. At last, Damon kisses his forehead, one hand wrapped around the back of Stefan’s neck.

“I’ll see you in a few days, brother,” he says.

He steps out into the cold. The snow is almost all gone, and there won’t be any more this winter. Spring has sprung. And there is the Lincoln, parked in a tow away zone, with Caroline sitting behind the wheel reading a magazine.

He opens the door and climbs in.

“Thought I said I’d get the subway home,” he says.

“You think I have something better to do than sit here and wait for you?” she asks, tossing the magazine into the back seat. “Not today. Besides, the subway doesn’t provide the thrill of multiple near death experiences and the age old question of ‘how does Caroline Forbes still hold a license?’ So you should complain less,” she says. She’s bubbly. She’d been quiet on the way over, but to be fair, so had Damon.

Hey, he could talk to Caroline. He’s not sure that she likes him – fuck, he’s not sure he likes her – but they seem to get along well enough, and that’s a decent start. Unfortunately, she knows Alaric, which makes it completely impossible to even contemplate opening his mouth.

He watches out the window. Another half an hour and the sun will be down; it’s still early spring. Here and there, sprouts of bright green, and flashes of colorful flower buds, pierce the gloom. It
would probably make Damon smile, if he was the type to smile at flowers. Which he is decidedly not. If he smiles, it’s in anticipation of warmer weather. Since the whole pneumonia deal, he finds he dislikes the cold more than ever.

The phone rings, and Caroline reaches for the console to answer it.

“Hi, boss,” she sing-songs. “What can I do you for?” When she scrunches her nose like that, she’s just adorable.

“Ah… Caroline, you can say no,” he starts, and she rolls her eyes at Damon.

“What do you need, boss?”

“There’s a small celebration at the bar around the corner from the office,” he says.

“And you want me to bring Damon? He’s in the car with me right now. What time?”

“About five,” Alaric says, and both Damon and Caroline raise their eyebrows. Alaric finishing work at five o’clock, even on a Friday, is almost unprecedented. “But you should come too,” he says. “Leave the car, get a taxi.”

Damon and Caroline glance at each other incredulously.

“You got it, boss,” she says. “Out.” And Alaric terminates the call.

“What do you think that’s about?” Damon asks.

“Beats me, but if there’s a bar tab, you’d better know I’m not above abusing it,” Caroline says cheerfully.
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

Some amazing news, and a moment of realization.

It’s sort of a nightmare, but Alaric still can’t help the smile on his face. He hadn’t expected to hear so soon, but he was notified by phone an hour ago. Shortlisted. It turns his gut, on some levels, but on other, more important levels, he’s more proud than he was when he won apartment complex of the year three years ago. This is personal.

He still feels an aching sadness when he lets himself consider than he was outed so publicly and spectacularly, but he’s never been ashamed of who he is. Just quiet. And even being shortlisted has had an impact on stock prices since the announcement; barely noticeable, but give it a week. He still worries that someone is going to find out exactly who Damon is and do their best to destroy them both, but no one has yet.

He’s still answering email at five o’clock when Louis comes to hurry him along. On the west coast, the day is still ripe, but since half of the board, most of the senior staff and a not insignificant number of junior staff are all heading to the bar, Alaric figures he has no choice but to suck it up and turn off his computer. After a moment’s hesitation, he leaves the laptop. He can always send for it in the morning. The office is never empty on a Saturday.

He wishes he had a change of clothes. Once he’s out of the office, he always wants to ditch the tie and the button down shirt, hang his suit somewhere it can’t hurt his brain. He’d rather be wearing jeans and decent sweater, but there’s nothing to be done for it.

He collects only the bare necessities; phone, keys, wallet, and he joins the throng in the elevator. By the time he reaches the bar, he’s already feeling claustrophobic. Everyone wants to shake his hand. He has a public relations person trying to commit him to a statement she can use in ‘thank you’ press. As soon as they arrive at the bar, the sound of champagne corks popping is deafening; the staff have been forewarned, apparently. Their group grows over the next fifteen minutes to take up most of the front bar. Alaric is flustered, uncomfortable. He unbuttons his top button, and loosens his tie. The stem of champagne flute in his hand feels like it might snap.

Alaric really doesn’t like champagne all that much. He also doesn’t like being pawed at. And he thinks he liked it better when not even most of his employees knew what he looked like. He used to be able to share an elevator with most of the junior staff and get nothing more than a polite nod. In the last few weeks, since his private life was spread all over the society pages, everyone in the entire goddamn company seems to have found a reason to talk to him.

He knows exactly how many of them are gay, too, or at least not strictly heterosexual, which seems unnecessary. And how many of them ‘gave it a try once’. He has his please stop talking to me expression honed to a fine art.

But he doesn’t hate the handful of times someone has said they’re inspired by him. It’s pure ego and it’s sort of pathetic but he still likes it.
He’s doing a lot of nodding and smiling and trying to steer clear of Miss P.R. 2015 and watching the door like a hawk, because he cares about everyone in this room in a paternalistic and employer-ish sort of way but he doesn’t really know many of them, and he needs a friendly face. Friendly faces.

There are snacks coming at him from every direction. Delicious and mostly deep-fried, because decent hors d’oeuvres aren’t really that easy to order with this kind of notice (and no one had known that the announcement would come this quickly, or Alaric is willing to bet that Louis and his perky blonde friend would have ordered in advance, just in case).

He’s caught up in a conversation with a board member, Stephen Brown, who seems as determined to talk to him as he is to keep a safe distance, as if he’s trying to make a point about how accepting and pleased he is, while simultaneously concerned that Alaric may not be able to keep his hands off a man in his sixties who has a wife, and three children, and even (unless Alaric has made a hideous faux pas) a grandchild as of last summer, sporting ear tufts and a paunch.

He glances up as there is a ripple in the crowd, and there he is. Damon, a step ahead of Caroline, looking ninety percent like he’s ready to own this room and ten percent like he’s ready to run.

The relief Alaric feels at his presence should not be this acute, but he feels his chest swell, his shoulders drop (he hadn’t even realized how much tension he’d tucked away there), his hands unclench. He feels himself smile, a genuine, reflexive smile, with no hesitation or calculation, as Damon wanders in, all swagger, and one arm reaches out, just a little, ready to pull him close. Again, it’s not calculated; it’s as natural as if he’d been married thirty years. He needs to touch Damon, actually feel him, and he’s not even thinking about the fact that Damon is as much an employee as anyone else in the room.

He’s still a million miles away, and Stephen is still talking, saying something completely uninteresting about one of his son’s friends in college and how it’s good that everyone accepts it’s just normal, now, doesn’t matter a bit, and it really can’t hurt the bottom line; an upswing last thing on a Friday can’t be a bad thing, am I correct?

Damon’s eyes are so blue, so goddamn pale, and his hair is so artfully scruffy. He’s wearing that jacket, those jeans, like he was styled by the best the city has to give and he’s so achingly beautiful Alaric feels his chest clench again. His lips are curled like he’s holding a secret just behind them.

Alaric could fucking marry him, right here and right now. He’s vaguely aware of Caroline a step behind, in a red party dress (she’s adorable, but he only has one set of eyes). Is time slowing down?

The plan is to settle his hand on Damon’s hip and kiss the corner of his mouth; less likely to cause a heart attack in any of the elderly board members, and definitely falls within the bounds of propriety. But the room is only buzzing noise, not people, and Damon’s eyes haven’t wavered. The crowd has parted. Is Alaric standing on a pedestal, right now? Will Damon have to ascend stairs to meet him? He seems to be a really, really long way apart from everyone, and since only a moment ago they were crowding him horribly, that seems like it might be significant in some way.

Both hands are moving now. That’s not in the plan, and in a distant sort of way, it’s interesting. There’s no spotlight on Damon. But it feels like he’s colored differently to the rest of the room. Like a clue. Everything is washed out, except Damon, Damon’s eyes, the color afforded his cheeks by the cold air outside.

Damon glances away, a second, and his eyebrows rise, and the small smirk turns into a smaller smile. But widening as he turns back to Alaric. The left side of his face hooks up, and then the right. Fuck, he almost looks goofy. And how long does it take someone to cross the room? It’s not
even that big a bar. Big, but it doesn’t take fifteen minutes to get from the door to the end of the bar.

He’s close.

One hand cups Damon’s jaw, and Damon covers it with his own. The other snakes around his waist, pulling him close. Damon tries to speak, but he hasn’t a hope. Alaric kisses him, and it’s not a CEO-kissing-his-partner kiss. It’s not fit for public consumption at all. There’s tongue, there’s heat, and although Alaric doesn’t actually watch, he’s pretty sure Stephen has skedaddled. There are eyes on them, though, a hundred sets at least. He has Damon almost bent over at the waist, and he doesn’t give a shit.

Damon tastes like the nip of bourbon he drank before he left the apartment. He smells like bergamot and Szechuan pepper. New cologne? It’s perfect.

Alaric lets Damon stand under his own steam, but he doesn’t let go. Damon seems pleased. Smug, even.

“I assume congratulations are in order,” he purrs. “I’d better get myself fitted for a new suit.”

Alaric laughs. “I’ll even buy it.” Which means he’s actually planning to take Damon to the dinner and awards ceremony, which is something a couple of hours ago he wasn’t sure he could do.

Damon slips an arm around Alaric’s neck, and they hold close for a second.

“I love you so much,” Alaric says.

“Me too,” Damon answers.

There’s a sudden stiffness, and Alaric feels a chill across the back of his neck.

This was not in the script.
Three little words. Definitely a potential disaster, but does it have to be?

I love you so much.

Me, too.

That was way too easy. Probably a land mine. But since Alaric’s the idiot who left it there for them both to step on…

Still, they hold close. Maybe it’s knowing everything will be different the next time they make eye contact, and neither is in a rush to make that happen. Damon can almost hear Alaric frantically rehearse lines in his head, but he’s willing to bet Alaric has no real idea of what he should say to repair the sudden tear.

And he’s just as bad.

I love you so much.

Maybe something like, I didn’t mean it. Or I didn’t mean it to come out like that. Something. Maybe a pithy line about boundaries. But if there are boundaries right now, Damon has no clue where they lie.

Me, too.

It’s alright. It’ll be alright. They both pull out of the embrace at the same time, and their eyes meet, however briefly; it aches. But it aches so nicely. There is a promise in their gaze; there is a conversation that needs to happen. Renegotiation, at best. The way Alaric looks right now there is no way he’s about to terminate the contract, but it was still probably the first thing he thought about, once the treacherous sentence had tripped off his tongue.

His own charming self. Damon knows how to do that. He might ham it up a little; he’s conscious that this might be a little overboard but he doesn’t really care. As he gets swept up and away from Alaric, into other conversations, he’s transported back to the days of grand parties at the plantation house, defying his father, being as much himself as he knows how to be. He shakes hands, kisses hands, stuffs his face with crab cakes and mini spring rolls (whoever planned this thing needs a better personal assistant, really, but they’re all pretty tasty). He waves off compliments about the hospital scheme (strange to think people know it was his idea). He drags Caroline in his wake for the first while, but no girl who looks like that in a red dress is ever going to be the wallflower. If she wasn’t besotted with the new doorman whose name Damon cannot keep in his head for three running minutes, she’d struggle to go home alone after a night like this. Tyler! That’s his name.

Fuck, under other circumstances, Damon would probably make a move.

It’s Friday night and Damon is on the clock, but he doesn’t feel like he’s on the clock. Some stupid dam has burst. When he gets close enough to Alaric to touch, they touch, fingers against wrists and
arms around waists and it takes him a while to realize no one has had the sense to offer Alaric anything but champagne, so the moment he spots him alone, Damon brings him a double Jack Daniels, no ice, and Alaric looks grateful beyond measure.

He also looks like he’s working up a speech in his head. Whatever the speech is about, Damon doesn’t want to hear. So, close to ten o’clock, seeing that Alaric has gone way, way past his capacity to cope with a large group, he sidles up close, and pulls him down by the shoulder, speaking into his ear.

“We can go,” he says.

Alaric tenses, and looks around the room, but his expression is hopeful when he looks back.

“Yeah,” he says. “Let’s just go.”

He doesn’t want to glad-hand every person in the room. He’s content for Damon to take his hand and lead him away. “Caroline,” he says, looking back.

“Shush. Tyler got off work an hour ago. She left in time to meet him. It’s cute.”

“Who’s Tyler again?”

Damon snickers. “The doorman.”

“Oh, Lockwood,” and Alaric looks faintly concerned by the fact that the guy’s first name escaped his memory, too, but he shakes it off.

It’s less than a minute before they’re sharing the back of a taxi, and Damon snakes his hand across the seat to take Alaric’s hand. Alaric squeezes back, so it’s all okay. This time of night, it’s only twenty minutes back to the apartment; but once they’re there, there’s a brief moment of awkwardness with paparazzi and a couple of actual reporters, smart enough to know they’ll catch a moment if they wait long enough. Alaric seems well-versed in this. He promises them there will be a press release in the morning, and begs their cooperation. And he doesn’t, not for a single moment, let go of Damon’s hand. He punches in the code for the elevator, and they’re alone for the first time.

Damon isn’t sure what to expect.

Alaric presses himself against the wall of the elevator, and Damon finds himself opposite, watching. Alaric looks exhausted. Well, who cares? It’s the weekend, hallelujah. His shoulders can slump all they need to.

“I’m not good with crowds,” Alaric says, like it’s a big secret.

“Really,” Damon answers, drily, and crosses the small space to press himself against Alaric’s body. Alaric drapes an arm around his shoulders and catches his lips in a brief kiss.

“Really,” Alaric says, and the elevator dings.

They step into the small entry and Alaric punches in the code for the apartment. It seems different, somehow. Damon glances at the bedroom door, ajar, and wonders if he’s getting laid tonight. Hard to tell when Alaric is trying so hard not to spiral.

Damon helps Alaric with his jacket, and Alaric gives him a surprised, fond look as he untucks his shirt and eases off his tie.
“I suppose you want to talk,” Damon says, but Alaric is pouring drinks, which is basically the opposite of talking, and that’s good. Alaric pushes a glass into Damon’s hand and cups a hand around the back of his neck.

“Not tonight,” he says. “Honestly, it’s been a big day, and I just…” he kisses the corner of Damon’s mouth, briefly, but somehow possessively, and finds his place on the couch, draping an arm around Damon when Damon joins him. The whole thing seems anticlimactic. Dammit. Damon had sort of anticipated a screaming match, something that might help progress the plot a bit. Or just being dragged to bed, which would be even better. He sips the bourbon, wishing he’d put on some music while he was still upright.

“Did you mean it?” he asks, after a long silence.

Alaric sighs. “Did you?”

Damon’s stomach twists. “Let’s just go to bed,” he says, and they do.

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It’s a quiet weekend. It’s too quiet, really, despite the phone ringing every half an hour with some well-wisher who Alaric probably regrets giving his number to calls to stroke his ego about the award. Alaric works, Damon works out, Alaric expresses some very boring concern about Damon’s shoulder, Damon dismisses it because the shoulder is fine.

The sex is good, Saturday night, but Damon is itching to play with the ropes again and Alaric doesn’t seem to want to go there.

Sunday, Damon gets insistent.

“If they follow us somewhere, fine, I give up, we can leave. But this is bullshit. If you’re not ashamed of me, we’re going out,” and he crosses his arms over his chest, and narrows his eyes, because he’s not on the clock and won’t be a good little sub.

Alaric laughs, that quiet, self-deprecating laugh he resorts to when he’s about to give up.

“Fine. Find something and we’ll go, but I swear to god, Damon, if we have idiots following us around we’re leaving, alright? I really don’t handle it well, and it’s only a matter of time before I hit someone in the face with his own camera. I have a temper, you know.”

Damon drops onto Alaric’s lap, there on the couch. Their eyes catch, and there’s a long moment when Damon decides again that he needs to know if what they said was real or just some throwback to when Alaric had a wife, and such declarations were easy, and obvious. Alaric’s arms go around his waist like it’s habit, and Damon leans down to kiss him.

“I’ll get changed,” Alaric says. “Find us somewhere to go.”

They use a private, unmarked taxi service and shake the one really persistent photographer long before they reach their destination, which is a bar in Queens where there are a couple of girls playing guitar (neither of whom Damon has slept with, thanks very much). No one bats an eyelid when they walk in and both of them relax. The place is busy enough to feel anonymous but not so busy they can’t get a table. Alaric shells peanuts and sips his beer, contemplating the menu.

Damon hasn’t been here before. Just figured it sounded crappy enough so no one would pay any attention, and the girls got good reviews. Plus, blooming onion, can’t hate that. Comes with a bizarre hot chutney that might change his life.
They talk quietly about nothing in particular, but even that makes Damon antsy. Over forty-eight hours since Alaric said he loved him and he still doesn’t know what the fallout is going to be. Under the table, their legs rest together.

“What is it,” Alaric says. “Come on. You wanted to come out and you’re wound as tight as a violin string. What’s bothering you?”

Ugh, is he really going to play this dumb? Damon gives him a scathing look and turns back to the stage.

“Damon,” Alaric says, a mild warning in his tone. But he slips his hand into Damon’s at the same time, so it’s not all bad.

“I thought we’d have talked about it by now,” he says, with a shrug, and if Alaric doesn’t know what he means he’s an idiot. “But I’m not one to push.”

That elicits a full-throated laugh that makes Damon’s skin burn briefly. “Oh, you’re not? My god, I can never tell if you’re joking or just completely oblivious. You push. Sometimes you push so much I regret throwin’ out the ball gag.”

… he might have a point but it’s not one Damon actually cares about. So. “That’s all you’ve got to say?” He bats his eyelashes, and gives Alaric’s hand a squeeze. “If I’m oblivious, you’re willfully ignorant. Or the worst faker I’ve ever known. And you’re really not that good at faking. So. Are we going to talk about the other night?”

Alaric sighs, and licks his lips.

“It’s gotten complicated,” he admits, and he tries to take his hand back but Damon doesn’t let him.

“It’s been complicated since day one,” he says. “I want to know if you meant what you said or not.”

“It’s not that simple.” Alaric meets Damon’s eyes and he reaches with his free hand for his drink. “It’s not. You’re right. It’s always been complicated, but that question… is not that simple.”

“It’s pretty fucking simple, Ric,” Damon insists. “Kind of an either-or situation.”

Alaric does take his hand away, then. And he leans back in his seat a moment. Thinking. Heavy lines mark his brow. “It’s not. Either you’re my employee who I… sort of date on the weekends or this is a relationship, and I think I made it pretty clear at the beginning…”

 “… that you don’t have time for a relationship. Yep, very clear. And I call bullshit.”

“Call whatever you like, won’t change a thing.”

“It’s not about time.” And it can’t be. Because a live-in sub is about as time-consuming as it gets, especially when he won’t go home on the weekends, especially when Alaric doesn’t want him to.

“You’re right, it’s not. So can we just enjoy the music and a drink?”

“If you fire me because you fucked up and said something you didn’t mean to –”

“I’m not firing you. God, you go there every time, don’t you? Just calm down. I have some thinking to do. It wouldn’t kill you to give me some time to do it.”

It’s annoying, and it’s definitely bullshit, but since having his contract terminated is off the menu
for now, Damon sits back, and enjoys the music.

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Tuesday is Stefan day. Damon’s trying to get consistent. He takes the subway and walks the rest of the way; the weather’s getting better all the time and New York City is prettiest in the spring.

Stefan is in a good mood again, and brightens further when Damon sits down with him. He accepts Damon’s arms around him, leaning his head on Damon’s shoulder, and smiles crookedly as Damon settles in to watch him lay his cards out, over and over.

“Any good parties this week?”

Stefan smiles, but he shakes his head, and for no reason he can immediately put a finger on, Damon is glad. It feels more like a real answer than his usual nod. He takes Stefan’s hand, and straightens his fingers. Stefan looks bored, and annoyed, but he doesn’t pull away.

“You ever think one day you’ll get out of here, Stef?” he asks.

Stefan shakes his head, but he doesn’t look too upset. He stands up, and walks away, wonky steps, and Damon watches for a moment before following. Anything Stefan does that is different needs to be catalogued. Damon follows him to his room.

“You tired, brother?” he asks, but Stefan opens the top drawer of his nightstand – It’s low, like his bed is low, in case he rolls over and falls out in the night. He pulls out a page of a newspaper, and brings it to Damon with a smile.

Where do people get these photographs from? Alaric has an arm on Damon’s shoulder and a smile on his face and ugh, they look so good together. Has to be a weekend because Alaric is in jeans, even if they probably cost nearly as much as a pair of his suit pants, and a plaid shirt which definitely cost him under twenty bucks (one day they need to discuss these things at length).

“Who gave you this?” Damon asks, but Stefan just smiles. His eyes slide away but he brings them right back again. “Wow, people are nosy. What do you want to know?”

Stefan takes the paper again, and tries to form words, but he’s struggling. It might even be that his speech is weaker than recent weeks, even if he is happier.

“Boss?” he says at last, and Damon’s mouth falls open. He remembered. He remembers. He was listening.

“Yeah,” Damon says, and if he’s honest, he’s embarrassed. “That’s my boss. You remember that conversation?”

Stefan smiles, and his hands curl in on themselves, and just for a second it looks like his old smile. And it nearly breaks Damon’s heart. “I remember,” he says, even if it’s labored and difficult to understand, and he leans against Damon for a goodbye hug, all six feet of him, wasted muscles and wonky joints. Damon wraps arms around him, runs his hand over the back of Stefan’s head, over the tufts of hair that grow at odd angles, and then he says goodbye.
Damon is still feeling weird. Alaric has had a shitty week. It's a recipe for tension. And kitchen sex.

It’s a rough week, but which weeks aren’t rough? It’s rougher because Alaric is more or less contractually obligated to do a handful of interviews. The awful PR woman has opinions about hair and suits and hints strongly that Damon should be a part of at least one interview but Alaric won’t expose him to that, no way. He sits for a few photographs (he hates them, always looks like he’s got a gun pointed at his head).

He’s not warm, and that’s what the PR person complains about. And maybe he’s not. Maybe Isobel sucked all of that out of him. Maybe the money did it. Or maybe it's just that being ‘warm' around strangers is near impossible. But he’s private, and he won’t discuss his… ‘relationship’ with Damon, and he turns every question back around towards the business. The only interview he feels safe and comfortable with is Echelon, because they’re the only ones that are actually interested in him beyond who he likes to stick his dick in.

Is he aware there is a gay men’s hospital in Buffalo facing closure? No, he’s not. Will he look at it? Yes, he will.

Does he think he’s going to win the award?

He’s just thrilled to be nominated.

And of course, where did he get his tie?

It’s silk, raw silk, a dusty blue with a dark gray fleck, and as soon as Alaric looks at it he realizes Damon bought it for him, blushes grapefruit red. “Ah... my partner chose this one,” he says, and maybe they’ll find a way to make him human with that little tidbit. “He says I can’t be trusted to buy my own clothes. ’m sorry, no idea of the label.”

This part is entirely true. They point out it’s sewn onto the back, and he blushes even deeper.

It’s also a rough week because since Florida, industrial disputes have become de rigueur. They have a new one brewing in Chicago and Alaric doesn’t even want to think about it. He’s genuinely weighing the cost of the loss of the contract against the chance of every other crew for the next twelve months demanding pay increases, looking for ways to pass the costs on, and reconsidering retirement. That had been one of Damon’s ideas, hadn’t it? Just say fuck it all. Maybe they could buy an island, get supplies flown in, a small plane for friends to get on and off.

He stares at his low-fat smoked turkey and salad wrap and sincerely wishes it was a cheese and bacon burger with a side of… a lot of chips, dripping with oil. If only he had time to do as much exercise as he had when he was younger, it would be.

This life is sort of bullshit, in a lot of ways.

He really doesn’t need to work as late as he’s been working, either. Truth is he’s still scared stupid
about what he’d said to Damon at the celebration. Scared of how easily it tripped off his tongue.

He sits at his desk with his head in his hands and breathes for a long moment after his pathetic lunch, rubs his temples and stares at his inbox as the number of unread emails gets higher by the minute. Doesn’t he have someone to keep on top of it for him? He’s only supposed to get the ones she can’t handle. This place is getting more complicated by the minute.

He flicks idly through them. Apparently, they’re all personal.

--

Thursday night, Alaric gets home at ten o’clock, and without a word, drops onto the couch, head in Damon’s lap.

“Hi, honey,” Damon singsongs, tugging gently at Alaric’s freshly cut hair.

Alaric grunts, and settles his hand on Damon’s knee. He’s always liked having someone play with his hair. But for all the things he knows how to ask for, it’s the small things, the simple things, without props and power, that he’s never known how to address. Damon picks up on things like that. He’s not really supposed to.

Alaric feels his shoulders relax, but he doesn’t feel himself fall asleep, as Damon turns the page in the book he’s reading.

Sometime around midnight Damon wakes him, coaxes him to the bedroom, and settles in his arms, under the blanket, best little spoon in the world. Alaric nuzzles against his throat.

He does love Damon, to the toes, to the weird little cowlick on the back of his head that he’s blissfully ignorant of because he only sees it when the hairdresser has wrangled it into submission. The insolent glint in his eye and the raw way his mouth falls open when Alaric touches him just right. He loves it all.

There has to be a way to make this work, has to be.

He pulls Damon closer, and slips back into unconsciousness.

--

Friday, Damon looks uncomfortable, and suspicious, there in the kitchen, reheating bits and pieces to put their meal back together because Alaric is late home again. His lips curls, and he nods tightly, and Alaric can literally hear him wondering if Alaric has been coming home late deliberately. Really doesn’t want to tell him the chances are good that he’s going to have to leave for Chicago on Monday. He pushes the door closed silently and hangs his jacket, puts his briefcase by the door, out of sight, and takes in the delicious sight as he steps towards the kitchen.

“Hi, honey,” he says, wrapping one arm around Damon’s chest, the other around his stomach. “I’m home.”

Doesn’t have the same ring to it, when he says it; but it’s the thought that counts, maybe, because Damon rolls his head sideways, exposing his neck for a kiss, and when he sighs, it sounds a little less miserable.

“I’m sorry it’s been such a shitty week.”

“Happens,” Damon says, airily, and moans when Alaric presses his hand over his dick, through his
jeans, just hard enough to elicit some interest. “Don’t worry… fuck.”

Alaric unbuckles his belt. Why does Damon need a belt in jeans this tight? Doesn’t matter, and besides, it might come in handy.

“Kind of the plan. Might fuck you right here on the kitchen floor.”

Damon rolls helplessly into his hand. He abandons his task, grips the edge of the counter to hold himself upright as Alaric unbuttons his jeans, unzips his fly. Christ, they’re tight, it’s ridiculous. He’s not gentle as he works the jeans down Damon’s hips, yanking one side and then the other until his ass is hanging out, and his dick is pressed against the edge of the counter. Half hard, but not for long.

“Be my guest,” Damon grunts. “Ric...”

Alaric presses kisses, open-mouthed and wet, against Damon’s neck, down to his shoulder; this t-shirt has a wide neck and it takes Alaric a few moments to realize it’s one of his own. He bites down on the ropy muscle, not hard, but possessive, holding back a moan. Only thing sexier that he can imagine is Damon in one of his business shirts, hanging open. Maybe if he thinks it hard enough, he’ll come home one night and find Damon dressed just like that.

He closes one hand around Damon’s cock, and rubs the other down between the cheeks of his ass, grinning as Damon’s knees go weak.

“Going to put you in the collar,” he growls, against Damon’s ear. “So you can’t forget for a moment that you’re mine.”

“Like I ever forget,” Damon breathes, trying to stay still, failing miserably, fucking up into Alaric’s hand. He leans back, head resting against Alaric’s shoulder, letting Alaric take some of his weight. “I can’t forget. Even if I fucking want to some days. Yours. Oh, fuck, Ric, get these fucking jeans off me, will you?”

“Can’t, don’t have any paint stripper,” Alaric grumbles, but he gets to his knees, dragging Damon’s jeans the rest of the way down his body, kissing the back of his thigh, tonguing gently at the back of his knee until Damon makes a strangled noise. Damon’s bare feet are all sinew and bone and Alaric loves the way he pads barefooted around this insane apartment where most people comment they feel underdressed.

“Better?”

Damon nods, half bent over the countertop, still trying to hold himself up. He staggers when Alaric pulls his t-shirt over his head, tossing it aside.

“Not a mark on you,” Alaric comments, letting his fingers play over the back of Damon’s right thigh, over his ass. “Not even a little green or yellow. Pristine.”

“Travesty. Going to do something about it?” Ballsy little shit, even if his voice is wavering, even if he’s struggling to stay present.

“Just trying to decide between your belt and mine.”

“Which one to use, or in what order?” Christ, he sounds wrecked, and Alaric presses against him, trapped erection rubbing between the cheeks of his ass.

“Smartass.”
“Please, you love it when I –” and then there’s nothing but a sharp cry as Alaric brings his hand down against the clean pink skin of his ass. It’s not even hard, but it makes such a satisfying sound that Alaric does it again, smiling when Damon thrusts up into his hand.

“Should put you over my knee. Bound to be something you’ve done that you deserve punishing for.”

“Oh, fuck. So many things.” Damon sounds stoned, but he sets his arms hard against the countertop, and braces against another slap. Alaric reaches for the belt, abandoned on the ground (loosing his hand from Damon’s disappointed cock), and folds it in two, keeping only eight inches or so hanging out. He slaps Damon hard, once, and Damon cries out, pressing his forehead against the countertop.

“Don’t fall. Lock your knees.”

Alaric hasn’t met Damon’s eyes once since he stepped into the apartment. He wishes he could see that pretty face now, the way the creases in his forehead will have been ironed out suddenly, the way his face will be slack. But Damon locks his knees, and Alaric repositions himself.

Another, and another, and already he can see the beginnings of some deep bruises, overlapping the earlier hand marks, down over Damon’s ass and thigh.

“That’ll do. Wish you could see it,” he growls, tossing the belt aside, and spits onto his fingers, working them over Damon’s hole. He’s soft, pliant, been playing with himself in Alaric’s absence, and the thought of it drives Alaric harder, as he slips two fingers into that delicious heat. Nice loose hole but inside, he’s tight around Alaric’s fingers, and he’s groaning, gagging for it.

Olive oil? Or will he drag Damon to the bedroom after all?

With his left hand he loosens his tie, and removes it altogether. A button, two, three, while he presses against the spongy gland of Damon’s prostate. Damon’s cheek is pressed against the cold countertop, mouth open a little, eyes closed. So pretty. Alaric pauses in what he’s doing to pull Damon’s hands roughly behind his back, and bind his wrists. Not even elegant, but the dark silk looks nice against Damon’s pale skin.

“Is your shoulder alright?” he asks, but Damon hasn’t even seemed stiff in days.

“It’s fine,” Damon says. Wants to sound pissy but he really just sounds like he’s turned on and floating away. “There’s lube in the second drawer.”

“What?”

“Told you I have an optimistic streak.”

… Alaric opens the drawer, and has to smile. He wonders how long it’s been there. Knowing Damon, a while. Alaric never looks in these drawers unless he’s getting cutlery, and that’s in the top drawer.

He doesn’t bother with any further preamble; he lubes up, and presses against Damon’s hole, watching as Damon tries to push back and take him in. He can hardly do a thing, though, and it’s as appealing now as it was the first time they did this, all those months ago.

He fists his hand in Damon’s hair and pulls him just slightly off the countertop.

you here.”
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

This isn't what Damon wants. Problem is, he doesn't know what he wants. Plus a Stefan-related bad day and an unexpected savior.

Easier said than done; Damon is already somewhere far away. But he lets the pain anchor his there to the kitchen counter. His cock is bumping up against the cabinets, cruelly, his wrists ache because he keeps forgetting they’re bound, and Alaric is fucking him with the force of a jackhammer.

Probably won’t be eating dinner for a while.

And then abruptly, he needs something different.

Maybe it’s because he hasn’t seen Alaric’s face since Alaric walked in the door; makes him feel like he could be literally any warm hole, if not for the way Alaric says his name. But he wants to stop. Can’t remember for the life of him how to make it stop, but he wants it to.

“Ric,” he murmurs, but Alaric seems to take it as the encouragement it usually is. “Ric. P…” Safe word. He only has to say it. Alaric will stop. The rest, they can work out later.

“Peanuts. Peanuts.”

He’s never said it, but Alaric stops so fast it’s like the word has been wired right into his brain. He stops thrusting, lets Damon’s head rest against the benchtop again, and pulls out, untying Damon’s hands without a word before bundling him in his arms, touching his shoulder.

“Did I hurt your shoulder? Was I too rough? Are you –”

Damon grits his teeth, feeling suddenly and horribly exposed. “No. Shut up, would you? I’m fine.” His heart is racing in his chest.

“What do you need?”

Damon leans his forehead against Alaric’s shoulder. “I don’t know.”

“You’ve had a shitty week. I’ve hardly been here.”

“Not your fault.”

“Not yours, either,” Alaric says, arms wrapped around him. Sounds guilty, though. Damon shivers. Fuck, he hates himself when he’s like this, and his legs are threatening to go out from under him.

“What do you need, Damon?”

This is the fundamental and inviolable rule; when Alaric asks what Damon needs, Damon is supposed to tell him. Doesn’t work when he has no clue what he needs. He flicks through a rolodex of images in his head. Sprawling on the couch watching some shitty movie with a glass of wine and Alaric’s fingers in his hair, feeling the ripple of laughter when Alaric finds something
funny that literally no one else ever would. Cuddling in bed (ugh, when did Damon become a cuddler). A long soak in the spa, his back pressed against Alaric’s chest.

Something soft. Ugh, how embarrassing. He can’t say that.

“Come on,” Alaric says, leading him out of the kitchen, gentle, and thoroughly confused. Damon wants to berate himself, maybe ask Alaric for a more impassioned flogging. He’s expecting to be led to the bed, but instead, Alaric stops, undressing, less careful than he usually is (Christ, does he know how much his own suits are worth? Really stupid to just drop those pants on the ground like that) and leads Damon to the shower. He runs the water hot, really hot, enough to melt the ice forming against Damon’s bones. He doesn’t say a word, but maybe he reads the way Damon starts to relax.

He turns Damon gently towards the tiled wall, but just as Damon is preparing to say he doesn’t really want to be fucked in the shower, either, he feels hands in his hair. Shampoo. Lathering up. Alaric’s fingers against his scalp. He sighs, pressing his hands against the tiles, contrasting sharply with the water. He leans his forehead, but Alaric coaxes him back washing his hair thoroughly, carefully, one hand resting gently on his shoulder, thumb brushing over his neck occasionally.

“Step back a second,” he says, and Damon complies, though truth be told he’s more likely to float off now than he was when Alaric was using the belt on him. It’s hard to focus. He tips his head back, and closes his eyes against the onslaught of the water (Alaric might like to keep his buildings environmentally friendly, but this shower is a crime against water conservation, and Damon loves it; the pressure, and the area it covers, it’s too luxurious by half). When the shampoo is rinsed, Alaric murmurs at him to step forward again, and he works the conditioner into Damon’s hair, gently, soothing him.

There’s that niggling feeling in the back of Damon’s head that Alaric has done this for someone else, before, and he hates it. But he ignores it. Dwelling on it would be a waste of time. Not like he could ever bring himself to ask, not like he’d really want the answer. He’s numbly compliant when Alaric takes a loofah, and a generous pour of the sandalwood bodywash he always uses, and scrubs over Damon’s back, and then more carefully over his leg where the bruising is definitely starting to take hold, down his arms. He turns Damon around and scrubs over his chest, his stomach.

“I don’t know why I freaked out,” Damon says, when he can force himself to.

“Doesn’t matter,” Alaric says. “If you figure it out, tell me. If you don’t… fuck, it happens, okay. Just… don’t worry,” he says, smiling in that way he does, setting the loofah aside to rinse Damon’s hair.

Damon feels more exposed, more self-conscious, like this than he ever does with his ass in the air and his knees forced apart. But perfectly safe. He whines quietly when Alaric seems satisfied that his hair is properly rinsed.

He whines less quietly when the water is shut off, but only for long enough for Alaric to wrap a towel from the warming rack – huge towel, fluffy and thick – around his shoulders, and rub his back.

“Get dressed,” he says, but it’s not a command, it’s an invitation. He reaches for another towel to dry himself off with. “Don’t dress up, alright? Grab some sweatpants, or, fuck, I don’t care, there are pajamas in one of the drawers. Turn on the TV. I’ll sort out dinner. You just get comfortable.”

Damon wants to protest. That’s his job. But Alaric cups his face in his hands and presses a kiss to his mouth, and he feels more grounded, and manages to nod.
“Just let me take care of you.”

By the time he’s stretched out on the couch, eyes zoning in and out on whatever the hell it is that Netflix has recommended to him, Damon has calmed down, feels alright again. He sits up to pour wine when Alaric brings the bottle, and two glasses, and he wrangles the remote control, turning up the heat until it feels like midsummer, and he gladly takes the bowl Alaric brings him. Alaric looks like Sunday morning Alaric, not Friday night Alaric, in sweatpants and a t-shirt so soft it has to either be a thousand years old or really, really expensive (probably the former). He murmurs a thank you as he twirls pasta on his fork – it’s been reheated twice, now, but it’s still pretty good, and the parmesan cheese is old, and crumbly, and sharp. Damon is suddenly hyperaware of every texture, every taste, the olives popping between his teeth, the slippery skin of a piece of tomato. The light in the room seems too bright, suddenly.

“Feeling better?”

Alaric’s voice seems too loud, but he’s actually talking quietly. Damon nods. “Fine. I’m fine. I was fine, just…”

Alaric bumps his shoulder, and Damon doesn’t bother trying to explain the sudden panic he’d felt. He just focuses on his meal, and tries desperately to follow the story on the television. Doesn’t make much sense. He feels like he jumps over several minutes at a time.

“Listen, if you need to talk… I know I haven’t been around enough this week… I mean, have you seen Stefan? Is everything…”

“I’m fine,” Damon insists again, and reaches for the wine.

Alaric has been asleep at least a couple of hours, snoring almost silently against the skin between Damon’s shoulder blades, while Damon stares out the window at the moon, which disappears and reappears behind clouds that seem to alternate between long, narrow ribbons and big swirling puffs. It must be freezing out there.

Damon still doesn’t know what the hell happened. He’s reasonably sure it has to do with those words, though. Spoken in haste.

I love you so much.

Me, too.

He’s wide awake, despite his exhaustion, and his ass stings despite the aloe Alaric rubbed into the skin after they showered. He’s warm, feeling safe, and somewhere, Stefan is sleeping soundly. But his mind is whirring.

Maybe if it’s this close to being real, he can’t stand it being fake anymore. Maybe he wants to be the one to terminate this stupid contract and just find out who they could be without it.

Maybe if they can’t work without Damon being paid to give up his body, he doesn’t want to give it up anymore.

Never occurred to him that he might be the one to end this.

Not until now.

--
Saturday night, they have dinner at Eleven Madison Park with Alaric’s friends and Damon feels like his old self, flirting outrageously and picking food quite unnecessarily off Alaric’s plate. Sunday afternoon in a jazz club with a Turkish tasting menu (genius idea, and Damon eats his weight in exceedingly sweet, tiny pastries when he’s sick of spiced lamb) and casual, slow, non-penetrative sex in Damon’s apartment where the rules have never applied.

On Monday, Damon kisses Alaric goodbye and promises himself he will not jump on a plane to Chicago, won’t call unless Alaric calls him first. Monday night he order three pizzas and picks at the toppings at whim, eats a mountain of popcorn and marathons the Lord of the Rings movies. The phone doesn’t ring, but Alaric’s plane was getting in late, and Damon isn’t really expecting it to.

Tuesday morning, Damon gets a phone call at eight in the morning. His heart sinks when he sees it’s the hospital.

“What?” No greeting.

“We need you here,” says a nurse. Could be the little blonde one but if it is, she’s so concerned that her voice has dropped an octave. “He’s upset, might be in pain, and if we can’t calm him down soon we’re going to have to sedate him. A lot. I mean a lot.”

Damon hangs up the phone and calls Caroline to pick him up. She’s asleep, but wakes up fast, and Damon doesn’t really want to think about how she might drive. He’ll close his eyes, if he has to.

To his surprise, she follows him into the hospital. Damon turns to her just inside, and tells her it’s unnecessary, she can wait, or go home. He doesn’t want her to see Stefan like this. And strangers can upset him.

“I’m very soothing,” she promises. Oddly enough right now she’s grating on Damon’s nerves so badly he wants to scream in her face. But he doesn’t want to waste any more time arguing with her, so he rolls his eyes, and forgets her completely as he’s ushered to Stefan’s room.

There’s a loud crash which makes his heart clench hard in his chest, and the door opens on the physical therapist trying hard to calm Stefan down. Stefan is more interested in continuing to throw things at the wall (and if a part of Damon is impress with his dexterity, he doesn’t say so). Damon steps out in front of the therapist and takes a step nearer to Stefan, who turns on him, roaring in his face.

It’s about the most communicative Damon has seen him in months.

“Stefan,” he says, trying to keep his voice neutral and failing horribly. “Stefan. Use your words.” Sam way he did when Stefan was four and five and he missed their mother and wanted her back, disappearing into silent rage and punching his fat little legs. Damon didn’t even know where he’d heard it. Television, probably. Use your words. Weird thing for a kid to say. Stefan rocks back on his ankles, and nearly falls, like he’s drunk.

“What have you given him?” It’s not an accusation. It’s a question. He looks like he should fall over, and sleep, and instead he’s in too much pain to calm down. Something has him upset. The nurse answers, but Damon barely hears it, except to acknowledge there is something.

“When did it start?”

“No one’s sure. But he wouldn’t eat this morning, and when someone tried to spoon feed him, he went nuts.”
“Stefan,” Damon says again. “You have to tell us what’s wrong, or no one can help you. Got it, buddy?” Aiming for that mild tone of command which sometimes works wonders, but today, it backfires. Stefan throws a fist out, and it’s only that’s he’s hopelessly uncoordinated that he barely catches Damon’s jaw. Damon staggers back, more out of shock and surprise than pain, but his brother is strong, even with his wasted muscles and his lumpy fist, and there’s no doubt it hurts. He stumbles back, and is caught by strong arms he resents immediately, and then Caroline is suddenly there, front and center.

“Don’t,” Damon says reaching to grab her.

“He has blood in his mouth,” she says. “Stefan? Does your mouth hurt?”

“He bit the inside of his cheek,” says a nurse, stepping forward to pull Caroline back, but she waves him off.

Stefan is breathing hard, glaring at her, but she doesn’t look afraid. “I’m Caroline,” she says, moving closer, and everyone huddled near the door wants to rush in and grab her, but Stefan is looking at her like she’s the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen, and for about the thirty thousandth time since the accident it occurs to Damon that Stefan’s life is grossly unfair. Besides the fact that Caroline is definitely a few years too old for him, he’d have loved Caroline, when he still remembered what that meant. And now…

“And you’re Stefan,” she says. He nods warily, but he doesn’t take his eyes off her, just shifts his feet, stands a little straighter.

“Are you sure he just bit his mouth?”

The deafening silence says it all. Caroline reaches cautiously for Stefan’s hand, takes it in both of hers.

Damon feels sick to his stomach. If Stefan lashes out, he could hurt her, badly. If anyone steps forward, he could freak out. He asks himself if he’s above letting Caroline get hurt on the off chance she can figure out what the hell is wrong with him and has to admit he’s not.

“Does your mouth hurt, Stefan?” she asks. “Can I see?” He turns his head, but doesn’t break eye contact. “Please.” She holds a hand out behind her, waving it, and after a moment’s confusion, a nurse presses a slim torch, about the size of a pen, into her hand.

Stefan narrows his eyes, and Damon’s heart thumps in his chest. But after a moment staring at the tiny light, he opens his mouth, just enough so that Caroline can shine the torch inside, and crouch a little to look.

“Open wider, Stefan,” she says, voice soft and light like he’s a reluctant little kid, and in some ways, he is. Damon has to look away a minute. He’s not equipped for this crap. He’s just too selfish. “That’s better. Ow, that must hurt. Does that hurt?”

Stefan closes his mouth, and nods miserably, and Caroline squeezes his hand again. She turns to Damon, and to the physical therapist, and the two nurses waiting to rescue her when Stefan snaps. The doctor waiting to pump him full of ketamine if he won’t behave.

“He has a broken molar. You can see it without even looking hard. No wonder he didn’t want anyone sticking a spoon in his mouth! Anyone here ever had a toothache? How rational does it make you, huh?”

Damon sort of loves Caroline.
Damon steps forward, and Stefan meets his eyes, still miserable but no longer angry, probably relieved that at least they know what’s going on now. Fuck. Damon fails him and fails him and it never gets any better. How it was their father just knew on sight that Damon was this useless, Damon will never know; but he was right, and it hurts.

Stefan lets himself be pulled close, and Damon wraps his arms around his brother’s shoulders, soothing him for a moment before helping him onto the bed. Stefan is exhausted. Now that he is still, the swelling on his cheek looks obscene, and Damon can’t imagine how anyone could have missed it.

“They’re going to give you a shot, little brother,” Damon soothes. “Help with the pain. And then they’re going to get you to the most expensive dental hospital in the goddamn city and they’re going to fix that for you. Today,” he adds, turning with a face full of fury to the other people in the room.

Stefan closes his eyes, and presses the unhurt side of his face into his pillow. But he opens one eye after a moment, searching for Caroline, and then Damon.

Once he’s asleep, that’s when Damon starts shouting.

--

Damon and Caroline are sitting in his apartment about eight o’clock that night. Music. Loud, loud music, and no one is going to complain because this entire building was designed to keep sounds exactly where they belong. Damon is mixing margaritas and wondering if he should buy Caroline a fucking pony, because apparently she’d wanted one as a kid, and he can definitely afford it. She has her shoes off, feet on the coffee table, toenails painted red. She’s smiling, but she looks sad.

“Come on, cheer up,” Damon says, because Stefan is asleep, has had the offending tooth removed and is a thousand times better than he was this morning, because Caroline got through when he couldn’t. He’s tempted to ask her to come back and see him again, because it’s the first time he’s seen someone get through to Stefan in as long as he can remember. “Caroline Forbes, Formula One race car driver and… what’s the equivalent of horse whisperer, for nineteen year olds with brain injury?”

Caroline takes the drink, and sips. “Hmm. I don’t know. Poor Stefan.” She moves her feet off the table, and pulls it closer, and curls up, pulling one of Alaric’s blankets into her lap. “You can see who he was, you know. Before.”

“They don’t.”

She shrugs. “I know you don’t think you’re doing a good job, Damon, but you are. Best you can.”

Maybe he does like her. She’s easy to like. “He used to never shut up. Never. Smug little asshole always had an opinion about something. And so brave, and selfless… basically the opposite of me. I miss him. I even miss telling him to shut up. I miss resenting the fact I was gonna be stuck in fucking Virginia for two fucking years while he finished high school. All of it.” He drains his glass, and reaches for the pitcher to refill it, and top up Caroline’s while he’s there, because they have to get drunk in a hurry, it’s the only thing he can do. He tucks his feet up under him. Can never seem to get warm when Alaric isn’t around.

“Thanks for today,” he says, because that’s all he can say. Dragged her into his crap on her day off and she was a trooper, and here she is keeping him company when he’s going to crawl out of his own skin.
If things were different, he’d probably hit on her. But they’re not, and he doesn’t, and well after midnight, with a promise to pick him up at noon and take him back to the hospital, she disappears off to her own identical apartment on another level of the building.
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

A trip. Damon turns out to be a bit of a softie (duh).

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On a rare Monday when things have felt calm, easy, for a couple of weeks, routines re-established, boundaries tested, and if he’s honest, some very enjoyable weekends feelings exactly like he has a live-in boyfriend who occasionally goes home for a few hours, Alaric comes home early. Damon isn’t there. Could be anywhere, and it makes Alaric wonder about it. He usually visits Stefan twice a week. Goes to the gym most days, still building up the strength in his shoulder, though he hasn’t complained of any pain, even stiffness, for weeks. Where else does he go? How does he spend his time? Seems like something Alaric should know.

Alaric pulls his suitcase from the large storage cupboard tucked away in the hall near the second downstairs bedroom, and carries it to his bedroom, but if there’s anything he hates more than packing, he doesn’t know what it is.

So he changes into jeans and a light sweater (it might be one Damon picked out, now he’s paying attention; the wool is soft, and he rarely chooses such dark colors for himself) and he heads to the kitchen to see if there’s any beer in the fridge. Flight’s not until later.

He’s opening his drink when Damon comes in, pouring sweat, and looks suddenly alarmed. It’s sort of cute, actually. Alaric opens a second, and pushes it across the countertop.

“Hi, honey,” he says. “You’re home.”

“Sounds stupid when you say it,” Damon answers, grinning, but he takes the bottle, looking around like there is some clue in the room as to why Alaric is home at two in the afternoon on a Monday. “To what do I owe the… I’m not sure what this is.”

Apparently, there is food in the cupboard, too. None of it looks all that interesting. Crackers to go with the cheese he usually ignores in the fridge. Like the housekeeper expects that he’s going to spontaneously start entertaining people on no notice and can’t get a caterer. Alaric shuts it again.

“I have a trip,” Alaric says, and Damon’s face shutters.

“When do you leave?”

“Actually… I thought you might come with me.” This gets some interest. “I think we’ve picked out our first hospital. Children’s hospital on the outskirts of Los Angeles. Half of it’s already shut down, has been for five years. They lost their trauma center last year… I think that’s what it’s called. Means thousands of poor children every year have to go four times the distance when they’re injured, and… well. There’s gonna be a lot of long meetings, planning, arguing about money and timetables and contracts, but… still. I thought it might be… I don’t know. Fun. And besides, you’ll never find my hotel, so I’m savin’ you the effort of trying.”
Damon seems to be trying to find some secret written on his face. A string attached, an ulterior motive. Apparently, he can’t find anything.

“Alright,” he says. “I’m sure I can find something to do while you and your fancy friends are boring the crap out of each other. When do we leave?”

“Flight’s at seven. We land just after ten.”

Damon tries to do the calculations in his head, but gets bored. “Time zones screw me up. I’m taking a shower.” He throws his towel over his shoulder, and heads toward the bedroom, pausing to glance over his shoulder. “Coming?”

—

Time zones screw Alaric up, too, but at least it will feel like they’re sleeping in, in the morning. First class makes it all a lot easier to take, as well. Damon seems to like it. He watches a couple of movies and drinks far too much while Alaric looks on, amused, trying to avoid a hangover in the morning and reading a trashy paperback crime novel he bought in the airport once he realized he’d left his e-reader at home.

He’s seriously contemplating buying a replacement from the on-board shopping service, the book is so bad, but he doesn’t.

At some point, Damon nods off to sleep, face wide open and serene, facing Alaric’s shoulder. Alaric quite unnecessarily brushes hair off his cheek, and Damon stirs, opening his eyes for long enough to make Alaric seriously contemplate telling him he loves him again, but he’s asleep before Alaric can do anything that stupid.

The hotel is a long way from the site, but Alaric needs to be comfortable on the road or he won’t get any sleep at all. They stagger in about eleven thirty and are ushered into a luxurious room on the upper floor. Damon doesn’t look particularly impressed, but he’s getting used to the finer things, again, apparently. They hang clothes silently in a shared wardrobe – going to be here all week. It’s been on the tip of Alaric’s tongue all day to tell Damon he can take a week off if he wants to, after this, but every time he refers even obliquely to their arrangement Damon shuts down, and he’s hard to pull back out again.

Alaric has packed no rope, no chains, nothing but lube. It’s a week with his partner, nothing more, nothing less. Maybe he’s experimenting; he’s not sure. He never seems to be sure of anything.

Except when the lights are out, and Damon is tucked in close to his body. That, he never doubts.

—

Coming from the direction they arrive in it’s hard to believe the place is still open at all. Apparently, it used to be huge, and one wing has been completely boarded up, falling into disrepair. It looks worse in person than it did in the photographs. They’re both dressed casually; this is informal, seeing what’s still happening around the hospital, what really isn’t.

“What a dump,” Damon says, quietly. Probably imagining that Stefan could have ended up in a place this bad. He was seventeen, after all, when he had his accident. Alaric reaches out, pats his thigh, and slows the car to turn into the parking lot.

“But the size of the grounds,” Alaric answers. He’s used to seeing the value of a site and what can be done with it and in his head, he’s already got the project sliced into eight pieces, each lasting about three to six months. “And the cool thing is it won’t be controlled by an HMO, but a
foundation. I know, I’m fucking insane. But I’ve done the math, and it’s possible. But… we need the county, the current hospital administration, and… I don’t know, there’s a few others coming along, and everyone needs to be on board. So this could cost us a week and net us nothing. One of my colleagues will be here tomorrow for negotiations, she put the proposal together, came out here a few… you’re falling asleep on me,” he says, but he’s smiling, and really, Damon doesn’t look disinterested, just a little less than enthralled.

They park in a space reserved for them near the front door and are met by the chief of surgery, chief of staff, head of the board and two representatives of the staff, a nurse and a resident. The resident looks like she hasn’t slept in a month (it’s possible she hasn’t) and the nurse has a deeply distrusting look on his handsome face. He looks Hispanic; probably, in a long career (he looks to be in his sixties) he’s seen a lot of well-meaning rich white men come through and promise to change things, and fail to follow through. Alaric gets it, insofar as a rich white man can.

The tour takes about an hour. Even the parts of the hospital that are still open are in disrepair. Everything could do with, at the very least, a coat of paint, some fresh linoleum. Equipment is old, but up to code. All of it could use replacing, and it occurs to Alaric that that might be a way to start building up some good faith here. They’re shown the oncology section, the dialysis center, a dozen other corners of the world where no child should ever end up. Teenagers in pajama pants and band t-shirts struggling to breathe, or fighting nurses over meals they don’t want to eat. It’s all… depressing. And they might have to be there. But it doesn’t have to be this bad.

Damon stays close until they wander past a day room where a bunch of kids who are in various stages of various illnesses – some with brightly covered scarves on their heads, some struggling to turn the pages of their books – are mixing, trying to squeeze a little fun out of the day. Mostly with face masks on.

“Problem with having different patient groups mixing in one big room like this is that some of the kids are too compromised to join in,” says the head of the hospital board. He’s older, a retired doctor, from memory. Completely bald, and with severe glasses, the frames dominating his face. His hands shake slightly. Probably why he retired. “No immune system because of chemo, or other reasons, you can’t let them play with kids with infectious diseases, or their done. Mr Saltzman…”

“Please, call me Ric.”

Guy doesn’t look like he’s planning to call Alaric Ric anytime soon.

“This proposal is… expensive, and time consuming, and we’ve spent the last five years accepting that eventually, we will be closed down.”

“I know. I’m here to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

“I’ve looked at these numbers. There is no benefit to you or your company, Mr Saltz-”

“Ric. And you’re wrong. For a start, I’m not gonna pretend we don’t want the kudos. We’re lookin’ at doing five hospitals, maybe six. That’s money in the bank in goodwill alone. Second, look again. No benefit for ten years. Ten years. That’s nothing to a company of our size. You gotta stop lookin’ for a downside, here, Mr…”

And Damon is sitting on a tiny plastic chair, helping a boy of about eight to stand up a series of tiny plastic animals on a similarly styled plastic table. His back is hunched, and the boy looks concerned, but they’re both trying, and it reminds Alaric so strongly of the way he is with Stefan that it brings a lump to the back of his throat. Damon’s hand curls over the boy’s fingers, helping him to peel them away afterwards.
“Five hospitals. Of over forty sites we’ve considered. And I’m prepared to start moving on this one in three months, if we can get all of our ducks in a row, here. By the time we’re done you’ll be better than this place was ever meant to be. We’re proposing a world class neonatal wing. I’ll get your trauma center back up and running in a year. Work with me. We’ve even looked at nearby sites for a low cost motel for families with children on site who live too far to commute.”

His mind is on what he’s saying. It is, but he’s watching Damon, too. Somehow, he doubts he was this patient with Stefan when he was a kid, but who knows?

The little boy sits up suddenly, wonky hands tucked in his lap, delighted. Alaric can see the smile in his eyes, and out of the edges of his mask.

It’s just that Alaric never imagined Damon would be good with kids. He wonders, suddenly, if he wants them, and then stops, because that’s not an issue. Damon can do what he wants with his life, once their arrangement ends. But fuck. Alaric doesn’t want it to. Never. He turns back to the head of the board. Franklin, Dr. Franklin, that’s it.

“I’ll be back tomorrow morning. Along with the rest of my team, and everyone else on the agenda. And we’ll see if this is viable.”

“There has to be a catch.”

Alaric slips his hands into his pockets, and he nods. “There are catches. It’s gonna be rough. Sometimes it’s gonna be loud, and we’ll have to install extra soundproofing to keep the kids safe. Traffic’s gonna be a bitch some days, and I mean for at least two years. I might have to buy a couple of the nearest houses and knock them down for equipment and material dumps. But the sort of catches you’re looking for…”

And Damon is at his elbow, listening, calm, trusting. Alaric drapes an arm over his shoulder because needs that, that unwavering belief.

“They’re not there. Stop trying to find reasons this can’t work. Let us work out the details tomorrow and then get your lawyers to look over everything sixteen times. If they can find a hole anywhere I will plug it. I’m not a saint, far from it. But I’m the closest thing to it that you’re ever going to get.”

Apparently, everyone is done talking. Alaric shakes everyone’s hands; some of them look deeply suspicious, and others look excited. They shake Damon’s hand, too, and nothing is said but goodbyes until Damon and Alaric leave the hospital by the front doors.

“So did that go well, or not? I really couldn’t tell,” Damon says, slipping into the passenger seat.

“Neither could I,” Alaric agrees. “Fuck. Let’s just… waste a couple of hours by the pool and head out to dinner. I need to give my brain a break.” He feels flat, rejected, a headache coming on.

“Suits me,” Damon says.

They never make it to the pool, but Alaric’s brain gets a break with Damon stretched out in front of him on the bed, moaning his name, pressing back against him while Alaric tastes the sweat of his neck. He spends a couple of hours working, sends a car for his young colleague, and then treats Damon to the best seafood dinner either of them has ever eaten.

Chapter End Notes
I am disappointed not to leave you all on a cliffhanger this time around! Fear not. The next four chapters will be brutal.

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First up, guys, my apologies. I never meant you to wait this long. Truth is I had three chapters written and I hated them. There was some great porn in them which I might post as side drabbles at some point but they didn't move the story.

I have the rest of this fic planned out and as you might have noticed, I've updated the summary to show an anticipated 44 chapters plus an epilogue. They are all planned out and if I can stay focused I'll be back on a better posting schedule until I'm finished.

I'll also say, on a personal note... It's been a difficult few months. Work's been nuts. I've been on the road a lot, and I am always really worn out when I'm traveling. Plus, and this is the really rough one, I had to say farewell to my precious kitty Titus. Still grieving hard for him but it's been easier the last few days, so hopefully the light at the end of the tunnel.

So hopefully the next few updates, leading to the end of this fic, will be more regular. And thanks once again for coming on this journey with me <3
Chapter 35

Chapter Summary

The hospital visit ends. And it's time for the awards ceremony.

It’s never felt real. The whole thing. That Damon could have made an off-hand comment to Alaric about fixing hospitals and Alaric could have taken it and turned it into reality – into this reality, these kids in this ugly decrepit building right here – it sends goose bumps up Damon’s spine. He barely listens to a word anyone says (it’s annoying hearing them poke holes in the offer anyway); he just wanders from room to room, watching.

He helps a kid whose hands look like Stefan’s. Won’t straighten out, won’t curl up right either. He wonders if this kid ever has a shot at playing quarterback. His mind seems intact. Maybe he does.

Damon has no intention of sitting around in meetings all week, but for some reason, on day two, enjoying a pleasant ache across his entire body, he dresses neatly and prepares to go along.

“This is gonna be boring,” Alaric says, with a smile, reaching out to cup the back of Damon’s neck, and scratching through the hair he finds there.

“I don’t know,” Damon says, pretty reasonably. “Maybe not. With a bit of finesse I might be able to coax them into a food fight. Should I be getting that you don’t want me there?”

“It’s not that.” Alaric seems to consider it. “Fine, come. But you’re off the clock, remember, so if you get bored, just go.”

Damon shrugs, and leans in for a quick kiss, and they head out into the warm morning. And it is warm, warmer than it had been the day before. Alaric’s colleague climbs into the back seat of the rental and greets Alaric formally, nods at Damon like she’s not sure if she’s supposed to even notice he’s there. She’s young, pretty, seems about as stunned to have picked this site that was starting to look like the springboard for this whole project as Damon is to have made the suggestion in the first place.

Damon sits unobtrusively to Alaric’s left, and to his own surprise, starts taking notes; it’s not necessary, there are two formal secretaries taking everything down, but it’s interesting, letting his brain stretch around it all. So long since he used it for anything substantial. His thinking is rusty, but it’s sort of distantly entertaining, being a part of something important.

Arguing about timelines also sounds promising to him, even if it pisses Alaric off. Makes it sound like they’re ultimately agreeing this is going to happen. They seem to want to do everything the longer, slower, harder way, though, and he’s not exactly sure why.

They break for a long lunch. A couple of hours, so everyone can deal with the pressing emails they’ve been ignoring since nine in the morning. Damon takes a sandwich and follows Alaric out to the courtyard. He looks tired and pissed.

Damon sits beside him, and takes off his shoes, presses his socked feet to the warm grass below. It’s a pity he loathes California to the core of his being because the weather is perfect.
He bumps Alaric’s shoulder. “What?”

“Nothing. Just I don’t understand why they’re looking for problems here. We should just leave. There are places where they’d beg for our help.”

Damon takes a bite, chewing thoughtfully. “Difference is none of them would be as desperate. Don’t you think? They don’t wanna get invested when they’re afraid you’ll pull the carpet out from under their feet. Can you blame them? What do you think’s happened the last dozen times?”

Alaric sighs, and shakes his head. “Maybe.”

“Thing is – and no offense, because I know you’re a stand-up guy who’s generous with the aftercare, but people don’t like developers. Nor the kind of fucking they usually do.” He sounds philosophical to his own ears, but maybe it’s just the way the sun warms his face; nothing really feels all that bad. “You know?”

Alaric cringes at the mental picture, and Damon snickers at him.

“Convincing them you’re the real deal is the hard part. So let them bring in their army of lawyers to go over it all. Unless you’ve planted a landmine somewhere along the way, they’ll figure it out eventually.”

“No landmines,” Alaric promises, and takes a bite of what looks like a damn fine BLT. He brushes his fingers over Damon’s wrist, and they finish lunch silently in the warm sun.

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They’re eating dinner poolside with a bottle of wine at the end of the following day and Alaric looks lighter than he has in a couple of weeks; Damon, for his part, is smug as fuck about it, because it turns out he’s a natural at public relations, especially when he believes in what he’s selling; and today he sold Alaric to a room full of people who were picking out pallbearers for their little hospital, so far gone they didn’t want to run the risk of believing in someone who might want to help. He’s doubly smug because over morning tea he convinced Alaric’s cute-as-a-bug associate that by changing the order of everything they were doing (well… not everything) they could finish probably six months ahead of time (which will probably end up meaning they finish on time, instead of six months late).

Alaric has people back home writing up tender documents for Los Angeles contracting firms already.

(Still feels surreal.)

Alaric doesn’t look like he fits all that well in LA – his clothes are all the wrong color, he doesn’t even walk right. But with a grin on his face and his eyes crinkling, he’ll do.

“You’re good at that,” he says, for what might be the tenth time today. Makes Damon sort of sad, under the circumstances, but he gives a little eyebrow wriggle regardless.

“Apparently I am,” he agrees, and picks at the seafood on his plate. It’s good, but he’s low on appetite, feeling a little distant from himself.

“Wouldn’t kill us to stay another night,” Alaric reasons.

Damon snickers. “No, it wouldn’t.”
His wrists hurt, somewhat, especially the left, where part of the buckle is digging in. It’s good. Makes Damon almost completely physical, makes it easier for him to stay inside his body, if he focuses. He thinks about before; anonymous hook-ups out of bars and clubs, out the door almost before the condom came off, nothing to sex but the physicality of fine bodies moving in – and out – of harmony. Licking and sucking and fucking and the almost physical satisfaction of a long, deep groan.

Damon’s ass is warm, and his upper thigh, too, where Alaric has loosed his hand a couple of dozen times. It’s a sweet ache. And he’s still staying in his body. It’s easier, not to get overwhelmed, now he’s made his decision. As Alaric bumps his knee, spreading his legs further, as two fingers breach him roughly, he makes all the right noises, noises he learned under Kelly’s watchful eye; he even begs a little. *Ric, fuck, just fuck me, I need it.*

Alaric never notices that anything is amiss, as he pushes into him, pulling Damon’s body against his own, snapping from the hips, telling Damon he’s doing beautifully.

Damon’s wrists hurt, but it’s good, it’s all so good.

Alaric is attentive, after, soothes the pain in his wrists, molds his body to Damon’s. Damon is like a cat, just like he has been for months, now, purring and pushing back against the heat of Alaric’s body. His body is in it. His heart…

It’s safe. Tucked away.

Emotionally, this is less satisfying; but in every way, it’s easier.

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Three weeks later, on a Saturday afternoon, Alaric is antsy and difficult but Damon has his routine down so pat now it’s brilliant.

“Just calm the fuck down,” he says, standing behind Alaric, in front of a full length mirror.

“A cummerbund?”

“You know how many eyes are gonna be on you tonight if you win?” Damon snorts. “You want them to see where your shirt tucks into your pants? Imagine the scandal.”

“You know, I could pretend to be sick.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Damon says. “And don’t make that face at me. I’m off the clock, remember?”

“You grew up in a tux,” Alaric complains, as he struggles with a full Windsor. It looks perfect. He’s clean shaven and has a fresh hair cut that makes him look so much like American royalty that even Giuseppe might have approved, if not for his deep seated hatred of all things non-heterosexual. “I hate the fuckin’ things.”

“And just a suggestion – you could lay off the four-letter words tonight,” Damon says. “At least anytime someone has a camera on you.”

“Fuckin’ cameras,” Alaric says, with gritted teeth. “I hate them.”

“Well, they love you,” Damon says, helping him into his jacket. He looks good. He looks so
fucking good Damon feels a twinge in his gut. “Perfect.”

Alaric forces himself to stand up straight, and scrutinizes himself in the mirror. He looks satisfied, even if Damon still thinks he’d be happier wearing jeans and a t-shirt, maybe a pair of Doc Martens. But nope. This is the uniform.

Alaric meets Damon’s eyes in the mirror, and he looks suddenly troubled.

“What?”

“Are you alright?”

“Peachy,” Damon says, stepping ahead to tie his own tie. Part of him wishes he’d thought to buy himself a top hat and maybe a walking stick; one of the ones with a duck’s head and a whiskey flask concealed in the top, maybe, he feels that dapper. “Side of… swell. Why?”

“You’ve been different.”

“Good, bad or indifferent?”

Of course he’s been different. Perfect sub. Doing exactly what’s expected of him every single time. Like he’s finally read the damn manual. He knows this. He smiles almost lasciviously, though, and Alaric relaxes.

“I don’t even know. Probably my imagination. I’m edgy.”

He needs distracting, but not the kind of distracting that is going to get this very expensive tuxedo crushed. Damon pours him a drink, instead, and they sit quietly in the living room until it’s time to head to the limo.

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When Alaric had mentioned that they were going to send a limousine for him on the night of the awards ceremony, Caroline had been livid. Hadn’t she been a perfectly good driver for five years? Couldn’t she do it? So Alaric had hired the limo, but skipped the driver.

Caroline is pleased as punch with the thing, wants Alaric to buy one so she can drive him around in it every day. She’s even bought this cute little outfit and a chauffeur’s hat – naughty chauffeur, really, it could be a Halloween costume, but she looks cute as fuck and she’s preening for compliments.

No paparazzi, which is nice. They seemed to get bored when neither Damon nor Alaric did anything worth photographing for weeks on end, and besides, tonight they’re likely to be hanging around outside the awards venue hoping to get a legitimate shot or two. Actual smiles on people’s faces.

“I got your favorite champagne,” Caroline says, lowering the screen.

“I don’t like champagne,” Alaric counters, still looking deeply uncomfortable and playing with his tie knot.

“I know,” she says, “which is why it’s a bottle of Jack Daniels.”

Damon grins, and opens the tiny bar. Yeah, Caroline’s pretty great. He pours Alaric a drink, pours himself one, too. Not overly generous because Alaric will most definitely regret it if he wins and
has to slur his way through some drunken apology instead of remembering to thank the Academy.

“You’re going to be fine,” he purrs, pushing the glass into Alaric’s hand. But Alaric hates scrutiny, and Damon knows it. The last few months have been way too much for him. Damon feels a stab of guilt when he lets himself think about it. But he sets it aside; they have to get through tonight. He slips his hand into Alaric’s, and gives a squeeze, and Alaric looks grateful.

It’s not as bad as he’d imagined it might be; intrusive, sure, flashes and shouted questions, all of that, but before too long they’re stepping into a sumptuous looking banquet hall, ushered to tables where they can see the stage. Damon wonders what Stefan would make of all of this. He was always better at the posh shit their father used to drag them to, always happy enough to wear some scratchy suit. These days, he’s way too attached to his pajama pants. Damon vows to steal him something shiny.

People approach with congratulations and introductions and Damon shakes hands and kisses cheeks and plays the part of the perfect partner, smooth and comfortable where Alaric is still stiff as a board and looks like he might throw up. But they might be equally grateful when they are finally ushered to their seats for appetizers.

The entertainment is pretty good. A very tall, blonde, gorgeous lesbian who five years ago, to hear her tell it, was a very tall, blond and deeply unhappy man working in finance (she’s a comedienne, now, when she’s not counseling trans kids) has them laughing for a solid forty minutes, which is impressive. She wears her spangly dress better than half the women in the room and there’s not a person alive who wouldn’t envy those legs. She’s followed by an entée of beef or chicken (Damon gets the chicken, and picks off Alaric’s plate, since Alaric looks too green and miserable to either eat it himself or argue. He does drink, though), with live music, and finally it’s time for a couple of hours of boring speeches and the moments that everyone’s been waiting for.

When it comes down to it… the speeches are not as boring as Damon was expecting them to be. Nor as long. He’s actually a little misty-eyed, at times (should play well for the cameras). He holds Alaric’s hand. Cold sweat. How did he ever manage to get to the Fortune 500 list with a complete terror of publicity and public speaking?

There is a roar of approval for the gay businesswoman of the year. Well-earned. She’s in publishing. Books, half a dozen magazines, syndicated content for columns all over the country (and for that matter, the internet). Strongly feminist, pays high wages, higher for women with children, finds employment for women out of refuges and halfway houses to help them get back on their feet. Donates about two million dollars a year to women’s charities. She reminds Damon of someone, can’t put his finger on it.

The host and hostess take the stage again when the applause has calmed down. Alaric dries his hands on his tuxedo pants, and Damon watches his face carefully for any sign that he might either combust into flame or run for the back door.

“I won’t even win,” he says, his mouth so dry Damon actually pushes a glass of wine into his hand. They are reading through a list of accomplishments for each of the nominees, and Damon almost rolls his eyes; Alaric is a shoo-in. But saying that might increase the chances of him running out the back door, so Damon rubs circles into his shoulder.

“Sure thing, Leo,” Damon murmurs, listening, looking around, checking the position of the cameras.

“And the winner of this year’s gay – actually, the first bisexual man to receive this award, but let’s not split hairs – I give you gay businessman of the year, Alaric Saltzman.”
The world has an unreal tint to it, and Alaric is almost certain that he is going to throw up, which probably wouldn’t be a first for an awards ceremony, but it’s not something he really wants to do. He stares, as the lights flash in his face, as a dozen video cameras zoom in. He can’t stand up, he can’t walk to the stage. How does anyone do that?

He’s breaking Damon’s hand, but Damon manages to squeeze back. Reaches up to brush his hand over Alaric’s cheek, snapping him out of it.

Damon leans in for a kiss – just a brief one, barely a brush of lips, and presses their foreheads together. And Alaric finds his feet. He meets Damon’s eyes – Damon looks so smug he’d have sworn he had insider knowledge.

“Go on,” Damon says. “Shoo.”

Alaric forces himself to his feet, almost stumbling on a chair leg, almost knocking over a glass of wine. Almost falling flat on his face. He’s not drunk, far from it, but he’s suddenly so uncoordinated that he might as well be. He puts one foot in front of the other until he gets to the steps, which look suddenly dangerous. Maybe he needs an escort. He turns to see where Damon is, but he’s exactly where Alaric left him. Smiling, clapping along with everyone else.

Alaric shakes the host’s hand, and the hostess uses the opportunity for a kiss on his cheek to ask if he’s alright; how embarrassing, everyone here must know he’s wishing the floor would swallow him whole. He puts one hand on the lectern to steady himself, and heeds the woman’s urging to breathe.

His voice is going to shake like he’s dying of some sort of wasting disease.

“This has been a big year,” he says, and people laugh; he’s not trying to be funny. He stops again, and the hostess steps closer.

“I think they’re wondering what a slow year would look like,” she says. “You’re fine, go on.”

His hands are shaking, his legs are jelly, and the only thing he can think to do is look at Damon. Seems like a solid strategy, for a few moments, until his stupid brain reminds him that Damon is an employee who is faking a relationship with him right now and then he’s back in the space.

“A big year. In a lot of ways. Industrial disputes have made the whole firm rethink wage policy, and…”

They don’t want to hear about that crap.

“I got outed,” he says, shaking his head, like wow, what can you do? “Which was a shock. And disappointing, because I’ve always felt that privacy should be respected. But close on the heels of
that came this nomination, and… I’ve never been so honored.”

He thinks a moment. Should have listened to Damon and written a speech, just in case.

“And we’re headin’ in a new direction, too, which is exciting. A handful of hospitals around the country, facing closure, that we’re investing in over the next several years. I’m going to show my board, and business owners all over this great country that philanthropy can yield a good return. That you can do the right thing and make a profit.”

He’s jumping all over the place. He looks back at Damon, who is turning a glass around, twisting the stem between his fingertips, looking like he sincerely wishes he’d written Alaric a speech himself.

“The hospitals… it was my partner’s idea,” he says, suddenly, looking around the room, standing straight. “Likes to pretend he’s nothing but arm candy, but he’s smart, right?”

And Damon stands, does a seriously flashy little bow which earns him applause and wolf whistles and takes the attention off Alaric for a moment, which is a relief.

“I’ll keep this brief, because I’m… not much of a public speaker,” he admits – though from the looks on faces around the room this is not coming as a revelation. At least they don’t laugh. His face darkens to a deep pink. He can feel everything burning, to the tips of his ears. “Thank you. To the organization, to everyone who voted, to all the nominees as well, because… wow. You’ve given me something more to aspire for. Maybe invisibility doesn’t suit me any more. I’d like to thank my parents, too, for not throwing me out of the house when I was fifteen and they first found a half-naked boy in my room…” this earns another laugh, though it wasn’t intended to be funny. Not everyone in this room was so lucky. “My company. Everyone from the Board, to the Executives, to the people who bring the mail and keep the computers running. Meredith, my best friend, for kickin’ my ass whenever I need it… and Damon. Thank you.”

Damon smirks, as the applause builds up again. They love him.

Alaric tries to leave the stage before the applause has died down and again before they hand over the trophy, a huge, heavy chunk of crystal, etched with his name and a bunch of other thing he might be able to read in different light; he doesn’t quite understand until one of the bright lights hits it and rainbows seems to spill from the cut depths. He makes it down the stairs, seized from every direction by people he doesn’t know (but is bound to be attending lunches with for at least the next six months). Louis, who has a spot at a table towards the back, accosts him carefully in front of one of the cameras (no doubt in any subsequent interviews he’ll be describing himself as Alaric’s right hand man). At last, he half sits and half collapses into his seat, one hand gripping the edge of the table as Damon eases the trophy out of his deathgrip and tucks his hair behind his ear. Completely unnecessary and still strangely grounding.

“Just keep breathing,” Damon says. “I don’t think it’s too late for you to pass out.”

“I think you’re probably right,” Alaric says, and there are not words for how grateful he is when, twenty minutes later, the live music starts up again and people start moving off, two by two, to the dance floor. “Shit. I really didn’t think…”

“Just do yourself a favor and avoid hitting YouTube tomorrow to watch a replay of that speech. You really should have written one.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Alaric says, reaching for a bottle to refill his glass. “How soon d’you think we can get out of here?”
“Not soon at all. Come and dance with me.”

“I can’t dance.”

“This is slow enough. Just remember to let me lead, you’ll be fine.” Damon sounds collected and convincing and Alaric let’s himself be coaxed out of his chair and out onto the dance floor, where the lights are designed for the photographers more than the guests. Photographers step from place to place taking photographs, and Alaric forces himself to smile. He looks like he’s in terrible pain. The photographer looks disappointed, and is about to step away, when Damon angles himself up and kisses Alaric’s cheek.

It’s unexpected, and Alaric smiles, and it’s a real one, this time. There’s a snap and a flash and the photographer looks like he has what he was hoping for.

“Thanks,” Alaric mumbles when the man walks away.

Damon only shrugs, and keeps leading him out towards the music.

On the dance floor Damon arranges their hands, and slips into a rhythm in only a moment or two, and Alaric manages not to try to lead, since he really doesn’t know how. Damon presses in close, chin on his shoulder, and Alaric feels better than he has since they arrived, with his hand pressed to the small of Damon’s back. The music stays slow enough, for a song or two. Alaric kisses the corner of Damon’s mouth. Wants to take him home, now. He’s done with this. Next couple of weeks he’s going to have to deal with interviews, and right now he wants nothing more than a glass of good bourbon.

And Damon writhing in ropes. Dammit, now he really, really wants to go home, and since the next song definitely has a beat, and people are starting to look like they plan to recreate Boogie Fever around them, he shoots Damon a pleading look.

They go.

A couple of quick questions on their way out the door. “Yeah, overwhelmed,” Alaric says, holding the trophy in one hand, the other looped around Damon’s waist as he ushers him towards the waiting limo. “Thrilled. Call the office, they’ll talk to you about interviews next week.”

Caroline is practically vibrating when she holds the door open, and Alaric grins at her. Her enthusiasm for everything is contagious, it always has been.

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Home. Caroline’s probably still sitting in the limousine making guttural grief noises; she really is in love with it. Maybe he should buy her one, but he’d feel like a complete wanker being driven to work in the thing. So she’s going to have to wait until she’s working for a way bigger diva to have one of her very own.

Alaric pours bourbon, and pushes one into Damon’s hand, before heading to the couch to wind down. Damon takes a sip, and puts his glass on the coffee table, before straddling Alaric’s lap.

“You deserve a treat,” he says. Alaric doesn’t bother to point out that he’s not on the clock. Neither of them care, tonight, apparently. Besides, weekends haven’t been uncomplicated for months.

“What did you have in mind?” He reaches up to card through Damon’s hair, and moans as Damon palms over the crotch of his tuxedo pants, reaching around to untie his cummerbund. He casts it aside, and begins to work on the tie, slowly and carefully.
“Might need this in a minute,” he purrs, dropping on the couch beside them and opens the 
fastening of Alaric’s pants, unzips them. He slips his hand into Alaric’s boxers, closes his hand 
over Alaric’s cock, already getting thick, and heavy. He leans back on the couch cushion and closes 
his eyes.

This kind of attention, he can handle. Damon’s mouth finds his throat, and Alaric closes his eyes, 
basking in it, lips, and tongue, and just a little graze of teeth, while his hips sluggishly begin to roll 
against Damon’s hand.

“Was I really that bad?” he asks.

Damon murmurs into his throat, unbuttoning his shirt. “You can always play it off as eccentricity.”

Probably trying to cheer Alaric up, but it’s not working; mainly because it’s hard to be upset about 
much with a Damon squirming in your lap.

“Come on,” he says, pushing Damon off his lap, and standing up. “Bed.”

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There’s something strange and different about this. The way they move together, Damon’s lips 
against his skin, almost worshipful; they haven’t changed places, exactly, Alaric is in charge, and 
Damon is helpless against the rolling of his hips as he always is. But he’s less passive. More 
touching, fingernails in Alaric’s skin, tiny half moons that might bruise, come morning.

They don’t speak, beyond those quiet murmurs, yesses and groans that make up the background 
track of lovers’ moments everywhere. Alaric doesn’t want to think about his catastrophic speech. 
Just Damon beneath him, in his arms, Damon’s mouth. Maybe tomorrow, yeah, he can think about 
tomorrow, maybe they’ll go out to the Village and listen to music, pretend to be normal for an 
afternoon.

Damon groans as he comes, and Alaric takes his time, pushing Damon’s body further and further 
until he’s ready for his own orgasm.

He cleans Damon carefully, wiping come from between his thighs, from his stomach, and settling 
him into his arms. There is definitely something different about this. There’s been something 
different the last few weeks; Damon isn’t prickly, argumentative. He’s just…

“Are you sure you’re alright?”

“Peachy,” Damon says again. “Turn out the light. I need to sleep.”

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In the morning, Alaric wakes and the bed is empty. He can smell bacon, though. Hungry as he is he 
would have liked a few moments to laze in bed, just dozing, kissing aimlessly. But he pulls on a 
pair of sweatpants and heads out to the kitchen, where Damon is only minutes off plating up a far 
better breakfast than they ever have delivered.

“You planned this,” he says, with a grin. Damon looks troubled, but he smiles, flipping bacon, 
pushing mushrooms around a pan full of what smells like actual, proper butter. Hnnng. Alaric 
pours coffee, and grapefruit juice, and gets cutlery out of the drawer.

He douses his breakfast in Tabasco sauce, and they eat fairly quietly. Damon still looks troubled, 
which isn’t easy with a mouth full of poached eggs and streaky bacon.
“Okay,” Alaric says, putting his cutlery down. “You need to start talking. Something’s felt different. For weeks. And last night…”

“Last night was fun,” Damon says, stuffing another forkful of food into his mouth. “But yes. We need to talk.”

Alaric is instantly tense. He pushes the plate aside, and reaches for his coffee. “Alright. What is it?”

Damon chews slowly, swallows more slowly. “You’d agree I have a flair for PR.”

Alaric nods. “Yeah, you could say that.”

“I want a job. Doing that. With the hospitals project. Your minions aren’t the most charismatic bunch. I’ll do a better job talking to actual people than they do.”

Alaric crosses his arms on the table, uncrosses them, tangles his fingers together. He gives a gruff smile.

“Alright, yeah. So what were you thinking? A day a week? Two? We can renegotiate your contract, cut down your nights here…” but Damon is shaking his head, and suddenly Alaric hurts all over. His ribs are cold, his stomach is heavy. His head aches.

“I’m terminating our contract.”

*I’m terminating our contract.*

Alaric has practiced saying it himself. After he dislocated Damon’s shoulder, he’d come up with a whole speech. With references to college and meeting someone who was better for him, all of that. It’s never crossed his mind in eight months that Damon might be the one to take this step.

What is he supposed to say?

“Oh,” is what he comes up with, which is better than his speech last night.

Last night. Last night, what a high, and did Damon know all the time that he was going to do this? Alaric meets his eyes. He looks calm, but sad; if he’s sad, why is he fucking doing this?

“You want to…”

Coffee is not enough, but nine in the morning is too early for bourbon, so there’s that. It’s late at night in Australia, right?

“Terminate the contract. Yes.”

Alaric shakes his head. “I love your timing.”

“How could I have timed it better? You think I would have wanted to send you out to that ceremony on your own? After how public this has been? Please, I’m an asshole, but I’m not that much of an asshole.”

“Jesus Christ, Damon, how long have you been planning this?”

Damon says nothing, but Alaric can read his answer written plainly across his face: A While. Long enough to have waited. Alaric wants to know when, exactly when. To the minute. Was it before, or after, they’d said they loved each other?
“I thought this was going fine,” he says, drilling his finger into the table. “You and me. It’s been good. Not just the sex – us.”

“IT has,” Damon agrees, evenly. Alaric wishes he’d yell. Fighting is easier. He stands up, paces in the small space. If he gets Damon riled up enough to start yelling maybe they can fix this before it’s unfixable.

“Then why?”

“You know why,” Damon snarls, and he’s on his feet as well, playing his part. “You know why, and don’t fucking pretend you don’t.”

Alaric grits his teeth, and rolls his eyes (this is a new thing; he’s picked this up from Damon, the eye-rolling). “Because of the fake relationship. That’s it. It was fine before that.”

“Basically.”

“I thought you liked it.”

“Liked it? My god, you’re a bigger asshole than I am. It was going perfectly. I loved it.”

“You loved it so much that you’re leaving? What the fuck, Damon? Explain it to me. Use small words.”

“Did I say I was leaving?”

“You said you wanted to terminate the contract.”

“I don’t want that fucking thing anymore. I don’t want you paying me for what you could have for free. You’re a complete idiot. And I knew you’d react like this.”

“Use smaller words.” Alaric wants to stomp his foot. Seems too childish, so he decides fuck it, and pours himself a glass of bourbon. “Much smaller.”

“I am in love with you, you complete idiot,” Damon snarls. “And you are in love with me, whether you want to be or not. I don’t want you to pay me. I want to build this into something real. Were those small enough words?”

Alaric drains the glass, and slams it down on the tiny bar; it smashes obligingly. Damon has never looked so angry, or so hurt. Walls coming up in front of Alaric’s eyes. Alaric stares at his hand. It’s bleeding. Not badly.

All the fight has gone out of him.

“Damon,” he says, trying to keep his voice reasonable, and quiet. “You know I don’t have time for a real…”

He hears the coffee mug smash against the wall before he’s even realized Damon has thrown it.

“Bullshit!” Damon says. “What utter bullshit. Your capacity to lie to yourself is incredible, Ric. Time? You don’t have time for a relationship, but you have time for a live in sub contracted to sixty-five hours a week, who basically lives here rather than drop thirty floors and go home on the weekends? You don’t have time? You infuriate me. Are you honestly this dense? Don’t give me that look; I’m not on the clock even if I hadn’t just quit my job. Time is the worst excuse you could possibly give me right now. So what is it?”
Alaric feels his face heat by degrees.

“Afraid of commitment? Easier to tear up a contract than tell someone you’re not in love with them anymore? Bet you’d send that lawyer with a nice fat check and the termination papers so you didn’t have to face it at all, wouldn’t you. How would being with me without our goddamn –”

“No. I’m talking. How does time factor into any of this? When was the last time we spent more than even a few hours apart on the weekend? When was the last time I slept in my little pied à terre downstairs?”

Alaric’s head. Fuck. It hurts.

“I’m not saying I’m leaving,” Damon growls. “I’m telling you I don’t want you to pay me anymore. I’m sick of you lying to both of us. Tell me you’re not in love with me. Go on.”

Alaric drops onto the couch. His hand is still bleeding. He’s exhausted.

There is a silence, long and deep and cavernous. They don’t make eye contact. Alaric tries to imagine it. How different would it really be? But he knows.

Too different.

“I can’t do this,” he says again. “I can’t.”

“Then give me the papers to sign, and I’ll go.”

“So it’s an ultimatum?”

“It’s a decision.”

Neither of them move for a long time. Damon stands by the bar with his arms crossed and his eyes red. Alaric sits on the couch, breathing. It was never this difficult before.

“What if I just need time?”

Damon shakes his head. “No. You’ve had time.”

Alaric’s head drops another inch, and he lets out a long breath.

“Alright,” he says, and the sound of two hearts breaking fills the entire penthouse; a loud, clean crack that will echo for days.
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Tying up loose ends. Damon needs something to ground him.

Chapter Notes

Warning for some unpleasant scene stuff, not between Damon and Alaric. It's not dubcon, but it's not what Damon was looking for.

Damon follows Alaric numbly and dumbly up the stairs to his office. Damon has never been here before. He assumes it stays locked, though he’s never thought to check. Alaric looks different, suddenly, and all wrong. He’s too healthy to have a stroke, unless that bacon this morning is conspiring to do him in. Pale and sweating.

Damon has no sympathy. He hurts too much for sympathy.

Alaric fumbles the key for the filing cabinet, and pulls out a thick folder. Too thick for just the contract, which is sitting on the top. He turns to the back page.

“It might take a week or so to organize your job,” he says, and his voice sounds hollow. “There’s office space, but… still a few things to do.”

Damon nods, and reaches for the thick envelope sitting on the desk. “What’s this?”

He only asks because his name, date of birth and social security number are printed on the front. It’s almost two weeks until his birthday. It’ll be shit, again. He realizes he doesn’t know when Alaric’s birthday is.

Alaric stares blankly, and pushes it across the table. “Your life story,” he says. “You should probably keep it.”

“You had me investigated?”

“Before you signed your contract,” Alaric says. He doesn’t look guilty, or embarrassed; just something he does, probably. Damon burns with shame. So Alaric knew about Stefan before he told him. Nice. Way to build the trust.

Alaric takes it, and flips it over, before he hands it back. “Seal’s intact.”

“And?”

“I just want you to know I never read it.”

Alaric scribbles his signature on the back page of the contract. It doesn’t look right. Probably wouldn’t hold up in court. But Damon signs as well, his inimitable shining swirl signature, and
just like that, it’s done. He grips the envelope in a death grip.

“Are you sure about this?” Alaric says. He looks miserable. The idiot.

“Are you?”

There’s a long silence. No, they can’t turn back from this now. Course is set. Damon moves hesitantly closer and Alaric pulls him in, arms wrapping around him. Damon hugs back. He needs to remember this scent, the weight of Alaric’s arms.

There are tears. They burn Alaric’s clothes like acid. How often has Damon cried, in the years since his mother died? Not many times.

This was his gambit. He lost. He’ll be alright. He’ll earn enough to keep himself afloat and pay Stefan’s hospital bills, and what more does he need? Somewhere to live, sure.

“I’ll move out of the apartment as soon as…”

“No rush. Get settled first. Or… I mean, if you need to get out of there sooner…”

“When I can.” He reaches for Alaric’s shirt, and pulls him close one last time. “I’ll get my stuff out of here tomorrow, while you’re at work.”

Alaric kisses his neck, his shoulder, but says nothing.

“You don’t have to leave right away,” Alaric says.

“I do. You know I do.”

Their foreheads press together for a long moment, and there’s a final kiss so brief they might both have imagined it, and Damon leaves.

He remembers very little of the next few hours. He gets downstairs to his own place, and sits on the couch for a very long time. He stares at the envelope with his name on the front and wonders why Alaric even bothered, if he wasn’t going to read it.

Four in the afternoon he heads out into the now warm New York afternoon; it’s not really summer, not yet, despite the date; but summer is close, and the sun actually penetrates the remainder of the gloom. It’s pretty, this time of year, and Damon wishes it was wet, snowing, raining, something more mood appropriate.

The plan is to see Stefan. He realizes too late that he can’t, now, visiting hours would be done by the time he got there. He needs…

He needs a friend.

Oh, look, a friend. Well, a bar, but any port in a storm. Damon pushes through the door. He orders a drink. He sounds numb. He’s not numb. Numb would be a relief. No, everything hurts. Maybe this was all a massive error. What if Alaric really does just need time? Damon finds himself a booth, and curls into himself with a large glass of bourbon, and waits for the ache to subside.

He needs to talk to someone.

The only person he can think to talk to is Alaric, and Alaric is gone.

Damon drinks until he gets himself thrown out. He walks six blocks in the wrong direction, just
after midnight, wondering if it’s too late to just let himself into the penthouse, apologize, insist he made a mistake he won’t make again. But he can’t. Has a little dignity left, if only a little, and he’s not going to crawl back to someone who has to lie to himself as often as Alaric does, just to keep up the veneer of control over his life. He stumbles into the elevator and makes his way back to his own place, to finish a bottle of bourbon and fall asleep on the couch.

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On Monday, with the worst hangover of his adult life, Damon makes the trek to Stefan’s hospital. Stefan is restless and irritable and it’s impossible to get any kind of comfort there. Maybe it’s better; Damon isn’t sure he wants comfort, right now, even if he needs it desperately. He sits for a miserable hour while Stefan refuses to play with his cards, or his puzzles, or do anything but fix Damon with an angry eye; he doesn’t say a single word, and it’s more exhausting than listening to him try and fail to communicate.

Damon heads back into the city before it’s dark, and doesn’t even realize he’s heading for another bar until he’s there, knee deep in his third drink.

He goes home with a guy whose name he can’t keep straight in his head. Nice guy, attentive, not exactly a masterful lover but Damon wants to be fucked out of his head, not back into it, so it doesn’t really matter. He doesn’t stay the night.

Tuesday, he lets himself into the penthouse to collect his things.

They’re boxed neatly and sitting by the door.

This wasn’t the plan. He’d wanted to do it himself. Look at the way his clothes looked hanging next to Alaric’s in the walk in wardrobe. Probably do something really creepy like lie on the bed. But he pushes the three boxes into the elevator. He’s clearly not welcome here. He leaves his key on the little table in the foyer, and wonders if Alaric will change his access code now. Probably. It’s the responsible thing to do.

It’s not a lot of fun pushing three boxes full of clothes down a long corridor with two turns, but eventually Damon gets everything back to his apartment. It’s tempting to just leave everything packed, since he really can’t stay here much longer; but ninety percent of his clothes are in those boxes and it might be a couple of weeks before he can do anything about finding something new. What’s going to happen? Will Alaric call about the job? Someone else? One of the minions? Fuck, maybe that whole part of the plan was crappy. He really hadn’t thought too much about it. Maybe he’d been banking on Alaric folding and just letting them work. Idiot.

The clothes are only half unpacked and hanging in his wardrobe when he is suddenly driven from the apartment by the need to feel something again. He finds himself at Kelly’s club, marching up her stairs.

“I need to work,” he says, the second she opens the door.

“I thought your employer frowned on dalliances,” she answers, but by the look on her face she either knows that’s done with or she’s guessed. Damon doesn’t say a word, just waits. Kelly has a way about her, though. Her face is a steel mask.

“Please,” Damon says, with gritted teeth. “Or I’ll pay. Got a big bad dom with no fucking agenda in here tonight? Kelly,” he pleads, and she steps closer.

“What did you do?” she asks.
“Fell in love,” he answers. No point lying to Kelly.

“Idiot. Go home.” She does sound kind, though.

“Please. Just tonight.” Saying ‘please’ has always been so difficult. It’s not, anymore. “These are the rules. You tell someone what you need, they’re supposed to give it to you. Right?”

Kelly has that exhausted look on her face. “You really are a fool, Damon Salvatore. Let me see what I can do.”

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His hands are tied so far over his head that Damon can barely keep his feet flat on the ground. He should say something, but he doesn’t. He braces, in so far as it’s possible. It’s not very possible. He’s naked, but he doesn’t feel nearly as naked as he had, telling Alaric he wanted what they had to be real. He feels…

He doesn’t feel much of anything at all, beyond the very real physical sting of the riding crop over his ass, over his thigh, actually all the way to his lower back which is so against the rules it’s not funny.

He’s distantly curious about whether he’s going to get fucked. Hadn’t asked. Didn’t care, didn’t really want to know.

“Worthless,” comes the voice Damon doesn’t recognize. He’s blindfolded, has been since minutes before the client entered the room. He doesn’t answer. “That’s what you want to hear, isn’t it?”

And his arms suddenly fall, as the cuffs are unclipped. Damon isn’t prepared for it; he stumbles to the ground, and lands on his knees. A hand presses against his head. Preparation is rough, and slightly painful; the guy has sharp nails, but Damon says nothing.

“Piece of shit whore,” comes that voice again. The guy is big. Not big the way Alaric was; he’s bulky, somewhat overweight over a strong frame and heavy musculature. “You’re loving this, aren’t you? Little bitch.”

His first thrust misses Damon’s hole. Second and third don’t, and the fourth stabs at an awkward angle and makes Damon groan in a way that is not intended to be encouraging, but is apparently taken that way. This is not what he’d wanted when he got here tonight. Fortunately, the guy finishes quickly, and tells Damon to stay where he is until he hears the door close again.

Damon obeys mainly because he doesn’t want to see him.

But when the door shuts, he peels off the eye mask, and rocks back on his feet, wincing at the pain down his thigh. This was not what he’d wanted. He’d wanted…

He’d wanted to be looked after.

He’d wanted to be told he’d done a good job.

He’d wanted Alaric. He wants Alaric.

He sits nude on the couch for several long minutes, holding his head in his hands, shaking slightly. There was nothing emotional about what just happened. He doesn’t feel better; he doesn’t even feel okay. He feels filthy, and he’s pretty sure the John wanted him to. So where does that leave him? He can’t do this anymore. He’s been destroyed. Torn into little pink shreds by Alaric fucking
Saltzman, billionaire, gay businessman of the year, not so hopeless romantic.

At least this little scene had been familiar. No different to the clients he’d serviced before Alaric had plucked him from the club and given him a home. Why do they all have to get off on humiliation? He hates it.

Kelly enters the room and locks the door behind her.

“Did you get what you wanted?”

Damon stands, and reaches for his underwear. “No,” he says.

“And what do you want, Damon?”

Damon says nothing, pulling his t-shirt over his head, following it with his sweater.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Yes. Yes, I do, because someone has to help me make sense of this shit; we’re in love, and he’s so fucking broken that he can’t just stop paying me and let it be a real relationship. And I need a fucking adult. I need someone to help me make sense of the fact that he’s perfect, as long as he pays me, but he can’t build a life with me.

Damon stares at nothing, pulling his jeans up over his hips. “I don’t think I’ll be back.”

“And if you come back. Do I let you in? Or do I remind you of this moment?”

“Let me in,” Damon says, stepping back into his shoes. He limps past Kelly into the corridor and out into the street to hail a cab.
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Meredith has strong opinions. And an unfortunate encounter in an elevator.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Alaric has thought thirty times in three days that he should really tell someone that he and Damon have broken up. But he can’t, because that will make it real in a way that packing his belongings into those boxes didn’t. He’d locked the special drawer in his bedroom and tucked the key away somewhere, somewhere he wouldn’t be tempted to open the drawer every day and just… smell Damon’s collar, the faint trace of shampoo and moisturizer still clinging to the lining of soft fur. Just touch the things he’d touched.

(How horrible it had been to come home on Tuesday night and find the boxes gone.)

Thirty times in three days he’d thought he needed to tell someone. Three times in three days he’d thought it was actually much more urgent to call Damon and swear black and blue that if he’d just give him a few more months they could make this work.

He’s given four interviews, with a fifth scheduled for Thursday morning over breakfast. Asked about Damon, he’s just smiled and said they are private people and every time he says it, it feels like he’s slapped himself with something heavy and wet.

Friday lunch, he gets a call from Meredith, who has been quite restrained, wanting to know if he and Damon can celebrate the award at dinner on Saturday night. A couple of tears build and threaten but Alaric blinks them back, and swallows a fresh-formed lump in his throat, and he says they’re busy, maybe next weekend.

Friday night at eight o’clock Alaric drags himself down to the street to find Caroline still waiting in the town car, reading a book. She doesn’t ask questions. She knows something’s wrong, though.

“I could have taken a cab. You were off duty an hour and a half ago.”

“It’s fine. I didn’t have plans.”

“Still. I’m sorry.”

“No need.” She glances in the rear view mirror, and opens her mouth, and clamps it shut again. Alaric doesn’t acknowledge it. He just stares out at the bright night – could be noon, this bright, and even the fact of the sunshine and the bright night seem inappropriate to Alaric’s mood.

He stands with his hand on the doorknob for a long moment. When he opens this door, he should smell food; takeout, maybe, or some exotic Italian soul food Damon spent half the afternoon on. Alaric closes his eyes, and turns the knob, and steps into the perfectly climate controlled and yet somehow very cold apartment for the fifth time in a row to find it empty.

“Hi honey,” he says to the empty space. “I’m home.”
He reaches for a bottle of bourbon from the pantry and pours himself a glass. It’s too full. It would be embarrassing if anyone was there to see it but no one is. He loosens his tie, and puts on some music, keeps the lights low. Damon should be sitting on the couch with that inscrutable expression, if not serving up dinner looking smug. Alaric walks around, trying to remember how he used to fill the interminable hours from Friday evening to Monday morning.

Before Damon.

He’s downstairs. Probably. Might even be as miserable as Alaric is; hell, he might be more miserable. Alaric could call.

He needs a shower, but he doesn’t bother. Somewhere closer to the bottom of the bottle, he falls asleep on the couch.

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Saturday Alaric is determined that he’s going to actively get on with things, get better. Despite the throbbing hangover Alaric goes for a long run in perfect weather in Central Park, and stops to buy one of those self-righteous health drinks on the way home. He takes a taxi to the office to catch up on a few things while there’s no one around.

The office phone rings and Alaric answers it before he quite realizes he really shouldn’t.

“Saltzman,” he says, skimming an email, and cringes when Meredith says “I knew it.”

“Knew what?”

“Why are you in the office?”

“Because I have work to do.”

“And where’s the arm candy?”

Alaric says nothing. “This isn’t a good time.”

“Alaric Saltzman, tell me the truth. Did you break up with him?”

Alaric holds the phone away from his face and breathes for a few moments, before he can even say the words. “We broke up.”

She seems to get the implication. “He broke up with you?”

Did he, though? Alaric still isn’t really sure who broke up with who. “I told you, this really isn’t a good time.”

“Well, then, have a drink with me. Tonight. Don’t pretend you’re busy. Nick can take the baby.”

“Meredith, I really can’t –”

“Oh, you can and you will. Eight o’clock, your place.”

--

By the time Meredith gets there, Alaric has already drunk most of a bottle of wine. He wishes it was easier to say no to her. He wishes he wasn’t so desperate for someone to talk to. He wishes he hadn’t answered the goddamn phone. He wishes he wasn’t wondering if Damon if downstairs in
his apartment getting drunk right now, or ten times worse, somewhere else, getting laid.

He opens the door, and accepts a hug. It’s nice. He’s missing physical contact already.

“You’re an idiot, do you know that?” Meredith says. She’s too smart, and she knows him too well.

“Don’t.”

“No,” she says. “I was thinking about it after we spoke. And you couldn’t tell me if he’d broken up with you, or you’d broken up with him, and I was thinking about this photograph…”

She’s walking through the apartment to the kitchen, where she knows there will be a bottle of wine, and she’s pulling a newspaper out of her handbag. She almost hits him with it, and he takes it from her hand. Custom folded so he can see what she means right away.

It’s from the award ceremony. Damon has his lips pressed to Alaric’s cheek and Alaric is smiling, looks ten years younger. Damon’s hair looks just untidy enough, and the shape of the hinge of his jaw is so real that Alaric could reach into the paper and pull him out, whole. He unfolds the paper. There’s another, of Damon, sitting with a smirk and listening to Alaric’s awful speech, and another of Alaric making the awful speech.

(True to his word, he hasn’t watched it on YouTube.)

“And?” He’s tired. She can go.

“And you look like you’re so in love, Ric.” Meredith has such kind eyes it’s hard to resent her even when she is being a complete nosy pain in the ass. And Alaric loves her, so there’s that.

She pours herself the last of the wine and fetches another bottle from the pantry, and leads him out into his own living room. She puts everything on the coffee table, and kicks off her shoes, tucking her feet up underneath her on the couch as she takes a sip.

“Things happen,” Alaric says, lamely.

“Yeah, things happen. And I think that maybe what happened is Damon wanted to start taking this a little more seriously, and you just… what did you tell him?”

“Mere, I just don’t have time for something serious right now.”

“Then do you think you might have been sending some very mixed signals when you called him your partner on national television?”

Here comes the morning’s hangover again. Only way to get on top of it is to drink faster.

“It’s complicated. I don’t really expect you to understand.”

“He was practically living here! Time? Really?”

He deserves this, which doesn’t mean he wants to listen. He leans back against the couch cushions. This would be so much easier to explain if he could tell Meredith how they started out. But he can’t. It’s embarrassing. And he has no idea how she would react.

“It’s hard to explain.”

“You don’t need to explain, Ric. I get it. I do. He was supposed to be a bit of fun, and when it got serious, you bailed. It’s not the first time you’ve done it.”
“You know we wouldn’t have worked out…”

“I don’t mean us. And not everyone you meet is going to turn out to be another Isobel. You can’t keep that big heart encased in concrete for your whole life, Alaric. We was great. And he was really great for you. And now here you are in your big empty apartment by yourself on a Saturday night instead of out living, all because you’re afraid – of what, exactly? Of winding up happy? It really wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world. Lots of people do it. I did it.”

Okay, now the headache is back in earnest. Alaric drains his glass and pours himself another. He’s going to end up drunk. How long since he’s really been drunk? Since before Damon. He hadn’t needed booze when he had that body to look forward to, that quick tongue.

He feels a tear roll down his cheek.

“I’m not sure I can do this stuff,” he admits. “It’s not about Is. I just… whatever it is that people have that makes them able to decide to share their lives with someone… I think I was born without it.”

“You need therapy,” Meredith says. It’s not said as a criticism, or to be mean. She means it. Maybe she’s right. Another thing Alaric doesn’t have time for.

Although, maybe he does. After all, his nights, for the conceivable future, are very, very open. There’s a sickening sense of panic at the thought, but enough wine poured over the top of it might make it go away, or eat least drown out its voice.

“Can you tell me about my godson?” he begs, desperate to change the subject.

“Oliver is perfect,” she says. “He’s not afraid to be loved.”

Goddamn six month old baby is smarter than Alaric. He pulls a couch cushion across his stomach and swallows back another lump.

“Talk to me, Ric. Make me understand.”

He stands, and walks to the window, floor to ceiling glass, panoramic view of the city. It’s still light out. It shouldn’t be. Breakups should be winter events, with blankets and hot chocolate, snow and slush and shoes that don’t dry all day. Alaric stares out at the twilight and tries to find a way to make it make sense.

“I don’t know how to explain, Mere,” he says. “I was looking for something. Something really specific, and there was Damon, and he was perfect. It was all on my terms. I know that makes me sound selfish – fine. I was selfish. We both knew what it was. We both knew it wasn’t going to be forever.” He took a sip of the wine. More like a gulp. “It wasn’t supposed to be. We have different worlds. We want different things.”

He can tell she wants to argue with that point. Meredith always argues that all anyone really wants is to love someone and be loved in return.

“It was never supposed to go public. The only people who were ever supposed to be involved, the only people who ever needed to know about it, were the two of us. But that changed. We rolled with it. But then it just got… too real. And he decided he wanted everything. Or nothing at all.

“I don’t expect you to understand, Mere. But my life is complicated, and a hell of a lot more public than it’s ever been. More public than I’ve ever wanted it to be. I’m busy. I can’t worry about someone else. I can’t get comfortable in a relationship knowing it’s going to end as soon as he
realizes I can’t give him what he wants. Maybe it’s better it ended now. He needs to find something better for him. Something he really wants.”

It’s as much as he can make himself say. He stares out the window again, and watches it get dark.

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Monday morning of the following week, Alaric finishes a breakfast meeting in the employees’ café on the ground floor of the office building which houses the bulk of his empire, and steps into an elevator which is empty except for one person. And there are thousands in the building, so it’s either a spot of good look or very, very bad luck that the other person is Damon.

He looks good. Hair freshly cut, neat suit which still stands out as more fashionable than anything Alaric owns. Cleanly shaven.

Hi, honey. You’re home.

“I’d forgotten you were starting today,” Alaric says, though in fact he hadn’t; the entire weekend had been spent wondering if they would cross paths.

“Good thing I didn’t,” Damon answers. There’s a small smile on his face that doesn’t hide the fact that he looks slightly miserable.

“Nervous?”

He shrugs; yes, he’s nervous, and his instinct is to lie about it, but he’s never lied to Alaric.

Alaric reaches out in a moment of weakness and presses the stop button. “Are you alright?” he asks, taking a step closer. Damon backs away.

“Don’t. I get it, you’re still my boss, but you don’t get to know anything anymore. Nothing. You don’t get to ask me anything that’s not about the job.”

“Do I get to ask you if you’re still sure about this?”

“Nope. Start the elevator, Ric. You made your call. Have the decency to let me stick with it.” And even with the blunt, poisonous words he speaks, Alaric can see there’s still something there; love, pain, hope Damon doesn’t even want. He sort of hates himself, in that moment, but he starts the elevator again, and leans against the wall, and thinks of every elevator ride he and Damon have ever taken together; and how they were all, without exception, more fun than this one.

Chapter End Notes

I know, I know, you’re mad at me now. Please have some faith. I will make it all better one way or another.
Sorry once again for the terrible wait. As I get closer to the end it’s bittersweet working on this. But the next section is underway and I hope you won’t wait another two months for it! In fact, I promise.
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Things are going okay-ish for Damon, which should really tip him off that it's all about to go very badly indeed.
Chapter warning for a BDSM scene in which Alaric is not the Dom.

Damon finds there’s something satisfying about getting up in the morning, dressing in a suit, and heading out to a nine to five job, though he’s rarely later than eight fifteen, and he rarely leaves the office before six. Nights are his own to do what he wants with, and while alcohol abuse certainly features heavily on the weekends, through the week, he rarely drinks more than a glass of wine, unless his colleagues ask him to a bar. Even then, he’s trying hard. He wants to make this work. A respectable job, an income he can actually talk about. There’s a novelty.

He sees Alaric. But not every day, and usually just across the lobby. He hates that Alaric’s shoulders curve forward, hates the dark shadows under his eyes. But he reminds himself the shadows aren’t his problem, and he turns away before they can make eye contact.

He’s coming back from the bar next door one Thursday night when a familiar blonde calls out. Damon hesitates, but joins her by Alaric’s favorite car.

“It’s late,” he says, and though the hug is slightly alarming, he returns it fondly after a moment or two.

“He’s late,” she echoes. “Again. He asked me to come at seven, but…”

“It’s nine,” he finishes.

“I have a book. He misses you,” she blurts. “I don’t know what happened. And I’m not going to ask. I didn’t really get the whole thing, you know, but I know he misses you.”

Damon is just tipsy enough to let a moment of misery cross his face, but he shakes his head. “He knew what he needed to do to make me stay,” he says. “And he didn’t.”

Caroline’s phone rings. Alaric, apologizing, saying he’ll take a taxi, time got away from him.

“I can give you a lift home,” Caroline says, and though at this time of night, with the roads relatively quiet, it’s not as thrilling watching her defy the laws of the road and physics both, but it’s nice to have someone to talk to. About Stefan, mostly, because the rest is taboo.

Problem is, it all comes back to the surface, then. Damon changes his clothes, heads to the gym (bad move after that much to drink but he needs to clear out his head). He barely lasts twenty minutes before he’s imagining Alaric joining him in the shower afterwards, making sure he’s completely clean. He takes a couple of valium and hopes for dreamless sleep.

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Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Things are going okay-ish for Damon, which should really tip him off that it's all about to go very badly indeed.
Chapter warning for a BDSM scene in which Alaric is not the Dom.
“You look like you’re coming from the office,” Kelly says, the next night. Appraising and approving. “Nice suit.”

“I did come from the office,” Damon says, resting against the door jamb. His tie is loose, but he looks good and he knows it.

“What are you doing here, child?”

“Don’t call me child. I keep telling you it makes you sound old.” But she says nothing, just waiting, and Damon drops his eyes. “Got anything for me?”

“No,” she says. “And I don’t think I will. You’re not looking for a Dom, honey, you’re looking for your Dom. I think you should just go home. Talk to him.”

Damon can’t do the latter, but he does the former. And hits his old pal Google up for some advice.

Thing about the big city – whatever you’re after, you can probably find it. The most unusual kinks you can think of are probably just a click or two away, and there’s certainly nothing particularly unusual about BDSM. Damon finds a website in about fifteen seconds, signs up with a fake name and no picture and ten minutes later he’s browsing profiles.

Anyone into humiliation is definitely out and while he couldn’t say why, he doesn’t like the idea of anyone who describes themselves as a switch. Rape fantasies, scat and golden showers, no thanks. Some of the profiles make him want to gag, and he has to remind himself fifty times that no kink is inherently wrong. But he has no guilt about being picky. If he’s not going to be paid, he’s going to have it his own way.

It leaves the selection depressingly small, and Damon is about to head off to find out if every site has the same few handfuls of people on it when something catches his eye.

No photo, of course; you’re supposed to put one up, but all the photos he’s seen are either of someone’s dick, or bound wrists. The occasional chest, massive and hairy or perfectly sculpted. But a fairly thorough physical description. So he may well look like Rick Moranis, but if he does, he’s a tall, built Rick Moranis with a huge dick. Preferences look good, and the guy has ticked the box that says he’s interested in a long term arrangement with the right sub.

‘Arrangement’. It’s so bloodless. Maybe Damon needs bloodless.

For a long, horrible second, Damon wonders if it’s Alaric, but decides no, there’s no way in hell he’d had time to start trawling for new meat with the crazy hours he’s been working. And Alaric is six foot two, not six foot.

Damon sends a message, shuts down the computer and heads off to bed.

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Why he’s agreed to go to this guy’s house, Damon isn’t entirely sure. Would have made sense to meet for a drink, first, see if they actually like each other. But here he is, being let into a lounge room that rivals Alaric’s in size – by a man who can only be a butler, Damon supposes.

“He’ll be along in a moment,” the man says. He’s shorter than Damon by a good six inches, and elderly, but spry, with a mass of white hair and sparkling eyes. He leaves by the same door Damon entered, closing it behind him with an expensive sounding click.

The Brownstone is crowded with old furniture and books; the furniture looks antique, for the most
part, and Damon finds himself suddenly nervous. He’s about to cut his losses and follow the old man out again when his host emerges from a hallway in the back.

He’s good looking, which is a relief. Very good looking, in fact, with a solid jaw and a perfectly proportioned body. Nice haircut, clean shaven; coloring similar to Alaric’s, though his eyebrows are pronounced and his eyes are much darker.

“Welcome,” he says, holding out a hand. He’s well dressed in what has to be a bespoke suit. Mild, slightly amused smile on his face, maybe enjoying Damon’s discomfort. “What should I call you?”

“Damon.” He shakes the man’s hand. “And you?”

“Call me Sir. Please, take a seat. May I offer you a drink?”

Sir. The hair on the back of Damon’s neck stands up. “Bourbon?” he asks, unsure, and the man crosses to a small bar to pour him one, and cognac for himself. Damon sits in a deep armchair, unwilling to share the divan until he has some idea of what’s expected of him. “I haven’t done this before.”

“Your profile suggested otherwise.” Damon accepts the drink, and watches his host take a seat, crossing his knees almost formally.

“Oh, no. That, I’ve done. Looking for… a ‘date’ online, not so much. I don’t really know what I’m doing here.”

“At least you’re being honest about it. The truth is I prefer not to use the clubs, I’m only in the city for a few months at a stretch, usually, and I prefer not to waste time – I find the Internet cold, but functional, in certain respects. What are your preferences?”

Damon finds himself cringing, and swallows most of his drink in one mouthful. “You start,” he says. “Sir.”

“First rule; if I ask you a question, you will answer it. Please.”

It sends a shiver down Damon’s back, and he starts to think he might be in the right place after all. He swallows, and shrugs, and forces himself to speak. “Bindings, all kinds. I like pain, until I don’t. Spreader bars. No humiliation and you can’t break my skin.”

“Spanking? Flogging?”

“Yes and yes, but I’d rather not start there. I’ve known you three minutes.”

“Trust is important to you.” It’s not a question. And Damon feels stripped bare. “We can start slow. See how things go.”

“I don’t need to start slow,” Damon says, putting the glass aside. Suddenly, slow seems to be the enemy. It’s urgent. “My safe word is peanuts and I’m wearing a plug. Is that motivation enough?”

“Insolent,” says Sir, since that’s the only name he’s going to give. “Or perhaps you prefer spirited.”

“I’m whatever you need me to be,” Damon says, and he stands, ready, waiting, trying to dismiss the feeling of Alaric’s fingers down his back. This is what this is about. Handing his body over to be touched by someone who will take away the fingerprints Alaric left, and let Damon belong to himself again.
He hadn’t anticipated how terrifying it would be to have a stranger tie him up so completely, somewhere where no one could hear him scream, somewhere no security guard is keeping an eye on the camera. But by the time he is completely immobile on a platform it’s a little too late to let his big brain do much thinking at all. He’s feeling disconnected, but not spacy, when Sir strokes down his back, fingertips brushing over the handle of the plug, and Damon keens quietly at the touch.

It’s different, everything feels different. That makes this okay. These knots are not Alaric’s knots, this hand, though big and sure, is not Alaric’s hand. The collar, attached to something Damon can’t see, forcing his head to stay up – it’s not Alaric’s either, and he’s pretty sure Alaric wouldn’t do this to his neck. Sir’s hand is in his hair, suddenly, sifting through the uneven strands, and he leans to whisper in Damon’s ear.

“You are doing beautifully,” he says, and suddenly it’s a much more familiar voice, and Damon finds himself freshly grieving.

“Yeah?” he asks, breathily, and he hears a zipper being pulled down. Sir wears no belt. Pants that well cut don’t need them. Damon opens his eyes, and finds himself face to face with a thick, dark, unfamiliar cock. Uncut. He opens his mouth, and the hand tightens in his hair, and he lets himself be used, the strange angle of his neck making it impossible to take it any deeper, though he tries; he tries to use his tongue, too, but finds fairly quickly that he can’t, all he can really do is try to keep up, focus on breathing when he can. He tastes pre-come, salty and acrid, and tries to let himself float away.

Sir stops before he can get too close to coming, and Damon tries to drop his head, wincing when the collar presses against his windpipe.

“Such a pretty mouth.”

Damon licks his lips, and closes his eyes again. This is what he’d wanted, it’s what he needs. Right? He’d come here asking for it. He watches out of the corner of his eye as Sir takes his clothes off, hanging his jacket and hanging the trousers over a valet. Damon shivers, and lets his eyes close again, wondering if he should just safeword out and go home with his tail between his legs.

“Do you like it rough?”

Damon tries to nod, remembers the rules and says, instead, quietly, “Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, sir,” Damon says, still wishing he had a name.

Despite the plug he’s been wearing for over two hours and copious lube, he still burns, a little, but it really doesn’t matter. Sir keeps his hair in an iron grip and fucks him ferociously enough for Damon to finally start to drift off, but as soon as he does, the hand becomes Alaric’s hand, the murmurs of encouragement are heard in the low rasp Alaric takes on when he’s so turned on he can’t think straight anymore. It’s Alaric’s hand that reaches around and grips his erection, jerking him to a very early orgasm, and it’s Alaric who slaps his ass suddenly, once, twice, as Sir’s rhythm stutters and he comes, at last, seemingly hours later.

Every muscle in Damon’s body is screaming by the time Sir deals with the condom, and starts to
untie the bindings. When he’s done, he leads Damon to a couch, offers him a blanket, some iced water, and then excuses himself for a few minutes.

Damon shakes, a little, but starts to dress before Sir comes back, and is zipping his boots by the time he returns, dressed more casually than he had been.

“You looked like you needed time to rest,” Sir says, topping up the water glass. “I’d thought perhaps we could talk, discuss terms, take another drink. Later. I prefer to ease someone down slowly.” He looks confused, and he also looks like he’s unused to being confused. “I thought you were rather a long way under, Damon. There’s really no rush.”

Damon pauses, elbows on his knees.

“I wasn’t. Not really. I’ll take that drink, though.”

They’re silent a while, and on the couch in the living room, Damon lets himself be drawn up against Sir’s chest, lets himself be coddled a little.

“I’d rather hoped this might work out. You’re very attractive. Beautifully submissive. A natural.”

Damon almost choke on a laugh. If only he knew. “I’d hoped so, too. It can’t, though. I didn’t realize it until we were done.” His voice sounds distant and resigned. He reaches up, and massages gently around his throat, hoping there won’t be too much bruising.

“Who was he, then?”

Damon shrugs, dropping his hand to his lap. “It really doesn’t matter. He’s gone, now.”

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It’s only a few days later that everything falls to pieces.

The morning starts out the way most of them do; Damon showers for as long as he can manage without turning into a prune, dresses in a very nice suit, with a shirt chosen because the neck is a little higher than most of them and he still has some marks he’d prefer not to explain.

He heads out by seven thirty into a bright, warm day, with a smile on his face, a spring in his step. Probably means he’s in need of therapy. Well, that might not be the worst idea anyway. It’s Thursday. Only one more day until the weekend. Saturday, he’ll spend a few hours with Stefan. A couple of the guys in PR play basketball on Sunday afternoons, and they’ve asked him to come along. Sundays are for live music in bars with Alaric, so basketball instead sounds fucking fantastic.

Friday night he’ll probably spend getting obliterated in the apartment he really needs to start looking to move out of.

Damon steps out of the subway, buys coffee from a stand on the corner, and notices a bunch of reporters standing near the entry to Alaric’s office block. Probably waiting for Alaric, he thinks, not knowing he usually enters the building via the underground car park. He takes a sip of his coffee. And then all hell breaks loose.

“There he is!” cries a reporter, and they descend on him. He is frozen to the sidewalk, coffee cup gripped in his hand, eyes wide. What the fuck. What are they doing? There are microphones in his face, tiny recording devices, even a few phones.
“No— no comment,” he says, or thinks he does, which is ridiculous, because they haven’t asked him any questions. He wants to run, but run where? And does he want anyone to photograph him racing down the street away from a horde of psychic vampires?

They’re all talking, which makes it impossible to hear a single word they are saying.

“— linked romantically to Alaric Saltzman, is that correct?”

“What is this?” Damon snarls. His hands begin to shake.

“We’ve recently learned that you are, in fact, a prostitute, from an upmarket establishment right here in Manhattan. Care to comment?”

Prostitute.

Damon’s knees turn to jelly, and he thinks for a terrible moment that he’s going to throw up.

“Get out of my face.” Damon’s voice sounds vicious, incendiary, though strangely enough it never crosses his mind to argue, or defend himself. He tries to step away, get inside and away from grabby hands and the sea of faces. “I’m late for work.”

“What did Mr. Saltzman think about your job, Mr. Salvatore?”

Damon turns, and suddenly the whole thing starts to come together. It’s not about him at all. It’s about Alaric. Someone trying to discredit him, make a few bucks, maybe get him thrown off his own board, something like that. Alaric, for all his paranoia about flying under the radar, had been right; he’s a big enough deal so that it matters. And up until recently, he’d managed. Rarely made the social pages, and no one who didn’t subscribe to the Wall Street Journal knew his name.

Until Damon.

The air is suddenly impermeably thick, and Damon once again feels the overwhelming need to throw up – preferably all over the guy who just asked him that.

“Ric?” he says, like it might buy him time. He turns to gaze at the building, wondering if he’ll ever go in again. Maybe it would be better to take the money he has, and move Stefan to a facility in… well, not Virginia, but somewhere quiet. Somewhere people will only look at Damon because he’s pretty, not because they’re wondering what someone who could cheerfully buy himself an island in the Caribbean might see in him, or how much he costs an hour.

Damon feels regret build thickly in his throat, and the fight goes out of him.

“He didn’t know,” he says, almost choking on the words.

Will they chase him into the subway? Onto a train?

“Damon!” he hears, and turns his head. Caroline, with her car stopped there on the curb, presumably because she’s dropped Alaric to work, depositing him underneath the building by the main elevator. She’s not allowed to stop there on the curb, the way she is, not during peak hour, and dozens of drivers are beeping their horns, waving their fists at her. “Damon! Come!”

He drops the coffee (sort of surprised he managed to hold onto it for that long, really) and jogs towards the car, throwing himself into the passenger seat and hauling the door shut, and off they go.
“You want me to call Ric?” she asks, in a small voice.

Damon shakes his head. “Don’t bother,” he says. “There’s nothing you could tell him that he won’t know within the hour anyway. Just… take me home, Jeeves,” he finishes, leaning back against the seat and closing his eyes.

With any luck, Caroline’s driving will kill him before he has to face whatever comes next.
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

Shaming Damon was probably a bad move. Alaric proves once again that he’s better at big gestures than working out what Damon actually needs outside the bedroom.

Alaric had almost forgotten how clean and simple it feels just to work, eat and come home again, do it all again the next day. He’s drinking more than he should, because there’s no good reason not to, but he’s balancing that reasonably well with a fairly punishing exercise regime which means getting out of bed at stupid o’clock in the morning.

He’s lonely, though. He doesn’t remember having been this lonely before. But maybe he had been. After all, he’d hired Damon, right? Companionship was definitely a big part of that – sometimes Alaric thinks it’s the nights they spent on the couch watching movies, Damon’s back resting up against Alaric’s chest, that he misses the most.

And then he tells himself to stop fucking thinking about it.

And so it goes, day after day, the nights in the office getting a little longer, his to-do list actually getting shorter. The board is happy, and the only time Alaric’s face has made it into the gossip pages is for a sad little postscript saying that bisexual billionaire Alaric Saltzman and his delicious boy-toy Damon Salvatore had broken up just days after making their debut as a couple at the gay and lesbian businesspeople of the year awards.

Meredith had sent him the link. He’d saved the photo.

His life isn’t empty. He’s busy.

It’s not empty at all.

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He lets himself into Kelly’s office on a Wednesday evening and drops into a chair. She’s on the phone, little earpiece clinging to the side of her head, and putting a clear coat of polish on her blood red nails. She gives Alaric a wink and starts to hurry her caller along.

“Next time,” she says, and presses the key on her phone to end the call.

“Ric,” she purrs. “What can I do for you tonight? I have a new boy. Dark hair, pale blue eyes, five foot nine… oh, that got a reaction. Not Damon. Though he has been in a couple of times.”

“He’s working for me, what is he –”

“The PR gig. Of course. No, I think he came for recreational purposes. Stop looking at me like I stole your favorite toy truck, Alaric. What can I do for you?”

Alaric sighs. “I don’t even fucking know. Has he really been here? Why?”

“You know I’m discreet. Ask him yourself.”
“You’re not that discreet.”

She shrugs. “I’m discreet-ish. What did you two get yourself into?” She shakes her head. “I should have known this would happen when I introduced you. His heart’s broken, you know.”

He stares at a coffee cup on her desk. World’s greatest mom. She has two kids. Alaric’s never heard their names. Older teenagers, he thinks, but he could be wrong. He wonders if they’re planning to join the family business, or stay as far away from it as they can. His brain ceaselessly searches for something to think about that isn’t Damon, his Damon, in here, looking for the sort of clients he’d had that had taught him to brace for the worst and laugh all the way to the bank.

“I should go,” he says, and stands. “Forget it. There’s nothing here that I need. Nothing I want.” Maybe he’s ruined forever. Maybe he wants to be.

He adjusts his jacket on his shoulders and leans across the desk to kiss Kelly’s cheek before he heads back downstairs, and out into the warm evening to hail a cab.

--

So it’s Thursday afternoon, when everything turns to shit.

There is a buzz around the place, which Alaric barely registers until it’s become a dull roar and each time he looks up people are staring through the glass into his office; he used to like it like that, never wanted to feel inaccessible to people, but the last few months are kind of ruining it for him. He opens the door, and roars into the meeting area and the cubicles he affectionately calls the bullpen. The team of people who basically run his life.

“Anyone who’s looking at me instead of their computer doesn’t have enough work to do, and will be transferred to the mailroom tomorrow morning. Look busy, people.”

And he closes the blinds, which he almost never does.

His stomach is screaming for food around noon, which is when he realizes he never bothered with breakfast. He sends an assistant downstairs to the café to fetch him a sandwich and orange juice, sincerely wishing it was bourbon, and she can barely look at him as they speak, she’s blushing so hard. She leaves without a word, and Alaric goes back to his emails.

His phone rings, his personal cell, and he frowns. Meredith. He answers, though, ready to tell her he’s too busy, he’ll call back later. But she’s talking a mile a minute before he can get a word in edgewise, and though the first few sentences don’t make a whole lot of sense, when she says “… found out he’s a prostitute!”, Alaric’s stomach cramps suddenly and horribly and the rest of his body seems to just shut down.

“What the fuck are you talking about, Mer,” Alaric says.

“Check out… I don’t know, google yourself, check the news. There’s a video.”

Alaric doesn’t want to. He wants to materialize in his bed at home, and find that this has all been a mistake. But he finds a photograph of Damon standing shell shocked right outside this very building, and a tawdry headline he can’t even force himself to read.

“I miss bein’ a recluse,” he breathes into the phone, and he plays the video.

Damon has never looked so young, or so scared, and just at the point where he starts to find some anger instead (Alaric regrets sincerely that he didn’t destroy a camera or two) he’s asked what
Alaric thought about his job.

Alaric can actually see Damon thinking about it. Walls going up around him, his eyes deadening from blue to gray. And he says it.

He didn’t know.

“He lied, didn’t he,” Meredith says, and Alaric can’t bear to answer. “Ric. Tell me what’s going on? I’m your best friend, and you’ve done nothing but lie and shut me out for months. Enough, already. Tell me what’s going on.”

Alaric rubs his eyes, and lets the hand holding the phone rest against the table for a moment.

“Can you meet me tonight? … actually, my place,” he says, when he can force himself to bring it to his ear again. “I don’t want any surprises.”

“Seven,” Meredith says.

There’s no way he’ll be out of the office that early. “Eight,” he counters, and ends the call.

The phones start ringing, people looking for a quote, a statement, something. Eventually Alaric promises a prepared statement in the morning. His PR team are not impressed, but they’re not exactly thrilled that their boss has gone from America’s gay sweetheart to filthy John in under a day, either. He dismisses their concerns. Damage control? This will blow over. He writes a statement, which comes back heavily edited. He sighs, and sets it aside. He tries to get back to work, to convince himself that this is all going to be fine.

It’s impossible. All he can see is the look of resignation on Damon’s face.

Three o’clock, the head of PR for the company comes to see him.

“Before you say a word,” Alaric says, pointing at a chair. “Tell me. Is he good at his job?”

The man flushes, and elects not to sit. He’s worked for Alaric for a long time, and they’ve been friendly enough, but right now he looks like he’d rather not think of Alaric as anyone but his boss. “Honestly – yes. He’s picking things up fast. I was going to suggest we set some money aside to get him into some business courses. He’s charming, good looking… he wins people over effortlessly, once he turns it on. But –”

“No, that’s all I needed to hear. This will blow over. He has a job here for as long as he wants one. You can go.”

Damon’s face. That resignation.

Alaric calls. Damon doesn’t answer.

He waits an hour, and calls back. This time, he even leaves a message. “Are you alright? Call me.”

He tries again half an hour after that, and still Damon doesn’t answer.

It’s probably answer enough.

--

Meredith sits spellbound on the couch, sipping her wine, the baby fast asleep in Alaric’s arms. He feels ridiculous, and enormous, and completely disarmed, and Oliver just twitches minutely in his
“BDSM,” she says, again.

“It’s probably not what you think,” Alaric says. “Or at least you probably have a screwed up perception thanks to that Fifty Shades shit you were reading last year.”

“But Ric, we never…”

“Don’t even finish that sentence. I like it. I’ve liked it for a long time. Doesn’t mean I want to tie up everyone I date. I was looking for something. Companionship, and… I don’t know. We decided to make it a long term arrangement, all paid, totally above board, and then we… that article broke early this year and then suddenly everyone knew about us.”

“So you pretended to date? How did he feel about that?”

She’s staring at Alaric like he’s the villain of the piece, but she hasn’t taken the baby back – he has a tiny hand wrapped around Alaric’s finger, clutching even as he sleeps, and it’s easier to look at the baby than it is to look at Meredith, so he does.

“I think we were both in over our heads by then, anyway. God, I’ve screwed everything up so fucking badly. I don’t know what to do, Mere. This is why I’ve always kept my private life private. If this does anything to screw with the business, or… the hospitals project – and I don’t even know why anyone cares. And Damon – I’ve tried to call him. He won’t answer me. I’d go down to his apartment but I…”

She sighs, and drains her glass, and reaches for the bottle so she can pour another. “They’re probably curious why someone like you would pay for something they could get for free,” she says, reasonably. “But in the end – people are assholes. Including you, lately. Doesn’t mean I don’t still love you,” she hastens to add, “but you’ve gotta admit, you could have handled all of this a lot better. Next time you like someone, maybe try asking them out instead of hiring them to be a live-in submissive.”

Oliver stirs, and Alaric shifts him, bringing him up against his body. He smells sweet, and clean, and exactly like a baby. Alaric finds himself thinking about Damon in hospital with pneumonia, Damon with his shoulder dislocated, Damon asking for more than Alaric was ready to give. And she’s right. He is an asshole.

He kisses Oliver’s head, and leans more deeply into the pillows.

“Forget how you met him, forget… all of it, Ric. Tell me something. The truth.” Her eyes are big and brown and she’s impossible to lie to, which is why, on a sunny Saturday morning four years ago he’d admitted it wasn’t working for him. “Just set it all aside, and tell me if you love him. If you want him back.”

She asks like it’s simple. Alaric rubs circles over Oliver’s back, and kisses him again, and wonders if maybe it is.

--

In a downstairs press room that has never been this full (closest it’s ever been before was the day Alaric bought up a dying development firm without firing a single employee) Alaric reads over the statement one more time, and scrubs his hand over his face.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the press, if such creatures there be,” he starts, to a light ripple of
laughter. Next sentence. Just read it. The voice comes from his own head, but sounds like the head of his PR department.

Alaric groans, and scrunches up the printed statement, ignoring the gasp of horror from someone standing close to the edge of the dais. He looks out into the sea of faces and shakes his head. He feels a surge of something fierce; love, maybe, protectiveness, sure, but something else, too. A fierce rebellion.

“Ah, let’s try something else. You,” he says, to a guy with a camera sitting in the front row. “You’re married. Look at that ring. Where’d you meet your wife? Husband?”

“Wife,” the man replies, too quickly. “And, uh… at a bar, actually.” One of Alaric’s PR people makes a sound of protest he ignores. The cameras are on him, so she’s not going to make a scene, but they hate it when he goes off script – and he’s been doing it a lot, lately. For years, they’d had a lovely, reclusive, well-behaved CEO, and the biggest complaint they could have made about him was how hard it was to get him to rub elbows with his peers. Now, they have… well. Something entirely different.

“Nice,” Alaric says, and points to a woman sitting a little way back. “You. You married? Seeing anyone?”

“Engaged,” she says, flashing a sparkly ring. “Getting married at the end of the month.”

“Where’d you meet?”

“Match dot com,” the reporter says, and pushes on. “Mr. Saltzman, yesterday it was revealed –”

“No, no. Please, don’t get ahead of yourself. I’m not done. Up the back. You with the rather interesting bow tie.”

The man stands, and nods. “Met my husband at a wet t-shirt competition,” he says delightedly, and takes his seat again to a quiet round of laughter. Alaric grins, and nods.

“I think I’ve made my point,” he says. “This is a wide, weird world. You never know when you’re gonna meet someone who… moves your furniture, so to speak. I’m a busy man with needs. I met Damon through his job. And I fell in love with him. It happens. Drunk or sober, online or off it. Wet t-shirt competitions, protest rallies, Dungeons and Dragons meetups. Damon’s job was perfectly legal. I could have fallen in love with a plumber, or someone in a shoe shop. But I didn’t. Neither of us is married, neither of us is cheating, we both pay our taxes. He has nothing to be ashamed of, and neither do I.

“You guys, on the other hand…”

He shakes his head.

“You waited outside his place of work. You waited for him to arrive and you badgered him with your questions until he had to literally run away. You should really be ashamed of yourselves. And why? What did it achieve?”

They look unmoved, for the most part. Alaric would love to add that what drove Damon into that kind of work was his sick brother, but that’s not his story to tell.

“You cornered him, and he lied to protect me. I’m unimpressed, and the next time anyone who was there is looking for an interview with me they’re gonna be sorely disappointed. I have a list from the video. A dozen of you in here should really take a photo of me before you go, because it’s the
last time you’ll ever be invited to get this close to me.”

He scratches his head, and presses his hands to the lectern. “I’m a builder. I mean, in the end, that’s what I am, that’s what I do. I build. Started out with one little railway station I turned into a resort, and then it was apartment blocks, boutique hotels, office blocks… now it’s hospitals. Did you know that? Hospitals all over the country that are bein’ closed down, or losin’ their trauma center status, places like that. Damon’s idea, by the way. That’s what I do. My love life, my sex life – they have no bearing on my ability to do that job, and I’m sure you’ll all have to agree. And if this petty attempt to disgrace me stops one single hospital bein’ saved, you’ll have to live with that. Go. Find something better to write about, and leave Damon alone.

“Now, I have a job to get back to. Enjoy the rest of your day.”

It’s easier than he’d imagined it might be to ignore the bewildered complaints of the PR team and just leave, ease himself into the elevator with a wink. There’s nothing to say this will be enough to make Damon forgive him, and even if this is a storm which is destined to calm eventually, it’s not going to calm anytime soon.

It’s okay. Alaric can wait. There are no secrets left. He feels freer than he has in weeks.

It takes an hour or two for the stories to start appearing, and for Alaric to decide that Damon might be ready to answer the phone.

And a couple of hours more for him to realize he is wrong.
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Stefan's health takes a turn for the worse.

Chapter Notes

**Chapter warning:** I don't want to spoil anyone, but this chapter may be triggering for some. If you want to check, read the footnote *before* you start.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Every single day is hard. Even the easy days are hard and Stefan can’t really remember too many of those, lately. He seems to tire out faster than he used to, or maybe they’ve been pushing him harder than they used to. And he is pretty sure Damon doesn’t come as often as he did. On the weekends, identifiable because there’s always more people on the weekends, he comes, sometimes twice.

The rest of the time, Stefan just plays with his cards, and watches the door, and hopes.

Stefan has almost stopped speaking altogether, except to Damon. There’s a woman whose job it is to make him try to talk, and at first, he’d tried to oblige her, because she was nice, and pretty, and when she smiled he felt like he was getting something right; but whether it’s getting harder, or whether he’s just getting more tired, most of the time now it seems like too much work.

Being dried off after a shower, Stefan stares at himself in the mirror. It’s not easy, because his eyes keep sliding away. But he tries. He doesn’t look right, like his reflection doesn’t match his own memories of his face. But though he knows that he has lost a lot he really doesn’t know what it is that he’s lost, and he doesn’t really want to look for too long anyway.

“I wish I knew what you were thinking,” says the nurse. He’s tall, strong. He probably thinks Stefan doesn’t understand but the truth is he understands most things, he just can’t find a way to respond. He hangs his head, and submits to his hair being dried. “Feels like we’re moving backwards, Stefan. Why would you be moving backwards? Maybe you’re just tired,” and at this, Stefan looks up, and catches a glimpse at those wide, brown eyes. “Is that it?”

Stefan nods, slowly.

“Let’s get you dressed and find you somewhere to rest. Saturday, today. Your brother will be here later and you can talk to him, instead. I know he’s had a bad week, could use a hug from his little brother, sound good to you?”

Maybe Stefan smiles and maybe he doesn’t but the intention is there, anyway.

--
Damon’s arms around Stefan’s shoulders, around his back, a hand on the back of his neck, brushing over the short hair there; these are the only things, Stefan thinks, that have ever in his entire life made him feel safe. His forehead is pressed to his brother’s shoulder, and he lets his eyes close. It doesn’t occur to him to return the hug. After a long time, Damon lets go, and crouches on the ground.

“Heard you’ve had a quiet week, little brother,” he says. Stefan looks away, because he can’t explain, doesn’t even know how to express something that’s more complicated than hunger, exhaustion, or pain.

There’s something wrong with him, something new.

Damon tries to lure Stefan with his cards and his puzzles but when Stefan resists, Damon doesn’t push it. He doesn’t push Stefan to talk, either, but he talks himself. He doesn’t say much, the sort of nonsense soothing that he’d indulged Stefan with when he was a little kid, and just needed his big brother. When their mom died, or when Damon and Giuseppe were fighting, or whenever any one of a thousand baffling things had happened. Damon’s arms were always the ones Stefan wanted.

“Tired,” Damon says, when he’s finally given up trying to bait Stefan into rearranging his cards. Stefan nods. Nodding is easy. “Maybe you need a nap.”

There’s no obvious reason why Damon should understand that Stefan wants him to stay, but he does. He lies close to the wall and lets Stefan curl against him. Stefan forgets, sometimes, that Damon isn’t the tall big brother that he used to be, that they don’t fit together the way they did. But he is grateful, and after two (or is it three?) nights spent tossing and turning he does sleep, in the end.

Damon is gone when Stefan wakes up.

Dinner time. No, he’s not going to cooperate. He has very little power and he’s in the mood to yield it. He burrows beneath the sheet and the blanket and pulls the fabric tight over his head, tight as he can with his useless hands, and after a while, the nurse stops trying and lets him be.

Damon was right. Stefan is tired. It’s easier having his eyes closed, too, because there’s an unpleasant pressure in his head which seems to be building, and getting worse. Yes. Asleep is definitely better.

Stefan wakes early in the morning, and everything is wrong. His immediate thought is that he is being attacked, but when he pushes out with his hands there is no one there. Damon is supposed to be with him, they’d been napping. And Damon is always supposed to be there, for the big things. Always used to be. There’s not so many big things, these days.

Maybe Damon was here hours ago. Maybe it was yesterday.

Dimly, Stefan remembers football. Most Valuable Player trophies, and his father slapping his back, promising that he’ll do whatever he wants in life.

Not true, not true.

Stefan cries out. There’s never been this much pain before. Or maybe there has, but he really can’t remember. Something breaks free, deep in his memories, and he sees a car fly off a bridge, and he
remembers chasing after it. Oh, Elena Gilbert. He saved her life, and now here he is, faintly aware that he’s wet the bed and his father will be furious but mostly just screaming because the pain in his head is too bad to be contained. Maybe they’ll understand, now.

Maybe he should have started screaming years ago.

There’s a lot of noise and fuss and lights being shone in his eyes but no one is fixing it, just trying to hold him down, and Damon still isn’t there. Stefan feels tears run down out of his eyes and into his hair, damp with sweat. His body is almost completely rigid, back curving tight up off the bed, and nothing, nothing will relieve it.

There is a place in Stefan’s head which is almost untouched, a place where he knows what he was, who he was, and knows what he lost. A part that has known since the first time he failed to focus on his brother’s face, the first time he found his eyes sliding away no matter how hard he tried to keep them there, that has always known he was going to die one day. A part that remembers Giuseppe’s cold face in the coffin they lowered into a hole, and his mother’s, too. That part might even be a little bit relieved, when it realizes what’s happening.

Stefan’s hands curl into the blanket and he shouts his brother’s name, twice, three times, close as he can, and still Damon doesn’t materialize to fix this.

It’s probably better Damon doesn’t have to see this happen. He’s already given up too much.

The light is overwhelming, and then it’s not. And then it’s a pinprick.

And then it’s out, for good.

Chapter End Notes

**Warning** for a major character death, namely Stefan’s. I am sorry, guys. I know some of you are going to be really upset about it. It took a lot of soul searching to realize that this was what the story needed.

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I am really sorry that it’s taken over two months this time. It was this final chapter. I have written it four times, now, trying to get it right. And it was really difficult to do, involving a lot of tears. But the good news is that the two chapters that follow it are long, and almost complete, and should appear later in the week. The final instalment should follow very closely behind, since having gotten past this block means I feel like I can get the momentum back.

Thanks for sticking with me guys

~ PBK
Chapter 42

Chapter Summary

Damon gets the bad news.

It’s been a shitty day. Stefan was grumpy, uncommunicative. Wouldn’t eat. The staff were whispering about Damon in a way that was highly unprofessional and was definitely intended to be noticed; sort of a ‘we know how you got all the extra help for your brother’, in general. One or two had been good. Honestly, one of the nurses went out of her way to make sure no one else tried to approach for any reason at all, which was much appreciated. She couldn’t protect him from the people who needed to discuss Stefan’s recent behavior, but it was for the best, since Damon gave them a blasting about being medical professionals who should be able to work out what the fuck it is he needs. He’d lain out on the narrow bed alongside his little brother and missed the days when there was nothing he couldn’t fix.

When he was trying to leave, that same nurse had stopped him near the door, back straight, eyes direct, and told him she didn’t think many people would do for their own brothers what he’d done for Stefan.

Damon hadn’t been able to say much. A grunt. He doubted it was true. Or rather, he doubted most people would ever need to go as far as he had.

He’d walked home from the subway in a sun-shower because the need to burn off some energy was suddenly greater than his need for privacy. The days were getting hot, and the raindrops hit the pavement and evaporated immediately. Arriving home dripping with sweat he’d been grateful for the air conditioning, and a long, cool shower.

But that was hours ago.

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Damon would like nothing more than to turn off his phone. Since he can’t, he ignores it for an hour at a time, and listens to the voicemail when he’s forced to. So far, it’s been nothing but reporters after comments. Time for a new phone number, he thinks. He’ll do that on Monday. He has nowhere pressing to be, since there’s no way he’s going back to work.

And how did they even get his number?

He is curled up on the couch, wrapped in a blanket. In front of him, his laptop is open. He cycles through the browser windows. His favorite window shows the video where Alaric attempts to shame a room full of prostitutes for treating Damon like a whore – when that was something Alaric always excelled at.

Alright, that might be mean.

He glances at the time. It’s barely eleven. Not too late to go out. Not even late to go out. But where? Who with? Either he has no one to go out with, or someone will recognize him, and he doesn’t really feel like being the hooker who outed one of New York’s biggest property
developers. No way in hell is he going back to the club; not tonight and maybe not ever. So he reaches a hand out from his blanket burrito and pulls a little more fabric over his face. Taking a leaf from Stefan’s book.

This makes it difficult to drink as quickly as he’s been trying to, though, so he sits up, and reaches for the bottle (classy, Damon, he can hear an unfamiliar voice echoing somewhere in the back of his head). As he takes a swig, he hits ‘play’ on the video again.

It really doesn’t matter what Alaric said to those assholes, though it does give him chills to see Alaric refuse to deny anything. The way he talks about meeting someone. The way he uses the words ‘fell in love’ like they mean anything now that this is done and dusted is pretty fucking painful.

Well, maybe once a suitable amount of time has gone by…

Damon takes another swig from the bottle, and glances at the time again. Eleven oh-seven. It’s going to be a very long night.

He’s thoroughly invested in a binge-watch of some legal drama he barely remembers from the first time it was on television when the phone rings for the first time in a couple of hours. It’s almost two in the morning. He’s drunk enough to be indulging a sexual fantasy about a DA who is clearly giving off some very ambiguous vibes. And the phone number isn’t familiar, so he answers the phone.

“I’m off the clock,” he slurs into the phone. “If you’d like to make an appointment…”

“Mr. Salvador?” It’s a feminine voice, brusque, one he doesn’t recognize.

“Salvatore,” Damon corrects, rubbing his eyes and forcing himself into a sitting position. “What is it?”

“I’m going to have to ask you to come to Mt. Sinai Hospital,” the voice says. “It’s about your brother, Stefan.”

Damon’s body freezes, flashes hot, freezes again. “Is he alright? What’s happened? Why is he at Mt. Sinai?” Because the rehab hospital can handle most things, and it’s really better if this is one of those most things.

“Please, just come, as quickly as you can.”

Damon reasons, as he sprays himself down with a body spray that probably does nothing to reduce the stink of bourbon pouring from his pores, that Stefan has to be alive, at least, or they wouldn’t have told him to hurry. Maybe he needs an organ. Damon will give him an organ. All of them, preferably, though it’s probably better if they don’t take his liver. He stumbles as he changes his clothes and again as he heads out the door, one foot still half in and half out of one shoe.

He can’t do this by himself. Briefly, he imagines calling Alaric, but he can’t and won’t. He imagines calling Caroline, but it’s date night with the doorman and he’s not going to risk committing coitus interruptus. So, who?

He manages to get down into the lobby and out to the street, and it takes only five minutes to flag down a taxi.

By the time they’re approaching Mt. Sinai Damon has convinced himself he’s sobered up, but he hasn’t. If anything, his imagination has run so wild that he’s actually convinced himself that Stefan
sat up perfectly lucid tonight after a couple of hours of sleep and asked where he was and what he was doing there, miraculously healed, and now all that’s left to do is discover the source of his extraordinary cure so the rest of the broken bodies at Mercy can benefit from it.

It seems to take a long time for anyone to be able to tell him anything about what is going on. Maybe he can pull some strings – doesn’t Meredith work here?

The doctor who comes to find him looks reassuringly doctorly. Short and somewhat stocky, like he earned his degree while kicking ass on the football team, and lost all his hair in one go at about the age of twenty-five so he’d never have to cut it again. Damon sways on his feet, and opens and closes his fists.

The doctor lets his eyes flicker from Damon’s face for a moment, and then leads him to a quiet visitor’s room. He says nothing about that fact that Damon is stinking drunk, which seems charitable.

“This isn’t going to be easy to hear,” the doctor says, easing Damon into a plastic seat. “He lost consciousness in his bed while the staff at Mercy were trying to stabilize him. His heart stopped beating in the ambulance. We’ve restarted it six times. We won’t know anything until we can get him into a CT, and that depends on…”

Damon follows the man’s eyes to a door that swings open. A blonde doctor who looks like she is probably taller than Damon steps out looking exhausted, and defeated, and that’s enough. The doctors share a look, and Damon stands again.

“No,” he says.

“I’m sorry,” the doctor says, but he’s not, really. He does this every day.

Damon’s hands clutch at the ground. When did he end up on the ground? Fuck, his knee hurts, too. But the ground is cool, tolerable on his forehead, enough so the hands that pull him up again are a gross invasion, and he tries to snarl and pull away.

There is pity on the faces around him. Damon can’t stand pity. He never could. He doesn’t want it now. Stefan is dead, Stefan is gone. Someone is talking to him. He’s sitting on one of those cold plastic chairs, hands clasped between his knees. Stefan died in the ambulance on the way here, and they brought him back. Over and over they brought him back, but the last time, it simply didn’t work.

Damon tries to speak. He wants the voice to shut up. He doesn’t want the details, not yet. But he can’t seem to speak to tell them to stop. Not for a long time.

“I want to see my brother,” he says, when he can.

There is a long moment of silence, and then some assent.

“Just give me a minute,” the doctor says, his reassuring, low voice sadder than Damon would have expected. “We’ll put the machines away, find you somewhere private. I’ll send for you.”

They move him to the morgue, which seems bloodless and cold, but Damon figures it’s quiet, at least. He’s offered a stool he doesn’t sit in, and a morgue attendant moves the sheet from Stefan’s face.
He looks so pale, and so young. And too still. His eyes are closed, but if they were open, Damon knows that confusion would be gone, that his eyes wouldn’t slide away the way they usually do. He reaches out; Stefan still feels too warm to be dead. He closes his hand around Stefan’s hand and gives a squeeze like he thinks Stefan might react; squeeze back, or pull away, or something.

Christ. Who does he have to call? What arrangements need to be made? Is he supposed to pick up a phone and ask someone to put his brother in the ground?

He rests his elbows on the cold metal table and closes his eyes, still playing with Stefan’s fingers.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “Should have realized. That your head hurt.”

There’s a voice behind him. “It wouldn’t have made a difference,” the doctor says, not unkindly. The tall blonde one. “The truth is it’s a miracle your brother survived his original injuries, let alone that he did as well as he did.”

Damon shakes his head. “I don’t need you to try to cheer me up.”

“I’m not. That’s not really my forte,” she says, shrugging. “I saw his medical records. He had to have been in excellent care, given how bad the original injuries were, to even be able to recognize anyone, let alone speak. It can’t have been easy.”

Damon doesn’t answer, but tears run down his cheeks.

“Is there someone we can call? Family member? A friend?”

“No one,” Damon says. “Can you just give me a minute? Please?”

“Okay,” she says, and she goes.

In the end, he settles for a kiss on Stefan’s forehead, before dragging himself back up to the emergency room to find out what he has to do next.

--

It’s ten in the morning before Damon gets home. He drinks the rest of the bourbon, which isn’t enough to knock him out. He ignores three calls from Mercy, though he knows he has to speak to them soon. He finds a barely touched valium prescription in his dresser drawer, and takes four.

In ten minutes, he’s fast asleep, and not dreaming.

--

The next few days are about as bad as he was expecting them to be.

Monday, he takes the subway across town to visit Mercy. He takes an empty gym bag; there’s very little of Stefan’s stuff that he wants to keep. Not his clothes, not those fucking puzzles. No one knows quite what to say to him; the director is probably worried Damon plans to sue. It’s not his style. It wouldn’t make any difference. And he doesn’t give a shit about money, not anymore. He’d sign over the contents of his bank account to say goodbye to his brother properly, just five minutes with him.

Someone brings him a cup of tea, as he sits in Stefan’s room, staring at the wall. The hangover is only mild, which is more luck than design. Mostly, Damon is feeling numb.

He finds several decks of cards, and those, he takes, because Stefan spent so many hours with
them. There are a few dubious works of art which he also takes, with as much a sense of duty as
the parent of a four year old must feel, adding masterpiece after masterpiece to the pile.

There are a few books. They can go to charity. The clothes, as well, except Stefan’s high school
letterman jacket, which Damon will add to the box of diaries and trophies that he has tucked in the
wardrobe of his second bedroom.

There are half a dozen newspaper clippings, too. Himself and Alaric. Not cut out by Stefan’s
awkward hands. Someone else clipped them for him. Those go in the bin, and only because Damon
doesn’t have matches with him.

The director meets Damon as he’s trying to leave, and coaxes him to the office with the promise
that there are just a couple of forms to fill out. He’s terribly sorry, and honored to have been able to
make Stefan comfortable, and where will the funeral be, because a few of them will want to attend?

“My family has a plot in a small town in Virginia,” Damon says. “I’m making arrangements to
bury him there. Is that the last signature?”

The director’s features blur. Did he always have such small eyes? And Damon needs to go,
anyway.

--

All there is left is to do it.

There is family in Mystic Falls. Not much. Damon’s uncle, Zach, who runs the boarding house,
and his daughter, Sarah, who’s close in age to Stefan.

Zach had been stoic, when Damon called him days ago with the news. He’d promised to make the
arrangements that needed to be made, and pass the word around. To who, Damon had wanted to
know. Who remembers, who cares? But he hadn’t wanted to argue. When he calls back to confirm
the details with Damon, Damon can’t think of much to say.

He wants someone to ask if he’s alright, if he needs anything, but so far, no one has.

--

Damon is standing by the elevator Wednesday afternoon when he feels fingers on his arm.

“You forgot to press the button,” comes a familiar, slightly rasping voice. “Damon. Are you
okay?”

Damon meets Caroline’s kind, worried eyes and leans against the wall by the elevator so he won’t
fall to the ground.

“Stefan’s gone,” he says, and his voice is a really, really long way away. He accepts her slender
arms around his waist anyway, and it’s nice to have someone else to do the crying for a change.
Chapter 43

Chapter Summary

Alaric gets the bad news.

Chapter Notes

Warning in this chapter for a funeral scene.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alaric tries every day or so to call Damon and the silence is deafening, after the first few days. He does what he's always done. He buries himself in work. He wakes early to a punishing workout, he works from eight in the morning until ten at night whether he has something pressing to do or not, and he reminds himself that Damon owes him nothing.

Hasn’t deterred him, though. He’s going to get him back, or at least talk to him. Alaric built a Fortune 500 company from nothing, earned his first million before the age of thirty and his first billion six years later. Nothing much deters him when he makes up his mind about something.

Thursday morning, it’s already hot by the time Alaric steps out of the elevator in the parking garage and finds Caroline in the grip of a terrible morning. Eyes are rimmed with red. Alaric reaches out to tuck her hair behind her ear, an instinctive gesture that seems to act as a catch-all for the women in his life.

“What’s wrong, Care?” he asks, and she shifts her weight from foot to foot.

“Um,” she says, and her throat seems to tighten over the syllable. “My friend died.”

That’s enough. Alaric pulls her close to him, lets her rest her head against his chest. Awkward, for a second, but she obviously needs the hug.

“I’m sorry. Just go park the car,” he says. “I’ll get a taxi.”

She shakes her head, and pulls away a little. “The funeral is out of state,” she says. “Virginia. I was hoping…”

“Of course. Take whatever time you need. Can I do anything?”

And she bites her lip in the way that tells Alaric there’s a lot she’s not saying, but she shakes her head.

“No,” she says. “Please, I’m okay. I’ll take you to work and then… I should maybe hit the road.”

“Not like this,” he says, pulling out his wallet and thumbing through his credit cards. “Fly. It’s not safe driving when you’re this upset. It’s a long drive to Virginia. Who’s your friend?” He hands her a black American Express card.
She takes a breath, but accepts the card, and when she insists she can still manage the drive to the office, he climbs into the front seat and doesn’t touch his phone the entire way there.

--

It’s a relatively easy day. Amazing how no matter the scandal, people lose interest when there is no fuel for the fire. Alaric needs time to get used to his new image as the kinky eccentric, but if Richard Branson can get away with it Alaric figures he can, as well. He just has to avoid things like suing people and ripping his shirt off in front of reporters and running full pelt down West Broadway.

Eight o’clock, he’s starving hungry, forgot to ask someone to grab him a sandwich for dinner. He crosses his office to stand in front of the floor to ceiling windows. New York is gorgeous in the early summer. It’s so light outside it could be noon. He should just call it a night, maybe, grab a burger and a beer somewhere no one is likely to recognize him.

His personal cell rings, and he pulls it from his pocket. Unfamiliar number in an area code he doesn’t immediately recognize, so he frowns, but he answers it.

“Hello?”

“Ric?” comes Caroline’s soft, wavering voice.

“Hey,” he says, reaching up to remove his tie. “Having a rough time? Was the funeral today?”

“It’s tomorrow,” she says, and falls silent. Alaric waits. She has to have called for a reason.

“Listen, Care, you need to take a couple of weeks, it’s okay, you know? You don’t sound…” He switches the phone from one hand to the other as he unbuttons a button and pulls his shirt out of his trousers. Better already. He should do that as soon as the office goes quiet, but somehow, he never remembers. “Or, do you need to talk? Not sure I’ll be able to say much, but I can… listen, I guess.”

Not something he’s particularly good at. Easier to have a problem to solve. But he’s fond of Caroline, and he’s certainly willing to try.

“It’s Stefan,” she says, in a near whisper.

Alaric shakes his head. “Stefan. Damon’s brother Stefan? What about him? Does Damon need something?”

“No,” Caroline says, choking again, and Alaric suddenly understands.

“Oh,” he says. He turns his back on the window, and leans against it, instead, grief for a man he barely knew overwhelming him suddenly. He scrubs his hand over his face and the gnawing hunger in his stomach is replaced with something heavier and hotter.

Alaric remembers picking out puzzles in a toy store on the upper east side the day before Christmas just a handful of months ago, the scars on Stefan’s head, the way his eyes had lit up when he’d seen his brother, the horror when he’d realized Damon was in a wheelchair. He closes his eyes.

“Fuck, Care.” A long, long silence. “Is Damon okay?”

“I don’t think so,” Caroline answers, voice so quiet Damon doesn’t think she can be far from where Damon is. “He’s like a robot. He’s going to collapse, and… there’s people around who know him, but I don’t think anyone knows him very well. And I don’t know what to do. I don’t think he would
have wanted me to call you…”

“No,” Alaric agrees, crossing his arm over his stomach. Everything that Damon did for Stefan, and now he’s gone. It must feel like it was all for nothing, and Alaric’s role in it all burns his stomach.

But Damon needs him.

Alaric pushes away from the window, and paces.

“Ric?”

“Yeah,” he says.

“Are you going to come?”

“Yes, of course,” he says, and he’s already at the computer, hoping he can figure out how to book an airline ticket without the help of a personal assistant. “Listen, maybe you shouldn’t tell him. Not until I’m there.” Not that Damon needs the surprise, but Alaric doesn’t want to give him time to refuse the offer, which is exactly what he’d do. “Can you text me the details? I’ll let you know what I figure out.”

She promises, and they say goodnight.

--

At ten o’clock the following morning, Alaric touches down in Charlottesville. By ten thirty he’s behind the wheel of a rental car, listening to the gentle instructions of the GPS lady who has the job of directing him to Mystic Falls, and explaining to his assistant that he won’t be in the office today, maybe part of next week as well. And that no, he’s really not interested in hearing how that complicates things. Louis can take over in his absence, he’ll be working from his room as much as he can, and he’s only a phone call away, in dire emergency.

He strongly emphasizes the word ‘dire’.

Around noon, he finds the bed and breakfast he’s managed to book himself into. The owner, Mrs. Flowers, is dressed in black and looks ready to go to the funeral herself. Alaric showers briefly, shaves, and changes into a black suit.

And right on two o’clock, he arrives at the cemetery Caroline named in her message.

--

There are far more people than Alaric had anticipated. He feels awkward, excessively tall, walking behind the group, a dozen young men wearing football jackets over neat trousers; Stefan’s friends from high school, Alaric assumes. Others the same age, or close to it. There is a man talking to the priest who looks enough like Stefan to mark him as Damon’s family, who has his arm draped over the shoulders of a pretty girl who must be his daughter.

Most of the people are either silent, or weeping quietly. There is music, something quiet and classical, though Alaric can’t tell where it’s coming from. Speakers tucked somewhere, he supposes.

He hasn’t yet seen Damon. Or Caroline, for that matter. And though most of the mourners know each other, and exchange hugs, or at least shake hands, Alaric stands separate. For the first few minutes he’s concerned that someone might recognize him and drive him away, but apparently
what passes for a big scandal in New York doesn’t even make it onto the radar here.

Nice thought.

Alaric tucks his hands in his pockets and wonders how the hell he forgot flowers, and then realizes it’s because usually, Caroline would have organized them. Or one of his assistants. He tells himself there just wasn’t time, and then he hears a voice.

“What are you doing here?”

He turns, and meets Damon’s eyes. He doesn’t look angry. Cold, shuttered. But not angry. Caroline is standing at his side, looking guilty and miserable.

It’s the first time they’ve come face to face since the day in the elevator, weeks ago. Damon looks different, though it might just be grief. His hair is shorter. The lines of worry in his face look deeply etched, and Alaric wishes he could take them away again.

Problem is, he only knows one way to do that, and that’s off the table.

“I just wanted to be here for you,” Alaric says. Damon barely nods, and walks to his chair, by the edge of the grave. Caroline hangs back, and gives Alaric a quick hug.

“He needs you here,” she promises, but Alaric says nothing in reply.

He’s hard to look at. Every one of Damon’s emotions can be read on his face, even when he’s trying hard to conceal them, and though he’s trying now, the pain, and guilt, and misery are clear. The man Alaric now assumes is Damon’s uncle says a couple of quiet words, but looks at Damon like he doesn’t know him well enough to give any real comfort.

Damon shrugs, and stares at the coffin.

The priest starts talking about young lives cut short, and the kingdom of heaven, and since Alaric is pretty fucking sure Damon doesn’t believe in god he thinks this must all sound like very cold comfort. Alaric barely hears, and only watches, and feels a tear roll down his cheek in spite of himself; and then it’s time for the others to speak.

Stefan’s football coach talks about his right arm, and the future he had forfeited when he’d committed an extraordinary feat of heroism. Damon blinks.

Zach, who is most definitely the uncle, talks about a hard-working kid who’d loved Mystic Falls. Damon closes his eyes.

A pretty girl around Stefan’s age, barely able to speak because she is crying so hard, thanks Stefan for saving her life. When she is done, she goes to Damon, vulnerable and miserable and begs for forgiveness. It might be one of the worst things Alaric has ever had to watch. Damon gathers all the strength he has, and stands, and nods, and pulls the girl – Elena. That’s her name – into his arms, and says something into her ear that eases her tears somewhat.

But Alaric thinks that might be all that he has left to give, because when the priest calls his name, he shakes his head.

Zach nudges him, and Damon shakes his head again. Every protective instinct in Alaric’s body wants to go to him, and stand between him and anyone who thinks he hasn’t already given every fucking thing that a person can possibly give. Damon is almost rigid in his chair when Stefan’s coach taps him on the shoulder.
Damon actually growls, and it’s enough to make everyone decide it’s better to just respect his wishes.

And then Stefan is being lowered into the ground, and people start to move away. Some are crying. The boys are talking about some game where Stefan ran three quarters of the way down the field to score a game-winning touchdown in the final seconds and secured them a place in the finals, and Alaric wishes that he could have met him when he was a real kid.

Damon doesn’t move. Not when the priest suggests the really shouldn’t watch them finish up. He shakes him off, and stays exactly where he is. Alaric shifts his weight from foot to foot, and waits.

“I’ll go,” Caroline says, and Alaric pats her arm, watches her walk down the kill towards the gates.

Damon stands, eventually. He looks down into the grave like he’s hoping Stefan might suddenly sit up and announce that the whole thing has been a ploy, and that seems to take the last of his resources. He’s on one knee, suddenly, and then both of them, hands on the grass in front of him, holding himself up as best he can, which honestly isn’t great. It’s enough.

Alaric lowers himself onto the ground beside him, and puts an arm over Damon’s back. He’s mostly expecting to get punched, doesn’t really anticipate the way Damon leans into him, tears that have probably been building for days suddenly pouring from his eyes, keening wildly. It might be the worst sound Alaric has heard in his life and at last he cries too, less for Stefan than for the ruin left behind. His hand cups Damon’s neck, and he doesn’t say a word, just holds him until the sobbing starts to subside. Nearby there are men waiting to finish the burial, but they make no move to hurry anything along.

They’ve probably seen this before. They are quiet and respectful and don’t make eye contact.

“Let me get you home,” Alaric says. Though where home is supposed to be, in this unfamiliar town, he has no idea.

--

In the end, since Damon seems to be unable to speak, Alaric takes him back to his own room. He eases Damon down onto the bed, and pulls up a small armchair. He doesn’t so much as take off his jacket, nor his shoes. Just seems wrong to try to relax.

Damon stares at nothing for at least an hour, and says nothing, and his eyes betray nothing but exhaustion. Alaric only watches. He needs a rulebook, a next thing to do, Meredith whispering in his ear. Something. His own instincts offer him nothing to work with.

“What do you need anything?” he asks, at last.

Damon says nothing, but his eyes flicker to Alaric for a moment.

“Why are you here?” His voice doesn’t sound angry, or accusing. Just tired. Alaric leans in, close as he can get without shifting his chair.

“I couldn’t let you do this by yourself. I know you’re angry with me. I don’t blame you. You don’t have to forgive me, Damon, just let me help you get through this.”

There’s a long silence. “There’s a wake,” Damon says, at last. “I have to go.”

“Do you?” Alaric reaches out, then, runs his hand down Damon’s back, watches as Damon’s eyes close. “If you’re not up to it, you really… you really don’t.”
Damon doesn’t respond, but Alaric feels his body relax a little under the attention.

“Do you need anything?” he asks again.

Damon shifts minutely, hesitantly, and moves over on the bed. Alaric lies alongside him, partially up against the pillows, and bundles him up like they haven’t been apart for weeks. Like he’s easing Damon down. Damon’s head on Alaric’s shoulder and Damon’s arm settled gently across Alaric’s body.

It’s more awkward in suits and shoes than when they are skin to skin with nothing but sweat to separate their bodies.

They lie like that until the sky is pink, and then deep purple, and then black. Damon falls asleep, eventually, his breath evening out, and then getting slower and deeper.

Somewhere along the line Alaric falls asleep as well.

When he wakes, at four in the morning, he’s alone. He scrubs a hand over his face. Might as well get up and do some work.

Chapter End Notes

Hi guys! So the good news is I'll be posting in a few more days. The bad news is... only one instalment of three chapters left. I finished drafting the last three chapters last night, but I was crying so much they're riddled with typos and need significant tidying up. But as soon as that's done, I'll get them posted.
I'll see you later in the week!
~ PBK
Chapter 44

Chapter Summary

Damon isn't coping too well in the aftermath of Stefan's death.

The boarding house feels so foreign. Damon wishes he was staying somewhere else. The shitty motel on the interstate. A tent. Anywhere but the boarding house where if he’s quiet enough, he can hear Stefan running across floorboards and climbing bookshelves.

He sits on the edge of an enormous bed he hasn’t seen before. Apparently Zach is doing well enough to have replaced a fair amount of the furniture in the last few years, and re-fit the bathrooms. Which is fine. But Damon was living in a freezing cold shoebox while his money dwindled to nothing, paying for Stefan’s hospitalization, and it hurts to imagine Zach spending thousands on renovations.

They’re still technically family.

He stares at the floorboards, and if he lets his mind drift he can still sort of see the characters he and Stefan had imagined when they were children, woven into the wood, loops and whorls. A tall man with a long, vertical eye, wearing a very small hat and holding a cane.

It’s been days of condolences, but people are awkward with Damon. No one knows him, not really. He got in his car the day after graduation and only stayed in touch with Stefan. Didn’t come back until Giuseppe was dead.

He supposes he can’t really blame them.

There’s a soft knock on the door and it opens a few inches.

“I just got a call from the minister,” Zach says, looking embarrassed. “His wife wants to bring over a casserole.” He shifts his weight from foot to foot. “I just wanted to see if you were gonna be here. I don’t know if you have plans, or…”

Damon stands, and shifts himself to a chair to put on a pair of boots, zipping them over his ankles. He snatches his jacket off a hook before pulling the door the rest of the way open.

“I have plans,” he says, as he slips past Zach and heads for the stairs.

“Damon?”

Damon stops and turns back.

“Do you know how long you’re staying? It’s just I… the room. I mean I figure you have your own life to get back to.”

“I’ll pay you for the room,” Damon snarls, and continues down the stairs.

“That’s not what I meant,” Zach calls. “Damon, would you slow the fuck down?”
Damon is at the front door by the time Zach catches up with him, grabbing his elbow. “You think I don’t get it?”

Damon pulls his arm away and glares the magic Damon glare which has been getting rid of people for his entire life, but Zach stays where he is.

“I get it. I’m sorry. I fucked up. We fucked up. We left you to deal with Stefan on your own. You took him to the city —”

“Oh, point me to where all the amazing rehab hospitals in Mystic Falls are,” he snarls.

“I know. I’m not saying – you gave up everything, and you were gone. And it was easy to forget, day to day. I fucked up. People sometimes asked how he was going, and I’d… I meant to call, and I didn’t.”

“Thanks. Apology accepted, if that’s what that was. I’m leaving now.”

“Can’t you talk about this for one minute?”

Damon turns and takes a step towards Zach, face a mask of pure venom. He wonders if it actually hides the frustration and pain, but suspects that maybe it does not, because Zach still has that pitying, apologetic look on his face. “Why? So you can feel less guilty? So you can tell yourself next week when I’m gone that you did everything you could?”

“Despite everything,” Zach says, “we’re still family.”

“Well, congratulations. We’re not family any more. I’ll give you my credit card details tomorrow for the room and I’ll be gone by the end of the week.”

And he pulls the door closed behind him, hard enough so the glass rattles in the cabinets.

--

It’s a fairly long walk into town but maybe Damon needs it, because by the time he finds himself standing at the door of the Grill he’s actually feeling a little better. It hasn’t changed, but it never does. It’s looked like this since he used to play pool in here with Mason Lockwood as a teenager. He feels eyes on him, but he ignores everyone, and finds himself a place at the end of the bar.


“Rocks?”

“Neat.” Damon doesn’t even look up, just waits, and acknowledges the drink with barely a nod. He’s halfway through his second when someone takes the stool alongside his and it’s fucking annoying, because there are plenty, and he wants some space. He turns with a curled lip and a sharp ‘fuck off’ on his tongue, but stops, because it’s Alaric.

He hates that Alaric can make him feel calm, even now. It’s not fair. He raises the tumbler to his lips and drains it.

“Whatever he’s drinking,” Alaric says. “And another for him.”

Damon rolls his eyes, and clenches his teeth, but he doesn’t turn down the drink, or ask Alaric to leave. “What are you still doing here?” he asks, after a good ten minutes. “Isn’t New York falling apart without you?”
“Caroline’s gone home. Figure she can be acting CEO for a few days.” It’s a stupid joke and neither of them so much as crack a smile. “I just didn’t want to leave until…”

There’s a long silence, but Damon shatters it. “Until?”

“Until I know you’re alright.”

Damon snatches his fresh drink up and takes a sip. “I’m alright. You should go.” But Alaric doesn’t look like he’s planning to go anywhere. He flips through a menu, but Damon knows he’ll get a burger and onion rings, because he gets the same thing in every fucking bar they’ve ever been to, just about.

“Caroline shouldn’t have told you about Stefan,” he says, but his voice betrays him, sounding hollow instead of angry. Alaric doesn’t respond. He won’t be baited into an argument.

They’re silent for a long time, until Alaric orders dinner, and Damon feels reasonably confident that no amount of silence is going to make him leave. “I have no idea what I’m supposed to do next,” he says. “There’s nothing keeping me in New York anymore.” He glances up. It had been a deliberate dig, and the brief stab of pain on Alaric’s face satisfies him somewhat.

“You still have a job.”

“No thanks.”

“Think about it. Your manager told me he wanted to send you off for some training. We might even swing college part time. You’ve got talent.”

“Think I said no thanks.” A tight, ugly smile.

Alaric orders another round. Damon should be getting sloppy, but he’s not. Too much fucking casserole, maybe. Seems unlikely, since he’s barely been able to choke down a complete meal since Stefan died.

Oh, god. Stefan died.

“Need to get out of the apartment, too,” he says, swallowing down a fresh lump in his throat. Can’t, but he tries. “I will. Soon as I figure out what the hell I’m going to do next.”

“There’s no rush,” Alaric says, sounding weary. “It doesn’t matter to me.”

“Matters to me.”

Alaric doesn’t argue, which is to his credit. And they sit in silence for a few hours until Damon realizes he’s so drunk he can hardly stand and Alaric pours him, alone, into a taxi, back to the boarding house.

--

The following night, Damon looks up when the front door of the Grill opens right on seven o’clock, and there is Alaric again. Great jeans (new, he thinks, maybe Alaric hadn’t packed for enough days, he’s had to actually buy clothes in Mystic Falls which is sort of hilarious) and a dark red t-shirt which makes his hazel eyes look slightly green.

They drink and they drink and they don’t talk much until Alaric asks about the last time Damon saw Stefan. Damon talks in general terms. He’d been miserable and uncommunicative and Damon
wishes he’d understood what it meant, but he hadn’t, and there’s no one to blame. No one to blame. If he says it enough times he might believe it.

Alaric pats his shoulder and orders another round. Damon presses into the touch like he’s been starving for it, like he has, and Alaric seems to just know, gives a squeeze and leaves his hand where it is.

Close to midnight, Damon leaves, still able to stand under his own steam, which is something.

Four nights in a row Alaric comes to the Grill and each time it’s the exact same thing. Sit quietly, don’t talk, and eventually Damon ends up filling the space with sound. Fifth night Alaric beats him there and Damon can’t do it again. He turns on his heel and storms straight back out of the Grill, pacing in the car park.

As expected, Alaric is out there a moment later, looking relieved that he doesn’t have to chase Damon down the street or something. Damon heads for the alley as soon as he’s been seen because he wants to yell, but not in front of the whole of Mystic Falls.

“I’m sorry,” Alaric says, like it’s been building up for days.

“Sorry now? Good for you.”

“Sorry for fucking weeks. Haven’t I left you messages? Haven’t I fucking tried, Damon? I’m sorry. I fucked up. I know I screwed up. I love you, and I screwed up.”

Damon can feel tears of frustration burning his eyes, threatening to spill. “Then this is a special moment for you. Good on you, Ric. Guess we both got a little character development out of this.”

“Okay, that’s probably fair,” Alaric says, though Damon can see him biting back a considerably stronger reaction. “I’m not tryin’ to make this about myself, I swear.”

“Oh, give yourself a break,” Damon spits back. “You’re rich enough to buy a whole person, of course you make everything about yourself.”

Alaric flinches, which feels fantastic. His face also falls, which doesn’t thrill Damon nearly as much. But in that instant he becomes the representative of everything that is wrong with Damon’s life. Damon flies at him, punching him across the jaw, which Alaric takes like a champ, and then underneath the chin, which goes less well.

Damon realizes moments later that he wants Alaric to fight back. Alaric still looks stupefied, but he’s a boxer, can’t ignore his instincts for long. Damon is expecting to feel a blow returned, but Alaric is only defending himself. Hands flying left and right, deflecting every punch. Talking the entire time, holy fuck, does he ever stop talking? Trying to make Damon calm down. Finally he grabs one of Damon’s wrists, and then the other, and Damon can’t think clearly enough to twist his arms, and he just struggles, keeps trying to lash out. And he is turned around, suddenly and inexplicably, and his body hits the wall, one cheek pressed against the rough brick. He splutters, kicks back, and Alaric immobilizes him against the wall. Damon feels his head start to swim.

“Calm down, Damon,” Alaric growls. “Calm down.” He has Damon’s wrists held firm over his head. It hurts. But it feels good. Feels so fucking good, and so safe, which makes Damon an idiot. He feels tears run down his cheeks and he stops struggling. Lets that weird calm wash over him. He’s missed this too much, being powerless and powerful at the same time. He knows if he tells Alaric to stop, if so much as whispers it, Alaric will back down.

He doesn’t.
Alaric’s hands on Damon feel so right. He fights, he struggles, and the tighter Alaric’s grasp is, the more securely he’s held to the wall, the safer he feels. He can fight. Alaric won’t let him get hurt.

It is so fucked up that this is the best he can get. His legs try to sag, and he knows he is done. Feels a little spacy, even.

Alaric leans in, lips close to Damon’s ear. “I only came to give you a shoulder to lean on,” he says quietly. “If you want me to leave, Damon, one word and I’m gone.”

Damon’s chest heaves. This is it. This is going to be the moment when he finally loses his shit. In the filthy, rubbish strewn alley behind the Grill, with dirt in his mouth and his knuckles in screaming pain because someone has a jaw made of concrete.

Alaric’s voice again. And Alaric’s thumb, brushing over Damon’s hand. It brings back much nicer memories. “Please, Damon. Please, don’t ask me to.”

Alaric eases up his grip on Damon’s wrists, and Damon sobs, half collapses. “I failed him,” he says, and he feels Alaric’s arms move around him.

“You didn’t. He had an aneurysm, Damon. It was a ticking time bomb. There’s nothing you could have done.” Lips up close to Damon’s jaw like the last couple of months never even happened.

Damon leans back into Alaric’s chest, humiliated by the way his body wants and needs Alaric’s body, the comfort he can bring. And he shakes his head because he knows it’s not true. If he’d been around more, if he’d spent more time with Stefan, he would have understood, could have got him help as soon as he needed it.

And the worst thing of all…

“Sometimes,” he says, barely loud enough for Alaric to hear, “I’m glad he’s gone.”

Alaric doesn’t react. His fingers move over the back of Damon’s neck, slow and soothing, and his lips brush against Damon’s ear. “It’s alright.”

It’s not. It’s really not alright. Even if there was almost nothing left of the real Stefan, it’s not alright that he’s glad his brother is dead. He’d had a life, his cards, his puzzles – not the life he’d imagined, not the life anyone wanted for him, but when he’d smiled, he was still there somewhere.

If Alaric wasn’t holding him upright Damon would fall. But he does, holds him up and holds him tight and keeps him together and maybe it’s a surprise to Alaric when Damon angles his head up for a kiss but it couldn’t be as much of a surprise to him as it is to Damon.

He’s no less enthusiastic for the surprise, though. He turns Damon in his arms. One hand falls to the hollow of Damon’s lower back, pulling him closer, and his mouth opens against Damon’s. Damon feels a shudder of surrender go through him, and he grips Alaric’s shirt.

“Take me somewhere,” he says, but he can’t meet Alaric’s eyes. “Fucking anywhere, I don’t care.”

--

Mrs. Flowers is nowhere to be seen when Alaric sneaks Damon in through the front door and up the stairs to his room. They’re barely through the door before Damon is pulling his shirt over his head and clawing at Alaric’s clothes. He doesn’t care about the consequences, or tomorrow, just right now. Alaric pushes him onto the bed and unbuckles his belt, drags his jeans down over his ass. He presses his lips to Damon’s stomach and Damon arches his back, lifting himself off the
“Doesn’t change anything,” he says, though even as he says it he’s really not sure.

“‘s alright,” Alaric says. “Doesn’t have to. Whatever you need.”

This is so sadly unplanned that Damon isn’t even in a position to demand to be fucked. No lube, and he has enough pain in his life right now without letting himself get fucked dry. Alaric seems to know what he needs, though, big hands pressing against his body, his mouth dragging over Damon’s skin. Insistent, relentless, dominant without needing rope or gags or anything else (though Damon might have admitted under duress that he’d side-eyed the belt, just for a moment), even with Damon’s cock in his mouth.

By the time they are both spent, Damon is exhausted, mentally, physically, unable to do anything but let Alaric manhandle him into position to be held. Coddled, he supposes, though that was very far from a scene. He stares unseeingly at the floral wallpaper until it looks like splatters of ink against a white background, calmer every minute.

“What time is it?”

Alaric turns his head to look, but he doesn’t answer the question. “Early. Doesn’t matter. How long since you got a good night’s sleep? Sleep.”

Damon wants to argue. Wants to head back to the boarding house. But it feels so right, being here, relaxing like he’s coming down from a really intense scene; he decides not to bother. It feels right being told what to do. He’ll wake up early and sneak out before Alaric can wake up and stop him.

And the hand on his shoulder is nice, and when Alaric tangles their fingers together, that’s alright as well.

--

His plans are shot in the morning when he wakes to find Alaric sitting on a chair beside the bed, dressed and with his bag packed. Damon lifts his head and tries to make sense of it, but he can’t. And it’s true, he’s just had the best night’s sleep he’s had in months.

“Didn’t want to wake you,” Alaric says. Damon closes his eyes and eases himself back down onto the bed.

“You’re leaving.” It isn’t a question. He meets Alaric’s eyes, and Alaric nods.

“I have to,” he says. “I was gonna tell you last night at the Grill, but… obviously got sidetracked. Been tryin’ to work from here during the day but everyone’s gettin’ antsy. I have to get back.”

What day is it? Maybe Monday. Damon isn’t sure. The days are crashing together.

“I’ll get up.”

“You don’t have to. Mrs. Flowers isn’t gonna boot you out. It’s still early.” He leans closer, and reaches for Damon’s hand, holding it in both of his own. “Damon. I want you to come back.”

“Come back where? I’m not working for you again. Fuck that.” Ugh, is he not having this conversation right now.

“Not what I meant. Listen. Stay here as long as you need to stay here. But when you get back to the city – come and see me. Or call me. I want to talk. Properly talk.” His thumbs work in circles over
the back of Damon’s hand, and finally he encloses it between his palms. “Please. There’s… there’s stuff we need to talk about. I don’t want to leave things like this.”

Damon shrugs. Mood shot. Wants to hide under the blankets. A few hours ago his head was empty and he was enjoying the first orgasm he hadn’t had to provide himself in months. And now there’s reality.

“Fine,” he says. Maybe he means it, maybe he doesn’t. But he wants Alaric gone. Alaric kisses his forehead, lifts his suitcase, and heads towards the door.

He looks back, and their eyes catch, and Alaric puts his bag down again, comes back to the bed. He kisses Damon hard, deep, insistent. A memorable kiss. Damon lets out a mewl that’s pitiful as much as it is needy and feels once again the way every cell in his body seems to crave Alaric.

It’s been so long since he’s been just Damon. Not Stefan’s brother, no Giuseppe’s disappointing oldest son, not Alaric’s submissive. He returns the kiss, but even as he does, he knows he won’t go back to New York. Not any time soon.

“Love you,” Alaric says one more time, and he’s gone.

Damon stares out the window until it gets to be too much, which isn’t long at all, in the end.
Chapter 45

Chapter Summary

Alaric waits.
And waits.
And waits.
In which we find out why this story is called The compromise.

The next few days are sheer chaos, which is a blessing, in a way. An unscheduled week off – week and a bit, really – has sent some people into a tailspin, though really, everything is ticking along nicely. Louis knows his job. Just some people don’t like not being able to ask Alaric questions the second they want information. A board meeting that should have been held the week before is scheduled for Wednesday, so it’s close to midnight Wednesday night when he gets home.

Alaric checks his phone every chance he gets through the day, but Damon hasn’t tried to call since they said goodbye in Mystic Falls.

He drinks a nightcap and sleeps on top of the sheets. Friday. If he hasn’t heard from Damon by Friday, he’ll call.

Caroline is quiet, Thursday morning. She doesn’t ask questions, but she probably wants to. Friday morning, the traffic is terrible, and Alaric is already answering email on his laptop in the back seat.

“Do you know if he’s back yet?” she asks, quietly.

“No,” Alaric answers, with a sigh. “He promised he’d call, but…”

He glances up in time to see Caroline bite her lip in the rear view mirror. He’s pretty sure there’s something he is supposed to say, but he can’t find the words. Like he should apologize for not fixing it, something like that. “You’d tell me if he called you, right?” he asks, and she hesitates, but nods.

“Have a good day, boss,” she says, pulling up close to the elevators in the underground parking garage.

“I’ll try,” Alaric grumbles back, collecting his things and climbing out of the car.

Alaric calls Damon’s cell at lunch time and doesn’t even get a signal before he is sent to voicemail.

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The days have long since become weeks.

It’s over. It’s definitely over. Alaric can feel it in his bones. Damon will clear out his things and leave a message with one of Alaric’s assistants, or maybe Caroline, and he’ll just leave, start again on the other side of the country. He has money now. Maybe he’ll go to college. Maybe he’ll open a fucking shoe shop or become a realtor.

Alaric knows the script. He’s supposed to say it doesn’t matter where Damon goes, as long as he’s
happy. But it’s bullshit. Complete bullshit. The fact that it is Alaric’s fault does nothing to mitigate the fact that it’s bullshit and he hates it.

“Hi,” he says, to Damon’s voice mail box. “I was hopin’ you might… well. I hope Mystic Falls is treatin’ you right. I just wanted to see how things are goin’. Just…”

He’s halfway through trying to end the sentence when he’s cut off.

Alaric calls the boarding house in Mystic Falls but Zach says Damon left the day after Alaric did. This unwanted knowledge seems to leech all the color out of everything. Alaric remembers one day that he still has a key to Damon’s apartment, and he stands in front of it for a long time, debating with himself. There’s no answer when he knocks, and when he finally opens the door, everything is still there.

He can imagine Damon leaving all of his clothes behind, he really can. But not those books.

--

Life goes back to normal, whatever normal means anymore. Saturday nights, a couple of times a month, there’s dinner for seven. Starts out awkward because no one knows how to react to the fact that the boyfriend they’d met back in March was… well, at least no one uses the words, and after the first dinner, no one mentions his name, either.

As the summer gives way to the fall, Alaric starts to find himself remembering the crushing loneliness that had led him to try that insane experiment in the first place. He checks Damon’s apartment at least once a week. It’s always clean. The service he’d arranged when he bought the place hasn’t said a word about the fact that no one is living there; they just emptied the refrigerator after the first couple of weeks, and kept right on vacuuming. Alaric wishes they wouldn’t. He could deal with dust settling on the surfaces. He can’t stand the little prickle of hope he feels when he first opens the door and finds that it’s so clean inside.

In late September he goes on his first real date since probably a year before he’d met Damon. It’s awful. The guy is quick witted, good looking, and manages to slip into casual conversation that he hasn’t yet met a kink he didn’t appreciate. But it feels so wrong. Before they have a chance to decide whether or not to order dessert Alaric excuses himself, promises five ways that it is one hundred percent him, and not this guy, and he leaves the restaurant to go straight home and drink on the couch until he’s unconscious.

So that’s two things in one night that he hasn’t done in a really long time.

The hangover the next day is bad enough to remind him of why.

The anniversary of the day they met, Alaric tries to call Damon for what he swears will be the last time. He’s practiced the speech out loud at least thirty times. It’s under a minute long. He’s ready. But there’s no voicemail, no busy signal, just a robotic voice telling Alaric the number is no longer in service.

And that’s the moment when he finally accepts that it’s over.

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Lots of people live long happy lives without relationships. Date or don’t date, work hard, plan for retirement, and Alaric’s current favorite thing to do, watch the progress on the now six hospital sites across the country. He wonders if Damon has any idea of what’s happening with them, and hopes that if he does know, he is proud. Maybe. Fingers crossed. The Louisville Women’s Hospital
will be twice the size, when it’s done, with three times the number of birthing suites and a transit system which will cut emergency response times to four minutes maximum – not bad for a place facing complete closure. In Queens, a smaller venture, Alaric has bought up a site which had been a free clinic open part time for gay men until it was closed due to budget cuts. The site is clear; they’ll break ground tomorrow, and in twelve months, roughly, it will be open full time, three times the size, with a counseling center and an in-patient substance abuse clinic. Alaric’s life is full, and he doesn’t need anything else.

He really, really doesn’t. He reminds himself of this every time he finds it’s ten o’clock at night and he’s still in the office, looking out over the city he helped build, because he can’t bear to go home to an empty apartment.

He stares out over the city as the fall turns to winter, and as the snow begins to fall, and as the city is lit up with Christmas lights. He spends Christmas with his mother, who doesn’t recognize him, and his father, who has never seemed so frail. He tells himself if this is the last Christmas he has with them it is going to be a good one, and he spends hours reading out loud to Diane, who doesn’t seem to understand, but enjoys the attention, and sitting quietly by his father watching the Twilight Zone on DVD.

“That fellow,” Ed says, on Boxing Day. He’s wearing the warm sweater Alaric gave him for Christmas and a pair of sheepskin boots he’s already said are the most comfortable things he’s ever owned.

Alaric shakes his head. “No, dad,” he says.

“Pity. You were a handsome couple.”

Alaric swallows hard, and wonders how much his kind father really knows.

“I just mean you looked happy. You don’t look happy now. Too much work, not enough of everything else.”

“I’m happy right now, dad,” Alaric says, and he closes his hand over his father’s trembling hand. It feels like onion skin. It’s as much as they say.

On the 27th of December Alaric goes home, and life goes on as it has been.

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He stares out over the city as the snow falls, and melts. As the winter becomes spring, as the leaves return to the trees and the blossoms start to appear. He watches. He stares, and he watches, and his life is so full he can barely sleep at night.

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March 19th, 2016.

Alaric wakes early for a Saturday, and since the weather is starting to get warmer, instead of heading to the gym, he heads out for a jog in Central Park. Already the city is bursting into color. It’s actually enough to make Alaric smile. Good sign; maybe he’s going to get out of this rut at last. Dinner tonight, and Sunday to rest up.

He’s back within the hour, pouring sweat, and almost misses Damon sitting on one of the couches in the foyer.
He looks good. He looks very good. A little tan. Strong. His eyes are bright, and his gaze is direct. He doesn’t look happy, but he looks content, and Alaric is pretty sure at this point in life that content is the better option. Happiness is too often fleeting.

He stands and crosses the foyer to where Alaric is standing. He really is pouring sweat, so it would be completely disgusting to pull Damon into his arms. Too sweaty, in fact, to so much as shake his hand. But he does smile, and nod, and wipe sweat off his brow.

“You look good,” he says, and Damon smirks.


“Are you back?”

Damon hesitates. “What do you mean?”

What does he mean? Alaric shakes his head. “I mean back in the city.”

Damon nods briskly. “I found an apartment,” he says. “In New Jersey.” He shrugs. “Have to make the money stretch. No job yet but there’s always a job for a bartender.”

Alaric wants to stomp his feet and holler but he only nods. He also wants to know why Damon is in the building, but he can’t make himself ask.

“I thought I’d start packing,” Damon says. “Sorry I left it so long.”

“I told you there was no rush.”

They look at each other, and they don’t look at each other, and it’s probably time to write this off. But Alaric can’t. “Were you waiting for me?”

Damon shakes his head. “I’m waiting for some boxes to be – oh, I think that’s my guy.” He points to the doors, and sure enough, there’s someone coming through with a trolley full of boxes. Alaric’s heart sinks. “I’d better get on with it.”

Alaric nods, and watches Damon walk away. His stomach hurts like it hasn’t since the phone number stopped working. He turns away, and heads towards the elevators, but he stops when he hears Damon call him back.

“What would you have said?”

There’s no context. Alaric shakes his head. “When?”

“You said you wanted to talk when I got back to the city. What would you have said?”

Alaric’s shoulders slump, and he takes a step forward. “Come to the penthouse when you’ve finished with your boxes.”

“I shouldn’t.”

“Damon…” Damon owes him nothing. Alaric has no grounds. “Please.”

Damon turns away, and nods, and follows the delivery guy to the elevator.

How long can it take Damon to pack, Alaric asks himself every ten minutes. Or was he just trying to escape? It always takes longer than you think it will and truth be told Alaric has used a service
for his last two moves, and promised himself he’d never move again when he set up here. He really can’t remember. He showers, washes his hair, even contemplates shaving, for a minute or two. He reads the current page of the book he’s reading fifteen times and doesn’t take in a word. He paces, and he stands in front of the window, staring out over the city he loves, and he waits, and he waits.

It’s mid afternoon, three o’clock, when the intercom beeps. Alaric lets it up, and opens his door to the tiny foyer, and waits for it to settle into place. There’s a soft chime before the doors open. And now he’s clean and fresh and a hug would not be out of the question, but it still is. Moment is gone.

“Can I get you a coffee?” he asks, by way of greeting, as Damon takes a cautious step inside. He looks around wistfully and Alaric is forced to remember that he once thought of this apartment as home.

“Got something stronger?”

“Beer?”

“Bourbon?”

Alaric nods, and crosses to the bar, while Damon tries to decide where on the couch would be safe to sit. Alaric pours drinks, and pushes one into Damon’s hand as he sits on the end of the chaise.

“You look good.”

“You said that.” Damon sips his drink, and sets it on the coffee table. “I don’t have much time.” He’s lying, Alaric is sure of it. “Just tell me. What would you have said?”

“Where have you been, Damon?”

Damon stands, and moves to the windows. “I always loved this view.” He’s quiet for a while. “I travelled. Went to Europe for a few months. North Africa. It was good. Spent a ton of cash, but I don’t need much any more. I watched the papers, though. Not the actual papers. Who buys papers? Online.” He’s talking quickly, nervous. “The hospitals are going well.”

Alaric watches as Damon sticks his hands in his pockets, and looks out over the city. “So tell me. What would you have said?”

Alaric downs his bourbon, too fast. “I was… I was tryin’ to come up with a compromise. That’s… that’s all.”

“A compromise. Nice.” Damon’s face hardens, and he turns around. “Love to know what you came up with. Did you think we could date? After all of that? Please.”

Alaric rubs his forehead with the fingers of one hand. “No, I… no.”

“So, what? Fewer days? Make sure we keep our faces out of the paper?”

“Would you shut up? I’m tryin’ to say something here.”

“More money? No. I didn’t mind being a hooker,” Damon says, voice flat and just a little barbed. “Just being treated like one.”

“’m not… Damon. Would you shut up? I tried. I thought about it. Those days in Mystic Falls I didn’t think about anything else. I fuckin’ missed you, Damon. My life is better with you in it. I’m
better with you in my life. I don’t care how we met. We were good for each other. Didn’t you think that?”

The sudden and brief flash of misery on Damon’s face says yes, he thinks so too.

“So I thought and I thought and fuck, after everything we’ve been through together… no. I didn’t wanna date. I didn’t wanna go backwards. And I don’t want you – I mean, I didn’t want you – to feel like a…”

He can’t say hooker, he can’t.

His hand closes over the velvet covered box in his trouser pocket. For months he’d carried it everywhere, tucked in his satchel, in the pocket of his jeans when he headed out for a casual meal. Like a talisman that might bring Damon back. He turns it in his hand the way he’s done a thousand times before.

“I thought maybe instead of paying you we could work on a sort of… what’s mine is yours basis,” he says, and feels heat rise to his cheeks. Damon narrows his eyes. “I thought…”

He takes a breath and pulls the box from his pocket, opens it up. Plain silver band with a very narrow gold band running around it, off center. He’d looked at it at least once a day from the time he’d bought it until the day Damon’s voicemail hadn’t picked up, and then he’d stopped looking, just carried the thing from place to place.

“Ric. What the hell is that.”

Alaric looks up and all the color has drained from Damon’s face.

“Exactly what you think it is,” he says.

“You were gonna ask a prostitute to marry you. Seriously.”

Alaric shakes his head. “No. I was gonna ask you.” He holds the box out, and after a long moment, Damon takes it. “That was my compromise. Best I could come up with. I don’t give a shit about the tabloids, Damon. I did, once. But after last year… I just didn’t care any more. I wanted you. Every which way. Watching movies on the couch. Tied to the bed frame. Waiting for me to come home from work in the spa. Workin’ in the PR department. Sunday afternoons listening to music in dive bars all over the city. All of it.” He shifts his weight from foot to foot and tries to remember if he’s ever felt this unsure of himself in his life; the only time he can come up with is the day he asked for the money to transform the train station. He feels so young.

And not in a good way.

“Don’t move to New Jersey,” he says, stepping closer, brushing fingers over Damon’s arm. “Move in here. Let’s make a go of it. You don’t have to wear that ring. Just think about it. Let me send you on some college courses in the fall. Business, PR, fuckin’ fine art, whatever you want. Be here. Be with me. Let me love you the way you deserve to be loved. I swear, I’ll be better than I was.”

Damon keeps staring at the ring.

“This is my compromise, Damon. You can have whatever you want. Just stay. I love you.” His voice cracks over the final syllables and his throat seems to close.

Damon looks up at last. “You switched to present tense.”
“I did,” Alaric says. “I’ve been tellin’ myself for eight months that you’re gone and there’s nothin’ I can do about it. But you’re here. So. One last shot. I love you. Stay. Marry me.”

Damon closes the box. “I need time to think about it,” he says, and Alaric’s heart sinks. He forces himself to nod, to tak a half-step back that his body objects to fiercely. “What the fuck. No, I don't. Fucking hell, Ric. Fuck. You’ve made my life insane. You practically owe me half of everything you own.” He opens the box again. “But do it properly.”

It takes Alaric way too long to understand that somewhere in there was a yes. His face realizes before his brain fully catches up, and he’s smiling widely by the time he takes the ring from the box, and reaches for Damon’s hand.

Damon pulls it away, and raises his eyebrows, deadpan. Alaric rolls his eyes, and gets down on one knee. There in front of the window it sort of feels like the whole of New York City is watching. He takes Damon’s hand.

“Marry me,” he says.

Damon shrugs. “Fine. But you’re going to need a bigger wardrobe.”

“You’re a fuckin’ mouthy asshole,” Alaric says, with a smile, as he settles the ring into place on Damon’s hand.

“Worst sub in history,” Damon says, and he closes his hand into Alaric’s, pulls him to his feet. “I missed you,” and they’re in each other’s arms again, where they’re supposed to be. Mouths moving together, fingers bunched in clothing like they’ve forgotten how to get out of it.

“I have to break my lease,” Damon murmurs, when Alaric breaks the kiss.

“You can afford it,” Alaric answers, with a grin, and draws Damon close again.
Chapter 46

Chapter Summary

The epilogue.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

~ Epilogue ~

Not that Damon has ever had any kind of objection to being the center of attention –

Okay, scratch that.

Damon likes being the center of attention when it suits him. Better? Better. Not a fan of reporters in his face, no, but when the reasons are right, he likes it. Eyes on him. Makes him feel real. Hands shaken, compliments exchanged, all of that he can more than live with.

He takes a seat at the grand piano. Still can’t believe Alaric got a fucking grand piano brought to the penthouse, but he did. Took days. He had to get it winched in through a window. Took the window out and put it back again. They’d had to stay in a hotel for a week, but it was worth it. Damon winces, as he sits.

“I can’t believe I’m getting married with my ass so bruised I can’t sit comfortably,” he calls out. “Reception’s gonna be hell. Just come out here. How long does it really take to adjust a cummerbund?” he finishes quietly, fingers running over the keys for a moment. A few bars of Tchaikovsky and he slips into the intro to Little Amsterdam, segues seamlessly to the bridal march because he’s Damon Salvatore and he’s hilarious.

“We could elope,” Alaric calls from the bedroom. “Seriously, it’s not too late to elope.”

“Nooooooope. You’re marrying me in front of everyone you’ve ever met.” Damon smirks. He might be bruised from his ass to the back of his knee but he’s buoyant. Something about doing this right. It’ll be in the papers tomorrow and there will, no doubt, be snide remarks here and there but mostly it’ll be about the previously famously reclusive billionaire bachelor Alaric Saltzman marrying the hottest guy in Manhattan in front of five hundred of his closest friends. Family, friends, the odd celebrity. No Stefan, but sometimes Damon imagines he’s somewhere watching, on his less atheist days. Alaric’s dad will watch on a webcam; Alaric actually hired someone to go set it up and wait until the whole thing is finished in case anything goes wrong.

The engagement party had been huge, too, message sent and received; don’t bother trying to embarrass us. We’re not embarrassed. Probably better than the wedding because hellooooooo he hadn’t had to endure it with an ass this bruised.

(Damon wouldn’t swap it for anything. When he closes his eyes ha can feel the spreader bar between his knees, another between his ankles. Wrists suspended in the air. He can feel Alaric pressed up behind him, a hand tipping his chin back, Alaric whispering that the honeymoon will involve harsher restraints than these, so long as Damon is good. Damon is prepared to be good.)
Alaric comes out of the bedroom at last. Not a bad approximation of a groom, but Damon fixes his bow tie anyway, mostly because he wants some excuse to put his hands on Alaric and ripping his clothes off will make them unfashionably late.

Caroline drives the limousine. She double checks three times (so what is that, quadruple checks? Whatever) whether Alaric really doesn’t want one of his own.

He does not.

“I’m not going to be able to sit through the reception,” Damon complains, but Alaric remains unconvinced. He just grins, and takes another sip of his whiskey, and pauses to adjust the flower pinned to Damon’s lapel.

Their eyes meet and catch the may they do and Alaric leans in to kiss him.

“Have we ticked the box on every embarrassing cliché?” Alaric asks. “You’re the one who made the list.”

“More or less,” Damon says, and they’re pulling up outside the hotel, red carpet rolled all the way down the steps. Wedding in the courtyard, so many guests it’s standing room only, and the reception in the grand ballroom starting at seven.

Damon squeezes Alaric’s thigh, and they pause for a long moment.

“You ready?” Alaric asks. He hates the spotlight, he always has, but he looks happy.

“Stop stalling,” Damon says, with a grin, and they step out of the limousine to face the future together.

Chapter End Notes

You guys, I did it.
I can't believe what a ride this has been. I apologize for the long breaks, I thank you for every review (I will be responding to everything I haven't yet responded to, now that I'm finished) and I thank each one of you for coming along with me on this insane adventure. Thanks for the encouraging message on tumblr on and off anon, too, they've been such a treat. Just thanks. I couldn't have finished without the encouragement, it means so much to me.
I don't know what's next! There are a number of unfinished deleted scenes which I might tidy up and post at some point - mostly plotless porn and things that plot changes rendered useless.
I'm way too emotional to say any more. Just, thank you. Thank you so much. You guys are the greatest.
~ PBK

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!