

CHAPTER 08

Minneapolis, January 13th

“Then I was running around the city to get here.” The last part had gotten his ears to stop burning, but hearing himself say how Henry had acted, the things he’d said, made him realize just how insane it all sounded.

But he’d also realized something else. He didn’t like it, but...
“I’m going to have to go back to the frat.”

“No,” Eric said.

“Dad, they know what’s going on. They know what happened to me.”

“They lied and said you are on drugs, Thomas,” His mother said. “They insisted we call them as soon as we saw you. Why would they do that if they are your friends?”

“Maybe they’re just worried about how it’ll look for them if I tell people they did this to me. I’m sure they’ll calm down once I tell them I’m not going to talk to anyone about this.”

“According to what you said,” his father said, “Henry didn’t sound worried. He talked about using you, what you could do.”

Thomas nodded. That hadn’t sounded like Henry at all. Maybe he’d been replaced? The idea would sound insane if he hadn’t teleported half a dozen times on the way here.

“Maybe he just got overly excited. He said I’d done the impossible. He’s had time to calm down. I’m sure he’s going to be reasonable now. He’s always been really supportive and helpful.”

Eric shook his head. “I’ve been looking into the families that are part of Sigma Theta Gamma and—”

“Dad,” Thomas said, unable to keep the whine out of his voice.

"I can't believe you've been investigating them just because I live at the frat."

"That's not why I did it, Thomas." His father took a deep breath. "While you were in the hospital during the holidays, after we found out in the grotto, Ettore convinced me not to contact the authorities. His arguments kind of made sense at the time; and you woke up, so I didn't feel like pushing. But once we got home from my father's I started wondering why he'd think he could be the reason for what happened to you."

Thomas nodded, remembering his future uncle-in-law asking him about what had happened when it was only the two of them in the hospital room. His insistence that Thomas could tell him anything about the people who had done this to him. That Ettore could protect him and his family."

"Did you know that the Lewistons have been tied to stuff that's happened in Denver?"

Thomas shook his head. He hadn't even known 'stuff' had happened there. What reason did he have to know anything about that city?

"They were almost wiped out a few years ago in some attack. I couldn't get the details. It's like they've been erased, but the number of death couldn't. I also looked into the Richards. Your friend Kuno, his family is a lot more than 'tight with the police' as that Rowling boy said. They have people in all levels of politics across the state."

"How about Yating?" Judith asked while Thomas tried to take in what his father said.

Kuno had never said anything about his family being political. Not that he had a reason. Unlike Felix Chouteau, the margay didn't brag about how important his family was.

"I've confirmed their estate is quite large, but it's difficult to get more personal information on them since they are in Taiwan. It does confirm they are rich."

"You knew that already, dad," Thomas protested. "It was like the first thing you told me when you found out I'd been accepted into the frat and offered a room. How they're rich and we're not."

"That is not what I said, Thomas."

"It's what you meant."

"But you're only a Freshman," Nadia said, placing a hand on Eric's arm. "Doesn't it make you wonder why they let you move there when they should have waited until next year?"

Thomas shrugged. "They had the room. Limbani, Kuno, and Laurence are also Freshmen."

"But you aren't from one of those families, Thomas," Eric said, sounding calmer. "My concern now isn't about the wealth difference anymore, but about how they might have acquired that wealth. And if my worries are justified, just how far would they go to get you back."

Roland snorted and earned himself stares. "What? All they have to do is get one of them to show his ass or his cock and Thomas is going to go running to them."

"Roland!" Nadia exclaimed in her patented chastising tone. "Now is not the time for jealousy."

"I'm not," his brother protested, then looked away under their mother's stare and mumbled. "Sorry."

Thomas was too stunned by the statement to listen to what his father was saying. Roland, jealous of him? Why? His brother was way better looking. At sixteen and one of the regular MVPs of his football team, the girls had to be lined up at his locker for a chance to spend time with him.

"Thomas?" Eric called. "Are you listening?"

"Of course," Thomas replied reflexively, then he was the one looking away. "Sorry, I wasn't."

“Right now, You’re going to spend the night here, in your bed. Tomorrow, I’m sending you to your grandfather. Bozeman is far enough I doubt they’ll think to look for you there while I settled this.”

“Dad, there’s no—”

“This is final, Thomas.” His father’s expression softened. “I need you to be safe, Thomas. My dad will make sure you are.”

Thomas nodded. “Okay, Dad.” He stood. “I’m going to go grab a shower, then go to bed.”

Outside of his room, Judith took his arm and lowered her voice. “Do you think Yating’s involved in what’s happening to you?”

“Judith,” Thomas protested. “I—”

“If he is, you tell me and I am going to kick his ass.”

Thomas smiled at the reminder of how protective of her family his sister was. “I don’t know. He did look guilty when he left my room, but he was who had distracted me in the kitchen, so maybe the fire was what that was about.”

She nodded. “The next time he wants to go out with me, I’m going to get him to tell me everything. Dad can do all the investigating he wants, but I know how to get a guy to talk.”

Thomas had seen enough guys come crawling to his sister after they’d screwed up to believe her. Yating might have an advantage in that being bi meant he wasn’t dependent on his sister for satisfaction, but Judith was a Royer, as well as a Hertz, and as a group, Royer women were... something.

Minneapolis, January 14th

“Mom,” Roland complained as Nadia put the backpack next to Thomas’s chair. “Those are mine.”

“You have ample clothing, Roland. Right now, your brother can use some for his trip.”

Thomas looked at his plate, instead of the glare his brother had to be giving him. He was already wearing one of his shirts and a pair of jeans since those Thomas had arrived in were still in the wash. In the previous evening’s excitement, they’d forgotten they were the only thing in the house that fit him, so they’d stayed by the bed.

Thomas had been surprised about how not loose Roland’s shirt had been. His brother was more muscular from years of weight training for the football games.

“I thought you were buying him clothing on the way,” Judith said.

“I was, but someone was quite convincing in how risky that was.”

Thomas looked at his father, who was reading on his phone while eating.

“And I get thanked by losing half my clothes,” Roland grumbled.

Thomas stared at his brother. He’d been who had come to his defense? “How is getting me clothes on the way to the bus station risky?”

Roland rolled his eyes. “They’ll have hired people to watch for you getting clothes, duh.”

“How would they...”

“Mad knows how much you’ve outgrown everything,” his brother said. Thomas didn’t like that Roland called Madoc by his nickname, the way every one of the rat’s ‘projects’ did. Except for Thomas. No matter how insistent Madoc got at times, Thomas had been raised to show respect by using people’s names. He’d thought the lessons their parents taught them would have stuck to his brother.

“...and since they’re all richer than anyone. It’s nothing for

them to give money around, so every clothing store is watched," his brother concluded.

Their mother placed Roland's high school winter jacket on the back of Thomas's chair. Roland glared, but stayed silent. Thomas remained quiet, too. He should protest, but the jacket in his bedroom closet hadn't grown to match the muscles he'd gained since moving into the frat anymore than his pants had. Madoc had complained that his hospital stay had cost Thomas a lot of his muscle mass, but it couldn't have been that much after all.

Thomas finished eating, then help with cleanup. Then Judith came back from her walk.

"I didn't see The Rowling's van or pickup anywhere, not Kuno's Ascendant or the otter's BMW either. That's as good as we're going to get for being sure they aren't watching us."

Thomas chuckled at the idea Felix would ever drive his expensive car in this neighborhood. He'd be afraid it would drop in value faster just being around so many middle-class vehicles. There was still the danger of them renting a car, or, like Roland had pointed out, paying someone to watch them, but his mother had a plan for that too.

Thomas put Roland's jacket on, and she added his high school cap. Adjusting it to ensure it was over the spot on the back of his head where Roland had a bit of white in his fur where Thomas's was all black. Other than that, the only way their fur differed was in where the black of their upper body changed to white around their waist, and that would require Thomas being out of his shirt for anyone to see.

"We're going to be back in a few hours," Eric told Roland. "Please stay off the internet until we do. Don't slot your phone in anything that's connected. You made a good point about them paying people, and they could have done the same to watch our online activities. If they see you online when they think you're in the car with me—"

"Yeah-yeah. I'll just jerk off until you get back."

Nadia patted his shoulder. "If you need material, your father's collection is—"

"Mom!"

"Nadia!"

She looked from her son to her husband. "You should learn to share, love."

Thomas had to admire his mother as he couldn't remember ever seeing his father's ear that bright.

"I don't need an old man's porn stash," Roland grumbled. "I have my own."

"Mine isn't all digital," Eric replied. "Wait, did you call me old?"

"Better run," Judith said, snickering.

"Your phone," Eric said, his hand before Thomas.

"Come on dad. There's no way they did anything to it, it was only a few hours before they brought it back."

"And in those hours we don't know what did to it."

"Dad, there is not one computer major at the house. Even Olavo, who took one because of his economic's course, wouldn't know how to plant a tracker in a phone."

"But they have more money than anyone."

Roland groaned.

"And that can let them pay someone to make your phone insecure. It's safer for you to leave it here."

"How am I going to call Grandpa when I get to Bozeman?"

"I'll call him from the administrative building tomorrow. I'll have your arrival time there and he'll be waiting for you."

“What am I going to do while on the bus?” Thomas complained.

“Have dad give you one of his not digital porn thing,” Roland offered.

“Eww, not on the bus,” Thomas replied. “There’s other people.”

“There you go,” Judith said.

“It’s in public!”

“Not really,” Eric offered. “The seats are high, and it isn’t like a lot of people take the bus anymore, so—” he looked at his children. “What, didn’t me and your mother tell you about that time we went to a concert in Portland, and my parents wouldn’t let me borrow the car?”

“No!” Thomas said forcefully, knowing such a realization would follow with the telling of the story.

“No.” Judith’s tone was more one of dismay that there was a story she hadn’t heard.

Roland stayed out of it.

“Now we have to look forward to once this is behind us,” Nadia said, taking Thomas’s hand in hers. Feeling the paper against his palm stopped his protest. He stared at the five twenty-dollar bills when she moved her hand away.

“How?” he asked, having trouble getting the word out. The only place he’d seen physical money was in movies. As far as he’d known, digital was the only way to pay for anything anymore.

“Oh, honey.” She placed a hand on his cheek. “You still have so much to learn about the real world.”

“I suppose this trip will do that for you,” Eric said. “A small taste of adulthood before you have to confront it after graduation. Are you sure you aren’t coming, Judith?”

“I’ll make sure Roland doesn’t cause any trouble.”

Roland and Thomas snorted in unison.

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Minneapolis, January 14th

Thomas looked out the window at the snow passing.

No phone meant no way to use the screen on the back of the seat in front of him. How was he expected to survive the next twenty hours or so with nothing to do? He stretched to look in the aisle. His father had been right. The bus was only half full and everyone was seated in the front. He had the whole rear to himself.

He could even —

Nope.

Not going there. He could go twenty hours without his cock getting any attention.

He looked outside again.

Which meant that all he had to occupy him was looking outside at the snowbanks. That and thinking.

Why was this happening? Why was it happening to him, of all people? Thomas was no one special. He was just an undecided freshman muddling his way through university. He wasn’t even the sexual raconteur that everyone in his family was on account of the Royer’s blood running through their veins.

Maybe he was adopted?

That would explain a lot.

No, if he was, his parents would have told him.

Unless he was an alien, and they’d found him in a pod on the side of the road after a storm.

No, that was a movie, he thought. Something Roland's best friend had brought over at some point.

He sighed and rested his head against the window.

Why him?

Why had Limbani picked him out of everyone at college to bring into the frat? Had he known about this? Was that why? He did always say he knew things. Claimed it was how he'd known where to find Thomas that first time in that restroom.

Was that why he'd made the offer once they were done?

What would have happened if Thomas had said no?