

Prologue

1 a.m.

late June

“Hell yeah!”

I laughed and punched the air as Quentin whipped his Mercedes around a sharp bend.

“Aw shit, Quentin! I just spilled this all over me!” Ven unbuttoned his black dress shirt and shrugged it down his arms until it bunched up between his back and the leather seat.

I grinned and held out my empty champagne flute.

“Here! I’m done!” I hollered.

He turned to look back at me and had to hold his platinum hair back with one hand while he took my glass with his other.

“What? You want more?”

I shook my head and he poutingly puckered his lips.

“Aww c’mon, Alan! Don’t make me drink the rest of this myself! There’s still over half a bottle!”

“No! I can’t! Not while Quentin’s—!”

Gravity threw our bodies sideways. I laughed and latched onto the door handle as Quentin took another broad curve. How could he look so composed in the rearview and yet drive like he’d shot-gunned a double-shot espresso?

“Look out!”

The wind snatched both glasses from Ven’s hands. Champagne rained across my face as they launched over my head and right out of the car.

“Holy shit!” I cried.

We whipped around and gaped at the red glitter trail on the dark road behind us. Luckily, ours was the only car on this remote, two-laned highway.

“Wow, sorry, Alan!” Ven shouted. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah!”

I laughed and tugged off my shirt to wipe my face and arms.

“You know, that was actually kind of refreshing! You should try it!”

“Yeah, no!”

Ven turned back in his seat and glared at Quentin.

“Okay! Now I know you’re doing this on purpose!”

Quentin finally looked aside at him and scoffed.

“If you’re so concerned about getting a little wet, why don’t you take everything off? You’re overdressed anyway.”

“Says the man in a suit and tie!”

Ven crossed his arms and rolled his tongue around the inside of his cheek as Quentin loosened and unknotted said tie.

“There. That better?”

A slow grin formed on Ven’s plush lips.

“Waaaait a minute! Quentin, are you sacrificing your Mercedes’ leather just to get me and Alan naked?”

Quentin didn’t have anything to say to the accusation though I caught a hint of a half-smirk in the rearview as we glided through yet another sharp corner.

“God damn it, Quentin!”

Ven grabbed onto Quentin’s shoulder and kept his other hand clamped around the opened bottleneck. Droplets somehow still made their way back to me so I wiped my face on my shirt again, then leaned forward and tapped Quentin’s shoulder.

“Hey! We’re almost there!” I said in his ear. “Slow down.”

He nodded, and for the first time, I noticed that his previously well-combed cinnamon hair defied gravity in every direction. He caught me staring at it and immediately reached into the center console for a plastic comb.

I chuckled as he re-tamed every strand to his satisfaction. God forbid he look the least bit disheveled. Even for us.

“That looks unusually deep,” Ven said with a curious downward glance at the console.

“What else are you hiding in there?”

Quentin thought for a moment.

“Ahh...a pack of gum, bottle of cologne, a Glock and some zip-ties.”

“Oh. *Pssht!* Of course! Dumb question, huh?” Ven slowly turned his head and glared at me from the corners of his eyes.

I grinned.

“What? Are you shocked by that answer?”

“Alan. You better tell me right now! What the hell’s way out here in the dark? Because I swear to God if we die on your Quiet Knoll—!”

I laughed.

“I told you. It’s a surprise! You’ll just have to wait and see.”

“No, I won’t see! And that’s the problem!”

He frowned when I unbuckled my seatbelt and got to my knees in the middle of the backseat. Even Quentin glanced back when I accidentally elbowed his headrest.

“Okay. Now what the hell are you doing?” Ven asked.

I nodded toward the bottle between his knees.

“I’m hot.”

He followed my line-of-sight then laughed.

“You’re not serious.”

“Do it!”

With a wide, toothy grin, he got on one knee in his seat and turned all the way around, vigorously shaking the bottle with one hand while holding onto his head-rest with the other.

“Are you sure you want to be doing that?” Quentin’s dark eyes met mine in the rear-view.

I just grinned, held out my arms, and tipped my head back as foamy champagne rained across my upper body. I rubbed the foam across my chest with both hands then slowly moved lower, tracing the fine, dark hairs below my navel.

“Niiice! Dayy-umm, Alan!”

I pushed my wet hair back and met Ven’s sky blue eyes while I sucked the champagne from each of my fingers individually. The bottle slid from his grasp as I slowly worked my middle finger up and down.

“Alright! That’s it!”

Quentin was quick to catch the bottle and chuck it outside. He scowled at Ven as he was wedging his slender hips between the front seats to get to me.

“Hey, drunk idiot! What the hell are you doing?”

Ven knelt on the floor in front of me but wound up face-planting into my stomach when Quentin slammed on the brakes. He drew back from me with his hand cupped over his nose, then looked back.

“Ow! Fuck, Quentin! What the hell?”

Quentin pointed to our immediate right.

“Is that it?”

Ven got up and shifted onto the seat beside me to see where Quentin was pointing to. He just shook his head when he saw a narrow dirt path that disappeared deep into dark woods.

“Uh-uh! Please tell me this isn’t what we’re looking for!”

“It is,” I said. “Turn there, Quentin.”

“But I don’t even need any Meth today!”

“Shut it.”

Quentin sighed and made a slow turn. The metallic scraping of branches and weeds against his fenders made me cringe and mouth the word “sorry” when he shot me an indecipherable look in the rear-view. That was going to cost me.

“You can’t see it right now,” I said, pointing over his shoulder, “but there’s a big gazebo past all these trees. Connor sometimes sets up speed traps here. He showed it to me when he arrested Cobryn.”

The tires had kicked up so much dust in the bright headlights that seeing more than a few feet ahead was difficult. And Quentin was driving so slowly that I couldn’t tell how far ahead the picnic area was. So I took the time to pat myself as dry as my already damp shirt would allow then dabbed at some of the excess drippage on the seat.

Ven watched me with his brows knit.

“Hey Alan?”

“Hm?”

“When Con brought you back here...was this before or after he Tazed and handcuffed Cobryn? I’m just trying to get facts right in my head.”

I bit my lip and smiled.

“Noooo...! Wait wait wait!”

He scooted his right ass-cheek to the edge of the seat then turned to stare at me in disbelief.

“He arrested Cobryn and then brought you back here? Is that how it happened?”

“He just wanted to talk where Cobryn wouldn’t mess with us,” I said carefully.

“Uh-huh. I know what you two talked about but....” He hesitated and glanced at Quentin. “What else happened?”

“Um....”

I also gave Quentin an apprehensive look, which he just waved away as he stuck a cigarillo between his lips. Somehow, talking about such intimate moments while he was in “big brother mode” just seemed wrong. Like I was still expecting him to punish me for something.

A lot of water way, waaay under the bridge at this point, I guess.

“Long story short...” I dropped my feet to the floor, along with my wet shirt. “He gave me a blowjob in the gazebo.”

“Holy shhhh-!”

Ven put both hands on his head and leaned back in his seat to stare at the sky.

“But that’s all that happened!” I quickly added. “Our threesome was the first time I actually had sex with him.”

“Damn. I always thought he was just bluffing about that! So he really....?”

“Yeah.”

I tipped my head back beside him and stared at the black treetops lazily swaying against the moonless sky. The darkness surrounding us was so thick that the distant clusters of stars almost looked like wisps of clouds.

“Well you never exactly told me how he came to be your ‘dick’,” I said. “How did that conversation even go?”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Quentin muttered.

Ven chuckled.

“Are you getting senile, Alan? I told you I owed him a huge favor and...I sort of...wanted to test the waters with you before I let him....”

I bolted upright.

“Wait! How come neither of you said anything about this before?”

He hesitated.

“Listen, it even surprised me how...attracted he was to me from the get-go. I didn’t tell you because I didn’t want you thinking I was unfaithful. We never had sex...but....” He swallowed.

“We did do other things. Are you mad?”

I closed my mouth and frowned, but I shook my head.

“I’m confused. I never knew there was more to the story.”

“Why am I just now hearing about any of this?” Quentin grumbled as he aimed his phone flashlight over the side of the car. The light slowly passed over a couple of trees before hitting the grassy clearing and the gazebo of picnic tables in the distance.

“Hey there it is! Stop here!” I said.

Quentin shifted into Park and, the moment he cut the engine, a deep blackness engulfed us. Spring frogs and crickets in the expanse of the surrounding forest drowned out the whooshing sound of the breeze rustling the trees. A hint of swampy marsh carried over from the lake.

“Jeez-us! It’s like the world’s worst case of tinnitus out here!” Ven said and shined his phone light in a slow circle around us, sweeping across the dark woods behind us then to the clearing ahead as we climbed out of the car.

“I guess all the rain this year made a tropical rainforest out of this place,” I said. “It reminds me of our yard back in Ridgely. Noisy and full of mosquitoes every damn summer.”

Ven smacked his arm.

“You aren’t fucking kidding.”

Quentin finally stepped out of the car as the mechanical canvas-top eased back into place. He bent down to strap a gun to his thigh then reached into the car.

Ven tilted his chin toward the back-pack Quentin slung over his shoulder.

“What’s that?”

“It’s something Alan asked me to bring,” Quentin said then shut his door.

“Something he asked you for?”

“Mm.”

Ven shot me a sarcastic look as Quentin led us toward the gazebo. He leaned close and grabbed my ass while we were walking.

“Are we having a little midnight slap ‘n tickle here?” he whispered.

I grinned and poked him in the side.

“What? Too old to sneak out of the house for some innocent, old-fashioned fun now?”

“Oh, yes! Because Quentin’s the epitome of innocent and old-fashioned.”

I laughed.

“Well, we’re here because he has something to show you. You won’t believe what we found.”

“Okay. Is it going to sting, burn or pinch?”

“I’ll let you pick.”

“Goodie,” he muttered, which drew another chuckle from me.

Quentin waited for me to lay the blanket over the grass before setting his phone and the backpack on top of it. We sandwiched him from both sides while he knelt and unzipped the bag. Ven was careful to keep his phone-light aimed at his hands when he reached in.

“Hey! Is that—?”

Quentin carefully pulled out a telescope. Ven fell to his knees and traced two fingers down the length of the cylindrical metal.

“No way! It is our old telescope!” he cried. “How the hell wasn’t this burned with the rest of our shit?”

I couldn’t help chuckling at his awed expression as he watched Quentin extending the legs to the tripod. Quentin had taken the time to dry-dust and clean everything so all the parts looked nearly new.

“Dad had a security box at the bank,” I said. “Quentin just never bothered looking into it until the lease expired.”

“Well damn. What was in it?”

“Nothing too interesting,” Quentin said as he stood and put the telescope on its legs. “Passports, deeds...lots of paperwork, some of their jewelry...I haven’t completely sorted through it all yet. I just dumped it all into a box and took it, but you’re welcome to have this if you want it, Ven.”

“Hell yes!” Ven laughed. “Damn. Thanks, Quentin!”

“How did you even know this was ours?” I asked Ven. “We haven’t seen this in years.”

“These.”

He tapped a knuckle against the long, silver scratches gouged into the black metal.

“I dropped it from a tree one night, but I never admitted to it,” he said.

“You! You’re the asshole that got me grounded for it?” I shouted.

He grinned and dodged my arm-punch.

“Hey! I didn’t say anything! Dad just assumed, and I didn’t correct him!”

“I can’t believe you two were just staring at stars.” Quentin shook his head and lowered one eye to the telescope lens. “I thought you two were jerking off together. Or maybe experimenting with porn on Dad’s laptop like Cobryn.”

I gaped at him.

“You knew we were sneaking out?”

Ven gave an evil laugh.

“Of course he did. How many times did you watch us, Quentin?”

“More than you think.”

“And just what were you hoping to see?” I asked Quentin with a laugh.

“Not a couple of space nerds staring at the sky.”

“Well, I’m so sorry we bored you, King of Kink!”

Ven studied the side of his face for a long moment while he adjusted the lens. And he either didn't notice or didn't care when Ven stood and got closer.

"So just tell me right now," he said in a low tone. "When should we expect the ball-gags and scalpels?"

"Mm?"

Quentin didn't even bother looking up.

"There has to be some reason you so happily gave us fancy booze and brought us way out here like the good big brother I know you aren't," Ven said. "What are you planning to do?"

I crossed my arms over my stomach as the champagne buzz in my head instantly evaporated. I'd become so accustomed to seeing so much of "Older Brother Quentin" lately that the fact I wasn't questioning this scared me. The cold businessman never would've let us get away with wrecking his leather interior with Dom Perignon. He'd have used this as a "teaching moment."

Quentin finally lifted his head and leveled Ven with a hard stare. Then he turned those cold gray eyes on me.

And smiled.

I shuddered and instinctively took a step back. That smile...the cordial mood.... He only went into big brother mode right before something terrible was about to happen.

"Oh, God. What is this?" I asked softly.

Ven stiffened when Quentin's hand shot out. Quentin laughed quietly at his reaction and gently flipped a cluster of his platinum hair away from his cheek.

"Have you never wondered what it would be like...to fuck the man you thought you knew?"

Chills ran down my spine at the grave, killer-soft tone Quentin usually reserved for targets. As far as I knew, he wasn't irritated. During our hour-long joyride, his intense gaze was thoughtful and even somewhat curious as he observed everything we did.

"Don't tell me you've never considered it." Quentin turned and took two steps closer to Ven. "As perverse a Carnalli as I know you are, I find that very difficult to believe."

Ven simply grinned when he leaned in with his head cocked to the side. Even as warm as the air was, I could still see faint traces of white vapor between their nearly-touching lips as they stared each other down.

"I always thought you were a stodgy old fart, to be honest," Ven said. "Alan was the only thing on my mind for a very long time."

"And now?"

Quentin breathed across the side of Ven's neck, drawing a visible quiver and a startled breath from him.

"Well you're still an old fart...." he rasped. "But a scary, well-armed old fart."

"Hm. Yeah? What else?"

"And your horse cock straight-up hurts! Have you ever fully penetrated a w-?"

Quentin grabbed his jaw and dominated his mouth with a deep tongue-kiss. Ven gave a breathy moan and shut his eyes when Quentin reached down to palm his ass with his free hand—something he never did under such light-hearted circumstances.

"Wow," I murmured.

Who the hell is this man tonight?

His rare display of tenderness had me wetting my lips. At that moment, I didn't care about the price we would undoubtedly have to pay for getting "Big Brother Quentin" exclusively. If he was offering up free samples, I wasn't missing mine.

As if sensing my thoughts, Quentin reached for my hand and tugged me closer. I shut my eyes and interlaced my fingers through his, not even questioning the reason behind his sudden bout of sanity as he gently pressed his wet lips to mine. I just went with the flow, fully intending to enjoy the here and now.

“Uhhh...Quentin? Are you.... Are we making out with you right now?”

I couldn't help laughing at Ven's disbelieving tone. Quentin pulled away from my smiling lips with an annoyed sigh.

“Do I really need to answer that?”

“No, I'm just....” Ven cocked his head. “Have you ever made out with anyone in your whole life?”

Quentin scoffed quietly.

“Of course I have.”

“Really?”

Ven exchanged an eyebrow-lifted look with me and I just shrugged.

“Quentin, is there something you're not telling us?” I asked. “Like do you have cancer? Or a life-threatening disease?”

His brows furrowed.

“Your dick's not trickling weird green ooze, is it?” Ven asked. “I mean, you can tell us if it is. We'll just move our party to the nearest twenty-four-hour clinic.”

The slightest twitch of a smile touched Quentin's lips. “What the hell kind of questions are these? I'm perfectly fine.”

Ven grinned and pressed his crotch to Quentin's thigh.

“Well, there has to be some reason you're getting my lacy man-panties all wet without pulling my hair first. I thought you're feeling guilty about something.”

Quentin took a giant step back with his lips tightly pressed together. I laughed when he dismissively turned back to the telescope.

“What the hell?”

Ven stuck out his arms.

“So that's it then?” he cried.

“Yee-up.”

I patted his shoulder.

“Sadly, I think it was the ‘green ooze’ and ‘man-panties’ that did him in.”

“Aw, come on! So no ball-gags? Not even a single nipple clamp?”

Quentin dropped his face into his hand and laughed.

“Get your stupid ass over here and look at some space, Ven!”