

Enjoy this sneak preview of [Cursed: Broken](#) by X. Aratare (Raythe Reign.)

Nick Fairfax vows to do whatever Lord Bane Dunsaney desires for one year. In exchange, Nick's family gets a chance to regain their fortune. Is this the worst mistake of Nick's life, or will it lead to a love only found in fairy tales? A modern, M/M retelling of Beauty & The Beast.

CHAPTER ONE - THE DEAL

Nick Fairfax turned off his motorcycle's engine. The whirr of crickets and the soft whoosh of night wind through the grass and trees replaced the motorcycle's throaty growl. He looked at the gates before him.

They were huge and still bore the remnants of being wrapped in thick vines that must have just recently been cut down. Vicious looking spikes stabbed towards the brilliant night sky from the gates' arched top. Two words were created out of thick, curving iron bars that stretched over that arch: Moon Shadow.

That must be the name of the house. Not a house. A mansion. A magnificent ruined mansion in the middle of nowhere, Nick thought then added, *This is Bane's mansion.*

Nick looked through the gates at the mansion beyond. It was three stories and made of dark stone with dozens of mullioned windows. The panes looked like they were painted with quicksilver. They perfectly reflected the first quarter moon that hung high in the sky. The same vines that had been wrapped around the gates covered much of the front of the house. No one had taken a knife to them just yet. Their dense leaves fluttered in the wind. He saw that there was a tower in the far back corner of the house with a bronze roof that had long ago taken on that gorgeous aged green patina. Perhaps the tower had been built so that the owners could stargaze.

Nick's gaze dropped to the overgrown garden in the front of the mansion. There was a large weed-choked fountain in the center of a circular drive. Flowers bloomed in profusion, spilling down the fountain's sides like water must have long ago. Though it was night and he couldn't see the colors of the flowers that bloomed there, Nick imagined that in daytime this place would be riotous with reds, whites, yellows and pinks.

There was a soft click and the hiss of static came from the intercom box to his left. Nick's head snapped towards it. His heart raced even faster and his palms became slick with sweat.

"Nicholas Fairfax," Lord Bane Dunsaney's English-tinted voice came through the speaker. "Are you ready to honor your part of the deal? One year of your life in servitude to me in exchange for the *possible* return of your family's fortunes?"

Nick's mouth went dry and cottony, but he stabbed the intercom's reply button and responded firmly, "I agree to your terms, Bane. Open the gates."

CHAPTER TWO - THE CHOICE

Earlier that day ...

“You either give up photography or you lose every cent of my money. You’ll have no home. You’ll have no family. You’ll be out on the street. Is your art really worth all that?” Nick imitated his father’s baritone in a passable voice.

“You’re kidding me! Your father did *not* say that!” Nick’s best friend Jade Lessitor rocked back in her chair and laughed, clearly certain he was joking. After all, what father truly said such super-villainish things to their son? Charles Fairfax evidently did. But even though Jade knew his father’s character, he could tell that not even she believed Charles would sink that low. When she saw that he was serious though the laughter died and she asked, “He didn’t *really* say that, did he, Nick?”

They were seated outside at a corner cafe in wealthy Winter Haven. The June sunlight on his skin felt like a warm blanket. He watched as streams of well-dressed, beautiful people walked past them, oblivious to anything but their cell phones. Yet even with his best friend with him Nick felt alone in the crowd.

“He really said that,” Nick finally answered her and took a sip of his fizzy water with lime. Telling her like this -- so cool and calm -- stopped him from feeling the aching pain of his father’s dismissal not only of his art, but of *him*.

“Please tell me that you punched him!” Jade’s spiked black hair quivered. Under the sunny June sky, Jade looked like a creature from another planet. She had skin as white as chalk and wore dark crimson lipstick and kohl black eyeliner to make her green eyes seem even more cat-like than normal. Her black babydoll dress and combat boots with pink laces truly made her seem otherworldly and out of place among the conservative couture that flowed by them.

“I was too stunned to really say or do anything. I just walked out of the dining room and grabbed a few things. Not all my stuff. Just what I could fit in my motorcycle’s saddlebags. Dad had already gone to work by the time I left.” He tilted his head towards his motorcycle at the curb. Only one of the saddlebags was filled with clothes. The other one had his laptop and beloved Nikon D7100 DSLR camera. He realized that he had left a ton of the Nikon’s accessories back in the house and he sighed. Hard to make a quick exit when not all your stuff would fit in your ride.

“Your father really thought that he would *win* this bet? Let’s see, what would anyone choose when presented with a cold-blooded reptile like your father who thinks of you as another one of his minions or your art that gives you peace and pleasure? Yeah, real hard choice!” She shook her head violently.

“It isn’t just him who thinks I’ll give up photography and join the family business. My brothers think the same thing. They believe my obsession with photographing ruins is a passing fancy that will go away.”

Nick grimaced as he remembered his oldest brother Jake actually *chortling* about how lame photography was in general. Steven, the middle brother, had just said something dismissive about how *rare* it was for even a truly *talented* photographer to make any money at it, leaving the impression that not only was Nick *not* talented, but he *certainly* could never make a living doing what he loved.

Jade did the usual thing when he spoke of his two older brothers. She looked like she was sucking on something incredibly bitter. “I’m not surprised about Steven. I mean the guy is practically a robot.”

At twenty-five, Steven was four years older than Nick and as different from him as night was to day. They both shared the same slender, muscular build, platinum hair and gray eyes, but that’s where the similarities ended. Nick was moved by beauty and intuition. Steven believed in figures and facts only. Steven thought that imagination was the refuge of the weak and easily gulled. Nick thought imagination was the closest one could get to the sublime. Steven had immediately joined their father’s venture capital firm after graduating Harvard, eager to use his skills with numbers to strip other companies of all their assets and leave the dregs -- the actual employees that had made those companies great in the first place -- behind.

“You started your diatribe against my brothers with Steven. I’m surprised. I thought Jake was your *favorite*.” Nick chuckled.

“Because I wanted to save the *best for last*.” Her green eyes narrowed. “Jake is a snake, Nick. He is another cold-blooded serpent in your family. I wouldn’t be surprised at all by him laughing as your father said those horrible words to you. I swear I think you’re a changeling! You don’t belong in that family at all.”

Twenty-eight year old Jake was a clone of their father with his shark-like smiles and ultra-tailored suits in dark blues and blacks like bruises. He had a lean hungry look and their father’s coloring, including dark brown hair and eyes and a sensual, almost predatory mouth. Jake was second-in-command at their father’s firm and took great pleasure in destroying people’s lives as he padded his own bank account.

“So your brothers just bobbed their heads like the automatons they are as your father threatened to disown you?” Jade confirmed.

He nodded. “Yeah, but - and I can’t believe I’m saying this - they’re not as black as they seem.”

“Really? Enlighten me?” She crossed her arms over her chest.

“None of them really think I’ll do anything other than give up art and join the family business after I graduate college next year anyways so they don’t believe that Dad will actually have to go through with his threat and disinherit me.” Nick let out a thin laugh. “They really don’t understand what my photography means to me. Their one goal in life is simply to make *money*. They’ve found a way to make loads of it while satisfying their desire to *kill* even if it’s only in the sense of killing companies. In their eyes, there’s *nothing* better than what they do for a living.”

“You really are lowering my opinion of them even more, you realize?”

Nick sighed. “They are what they are. Sometimes I think I’m the only one that took after Mom.”

“I wish I had known her.” A pall fell over Jade’s expression.

His mother Emma Fairfax had died when he was just nine of heart failure. She’d had a heart defect that simply couldn’t be fixed and, though she was on the organ donor list, no heart had come up for transplant in time. He still missed her.

Jade suddenly let out a soft laugh and shook her head. “Why would your father or brothers *want* you in the firm anyways? Forgive me, Nick, but you’re *not* the business vulture type.”

“No need for forgiveness. I agree with you.” He leaned back in his chair and groaned. The sunlight splashed onto his face and he relished the light and heat. The winter had been very dark and deep. Spring had been rainy and gray. The cusp of summer was now here and he wanted to drink in every moment of it. He looked back at Jade, feeling a little sun drunk. He wanted to be *really* drunk, but it was too early to be starting on the martinis. “Even if I had any *desire* to rape and pillage companies, I have no *aptitude* for it. But it doesn’t matter to them. Dad just wants me under his thumb forever.”

“Do you want to be?” Jade asked. Her piercing green gaze was upon him.

“What do you mean? Want to be --”

“Under his thumb, Nick? Or are you prepared to be done with him? Strike out on your own? Live your life? Like your *mother* would have wanted?”

He looked over at the saddlebags on his bike. Most everything he cared for was in there and the person opposite him was his best friend. This was all he needed. Did he have the courage to admit that and leave all the extraneous stuff behind? His right hand curled tightly around his drink.

“I’m ready,” he said. “I’m done with them. I want to get out.”

“That’s AWESOME!” Jade leaped up out of her seat and embraced him. She smelled of clove and oranges. He held her tightly.

He laughed and asked, “You’re happy that I’m going to be disowned by my family?”

She released him and sat back down in her own seat. “No! I’m happy that you’re going to be *free*.”

“Free? That sounds so unreal to me.” He shook his head. “Family obligation is worse than any other obligation. Because those bonds -- though invisible -- are like *steel*.”

“I wouldn’t know. My family is you, Nick, and I’ve *chosen* to be bonded to you.” Jade smiled brightly even though her words were rather grim. Both her parents had died in a car accident when she was fifteen. She was raised by her grandmother who had passed away just a year ago.

“I’m sorry, Jade --”

“Don’t be sorry! You are the best family there is!” she assured him.

“And so are you.”

“Do you know where you’re going to stay?” Jade’s green gaze focused on him. Before he could answer she was clapping her hands together and grinning. “You’re staying with me, of course! Lauren moved into Jason’s apartment last week so I have a free room that has your name on it.”

“Jade, I don’t have the money to pay for half the rent at your place!”

Jade’s apartment was a cramped two bedroom in the heart of Winter Haven, which was why it cost the earth. His only option if he were to stay in the expensive city was to rent the second garbage can from the left in the dirtiest alley. To live in Jade’s place was more of a dream than he could have hoped for. Jade was able to live there, because of her substantial inheritance and her eBay business.

“You don’t need to pay anything. At least, not in *cash*. You can take pictures of the merchandize I’m selling on eBay. That will be more than enough to cover rent and I will pay you on top of that,” she assured him. “The photos you’ve taken for me before have doubled what I’ve gotten in the auctions.”

“I’m happy to do that for *free* for you like I have been,” he pointed out.

“Well, now you’re going to get *paid* for it. You have no choice, but to take my cash.”

Jade scoured every pawnshop, estate and garage sale for antique clothes, jewelry or whatever else had value. He would photograph her purchases in the most attractive way possible and she’d sell them for gobs of money compared to what she spent. Living in Winter Haven with all the rich people’s castoffs helped hugely.

“I guess I can’t argue with that since I had no idea where I was going to sleep tonight after I shoved off from the family home.” Nick smiled at her. “Roomies?”

“Roomies!”

They shook on it and both of them finished their drinks.

“Shall we go back to *our* place and have actual *alcoholic* beverages?” Jade asked.

Nick could think of nothing better, but he shook his head, which had her raising her eyebrows.

“I’m going to see my father and brothers at Fairfax International.” Nick smiled grimly “I’m going to tell them my decision. I’m choosing art and friendship over them.”

Jade grinned. “Damned straight. They’re not going to know what hit them.”

CHAPTER THREE - BANE

Nick slipped through the rotating doors of Fairfax International. He caught sight of his reflection in the glass. Platinum blond hair, high cheekbones, wide gray eyes and a slightly fey look peered back at him. He tried to firm his expression, but he just looked scared.

I can do this. I can walk away from the family. They don’t want me anyways.

He let out a silent huff of laughter. He knew that last line sounded like a child feeling sorry for himself. He'd never fit into the family. Only he and his mother had connected in any way. But she was gone and he was more alone than ever in the Fairfax home. It was time to leave and be the person he was meant to be, not to hang onto old hopes of finally having his father and brothers accept him, let alone love him.

Nick's footsteps echoed loudly as he walked through the cold chrome and marble lobby to the elevator bank. His father and brothers' offices were on the forty-sixth floor. The entire black, steel skyscraper was named after them because his father paid a ton to make it seem like he owned the whole building.

Money my family's made from buying and then picking apart other people's businesses.

As corporate raiders, Fairfax International took over various companies when they were at their weakest. They loaded the companies up with debt then bailed out. They left pensions unfulfilled and workers suddenly without jobs. Yet as his father had pointed out many times, how could he judge when he had enjoyed the fruits of his father and older brothers' raiding for years?

But that stops now. I'm going to free myself from all of this.

Nick was going to make it on his own. He had already scraped together enough loans, grants and work-study to get through his last year of university. And now that he was staying with Jade he would have a roof over his head and food, too.

Shooting for her was fun and now profitable, but his true twin passions were taking photographs of ruins and nature. He lovingly photographed any fallen down structures he found, the more overgrown and remote the better. He would make up stories in his head about the people who must have lived there. His ultimate desire was to travel all over the world and record the past with his camera. But he wasn't naïve enough to think that anyone would necessarily pay his way for that. He would have to earn the money himself and convince people of the beauty and value of his art by showing it to them after he had created it.

Or I'll have those photographs for myself if no one else appreciates them. Either way, it's in my soul. I have to do this.

The elevator's doors whooshed open with a cool hiss of air. He stepped inside the car and swallowed. The elevator doors whispered shut behind him and rocketed him upwards. As each successive floor lit up on the elevator panel Nick drew his worn leather jacket tighter around his slender frame. His hands were slick with sweat and there was the bitter metallic taste of fear on the back of his tongue. He knew he was making the right decision for himself.

And for Dad, Jake and Steven. Like I told Jade, I'd never be any good to them in the business anyways. I couldn't bear to do what they do. Yet I still feel sick like I'm betraying them somehow.

The elevator slowed as floors forty-four and then forty-five were highlighted on the elevator's electronic panel. Finally, the car stopped on floor forty-six. There was only the

slightest shudder before the doors opened and the sterile, black-tiled reception area of Fairfax International was revealed.

Now or never.

Nick stepped out of the elevator. The lights were dimmed to save energy during the evening hours. The office felt like it was sleeping. Sarah Westwood wasn't manning the reception desk with her perfectly coiffed hair, red-lacquered nails and frosty smile. She had automatically known what his father and brothers still didn't, which was that Nick was going to be an artist and, unless he struck it big somehow, he would never be making anywhere near the type of money that the corporate raiders, financiers, and attorneys who floated through this office made. He was, therefore, *uninteresting* to her even if he was the youngest son of the owner.

Nick passed by her empty glass and chrome receptionist desk and padded into the hallway beyond. This hallway led to his father and brothers' offices. His father had the largest office on the right. It was the ultimate corner office with floor to ceiling windows facing towards the glittering downtown of Winter Haven.

Nick wasn't surprised that all three offices had their lights on despite the fact that it was late on a Wednesday night in June when the air was warm and sweet and the bars and restaurants were filled with the rich and beautiful people of Winter Haven eating, drinking and laughing. His family lived purely for business and, from the recent conversations that Nick had overheard, he was pretty sure that they were in the middle of some big deal.

Something to do with a company – or maybe a person – called Bane. Dire sounding name.

Nick could tell from the sound of their voices that all three of his family members were in his father's office. His stomach clenched as he realized that his father would force him to make his decision known in front of his brothers. He could already hear Jake's sneer that Nick wouldn't last a week without their money. Steven would push his wire-rimmed glasses up to the top of his nose and list the costs of living on his own in Winter Haven, the likelihood of him making any money from his photography and so on and so forth. Part of Nick was tempted to sneak away then, to put off telling his father altogether. But he imagined Jade's disappointed expression and he kept on.

As he neared his father's office, he realized that there was something *off* in the way everyone sounded. He frowned. He had never noticed that shrill tone in Steven's voice before. Jake sounded like he was pleading, which his eldest brother had never done in his life. His father's voice, too, which normally was so authoritative held a note of plaintive disbelief in it. Nick couldn't yet make out any of the words that they spoke, but he knew that something was wrong.

Maybe I shouldn't go in there. Whatever they're talking about is business-related. There's nothing else that would make all three of them this on edge. They won't appreciate me interrupting them.

But just as Nick had that thought he stepped into the warm pool of light that spilled out of his father's office onto the hallway's carpet. Nick froze in place as he took in the scene before him.

His father was leaning against the front of his desk as if he needed it for support. Jake sagged beside him on the arm of a sofa. His blood red tie, the one he always wore when they were going to close a deal – *or make a killing* – was half undone and looked like a noose around his neck. His normally perfect hair was standing up as he kept running his hands through it with nervous strokes. Steven stared down at a tablet in his hands as if he couldn't quite believe whatever he was seeing on the screen.

Then there was the fourth man.

Nick guessed it was a man from the sheer size of him, because the man was wearing a cape with a hood, hiding himself entirely in a swath of darkness. Even for Winter Haven, which had its share of eccentrics, a cloak and hood were unusual clothing to wear. The man's shoulders were immensely broad and he stood over six feet tall. He was by the windows, back to Nick, looking out at the glittering city of Winter Haven as if it were his domain. There was something in his stance that had the air of command. Nick shivered.

Who is he? And what's going on here?

Just as Nick was about to back-peddle out of the room, certain now that he was interrupting a business meeting, his father's head lifted and he looked directly at Nick. Charles Fairfax was a robust man of fifty-eight. He still had a thick head of dark brown hair with just the slightest touch of frost at the temples. His face was handsome even if his jaw was a little too square to make him pretty. It gave him the appearance of crunching rocks between his molars. He normally swaggered rather than walked. His expression was usually one of conquest as if all would fall before the force of his personality or the dollars in his wallet. But now, he seemed shrunken and there looked to be more gray in his dark brown hair. His expensive suit was rumpled. Lines creased his face that Nick would have sworn hadn't been there this morning.

A prickle of unease went through the young man. Again he thought, *What's going on here?*

"Nick," his father said, his usually booming voice was just a whisper now. Cracked, dry, and pale as paper.

Jake looked over at Nick then and his eldest brother threw his arms into the air. "Fuck, Nick, what are *you* doing here?"

Steven let the hands fall to his sides. His gray eyes scanned Nick and nodded as if something in Nick's face or body told him everything he needed to know. And he was right, too, as he said, "I believe Nick's here to bid us adieu. Take his chances on his art rather than our money. As it so happens, he has the right idea."

The cloaked man's reaction to Nick being there was to stiffen slightly. But he did not turn around. Instead, Nick realized that he was watching Nick's reflection in the glass. Nick watched

the man back. The hood of the cloak mostly obscured the man's face, but Nick did catch sight of a powerful jaw and sensual mouth.

Nick stepped fully into the office and voiced the question that had been spinning in his head, "What's going on here?"

"What's going on *here*? *What's* going on here? We're fucking ruined is what's going on here!" Jake's voice rose up into almost a shriek.

"Normally Jake's hyperbole would cause me to correct him," Steven said, his voice more robotic than usual. "But Jake is correct. We *are* ruined."

"What?" Nick breathed. His gaze darted from one man to the next until he focused on the cloaked man. He knew that whatever had happened here, the cloaked man was clearly the one behind it.

His father pushed off of the desk. His legs tottered underneath him for a moment. Nick hurried over to him and steadied him with an arm around his waist. He led Charles over to the black leather sofa in the corner of his office. His father collapsed on the couch, nearly dragging Nick down with him.

"Thank you, Nick. I – I feel a little unwell." His father's skin was gray and there was a sheen of sweat on his upper lip.

"Dad, what is going on? Who is that guy?" Nick asked the last very softly as he tipped his head towards the cloaked figure.

His father went grayer. He rubbed the back of one hand over his mouth as his gaze flickered over to the cloaked figure and away again. He opened his mouth and shut it several times, but nothing came out. Nick's unease grew greater and greater.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, this can't be happening!" Jake paced. His hands worked convulsively at his sides.

Steven took off his glasses and polished them with a linen handkerchief from his pocket. His hands were trembling. "It is happening, Jake."

"What is happening?" But even as he asked that he knew that his father and brothers wouldn't come to the point so he got up from his father's side. He stalked over to the cloaked man and asked, "Who are you?"

There was a long pause, but then a low, smoky English-accented voice answered, "My name is Bane."

CHAPTER FOUR - THE DEAL

My name is Bane ...

Under other circumstances that voice would have skated down Nick's spine and left a pleasurable tingle in its wake. But not now. His family was in pain and *Bane* was the cause.

"Don't you have a last name? Or is it *just* Bane like Cher or Madonna?" Nick grated out.

The man laughed. "It's *Lord* Bane Dunsaney, but you may call me Bane."

Nick was *not* honored to call the man by his first name. "What have you done, *Bane*?"

The cloaked man's shoulders began to shake. At first, Nick thought he was having a fit, but then the gales of laughter broke out. Rich, velvety laughter that caused his father to hold his head in his hands and his brothers to shrink down. Anger suddenly burned in Nick's belly.

"What the hell is so funny? I don't see anything funny!" Nick snapped. He was tempted to grab Bane and spin him around to face him. Though Nick was probably only three-fourths Bane's size, he wasn't afraid of a fight.

The laughter subsided to chuckles. Bane shrugged the cloak more firmly around his large frame. "Forgive me. I can see that you truly do not understand the *irony* of your question."

"What irony?"

"Your family attempted to take over one of my businesses. They *failed*," Bane answered simply.

"It was a trap," Jake added. "A damned dirty trap."

"Yes, it was," Bane agreed. "But you did not have to take the bait. You could have acted *honorably*. Instead, you let greed lead you. And now you have *nothing*."

Jake dropped down onto his haunches and wrapped his arms around his knees. "You were *waiting* for us."

"He's taken our company over, Nick," Steven explained dryly, but his hands were still trembling as he continued to clean his glasses.

"It's all gone," his father whispered. "We put all we had into acquiring Bane's company and we were acquired instead."

Nick blinked. "I don't understand."

"I own Fairfax International," Bane said simply. "More than that actually. Your family has overextended itself. They are *broke*."

"We're not broke!" Nick scoffed. "We have other investments--"

"No, we do not. I should say that our investments have gone terribly south. We invested in real estate," Steven said. "We've been running in the red for some time."

Nick couldn't believe this. He hadn't noticed things being leaner at home this past year. In fact, they had seemed to live even more luxuriously than ever before. A new car for Jake. A fabulously expensive new sound system in the house for Steven. His father had indulged in his wine collection extensively buying rare vintages that he had only dreamed of owning before. Everything they had done had made Nick think that things were going wonderfully, better than ever, in fact.

"What about the house?" Nick asked. Their house in Winter Haven was worth at least a few million. That might not seem a lot to his family or to Winter Haven residents in general, but it still made them incredibly wealthy to the rest of the world.

"Mortgaged to the hilt," Jake said with a mirthless laugh. "The bank owns it."

“What about your bank accounts?” Nick struggled to find something that his family had left.

“A few hundred dollars at most,” Steven answered.

“We’re done, Nick,” his father said.

The words seemed to sink like stones into a still pond. Silence fell for long moments. Nick didn’t pretend to understand how it had happened, but he realized with a sick lurch that it wasn’t just him who was poor. His father and brothers were, too. Not by choice, but the end result was the same.

“It’s much worse than that,” Bane suddenly said, breaking the silence with his smooth as molasses voice. “I intend to make sure that your family will *never* prosper again.”

“What? *Why?*” Nick knew his expression was taut with shock and disbelief. He could see his reflection in the glass just as Bane could since he continued to keep his back to them as if they were not worthy of his notice.

“I’ve watched your family’s business. For years. Vultures circling around and around. No mercy. No compassion. Just pick, pick, pick until all there is left of the businesses they buy are bones bleached under the sun. The more workers displaced the better,” Bane said. “Haven’t you, yourself, seen them celebrating their accomplishments over rare beef and red wine? Like hyenas over a kill.”

Nick swallowed shallowly. He *had* seen them do that. Some of the imagery that Bane had just used to describe his family he had used himself, but to have a stranger state it so bluntly and with such distaste had Nick’s back up.

“Save your judgment!” Nick snapped. “I don’t want to hear it!”

“Of course, you don’t! You are a spoilt, beautiful boy! You don’t want to know what has funded your fun and free lifestyle! Who cares at what cost it has come?” Bane nearly spat.

Nick reared back as if he had been physically slapped. “You don’t know me! You don’t know *anything* about me!”

“Don’t I? It seems to me that *who* and *what* you are is written in that pretty face and lovely body,” Bane taunted.

Nick spun away from Bane. His heart was thundering in his chest. Rage caused adrenaline to spurt into his veins. He wasn’t sure what he would do to Bane if the other man continued to speak to him in that way. So instead, he kneeled down in front of his father. That arrogant yet boisterous man seemed so small and insignificant now.

“Dad, it’ll be okay. It can’t be as bad as he says.” Nick clutched his father’s broad hands in his own. Charles Fairfax was trembling. That his father should tremble pushed the world off its axis.

“I haven’t overstated the peril your family is in,” Bane said and his voice seemed to suck all the oxygen out of the room.

Nick scowled. “Talk about wanting to lord it over people! Why the hell don’t you leave? You don’t have to be here! You can go!”

His father clutched Nick's hands. "No, Nick, no. Just – just be respectful."

"Dad, don't you see what he's doing? Hear what he's saying?" Nick cried.

His father's shoulders curled inwards. "It doesn't matter."

"It matters!" Nick yelled. His voice echoed in the deep silence that had fallen. Apparently, no one agreed with him.

"Still hoping for mercy, Charles? Still hoping that things can be turned around?" Bane asked.

"Are you capable of mercy? Is there still a way things can change?" His father's voice was hoarse.

"Dad!" Nick gasped. To him, asking for something from Bane was like asking the Devil for a favor. He'd just as soon laugh in their faces as assist. And there would always be a price, one that would, undoubtedly, be too dear to pay.

Bane slowly turned towards them. His cloak swirled around his long legs, revealing a well-cut dark suit underneath the thick, black material. Nick found himself looking immediately up to Bane's face. This time instead of just the slice of jaw and mouth, Nick saw far more. The hood fell back for just a moment. Bane had dark hair that curled in waves to his shoulders, striking Siberian blue eyes, a noble nose, as well as expressive full lips and a strong jaw. But that perfect beauty was horribly marred. The right half of his face had the imprint of what almost looked like a handprint burned into his flesh. Puckered skin, reddened and coarse, marked that terrible injury.

What happened to him?

Bane noticed Nick's gaze and he stiffened. For one moment, shame coursed through those liquid blue eyes. It felt like just the two of them caught in that moment like insects in amber. Bane shuddered, but then anger clearly took over and subsumed any other feeling he had.

"What would you do, Charles, to save *yourself*?" Bane asked.

"He won't do *anything* bad!" Nick cried.

"Let your father answer," Bane hissed. He pointed a gloved finger at Charles' chest.

"Dad has nothing to say to you!"

But then his father lifted one hand and Nick found his heart tumbling into his feet even before his father spoke. Bane's lush mouth curled into a smile already anticipating success.

"What – what are you offering? There's always an offer, isn't there? We're businessmen after all," his father said with a strained smile.

Nick's hands left his father's and dropped down into his lap. He felt numb. His father had just failed a test that he didn't even know he was taking.

"An offer?" Bane tapped his chin.

Jake rose up on shaky legs. "Yeah, what *are* you offering? You want something in exchange for giving us a second chance?"

Bane's blue eyes narrowed. They were locked on Nick. The young man felt a thrill of deep unease run through him as if he were in the sights of a gun.

"It is logical that you would want something. Mere censure could not possibly be your goal," Steven said, always logical.

Nick felt like they had once more stepped into another trap. But his family kept forging ahead as if they didn't see it or didn't care.

Which is worse?

"Yes, I suppose you *would* think of that. An offer. A bargain. A *deal*. Something – *anything* – to keep you going. For you know I intend to destroy you. You'll never get work anywhere. You'll be out on the street," Bane purred.

"You can't do that! You don't control everyone and everything!" Nick scoffed.

"Oh, but I *do*. You see your family has made a lot of enemies. A lot of powerful people have been looking forward to their fall. One word from me and they will close any doors that might have just cracked open," Bane chuckled. "They'll be lucky to work at a fast food restaurant after I'm done with them."

Nick burned with anger and hate even as he had to acknowledge what Bane said was true about the Fairfaxes having enemies and lots of them. His lithe body shook. His family had earned the enmity of many people as Bane had said. Bane was using his family's weakness against itself. He saw how the cloaked man was playing them, but none of the rest of his family did.

They're desperate. They're in shock. They're fooling themselves.

But a part of him knew that maybe this wasn't the whole explanation for why his brothers and father were willing to believe Bane. They thought that, at the core, everyone was as greedy and grasping as they were.

"He's not going to help us!" Nick yelled as a last ditch effort.

But they were not listening. They didn't even look at him.

"What are you asking for?" His father rose up from the leather sofa.

Bane's expressive mouth widened into a toothy smile. "I will make you a *deal*, Charles."

"What is it?" Jake asked.

"Yes, what do you want?" Steven chimed in.

"We'll do whatever you ask," his father gasped.

Bane's gaze swung to Nick again. A cruel smile crossed his beautiful yet marred face. "I want your son. I want Nick."

CHAPTER FIVE - THE DETAILS

The office was so quiet. The phrase "could hear a pin drop" suddenly made sense to Nick. Then everyone was talking at once. Jake shouted about Bane not being serious even as his

gaze flickered over to Nick like he wished Bane *were* serious and he would give Nick over in a heartbeat. Steven claimed that such a deal couldn't be legal in his dry, pedantic way. His father loudly proclaimed he would never sell his son! Nick was sure that he said something like "no way!" but his voice was lost in the babble. Bane merely smiled.

"Truly, you won't even consider it?" Bane wheedled, his smooth as smoke voice rising above the others effortlessly even though he wasn't shouting.

"*Sell* you my son? Are you *mad*?" His father shook his head.

His brothers nodded their heads in agreement, but their eyes showed that they didn't *completely* agree with him. Nick glowed with pride though. His father really seemed to be sticking up for him, recognizing him as someone valuable, as a part of the family. For one bright shining moment, Nick felt connected to them in a way he never had before.

"You won't give up Nick for a single year?" Bane spread his arms expansively. "Think of it as an internship. He'll even get *paid*, which is so very rare these days. His payment will, of course, be the chance for your family to be rich and powerful again."

"I don't understand. What are you offering here?" His father's brown eyes suddenly had that predatory look he got when he was assessing a deal.

"Dad, don't listen to him! We aren't doing this no matter what he says!" Nick cried, but a small sliver of ice formed in his belly.

Could his father really be considering this? The man had just gone from "never!" to "well, wait, what are you offering?" He glanced at his brothers. Jake looked up at their father with that faintly desperate, avaricious look. Steven had this alert expression on his face, rather like a ferret.

They're all wondering the same thing as I am. No, they're wondering if Dad IS listening to him because he's interested.

"I just want to know what crazy plan he's offering, that's all, Nick." His father exuded that false bonhomie that he used on underlings that sensed they were about to get a shit job.

His father put an arm around Nick's shoulders, but instead of feeling warmed by the act, Nick felt trapped by it. But shrugging off his father's arm in front of Bane would show weakness. It would reveal a crack in their family facade. Bane though seemed to know exactly how Nick felt anyways. He pulled the hood up to more fully hide his face, but the knowing smile on his full lips was still visible.

"What I am *offering* is simply this. Nick will stay with me for one year. He will live on my estate and do *whatever* I ask –"

"*That's* what this is all about?" Nick laughed. "You want a sex slave?"

"Do not *flatter* yourself. You are not to my *taste*. And you would *not* be a slave unless you consider doing hard work *slavery*." Bane's lips writhed back from his teeth. They were white and sharp. But the heavy-hooded looks he had given Nick since the young man had walked into the room belied those statements. Not to mention calling Nick "beautiful" and "pretty" several times.

Nick threw up his hands. “What the Hell am I even worried about? We’re not doing this so it doesn’t matter what little fantasies you’ve got going on in your head!”

His father squeezed his shoulder and said, “Let the man finish, Nick. I think it’s clear that he’s not looking for – ah, *companionship* in all of this. Please continue, Bane.”

But Nick burst out, “We’re not--”

“I notice that you keep saying ‘we’ as if your family is involved in this decision,” Bane said to Nick.

“Well, I guess it’s *my* decision, but I mean, we’re *family*,” Nick said as if that would convey some Norman Rockwell-esque flavor to his very dysfunctional clan.

But I do feel this way even if they don’t. Even if they run me out. I keep hoping that things will change. Maybe the change is acting like we’re a family and they’ll go along with it.

Bane tilted his head to the side. “So you are devoted to your family? You want to see them do well? You certainly don’t want to see them out on the street, begging for coins with tin cups in their hands?”

“No! But I’m not going to be your sex slave for a year to --”

“I see. Your devotion only goes *so far*. Interesting.” Bane leaned casually back against his father’s desk.

“You’ve got to be kidding! You’re trying to turn this around on *me*?” Nick’s shoulders straightened. Was Bane questioning his motives? “You’re the one who --”

“Who has *absolutely* no duty to help *your* family. I have quite the opposite feelings for them. They are *my* enemies, after all,” Bane said.

“Nick, Nick, it’s all right. Don’t get yourself all worked up here,” his father said.

Nick did shake off his father’s hand off that time and took a few steps away. His skin was twitching between his shoulder blades. Why was his father even *indulging* Bane in this way? Was he recording this conversation for blackmail later? He knew that his father had done something like that at one point.

Maybe he’s letting Bane dig his own grave. Fine. I can play along with this.

But he still felt panicked. His nostrils flared and the urge to flee was heavy upon him. His brothers were standing still as statues while his father drifted over to the silver serving cart where the cognac was kept. He poured himself a snifter full, but didn’t offer a drink to anyone else. Nick felt like he wanted to upend the decanter into his mouth.

“I don’t think your son likes it when you discount his feelings,” Bane remarked mildly.

“I’m not. But the thing is that I already know what Nick is going to -- *understandably* -- say, but I admit that I have no idea what *you* are going to.” His father took a large swallow of cognac.

“And you always want as much intel as you can possibly have, don’t you, Charles? Or maybe it’s because you either listen to my offer or start packing your bags. But be sure they’re not too heavy to carry in your own two hands, because the cars aren’t paid for either.” Bane’s Siberian blue eyes flared with mockery.

Do we own anything? Even the clothes on our backs?

Nick felt a wave of despair hit him. He had always assumed that his father and brothers understood money. But now it seemed all they understood was debt and how to rack up so much of it that it became a tsunami of bills.

"I'm always willing to listen, Bane. You might not appreciate my business practices, but surely you've noticed that I'm not a one-trick pony. I can adjust. My strategies are not set in stone," his father said. There was a hint of Charles' old business flair in his tone and behavior.

He's really acting like this is a deal he can make!

"You truly are such a *fluid* creature, Charles," Bane murmured.

"So lay out your offer in full. Let us hear it." His father spread his arms expansively.

"Right to the point." Bane chuckled then he began to pace in a short line, changing direction with every point he made. "Nick works for me for one year. He lives on my estate. He does whatever I ask of him. He is at my beck and call twenty-four seven, three hundred and sixty-five." Bane's gaze slid over to Nick. "Which does *not* include sharing my bed as that has no benefit to *me*."

Jake snorted. Nick glared at his older brother. Steven made a tutting sound.

"And what would we receive for this in return?" His father took another long swallow of cognac.

"His payment is that the three of you will be given a chance to prove your worth to me. I will give each of you a division of one of my companies. You will have one year's time to show me that you understand my business philosophy and can put it in practice profitably," Bane ticked off the terms on one of his large hands with surprisingly delicate movements. "If you *fail* you will *lose* everything. If Nick *fails* to stay with me and live up to his part of the bargain you will lose everything. You will be right back *here*, but there will be no third chance."

Jake's head jerked up as he heard the deal. He had that hungry, lean look on his face that reminded Nick of a street kid who hadn't eaten in a long time. Steven was seemingly frozen in place, but his eyes showed his brain furiously working.

"And obviously nothing bad would happen to Nick? He would be well taken care of? Not harmed in any way?" his father questioned.

"He would have to actually *work* for a living, but I would not ask him to anything that would harm him. Anything but his *pride*, that is," Bane answered.

Nick bristled. What the Hell did this man know about him? He acted like Nick was some kind of spoiled little prince! Maybe he'd had it easy compared to a lot of people, but it wasn't like he was afraid to get his hands dirty.

"What happens if we don't take your deal?" Steven asked, ever the practical one.

Bane smiled. It wasn't a nice smile. It was a tigerish grin. There was something almost feral about the man. Despite a veneer of good breeding, the remnants of a posh accent that hinted of high-class English schools and the well-cut suit, Bane's nature seemed quite wild.

"You'll be out on the street tomorrow," Bane said.

“But there are rules against stuff like that!” Nick protested. He turned to Steven. “They can’t just kick us out of the house even if the bank foreclosed tomorrow! Steven, tell him!”

But Steven pressed his lips tightly together as if to stop any words from flowing out. He shook his head.

“You’ve lived in Winter Haven all your life and you *still* think that the rules apply equally to everyone?” Bane asked softly. “Or perhaps you’ve just been used to being on the *winning* side of those rules so long that you can’t even comprehend how unfair and unequal they can be applied?”

“You don’t have the power to get around the laws!” Nick yelled.

He looked at his brothers and father, expecting them to show the same level of incredulity as he was. But none of them would look at him. Jake kept rubbing his mouth with the back of one hand. Steven stared down at the tablet he held listlessly. Their father’s gaze was on the floor. They believed Bane. They believed that no matter what the law was that Bane would have his way. Nick’s mouth went dry as the desert.

Bane drew himself up to his full height again. His voice was low and dangerous, “I *assure* you that your family will not have a home tomorrow. What little is left in their bank accounts will be frozen. No friends will take them in. If they *had* any friends, that is. No one will give them a job. Not even at the corner market. And even if they could scrape up the coin to go to another city or town it will be the same there, too.”

Nick jerked back as if physically struck by the man’s words. “Why are you doing this?”

“Do you think that your family hasn’t done the same to countless others? The suffering that they have caused around the globe has lined their pockets for many years. I am just *paying* them back,” Bane said with a tight smile. “Think of me as Robin Hood.”

Nick swallowed the bile that had bubbled up in his throat. He had tried not to know the cost of his family’s business practices. He wouldn’t even look at the news about jobs lost, lives ruined, and pensions disappeared by keeping his gaze always on the horizon and the time when he would be free of them.

“We’re not the only ones that do business that way, you know,” Jake said suddenly. “Why pick on us? I mean it’s clear to me that you were luring us in all the time!”

Their father gestured for Jake to keep silent. Jake recoiled and seemed to curl in on himself.

“No, you’re not the only ones. And you’re not the only ones that I’ve destroyed for the same thing,” Bane answered. His frosty blue gaze swung back towards Nick and there was something unreadable in it. The beautiful marred face seemed rather mask-like at that moment. Then Bane was turning away towards the windows to look at Nick’s reflection instead of head on. “But you are the *only* ones I’ve given a second chance to.”

“Why?” Nick asked.

“I don’t honestly know,” Bane answered.

“You don’t seem like a man who doesn’t know what he’s doing.” Nick frowned. “Though I’m not sure what’s worse: that you planned this out or that you’re destroying our lives on a whim.”

Bane sounded almost sad as he said, “You think one year of hard labor too much for your family’s well-being? If that is your answer then --”

“No, I didn’t say that! Just -- just give me a minute,” Nick begged.

Silence fell. There was nothing left for anyone to say except for Nick. His gaze swung around the room at all of his family. What he saw on their faces was fear. Raw, unbridled fear.

There’s no recording device. They aren’t trying to trick Bane into anything. This is real. This is absolutely real.

Could they all fit into Jade’s two bedroom apartment? Maybe for a night or two, but then what? At that moment, he could very well believe that Bane’s reach was infinite or that the businessman would make it so. Like an avenging angel he would follow them and make sure his vengeance was meted out.

Is he insane or just really pissed that my family tried to take his company? Does he think of his workers? Does he care about them or is all this just an excuse to vent some anger?

His family wouldn’t look at him. He wondered then what they were thinking. If they were given this offer would they accept it to save the others? Some part of him doubted it. He could walk away from them now. Bane didn’t seem to be threatening his livelihood, just his brothers and father’s. He could leave them to their fate or he could take the deal and save them.

One year of working for Bane. How bad could it be?

He looked at the powerful line of Bane’s shoulders and back. He shivered in spite of himself. Bane was beautiful and the exact kind of guy that would have appealed to him in the past. But not now. Bane was poison.

“If I do this,” Nick began and he saw his father flinch. Was there a look of hope or dismay or perhaps both on his face?

Bane’s head rose. “If you do this ...”

Nick tried to read the businessman’s expression in the glass. The full lips were slightly parted as if Bane wanted to capture Nick’s next words with his teeth. The Siberian blue eyes gleamed in the low light. The puckered, ruined skin of his scar seemed to glow.

“If I do this, they’ll be okay?” Nick gestured towards his brothers and father.

“They will be given exactly the things I promised,” Bane answered.

“And you’ll give them a *real* shot, right? You won’t stack the deck impossibly high against them or anything?” Nick pressed and he saw a flash of Jake’s eager face, wanting this chance, wanting to prove that he could do the impossible.

Bane let out an earthy chuckle. “The deck is always stacked against people somewhat. But yes, they will get a *fair* chance.”

“And whatever you’re asking me to do won’t be illegal? It won’t be to hurt someone else or myself? And it won’t be to sleep with you – because, believe me, that so isn’t happening.” Nick sliced his hand through the air.

Bane let out a sharp laugh. “From the sheer *amount* of times you’ve brought up sleeping with me, I might begin to think that you are, in fact, *interested*.”

Nick’s cheeks flared with heat. “Ah, *no*. But that’s usually what is the main part of these *arrangements*. It’s normally the reason for them, right?”

“You’ve heard of many of these arrangements?” Bane suppressed a laugh.

Nick flushed hotly again. “Not in real life, no. But I’m sure they happen.”

Bane chuckled. “The rich and powerful *always* have someone under duress, don’t they? I’m sure you have seen *lots* of that.”

Nick bridled at the implication that his family was completely avaricious. “My family has never had a live-in slave -- or should I say *intern*, thanks.”

Bane lifted his hands in the air as if in surrender. “I see. I am lower than them then in your eyes.”

Steven gripped his tablet tighter and Nick knew that he was worried that Nick was going to blow the deal if he kept on being so aggressive.

“I just want things to be clear between us,” Nick ended.

“You have been *crystal*,” Bane said the word as if it had a piquant taste.

Nick advanced on Bane. He saw the man’s large shoulders stiffen in surprise as he approached. His family shot worried glances at him, but he ignored them. Bane slowly turned to face him. Nick stopped a foot from him. Bane was so much bigger than he was. The man could engulf him in those massive arms. There was the slightest scent of sandalwood and cinnamon rising off of him. Exotic spice. Nick looked up into that hooded face and didn’t blink. Other than the terrible burn scar, Bane was as beautiful as a Greek sculpture come to life.

“If you *break* any one of your promises to me or to them, you forfeit my family’s company and fortune. It *all* goes back to them. Are we *crystal* on that, too?” Nick asked.

“You think you are in a position to make any terms?” Bane’s heavy-hooded blue eyes stared right back into his.

“I think that you fancy yourself *honorable* in some weird, twisted way,” Nick guessed and the slightest flicker of emotion on Bane’s face confirmed that. “I think you don’t intend to break any of your promises so what’s the harm in putting that on the table, too?”

Bane studied him for long moments. “All right. Agreed.” The big man was suddenly spinning away from Nick and heading towards the doorway. He called over his shoulder, “I will send you my estate’s address. I expect you will be there later this evening. Do say your goodbyes. You’ll all be too busy for guests. Your family’s new positions will be emailed to them in a few hours.”

“But what about a contract? Surely, we should write this all down!” His father cried, reaching out towards Bane.

Bane laughed. “A contract? In writing? Your son in exchange for potential prosperity? I think not. Your son is wise. I will honor my promises so long as you and he honor yours. That is more than you deserve.”

Bane then strode from the room, without a look back, as if he was certain everything would go exactly as he wished it.

CHAPTER SIX - MAGNIFICENT RUIN

“You’re crazy, Nick. Certifiably *insane*,” Jade’s voice buzzed angrily through the earpiece of Nick’s cellphone. Even with his motorcycle helmet on and the engine roaring, he could hear her rather well as she was almost yelling.

“I know,” Nick sighed.

“And you called me on the phone *instead* of coming back to the apartment -- *our apartment* -- because you knew that I would convince you not to go through with this crazy plan!”

She was right. He had specifically avoided going back to *their* apartment, but instead immediately headed towards Bane’s country estate. The address had popped up on his cell phone a minute after Bane had left. He hadn’t given Bane his number so it was a little creepy -- okay, a *lot* creepy that Bane knew it.

“It will be *our* apartment, just a little later than we’d hoped,” Nick said.

“I can’t believe that even your father would stoop this low! To sell his son?!” her outrage reverberated. “That’s what this is, Nick! Your family *sold* you to Bane!”

“I *agreed* to be sold,” he corrected her.

The truth was if she knew half of what had happened after Bane had left she would never understand why he was doing this. He feared he didn’t understand it either. If he had gone back to the apartment, he would have told her everything. He would have told her how his father had promised to pay his way through art school and get some of his art dealer friends to take an interest in Nick’s *undoubtedly* incredible photography after the year was up.

“It’ll be over before you know it, Nick!” His father had slapped his back and grinned at him avuncularly.

Nick would have had to tell her how his brothers and father had then turned their backs on him to feverishly check for Bane’s emails on their phones. Steven and Jake had already been researching Bane’s companies by the time Nick had slowly turned his own back on them and headed for the door. His brothers were trying to predict which divisions they would be put in charge of and already vying over who would get the better company. If he’d been in the apartment, he definitely would have told her how his family had hardly noticed when he had gone away.

“Why did you do this, Nick? Why would you agree to anything like this?” she asked, her voice sounded choked with tears now. No longer angry, but afraid and upset for him.

He blinked. The curving, two-lane highway spooled out before him like a length of ribbon cutting through the nighted forest. As he looked at that serpentine road, he struggled to explain why he had done this.

“I couldn’t let Bane destroy them. He was going to do it, Jade. There’s no doubt about that,” he explained.

“Nick, they *chose* how they were going to run their business. Maybe they *earned* this. But you’re the *only* one really paying for it. Bane set them up at his companies to do what they love to do best!” she protested.

That was true. Nick was really getting the short end of the deal. Like always. But he still wouldn’t have made a different choice.

“I did it, because I wanted to be *free*,” he finally said.

“What? What do you mean? How can being a slave make you free?”

“I do this and I’m really *done* with my family. No doubt. No guilt. No looking back,” he said.

“And you couldn’t have done that by telling them to piss off and becoming an artist instead of Bane’s *slave*?”

He could imagine her shaking a fist in the air in front of her face as she paced her apartment. Underneath the anger in her voice, he heard the overwhelming worry. *This* was how people who loved you were supposed to react. He hardly felt the miles between them even as he left the city far behind and traveled into the countryside. Vast forests surrounded cosmopolitan Winter Haven. There were only a few homes tucked deep in the woods. Bane’s was one of them.

“Just think of it as an internship, Jade. That’s all,” he said and winced. Not even he could quite keep a straight face at the idea of this being an *internship*.

“Internship in what? Wait, don’t answer that! Because you’ll tell me *again* how you’re not sleeping with him!” She let out a harsh exhale of air. He imagined that it puffed up her black bangs. “I thought that the worst thing that could happen tonight was that you would lose your nerve and give up on your dream to be a photographer and become a corporate vulture-like your brothers –”

“I would never do that,” Nick interrupted her. He gripped the handles of his bike harder. He heard the leather gloves squeak in protest. His photography seemed more like a lifeline than ever before.

“Oh, what a relief! You’ll *never* give up photography, but you *will* give up your freedom!” She was quiet for a moment before she said, almost despairingly, “Nick, I can’t believe you’ve done this. Maybe you can undo it.”

“Unless you want my father and two brothers crashing at your place *forever*, I’m pretty sure I have to do it. Besides Bane may destroy your eBay business for helping us,” Nick said the last with a sardonic smile.

“Doesn’t that freak you out a little bit? That the guy would go to those lengths? I mean it’s crazy! Almost pathological!”

“Considering I’m crazy, too, in your mind, Bane and I should get along swimmingly,” Nick reminded her.

“How can you be so calm about this? It must be shock. It’s got to be shock!”

Nick watched as the moon rose up before him. It silvered the trees on either side of the road. The only sound besides Jade’s voice was the roar of his bike. The vibrations from the road and the pleasant warmth of the motor flowed up his body. He was calm. More than calm. He felt at peace.

“Maybe it is shock,” he answered her, surprised at his own feelings. “Or maybe now I get to live my life without guilt or what ifs.”

“You mentioned this lack of guilt before and I really don’t get your reasoning here.”

“When I was going to leave my family before, I felt like I was letting them down,” he said. “I felt selfish about going away like I was taking something from them.”

“Oh please! Those three don’t care – all right, I’m not going to say it. I’m not going to argue with you about it. Go on.” He imagined her pulling her pink sweatshirt tighter around herself as if it were a straight jacket on her feelings about his family.

“They may not deserve what I felt, but I did feel it,” Nick explained. “And now ... there’s no more guilt. No more worry. One year of cleaning Bane’s toilets and I’m done with my family’s business for good. I feel *free*, Jade. Seriously, free.”

“You think Bane is going to make you clean his toilets?” she asked after a beat.

Nick laughed though it wasn’t a happy laugh. “From what he said about how he views me – essentially, as a rich pretty boy who’s been waited on hand and foot – my guess is that he’s going to have me cleaning his toilets with my *tongue*.”

Jade made a gagging noise, but then he heard another serious huff of breath. “I really hope that’s the worst thing he makes you do, Nick. You’ve given him so much power over you.”

“I didn’t give him *anything*. My family did. I’m just cleaning up their mess this time,” Nick corrected her.

He followed what he guessed to be a final curve of the road before his destination. He knew he was getting close from the directions he had looked up online before he left his father’s office.

“Well, I’m going to come see you this weekend at Bane’s place,” Jade said. “I need to make sure you’re okay.”

“Let me ask and see if it’s cool for you to come,” Nick cautioned. “I don’t -- holy shit!”

“What? What is it?”

The screech of the motorcycle’s brakes drowned out every other sound as Nick skidded to a halt in front of an iron gate wrapped with ivy. But it wasn’t the gate he was looking at or the drive beyond it. It was the house.

“I’ve found it,” Nick whispered.

“Found what?”

Nick actually laughed as he answered her, “A magnificent ruin!”

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