

The book cover features a dark brick wall background. A pink chair with a dark metal frame is partially visible on the right side. The word 'renewal' is written in a large, pink, cursive font across the top. At the top and bottom edges, there are clusters of pink and white flowers. The text 'ONE WORD SERIES' and 'BOOK 1' is printed in a light pink, sans-serif font on the right side of the chair. The author's name 'DANIELLE SARAH' is printed in a white, sans-serif font at the bottom.

renewal

ONE WORD SERIES
BOOK 1

DANIELLE SARAH

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revival

DANIELLE SARAH

REVIVAL
DANIELLE SARAH

This book is a work of fiction. All characters, incidents, and dialogue were created from the author's imagination. Nothing in this story should be constructed as real. Any similarities between persons living or dead are entirely accidental.

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CONTENT WARNING

Discussion of parental abandonment, drug use/overdose, infidelity (mentioned in passing - not on page), sexually explicit content.

PLAYLIST

Tennis Court - Lorde
King for a Day - Pierce the Veil (feat. Kellin Quinn)
American Psycho - Marshmello, Mae Muller & Trippie Redd
Today I Saw the Whole World - Pierce the Veil
So It Goes... - Taylor Swift
Don't Wait Up - Silverstein
Delicate - Taylor Swift
Stay - Emarosa
sex - EDEN
Boyfriend - Ariana Grande & Social House
Dress - Taylor Swift
The Only Exception - Paramore
Love Like This - ZAYN
It's You - Ali Gatie
how many things - Sabrina Carpenter
The Diary of Jane - Breaking Benjamin
Naked - James Arthur
When You're Gone - Shawn Mendes
Just Pretend - Bad Omens
Cross My Heart - Marianas Trench
For Her - Xavier Mayne, ELIO & Chase Atlantic
I Wanna Be Yours - Arctic Monkeys
3:15 (Breathe) - Russ
That Something - With Confidence

LISTEN ON SPOTIFY:



AND APPLE MUSIC:



*To those whose dreams feel out of reach, you can do it.
And to my mama, thank you for always encouraging me and giving me my
love for books. But you should probably put this down.*

REVIVE

To return to consciousness or life: become active or flourishing again

Summer

“And in that moment, I swear we were infinite.” - Stephen Chbosky, The Perks of Being a Wallflower



“I present to you this year’s Maple Garden graduating class!”

Caps fly into the air as all of my classmates let out whoops and sounds of joy. My best friend, Stella, pulls me in close for a hug, a huge smile etched on her face.

“We’re out of here,” she whispers to me.

“Finally!” The excitement has my heart racing. I can’t wait to run out of this gymnasium. I’ve spent four years at Maple Garden High with only Stella to keep me sane, and I’m ready to be free.

For as long as I can remember, I have been anticipating this day. The moment I could finally leave Stars Valley and be out on my own. My life here has been *fine*, but small-towns can be stifling at the best of times. Not to mention they lack the excitement that I crave.

It feels like living in a fishbowl. I can see the outside world, but I can’t escape. That is, until now. Now, I can smell the freedom within my reach, and I’m desperate to grab hold of it.

First things first, I have to find my family in this crowd so we can get the hell out of here. I grab Stella’s hand and we join the rest of the students walking off the stage. It takes us far too long to reach the exit of the school gym as we aren’t able to take more than two steps without someone stopping to congratulate us on this newest milestone. Not just teachers, but other parents and members of our community. The town is so small that pretty much every adult here has known the members of this graduating class since birth. And they have all crowded into the space, whether they have a child

walking across the stage or not. This is a Stars Valley affair and, since everyone knows everyone, *this* is the event to be at right now.

Mrs. Locklier, our ballet teacher from when we were six, is next up to stop us.

“Congrats, girls!” she chirps, her face breaking out in a cheek-splitting grin. Stella and I murmur our thanks as she continues on. “It feels like just yesterday I was begging you both to keep your tutus on during dance class. Desiree, do you remember that time you interrupted the *entire* production of *Sleeping Beauty* to announce to everyone you needed to pee?” Her shoulders shake with laughter at the memory.

I cringe thinking back on the moment she’s referring to. It had been an emergency situation, and I blame my mother. Who gives their child a full-sized Sprite right before a dance recital? She was practically begging me to have an accident on stage.

“Absolutely adorable, and now look at you. You have grown up to be fine young ladies. I expect the two of you will represent Stars Valley well next year.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Stella and I say in unison, chuckling.

Satisfied with our response, she shifts her attention over our shoulders. “Oh! Is that Cindy? I let her borrow my wheelbarrow last week and do you think I’ve gotten it back?” She rolls her eyes. “Congratulations again, girls.” And then she’s off toward her new target.

We continue forward to the exit, but I’m stopped in my tracks when I catch a glimpse of another familiar face. Liam, my ex-boyfriend, stands just outside the door with a group of his friends. None of the others notice me, but his eyes lock with mine.

I’d foolishly hoped that I would be able to avoid him today, but in a school this small I should have known better. My chest grows tight and my breath quickens as both sadness and anger rush through my body at the sight of his smug smirk. How did I never see him for who he truly was before? His gaze shifts to Stella and he scowls before walking away. I turn just in time to see my friend lowering her middle finger.

“Reflex.” She shrugs when she notices me looking at her. I grin. I can always count on Stella to have my back.

“Oh! There they are!”

I follow the direction she’s pointing in and, sure enough, our parents are all together just outside the gym. We make our way over with huge smiles on

our faces.

I see my dad, Floyd, first. His height and shiny, bald head make him stick out among the crowd. Standing next to him is my mom, Margaret, dabbing her eyes with a tissue as she speaks to Stella's parents. She's holding a bouquet of pink dahlias, my favourite flowers, in her other hand.

"Look at our beautiful girls! We are so proud of you both. I can't believe you've already graduated high school." The words tumble out of her mouth at such a rapid rate, I'm barely able to keep up. "Where did the time go, Desiree?! I swear I was just holding you as a baby at the hospital." Her tears are fully flowing now. My dad looks at her with so much love in his eyes, it makes my chest feel tight.

"These are for you, sweetheart," my dad says as he takes the flowers out of her hands and gives them to me.

I raise the arrangement to my nose and inhale. "Thank you so much."

Meanwhile, my brother, Dominic, looks like he's trying to find the nearest exit. Overt displays of affection tend to make him uncomfortable.

At six foot two, he's only a tad shorter than my father, whereas I, at five foot three, definitely got my height from my mom, but my brother and I share our father's deep brown eyes. Dom opens his arms for a hug, and I step into his embrace.

"Congrats, Des."

Before I can even utter the words "thank you," he's rubbing his knuckles on the top of my head hard, adding, "Didn't think you would make it out of Maple Garden for a second there."

I roll my eyes and laugh as I push him away.

"I'm not *you*, idiot, my graduation was never in jeopardy."

"That's because you never had a social life."

I'm about to argue when my father clears his throat, effectively cutting off my brother. "How about we continue this at home in front of some good food."

We all walk toward the parking lot and agree to meet back at my family's house to celebrate.

Once we're on our way, my dad speaks up. "So how do you feel, Desiree? You're officially a high school graduate. Ready to close this chapter and start a new one?"

"I think she's already regretting her decision," Dominic says with a laugh before I'm even able to respond. "You sure you don't want to come to UBC

with me and Stella? It's not too late. I'm positive they'll still be willing to take pity on you."

"I am *not* regretting my decision," I protest, knowing that my brother is trying to get a rise out of me. I refuse to give in to him. I don't regret my choice, but sometimes I do wonder if it's the right one.

Stella will be joining Dominic—who has been attending the University of British Columbia since he graduated two years ago—in the fall. It's the first time we'll truly be apart since we met in kindergarten. Whenever I think about it, my heart starts to race.

I've never had many friends. I wasn't a loner, exactly, but I wasn't popular either, though it never mattered because I always had Stella. I know everyone in my family expected me to join her and Dom at UBC. I almost did. I applied to a few universities around Canada and got into nearly all of them, with Carleton University being the exception, but that was a long shot anyway. Where I decided to go did shock my family. Starting in September, I'll be attending the University of Winnipeg. *Yeah. Winnipeg.*

Safe to say, I'll be the only one from my little, rural high school in Saskatchewan moving to Winnipeg, Manitoba, in the fall. Regardless of what anyone thinks, I'm excited. It'll be somewhere different, with no family around, unlike Vancouver where I have aunts and uncles all within driving distance of the UBC campus. I'll be on my own, getting to experience my new adult life, no longer under the watchful eye of this extremely tight-knit community.

As if he can hear my thoughts, Dom playfully smacks my arm. "There's no shame in admitting when you've made a mistake."

"Dominic, leave your sister alone!" Mom chides from the passenger seat. Dad keeps his eyes on the road, his lips pursed, trying to contain his laugh.

"She made her decision," Mom continues, and then, under her breath, "but I can't for the life of me understand why she chose *Winnipeg.*"

"I heard that, Mom. And yes, I'm sure," I say, side-eyeing my brother.

Worst case scenario, I can transfer to UBC for my second year. I just want to give this a try. Something different, a place where no one knows me, somewhere I won't be faced with my ex at every turn.



ONCE WE GET to the house, I run out of the van, kick my shoes off at the door, and head straight to my room. I've spent hours in this dress and, as cute as it is, it has to go. I put on a pair of light denim jeans and a black crop top that cinches at the front and turn to look in the mirror, already feeling ten times more comfortable and like myself. My dark, curly hair spills over my shoulders and down my back. I reach for a scrunchie and tie half of it up, needing it out of my face.

I grab my phone, snap a quick mirror picture, and send it to Stella, letting her know that I'm ready. She texts me back almost instantly.

Stella: I'm on my way over, hottie!

I chuckle as I place my phone in my back pocket and head down the stairs. Mom is still wearing the pink wrap dress she wore to the ceremony, and is in the kitchen pulling out drinks and containers of food from the fridge that she prepared this morning. Her dark brown hair blows with the breeze coming in from the open window.

I lean over the kitchen island, placing a grape from a fruit platter into my mouth. "The Wilsons will be here in a few."

She nods, and then looks at me with tears in her eyes. "I still can't believe that my sweet baby is graduating high school." Her voice is so soft that it's almost a whisper. I wonder if she's going to start crying again.

"Mom, stop. Please," I respond with a laugh. "I'm not moving that far away! It's an hour's flight. And I'll always be your little girl." I say that last part more softly because, no matter how ridiculous I think she's being at the moment, I know it's due to the fact that she's about to be an empty nester. She's spent the last twenty years of her life dedicated to being the best mom she could be, and she has been. I walk around the counter and wrap her in a hug, doing my best to swallow the lump of emotion that has now painfully lodged itself in my throat. I wonder if it's possible to be homesick before you've even left home?

She sighs and gives me a firm nod, looking more like she's trying to convince herself that everything will be okay. I know it will be hard for her

with my brother and me gone, but she and Dad will be okay. I'm sure of it.

Right at that moment, Dad bounds down the stairs. He's changed into sweatpants and a plain white tee that stands out against his dark skin. Mom looks over at him and shakes her head, a little smirk on her lips.

"Sweatpants? What was wrong with the jeans you were wearing?" She chuckles.

"I only get to celebrate my daughter graduating high school once, and I intend to do it in comfort. I'll have you know, these are my best sweatpants!" His eyes twinkle while he laughs. I watch their back-and-forth over what my mother calls his *questionable* fashion sense and I realise how much I'll miss them come the new school year. My heart squeezes and I'm fighting back a tear that threatens to spill when I hear the front door open.

"Des, I'm here!!! Time for graduation shots!" I laugh at Stella's high-pitched voice and feel the knot of sadness in my chest dissipate. Today is not the day to feel down. I don't think my best friend would let me even if I tried.

"Hey, now! I don't recall either of you turning nineteen," Adrian, Stella's dad, says as he and his wife, Sheryl, walk from the foyer to the kitchen. The legal drinking age in both Saskatchewan and British Columbia is nineteen, but eighteen in Manitoba.

"Oh, come on, Dad! Loosen up, will ya? We're heading to university, we're practically adults," Stella proclaims.

Adrian lets out a semi-amused grunt. Stella and I both know he'll be fine with us having a few drinks to celebrate tonight. The Wilsons are my extended family for all intents and purposes. They adopted Stella when she was one year old, and have been living across the street from us ever since. She and I grew up and shared almost all of our major milestones together. Stella is the sister I always wanted.

My mom's eyes widen when she sees what Adrian is wearing.

"You too, with the sweatpants?" She chuckles in exasperation as she looks at Sheryl, who has also remained in her black dress from the ceremony.

"I don't know what to tell you, Margaret. He said something about celebrating comfortably?" She looks back at her husband, her expression that of confusion.

Adrian and Dad give each other a high-five and head over to the living room with a laugh. A few seconds later, we hear the TV playing what sounds like football. It doesn't take a genius to realise this must have been the plan from the start and where they'll probably be for the remainder of the evening.

“Where’s Dom hiding?” Stella asks, attempting to sound disinterested. I know her like the back of my hand and there’s absolutely nothing nonchalant about her question. Stella’s long-standing crush on Dom is well-known by both him and me. She’s had a thing for him since she sprained her ankle at twelve and he piggybacked her home. She wouldn’t stop talking about how he had rescued her. I find it gross. It makes my skin crawl thinking of the two of them together.

Dom has chosen to ignore it. But what other choice does he really have? Growing up, we did everything together as a trio. Stella is practically a third Clarke sibling. As we got older and Dom began hanging out with “the boys,” the trio disbanded but he’s always remained friendly with her, treating her almost like a second sister. I can tell he tries not to encourage her.

“He’s out back, hun,” my mom responds.

Stella gives me a wicked smile and a wink as she grabs an orange Crush from the countertop and heads out the sliding doors to the backyard. I roll my eyes and follow her lead, grabbing a cream soda as I exit the kitchen.

It’s been an unseasonably hot summer in Stars Valley, but today, a cool breeze makes being outside bearable. Dom is lying in the hammock that Dad set up between two trees, his eyes closed, looking completely at peace. Stella grabs the edge of it and tilts it so that he almost falls out.

“Can I help you with something?” he asks, tossing her a playful glare.

We sit on the ground beside the hammock, and I revel in the feel of the lush grass between my fingers.

“Well, since you’re asking,” Stella says with a teasing tone, “I was thinking it would be nice if you could show me around campus when school starts.”

Stella is a flirt. Not just with my brother, but with everyone. It’s who she is, and I wouldn’t change her for anything. She doesn’t even have to try, she just has this easy way of chatting with everyone and making them feel like they’re the most important person in the world to her. There are times I wish I could be more like her, a little more carefree and flirty instead of the reserved person I am. Liam—my first and *only* boyfriend—and I got together because he approached me first. I had a crush, but never found the courage to approach him, despite Stella’s constant encouragement. Three years later, I’m left wishing that we had never spoken at all.

But right now, something about the way Stella is talking to Dominic has me on edge. My fist tightens in the grass and I resist the urge to pull it out. It

feels like something has changed. I can't put my finger on what's going on.

Dominic looks at Stella a beat longer than usual and then scoffs in his typical you-can't-faze-me way.

"As if I have a choice. If you get lost on campus, I'll immediately get a call from my mom."

"I'll take that as a yes, then."

"Yeah," he says with a smirk. "Take it as a yes."

Suddenly, I'm questioning if the two of them attending the same school is going to be a problem. As soon as the thought enters my mind, I push it out. *They would never.*

"He won't be much help," I interject, laying on the sarcasm. "Dom barely attends class. He'll be useful if you want to know where the football field or the gym is though."

He looks at me out of the corner of his eye. "At least I had a major when I started school."

He's got me there. I have no idea what I want to study, the academic counsellor at school encouraged me to choose something I felt passionate about. Unfortunately for me, I have no idea what that is. Whenever I try to make a decision, I feel warm and my skin begins to itch. This is one of the biggest decisions of my life thus far, what if I choose the wrong major and end up with a completely useless degree? Worse yet, what happens if I never find my passion? Dominic knew he wanted to go into education, and Stella has her heart set on nursing.

And then there's *me*.

Undeclared, I'll be taking random courses hoping to have a magical lightbulb moment where I'll know exactly what I want to do. I've read through the different programs offered at the university so many times I know them by heart, and still nothing has jumped out at me.

Dominic must see the stress on my face because he walks his comment back.

"Hey, I'm kidding. It's really not a big deal."

"Yeah, tons of people don't have a major decided right away," Stella says, bumping her shoulder against mine. "That's the point of your first year. You can figure out what you like and what you don't. You'll find something, Des."

I pull my lip between my teeth, doing my best to believe their words.

The rest of the evening goes on without a hiccup, making me feel like

whatever vibe I was picking up between Stella and Dom was just a figment of my imagination. It must have been the result of realising that they're going to be in the same place once the school year starts, while I'll be thousands of kilometres away.

After dinner, I lie on my stomach, sprawled out on the ground, feeling the repercussions of too much dessert. "Ugh... I love Mom's chocolate cake, but I think I overdid it," I groan.

"No one told you to go for that second slice," Dominic says in a flat tone.

"You quite literally said, 'Have a second slice, Des. It's your graduation day.'" I side-eye him and his lips curl up at the sides as he stands.

"Huh, I guess I did. Well, goodnight!" His laughter fades as he walks back toward the house where our parents are still reminiscing over stories of when Stella and I were kids. Stella sits down next to me and lies on her back, and I flip over. We stare up at the night sky for a few moments. *Perks of living in the middle of nowhere? A clear view of the stars at night.*

"I'm going to miss you," Stella says, barely above a whisper. I feel the sting of tears behind my eyes for the second time today as I take a deep, steadying breath.

"I'm going to miss you so much, Stel." My voice somehow sounds far more solid than I feel on the inside. "But we'll FaceTime often and see each other during Thanksgiving break. Time will fly! And no matter what, you'll always be my sister."

"You'll always be my sister too, D." She sighs and, after a beat of silence, adds, "Is it wrong that I hope you're miserable in Winnipeg and you come to Vancouver next year?"

I'm unable to contain my laughter as I smack her arm. "Bitch! Wishing for my misery? How could you."

She lets out a cackle and smiles at me. "Just don't fall in love with a Winnipeg boy, okay?"

I grin back before turning to look back at the sky.

Her parents, like mine, met during their time in university and, growing up, Stella and I wondered if we would meet our future partners in the same way.

We're what my mom calls "hopeless romantics," we both love *love*. We once spent an entire day watching *Say Yes to the Dress* on repeat, and by the end of the day we'd added probably fifty Vera Wang wedding dresses to our respective Pinterest boards. We'd always get carried away and dream up

different scenarios of the men we would meet while away at school.

Although, right now, with all the change heading my way, finding my “person” is the last thing I’m thinking about. After everything that went down between Liam and me, I’ve sworn off boys for the foreseeable. I refuse to let myself spend another three years wrapped up in someone else, only to be let down. My focus will be on making friends, adjusting to a new city, and figuring out what the hell it is I want to do with my life. No other complications. I’ll just get my romance from books and movies.

“I won’t,” I promise.



The rest of the summer goes by in a blur. My days are either spent shopping, getting new stuff for the apartment that I'll be living in once school starts, or soaking up all the hangout time I can get with Stella before we go our separate ways.

Tonight is our last night together. Tomorrow afternoon, Stella and her parents are leaving for BC. Dominic will be on that flight as well, while Mom, Dad, and I will pack the car up and drive to Winnipeg. My mind can't begin to accept that we're truly going to be separated. Outside of my immediate family, Stella has been the one constant in my life, and my heart breaks knowing that we'll have over two thousand kilometres between us. I've spent the day doing my best not to think about it, yet I can't help the tight feeling in my chest as I prepare my living room for Stella's arrival.

In honour of our last in-person hangout for a while, we're having a classic girls' night. Pizza and every other junk food imaginable covers every square inch of the coffee table. My parents went to bed early and left us to our own devices. Which means that Stella and I can watch *She's the Man* for the hundredth time.

"Seriously! This movie was Channing Tatum's prime," Stella proclaims while reaching for the bowl of All Dressed chips. "So fine! Never looked better."

I side-eye her as I raise a slice of pizza to my mouth. "Not even in *Magic Mike*?"

"Mmm... okay, I'll give you that," she concedes. She opens her mouth to

continue speaking, but Dominic walks in.

“This again?” He rolls his eyes as he walks past us. “You guys do know it’s okay to have a movie night without watching this, right?”

“If you want to join us, Dom, you just have to ask,” I call out to him.

“I’ll pass, I still have to pack up my clothes, which I may have told Mom I did last week.” He grimaces. “But I’ll see you guys tomorrow. Have a good night.”

We say good night, but Stella’s eyes follow Dominic as he walks to the stairs. Her gaze lingers on his backside as he goes up. I reach out and smack her with a throw cushion. “Hey, eyes on the screen lady!”

She laughs and turns back to face the TV, but the look on her face makes me think she’s not focused on Amanda Bynes and Channing Tatum in the slightest.

When the movie credits begin to roll, Stella sits up on the couch. There’s a gleam in her eye and I can already anticipate what’s coming.

“So...” She draws out the word as a smile creeps onto her face. “What’s Dom’s workout routine lately? He looks... different.”

Here we go.

“Different how?” I ask as I stand up and head toward the kitchen to refill the now empty chip bowl.

I hear the padding of Stella’s feet behind me. “Don’t pretend you haven’t noticed that each time he comes back from UBC, he looks better and better.”

“No, Stella. I have not noticed that about my *brother*... not once,” I deadpan.

She shrugs her shoulders and grabs a chip directly from the bag. “I don’t know, all I’m saying is that maybe there’s something in that UBC water. I wonder if all the boys look like that there.”

She waltzes past me back to the living room as I follow with a sigh.

“You’re telling me that you’re not slightest bit curious about what the guys at your school are going to be like?” she asks, flopping back onto the couch.

“I haven’t given it much thought,” I respond honestly.

Stella lets out a low hum. “You might find a real hottie and bring him to Stars Valley for Thanksgiving break,” she says with a laugh.

“I thought you didn’t want me falling in love with anyone out there,” I point out, hoping that will put an end to this conversation.

“Who said anything about falling in love?” she questions. “I said find

yourself a fine as fuck man, and bring him back here. I just want you to rub it in Liam and *Karen's* face. Just have a good time." She winks at me.

Heat rises in my cheeks; casual hook-ups have never been my thing. *Maybe they should be*, a small voice in my mind says.

"His mom's name is Christine." I chuckle.

"She looks like a Karen to me."

Earlier today, Stella and I went to Morning Rae—our favourite diner in town—for breakfast and ran into Liam's mom.

I did my best to look away before she noticed me, but I wasn't quick enough. She made direct eye contact with me, narrowing her eyes and turning up her nose as if she had suddenly caught a whiff of something disgusting. Liam and I broke up nearly nine months ago, yet every time his mom sees me around town she acts as though I've wronged her entire family. As if her son wasn't the cause for our break up.

"Hey," Stella had said, pulling me out of my head. "Fuck her. If she wants to wear her son's ass as a hat, that's her business. You know you didn't do anything wrong, right?"

"I know," I replied as the waitress brought out our food.

Still, I can't help but feel thankful that my move means I won't have to suffer through any more of these awkward run-ins.



FINALLY, the time has come. The late-August air is hot and muggy, not even the slight breeze is able to keep us cool. The car is packed with all my boxes and bags, and we're ready to go. Stella and I stand on the driveway clutching each other for dear life as we say our final goodbyes while my parents wait for me in the car. Stella sniffles with her head on my shoulder, and the need to cry chokes at me again. This time, though, I let it out. We pull away from our embrace and laugh as the tears spill down our cheeks.

"We look ridiculous," she says with a tremble in her voice, wiping her cheeks dry.

"I know," I respond, attempting to compose myself. "I'll see you in October for Thanksgiving."

She nods her head, takes another step back and exhales shakily. “I love you. Call me when you get there.”

“Of course.” My voice is equally unsteady. “I love you too, I can’t wait to see what your dorm looks like!”

Dom walks up, a smirk on his face. “I didn’t think you guys would stop crying. Don’t worry, Stel, I’m sure Des will survive out there in the boonies.”

“It isn’t the boonies, idiot.”

My brother acts like I’m moving to some remote village when Winnipeg is a *regular* mid-size city. He hugs me, squeezing me tighter than ever, and whispers, “Seriously... stay safe, sis. I’m always a phone call away if you need me.”

Tears rim my eyes again. For all our jabs at each other, he is without a doubt my best friend, right next to Stella. I can’t imagine him not in my life and it’ll be just as hard to be without him as without her. Stella and Dom stand next to each other on the driveway, waving as we back out onto the main road. As sad as I feel, the moment we pull onto the highway, excitement runs through me.

I can do this.



FIVE HOURS LATER, we arrive in Winnipeg. My heart races as I take in my new surroundings. I’m determined to explore as much of the city as possible while I’m here. We pull into the guest parking section of the underground parkade to my building and head upstairs to my unit. The apartment is still bright with the last remnants of daylight and, as soon as we enter, I feel my whole body relax. *See? Nothing to be worried about.*

The unit is beautiful. The place is furnished, which was the biggest selling point. The living room has floor-to-ceiling windows that let me see clearly through to the Manitoba legislative building. A beautiful grey sectional couch faces the TV, and I’m already picturing the decor I want. The layout is open concept and the kitchen, while not huge, is very nice, with white cabinets and large light fixtures that hang down from the ceiling. They’ll keep the space bright when it starts getting dark early in the winter

months. The apartment building is part of the province's Affordable Housing Program, and has dedicated apartments that are cost-effective for students. From what I've read online, I really lucked out, since the units usually are taken quickly. *I love it.*

I hear my mom call out from the hall. "Des, when did you say your roommate would be here?"

I follow the sound of her voice and find her and my dad standing in the hall between the two bedrooms. "Friday," I respond, double-checking the text message she sent me last week.

I found Yazmine online on a University of Winnipeg forum. She's a second-year student and was looking for something closer to the university. She seems nice from the few messages we've exchanged, but I'm still nervous to meet her in person. I don't know what I'll do if we don't get along. I've never lived with anyone who wasn't a blood relative, but I try to push aside the anxious thoughts.

We arrived two weeks before school starts so I can settle in beforehand. I'll have the place to myself for the week. Mom and Dad are only staying for a couple of days before they head back home, which means they won't get to meet Yazmine. I know they're worried about me living with a complete stranger. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't uneasy, but I keep reminding myself that I'm not the only first-year university student to move to a new place and have a new roommate.

"How about we go find dinner and then call it a night," my dad says as he begins to lay out an itinerary for the next few days. "We can go grocery shopping and get you any extra things you need for the place tomorrow."

When we arrive back home, I'm both stuffed and worn-out. It was so nice to get out and wander around my new neighbourhood a bit with my parents. We found a cute local cafe called The Next Plate not too far from my place. *I still can't believe that I have my own place.* I'm sure I'll become a regular; the food is great, the atmosphere is cozy, and it's the perfect spot for study sessions since they're open late.

We collapse on the couch almost immediately, and Mom and I try to convince Dad that *Pretty Woman* is the perfect movie to end this long day. After courtroom-level arguments, we start the movie, only for all of us to fall asleep within thirty minutes.



THE SMELL of hash browns and coffee invades my senses the next morning, sunlight pouring into the living room.

I get up from the couch and stretch my arms as I walk toward the kitchen. Dad's got a huge McDonald's bag on the counter.

"Morning, D," he says, smiling. "I got your second favourite breakfast, since we still need to go grocery shopping. A bacon and cheese McGriddle, hash brown, and a caramel iced coffee." His own hot coffee sits on the counter next to it. "It's no Morning Rae, but I'm hoping it'll do."

My stomach growls in response as I open the bag of food. "This is perfect, Dad, thanks."

Just as I begin to eat, my mom comes padding out of the bathroom, her hair wet.

"Morning, hun, how are you feeling today?"

How am I feeling? *Still a lot nervous, but way calmer than yesterday, I suppose.*

"Good! Thanks." I take a sip of my coffee and plaster a smile on my face. Letting my parents in on my anxiety will only end with them being more worried about leaving me. No need for all of us to spiral today.

After everyone has finished stuffing their faces, we head out to the grocery store to finally stock the fridge. My parents take twice the normal amount of time needed because they're explaining what "good prices" are for different items. It's as if they realised that they now have less than forty-eight hours with me and must impart all their wisdom before they go. Most of it is unnecessary—I have in fact been to a grocery store before—but I nod along and ask questions. I know it makes them feel helpful and that they're only doing it out of love for me.

After groceries, we head to the trifecta of home goods shopping: Winners, Marshalls, and Home Sense. The next couple of days continue like this, with us running around different stores and coming back dog-tired. I still need to get stuff for the kitchen, living room, and bathroom, but I'll wait for Yazmine before decorating the common spaces. The only thing left for me to do is buy books for my classes, but I can take care of that on my own.

When the time comes for my parents to leave, I go down to the building lobby with them and give them each the tightest hugs imaginable and let them know how much I appreciate them taking time out to help me settle in. I'm crying, Mom is crying, and Dad swears up and down that there's a lot of "pollen" in the air here.

"You know everything is going to be okay out here, right?" Dad says as he blinks back a tear. "Your mom and I raised a strong girl, and we are so endlessly proud of you." Mom snuffles and nods her head in agreement. "You're heading for a big change, but I couldn't be more confident that you can handle anything."

I look at him, the setting sun through the lobby window hitting his black skin and making him look almost golden, and I smile. "Thanks, Dad."

They promise to call me when they get back home, and just like that, I'm alone.

A strong girl. As I wave goodbye to the two most important people in my life, the ones who've been a constant pillar of strength for me, I wonder if Dad was right. I've spent my whole life in the same place, with my family to support me whenever things got tough, but it's all on me now. *Can I really do this by myself?*

As I enter the elevator, a tall Asian guy gets in after me. I try my best to keep my tears at bay and wipe my cheeks in what I hope is a discreet way.

"First year?" The guy gives me with a sympathetic smile.

I hadn't expected a complete stranger to speak to me and I don't trust my voice right now. I nod.

"I'm from here, so it wasn't so bad for me," he continues, "but my girlfriend goes to school in Toronto and when she moved, she cried for weeks. Now, she's in love with the city. It'll get better, I promise."

I stare at him, amazed. I didn't think I would need a pep talk from a stranger today, but here I am. I look at him more closely. He's about five foot eleven with dark black hair that hangs down to his shoulders. His smile seems genuine, and I find myself feeling strangely at ease. His friendly demeanour makes me feel as if we're friends, not people who just met. The elevator reaches the fourth floor and he moves to get out. Finally, I find my voice.

"Thank you," I say with a lot less confidence than I had hoped for. I clear my throat and try again. "I'm Desiree."

His smile widens, eyes crinkling. "Nice to meet you, Desiree. I'm Tristan."

Maybe I'll see you around again, it's a small building after all. And hey, keep your chin up, I'm sure things will get easier."

I smile, feeling more at peace than I did a few minutes ago, and take the elevator to the fifth floor.

Yazmine will be here tomorrow, so I have the apartment to myself tonight. I consider pulling a Rachel from *Friends* moment and dancing around naked in the apartment, but one look at those huge floor-to-ceiling windows and their weak drapes has me thinking better of it. Face mask and movie night it is. I pop some popcorn and throw on my all-time favourite movie: *Pride and Prejudice*. I've seen it hundreds of times, but what's a hundred and one?

I grab my drink and settle into the couch, ready to watch the Bennet sisters freak out over a new potential suitor.

Fall

“The unexpected is what changes life.” - Lacey Weatherford



“Quit playing games, Eli.”

I grab Sadie’s hair in my hand, wrapping it around my fist, and yank her head back so she’s looking up to the ceiling.

“What was that?” I taunt as I lean over her.

As she opens her mouth to respond, I slam into her, filling her completely. Whatever she was about to say dies on her lips and is replaced with a breathy *Oh god*.

I keep fucking her hard, our bodies joining together the only sounds in the room. When it becomes too much and her arms bend at the elbow, I use my grip on her hair to pull her up against me. I slow my strokes down and let my other hand wander over to her front, rubbing her clit slowly and gently, and then faster. She turns her head to the side so her lips are less than an inch from mine, but I tug the strands and force her head in the opposite direction.

No kissing.

She knows this rule already, there’s nothing intimate about what’s happening here. We both have needs to satisfy. That’s all. My balls start to tingle and when I look at Sadie, she’s biting her lip so hard she’s about to draw blood.

“Let it go, Sade,” I whisper into her ear, letting the tip of my tongue graze her earlobe. “Come for me.”

I move my hand faster on her clit as I feel her clamp down on my dick. She cries out. The tightness of her around me sends me over the edge. With one final thrust, I come hard, pulling out just as Sadie collapses onto the bed.

I clean myself up and grab the dress she'd been wearing from the pile on the ground, tossing it over to her. She rolls her eyes but grabs the outfit.

When we're both dressed again, Sadie attempts to linger in my room, leaning against the dresser.

"I missed you." Then, she adds with a pout, "You barely texted me while you were gone."

"Things were hectic back home. Stuff kept me busy." I shrug, keeping it vague. I don't want to touch the *I missed you* shit with a ten-foot pole.

I help Dad out on the farm and with selling food at the market when I'm in Brinkley, but nothing keeps me *that* busy. I just don't have any interest in sharing meaningless texts with her at all hours of the day. On occasion, we would talk on the phone, but those conversations always served a purpose. I'd listen to her moan into my ear as she fingered herself and I told her the filthy things I wanted to do to her. How badly I wanted to taste her, how much I wanted to feel her hot mouth on me. All while I fisted my cock at a furious pace in my childhood bedroom.

Once we'd both released that pent-up tension, I would claim exhaustion and let her go. I wasn't interested in any small talk afterward, and I *certainly* didn't want to hear about how much she missed me.

She must realise that this conversation is going nowhere because she purses her lips and gives a terse nod. "Okay, well, I'll see you at the next band practice then."

"Sounds good," I respond, lying back down on the bed as she exits the room.

Classes start tomorrow, and normally people would resent the fact that their break is over. That's not me, though, after the last four months in Brinkley, I'm thrilled to be back in the city. Summer at home is always depressing as fuck. I love my family, but damn, it's tough to be around my father sometimes. He's practically a billboard for the pain and suffering our mom put us through. Thirteen years later and we still can't even walk into the grocery store in town without someone looking at us with pity in their eyes. I can't stand it. So being back in my apartment in Winnipeg with my friends brings me a type of contentment that most need drugs to feel.

I hear a light knock on my door before it cracks open. I expect to see Sadie again, assuming she must have forgotten something, but instead, Nate appears on the other side, his red hair shining as the sunlight hits it. I'm surprised and wonder briefly how long he's been in the apartment—he wasn't

here when Sadie arrived—before coming to the conclusion that I don't give a fuck.

“Yo, Eli. Tristan and I are heading to the bookstore, you wanna come?”

“When are you guys going to learn?” I heave a sigh as I stand up from my bed. “There's no need to buy books before the class even starts. The prof may say it's required, but is it really?”

“Whatever, man,” he says with a roll of his eyes. “We're going. Are you coming or not?”

“Yeah, yeah, I'm coming.” It beats doing nothing.

Fifteen minutes later, we're at the campus bookstore. Both of my roommates take off in separate directions to pick out their books. I'm just here for the sake of getting out of the apartment for a bit. I'm not buying a textbook before classes start. Half the time, you can get away without it, and I don't have money to waste.

I'm looking around the merch section of the store, wondering why people would willingly choose to wear sweatpants with “University of Winnipeg” down the side of the leg when I hear a soft grunt come from behind me.

There's a girl struggling under what appears to be her weight in textbooks. She lets out another small yelp as she does her best not to let the books topple over. I try my hardest to hold back my laugh, but it's difficult. She moves over to the next aisle, looking for an additional book to add to her stack. I follow her, unable to stop myself. *What am I doing?* I enter from the opposite side of the aisle and see her kneeling down, looking at a textbook on the bottom shelf, her massive stack of books placed on the floor. She's so intently focused on reading the synopsis she hasn't even noticed me—and thank god—because I'm standing here like a creep and, for some reason, I can't take my eyes off of her. Her skin is a light golden-brown, her long, curly hair cascades over the smooth curves of her shoulders, spilling over her white cropped shirt. Her light blue jeans hug her ass so well they demand my attention. I'm drinking her in and I can't explain why. Her eyes are squinted as she reads the small text as if she's afraid she'll miss a word and she's chewing on her plump lower lip. I've never seen anyone take picking out class textbooks as seriously as she is right now. She adds the book to her stack and begins to stand, and I, like any sane, non-stalkerish person, turn as fast as possible, grab the first book I see on the shelf, and crack it open. Luckily for me her cell phone rings, and the girl pays me no attention as she struggles to get the phone out of her bag. She turns and exits from the side

she entered and wanders over to the next aisle.

“Hey, Stel,” her melodic voice floats through the space. It’s soft, *delicate*, and has me in a daze. “I’m at the bookstore.”

Before I have time to think about what I’m doing, I move forward along the bookshelf between us, trying to catch a glimpse of her face through the spaces between the books. I’m acting like a lunatic. *Get it together*, I think to myself, feeling frustrated by my irrational response to her.

Whatever the person on the other end of the line says to her causes her to giggle, and it sounds as though it should belong to a Disney princess.

“I know,” she continues, “I’m about to pay. I’ll call you back later, okay?”

Unaware of the fact that I’ve been watching her for the last few minutes, she hangs up the phone, grabs one final book, and goes to stand in the checkout line.

Tristan spots me as he’s walking by. He eyes the book in my hand, “you buying something after all?”

I put it down and shake my head, hoping to clear it. “Nope. Are you done here? Where’s Nate?”

“Yeah, I’m done. I think he’s at the front, looking at some of those study sheets. He wanted to grab one for biology.”

I laugh. “If you guys like wasting money so much, why don’t you just give it to me.”

We walk over to the front to join Nate where have a clear eyeshot of the checkout and *everyone* in line. Both of my friends are focused on each other, deep in conversation, unaware of the trance I’m in. I stay right where I am and look over at *her* struggling once again with her books. I’m sure that if I were to squint, I’d see sweat on her brow.

Once again, I bite back a laugh. A nicer guy would offer to help carry them, but I’m not that guy. That’s where I draw the line. She may be holding some kind of strange Disney-princess-in-a-bookstore power over me, but there’s no reason for me to introduce myself. This is simply shopping entertainment, and I refuse to pretend it’s more, even if it takes all of my restraint to stop myself from walking over there. The woman behind her taps her shoulder, asking her a question, and she turns around to respond. And then, I fully see her face.

Fuck. As I look at her head-on, I realise she’s even more stunning than I initially thought. She’s one of the most beautiful girls I’ve ever seen. She

must be new here because there's no way I would have forgotten her. She finishes speaking with the lady, and then turns back to the front, and I find myself wishing that she would face my way again. I have never been an obsessive person before, certainly never about girls. They come and go, and I couldn't care less. But I have never felt drawn to anyone as much as I am to her and it's making me feel completely off-kilter. This girl has my full attention and I want to soak her in and memorise her features. If she were to turn around right now and look in my direction, she would catch me staring like some campus creep but, even then, I don't think I could turn away. As soon as that thought crosses my mind, the cashier indicates that it's her time to pay, and in her rush to relieve herself of the burden of the books, she ends up dropping one, causing me to chuckle. She bends down to grab it and, on her way back up, turns her head and makes eye contact with me before I can glance away.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Now I do seem like the campus creeper. The only thing making this situation even the slightest bit okay is how flustered she appears from dealing with all those books. Another laugh starts to slip through my lips, but I clamp it down. She stares at me dead in the eyes for about three seconds and it feels like an eternity. My heart beats wildly in my chest as our eyes lock. Hers are the most beautiful shade of brown and, try as I might, I can't look away. I do my best to snap out of it when she turns back to the cashier, but I'm unsuccessful and continue to watch as she pays and accepts the reusable bags to carry her purchases out. As she puts the last item in the bag, she glances over her shoulder again, catching me staring once again. This time, I don't care. There's no point in hiding now, and a part of me wonders if she'll say something, *maybe I even want her to*. Bringing her focus back to her purchases, she picks up the bags from the counter, but the weight of it pulls her down. She's completely tilted to the right, and with that, my laughter spills out, no longer able to be contained, and the girl who just held my attention for longer than any of my past hookups walks out the door.

Hearing my laughter from where they stand in line, Nate and Tristan stop their conversation, turning to look at me in confusion. I just shrug at them and move to stand closer to the exit. I can't help but crane my neck a bit to catch a glimpse of *her*, my curiosity peaked, but she's already out of sight. I feel a pang of regret hit my chest, maybe I should have offered to help her.

And then what? Walk her home? Yeah, right. That's not me, and being

fixated on a random girl isn't either.



When I make it back to the apartment, Yazmine is sprawled out on the couch watching some sort of baking show on TV.

“Hey! If I had known you were going to be home this afternoon, I would have waited to see if you wanted to come with me to the bookstore,” I say as I drop my bags of books on the ground at the edge of the living room and join her on the sofa.

It’s been just a little over a week since Yazmine moved in. We instantly clicked. Even though we had spoken over text, I hadn’t realised how nervous I was to meet my roommate until she waltzed in that day and I was hit with the largest dose of relief.

With her black hair and legs for days, she’d looked like a young Naomi Campbell.

“I sure as hell hope you’re Desiree, ’cause if not, I’m in the wrong apartment.”

I laugh, unsure how to greet this new person I’ll be living with. “I’m Desiree,” I confirm. “You must be Yazmine?”

She places her bags on the ground. “Sure am, and I’m starving! I’ve got some more bags to bring up, but do you want to go grab dinner after? Unless you have other plans.”

She’s speaking to me as if we’ve known each other for ages, and aren’t random strangers about to share a home. It instantly puts me at ease; her demeanour reminds me a lot of Stella.

“Yeah, that sounds great,” I reply.

“Awesome, I know the most amazing Middle Eastern restaurant.”

We’d spent that entire first night chatting about everything from music to our favourite snacks, and ideas on how to decorate the apartment. Turns out we have a lot in common.

“Oh, no worries, I just got home! I’ll just pick up the books I need tomorrow after class,” Yazmine replies.

I join her on the opposite side of the couch. The rest of the day passes in a blur and we watch five episodes of a baking competition before it hits us how starving and ready for dinner we are. We settle on frozen pizza and a salad; clearly watching *Food Network* all evening hasn’t inspired us to up our cooking skills.

“Are you feeling nervous about tomorrow at all?” Yazmine asks as I chop the veggies for the salad.

“Yeah, sort of, but I’m sure it’ll be fine.” And yet, my mind immediately starts running through every scenario in which my first day of university could be a disaster. “It’s just a very different experience, you know?”

She nods. “I get it, first year is always an adjustment. You’ll be okay though. When’s your first class? Maybe we can meet up afterward.”

I pause and think of my schedule. “I have Art History at ten and Calc at three, so somewhere in between there?”

“Perfect. I have class at two, but I’m meeting up with a friend for lunch beforehand. What if I meet you after class and you join us for lunch?”

“I’d love that, but I don’t want to intrude.”

“You’re not intruding,” she says quickly. “I’m inviting you. It’ll be fun, promise.”

I smile and nod my head in agreement. I can’t just go to school and run back home every day. I promised myself I would get out and meet people, and if Yazmine is inviting me out, I should take the opportunity.

Once the plans for tomorrow have been agreed on and dinner has been made, we head back to the living room to eat and watch more bakers scramble to make the most elaborate cakes in what hardly seems like a reasonable time frame.

My mind drifts back to what happened in the bookstore while in line to buy my books. I’d felt as though someone was staring at me. I brushed off the sensation, but when I dropped one of the textbooks and stood up, I made eye contact with a guy. He was tall, his dark hair falling just over his eyes, and there was a stupid smirk on his face. My cheeks flush with embarrassment at

the memory. He had definitely been laughing at me. I swear I heard a low chuckle from across the store as I walked out of the building. *What a dick.* I'm sure I looked ridiculous with all of those books, but still, who just stands there staring and laughing at someone?

But there had been something more to his gaze that had pulled me in, it was as if he didn't just find me humorous. He seemed to be studying me, and it had left me feeling off-balance and slightly vulnerable.

I force my mind away from the memory; it doesn't matter anyway. I'm sure that won't be the last time I embarrass myself here. I cringe, that was not the comforting thought I had been seeking.

As if aware of my spiraling thoughts, Yazmine taps me on the shoulder. "Wanna bake a cake?"

I let out a laugh. "Seriously?"

"We've been watching this baking show all evening, it can't be that hard."

Turns out we couldn't even if we wanted to; Yaz looks up about seven different cake recipes online and we're missing key ingredients for each one. We decide that the next best option is to go to The Next Plate and treat ourselves to a slice of cake there.

When the elevator stops at the fourth floor, a food delivery courier steps in, looking down at his phone. From where I'm standing, I can see that he's just left a huge bag of food in front of someone's door. As the elevator begins to close, the apartment door opens and a guy pops his head out and reaches down to grab the food. His eyes are fixed on the bag, not bothering to look up.

I, however, can't stop staring at him; I could swear that it's the same guy from the bookstore. *There's no way.* I shake my head in an attempt to clear it as the elevator doors come to a close. There's absolutely no way it was him. His hood was up and he was leaning over to pick up the delivery, so most of his face was obscured.

No. You were just thinking about the bookstore incident and now you've seen someone who looks similar and you're running with it, I think to myself.

The elevator stops on the ground level and the delivery guy and Yazmine step out ahead of me, neither paying any attention to the daze I'm in. When Yazmine turns around and notices I haven't moved, she gives me a quizzical look.

"Are you coming or what?"

I take a deep breath to clear my head. “Yeah, I’m coming.”

Who cares if it was him, *which it wasn't*, it doesn't mean anything. He's hardly bound to start following me around campus laughing at me. “Sorry, I thought I forgot something upstairs. It's all good.”

The rest of the night passes without any fanfare. We order maple lattes and share a massive slice of carrot cake. She tells me about her life growing up in Winnipeg and I tell her about small-town life back home in Saskatchewan.

“I would love to live in a cozy small town. Ever since I watched *Gilmore Girls* it has been *the dream*.”

I take a sip of my latte and raise my eyebrows. “I can honestly say that it's nothing like being in a *Gilmore Girls* episode. The most realistic part of that show is how everyone is in your business. I still remember when my ex and I first started sleeping together and he went to the store to buy condoms. We hadn't told anyone yet, but before he even made it back to his place, the gossip mill had started and his mom had called mine to let her know what was happening. She'd heard the news from one of her neighbours.”

Yazmine bursts out laughing. “Is that why you decided to come here rather than go to school in Saskatchewan?”

“Yeah, or at least most of the reason.” I pause, thinking of the best way to explain why I wanted to get out of my home town. “I could have stayed there and been close to my parents, and I considered going to school with my brother and Stella, but I just wanted to do this on my own. You know? If I had gone to UBC, I would have always been leaning on Stella.”

Stella had called back, as promised, the night that Yazmine moved in and they'd spoken to each other for a few minutes. Stella had texted me later, saying how nice she seemed and that she couldn't wait to come visit.

“I get it. Sometimes you just need to get out on your own. It makes sense, especially if you're in an environment where everyone is always keeping a watchful eye on you.” Yazmine smirks as she takes another sip out of her mug. “So, no boyfriend waiting for you back home then?”

I wince and she notices.

“Sorry, is that a sore spot?”

“No, it's fine.” I hope my voice sounds a lot more relaxed than I feel. “It was nothing serious. I dated a guy for a while, but it didn't work out. We broke up in January. It is what it is.”

That's one way of summing up the three years I spent with Liam. I

thought everything was going great, only to find out that every holiday and summer break, when he would go to visit his dad in Calgary, he was also visiting his *other* girlfriend. I was shocked when, in January, she turned up at our school to surprise him. She ran and all but leapt into his arms, kissing him in front of everyone. Turns out, she didn't know about me either. I left school crying that day, and Stella and I spent the entire weekend watching the dumbest rom-coms and eating Ben & Jerry's by the pint, vowing to never utter his name again.

The look on my face must give Yazmine some indication that I'm not wanting to rehash the whole event, so she drops it and tells me about her family. We get home around ten thirty and I'm ready to call it a night. I do my normal skincare routine and crawl into bed, psyching myself up for class tomorrow. I've almost forgotten all about the embarrassment from earlier today and the dumb guy from the bookstore.

Almost.



Tristan suggests we order in for dinner. We're all far too exhausted to stand around and cook, so it's not a hard decision. I barely slept last night because he was on the phone with his long-distance girlfriend.

"Hey Tristan," I say as we each take a seat on the couch, waiting for the food to arrive. "Maybe next time you want to talk to your girlfriend until two in the morning, you could go—"

"Two? They didn't stop until 3! How many times can two people say I love you? It's just back and forth, over and over again," Nate interrupts. "*I love you. I love you more. No, I love you more.*" His pitch gets higher with every use of the phrase.

Tristan throws a pillow at his face. "That's not how we talk."

"No, of course not, I hear the occasional moaning too... You really know how to put it down over the phone."

Tristan's cheeks redden as Nate and I snicker.

"I'm kidding. I haven't heard that, but thanks for the confirmation on what you two get up to."

Tristan is defending himself when my phone buzzes in my pocket.

Sadie: Hey E. Want to meet up tonight? My place. Something came up and Carrie isn't coming back until tomorrow. I'm home alone.

Sadie has been a constant presence in my life, both as a friend and as my most consistent hookup, for over a year. She came to one of our first

basement shows and stuck around long after the small audience had left. She's hot, no two ways about it, with her jet-black hair, green eyes, and more tattoos than I could count, and I was instantly attracted to her. She went from flirting with me to sucking on my tongue in no time, and when she suggested we head back to her house, I wasn't going to say no. Sadie has always known the score, I'm not interested in anything serious. I don't do cute dates, cuddling, or any of the couple shit; she's insinuated a few times that she would like something more, but she doesn't push it, making her just my type. Although she couldn't look more different than the girl from the bookstore—

Why the *fuck* am I thinking about her again? And comparing her to Sadie?

I've already seen Sadie once today, and I'm tired as hell but, for some reason the girl from earlier is still on my mind and it has me feeling unsettled. I'm pretty sure this is my body's way of telling me that one quick hookup wasn't enough to undo the time I went without sex. It had been a long four months because I refused to sleep with any of the girls back home. The town's too small, and I don't want any of them to get the wrong idea. I'm not interested in a relationship whatsoever, and I'm certainly never moving back to Brinkley, so it's just easier to stay away from the girls there than get tangled up in some unnecessary situation.

Me: Sure, I'll see you later.



MY FIRST CLASS of the semester is Art History. A first-year course that I'm taking in my second year because I want the GPA booster. I'm not doing poorly in school, but I could use an easy A this year, so here I am, sitting in class at ten a.m., listening to the professor drone on about what the class will entail, what assignments will look like, *blah blah blah*. My attention is elsewhere as I use my pen to tap out the beat to the newest August Burns Red song that's been in my head all week. I'm still annoyed by the fact that seeing Sadie last night wasn't enough to stop my mind from drifting back to the girl. I could still hear her laugh in my mind and I started wondering what she

would sound like as my lips trailed down her body. Her hair had looked too thick to wrap around my fist, but I'm sure I could still get a good grip on it.

And now I'm thinking about her again.

There's no reason for me to be reacting this way to someone I don't even know, but she seems to have taken up residence in a small corner of my brain and won't get out. *No more*, I tell myself as I rapidly tap my pen against my notebook. I refuse to let this continue. If I never see her again, it will be too soon.

I feel confident that I've made up my mind just as the door to the classroom swings open. My heart stops for a moment.

Standing at the door is the girl from the bookstore.

Her hair is tied up in a messy bun and she looks like a deer caught in headlights as everyone turns to look at who just walked in. Her eyes stop on the empty seat next to mine before landing on me. I see the moment she recognises me, *remembers me*.



HIST-1011

INTRODUCTION TO ART HISTORY

PROFESSOR: C. LOUGHLIN

THIS CLASS HAS BEEN MOVED FROM 1L15 TO 1D11

This cannot seriously be happening!

As far as first days go, this has to be in the running for one of the worst in history. I had woken up to the sound of Yazmine knocking on my door.

“Hey, Des? Are you up? Pretty sure you said you have class at ten.”

Confusion swarmed my mind as I pulled myself out of the fog of sleep. I grabbed my phone off the nightstand to check the time and shot straight up. *Nine-thirty. Shit.* I was sure I had set an alarm the night before. A quick phone check confirms that yes, I had indeed set the alarm — for eight p.m., *not* a.m. I scrambled out of bed, running across the hall to the bathroom, thanking Yaz for waking me up as I ran by her. I usually don’t sleep in, but last night I’d tossed and turned, never able to get comfortable as worries about the next day took over. Ironically, all of the nervous thoughts about what could go wrong on my first day of school kept me from sleeping, which

led to one of those scenarios actually happening.

I pulled on the most basic outfit: black jeans and a cropped teddy sweater. By the time I was out the door, I had a whopping twelve minutes until class started. I booked it to school, and thanked myself for having figured out my route to class last week. I ran so hard a light sheen of sweat coated my forehead and my lungs burned like hell.

And now, I am greeted with a sign on my class door in Lockhart Hall, indicating that it's been moved across the street to the Duckworth Centre. I have thirty seconds to make it to a different building. I let out a sigh heavy enough to blow away a strand of hair that has fallen out of my bun and onto my face. There's no point in running anymore, I'm already late. I pull my phone out to take a look at the campus map. I could use the overpass that links the two buildings, but I'm so hot from rushing around that I decide to take the outdoor route.

Once I get inside the Duckworth building and successfully locate my classroom, my anxiousness skyrockets again. I can see through the window that the class is full. I take a deep breath and open the door. Nearly all heads turn to me, causing me to pause in the doorway.

The professor gives me a warm smile and asks, "Intro to Art History. Are you in the right place?"

If I tried to speak now, my voice would be a croak, so I just nod. I scan the room to find a seat. There's one left smack dab in the middle of the second to last row between a blonde girl who looks like she's fighting sleep only ten minutes into class and—*oh, you have got to be kidding me*—the guy from the bookstore. This time, I know my mind isn't making him up. He has the same dumb smirk on his face as he did yesterday and he's watching me with a gleam in his eye that says he hasn't forgotten me either.

I urge my feet to move, awkwardly whispering apologies to everyone as I shuffle to the seat. When I finally sit down, I take a deep breath and pull out my notebook. I do my best to focus on what the prof is saying to the class as he explains the syllabus and our future assignments, but it would be a lot easier if I didn't feel the blazing gaze of the guy next to me. I do my best to ignore him, but his woodsy scent calls to me, demanding my attention. I give in and look at him, and we make eye contact for a brief moment before he turns his smirking face back to the front of the class, leaving me to stare at his side profile. *A gorgeous one... No one should look that good from the side.* I internally chastise myself for gawking at him, and I go back to facing the prof

as well, refusing to be pulled into whatever weird game he's playing.

Class gets dismissed twenty minutes early, and I grab my phone out of my bag to text Yazmine that I'm ready to meet up whenever she is. She texts me back almost immediately to say she's on her way and that she'll meet me in the outdoor quad area. Most of the students have already cleared out and *he* seems to be gone too. I gather the last of my things and exit the room.

Just my luck. He's standing right outside the classroom next to a tall redhead with glasses, a guy built like a Greek god, his long-sleeved, black shirt stretched tight across his folded arms as he talks to his friend. On his other side is a girl with long black hair and tattoos scattered across her arms and chest. Her face is, as Stella would say, "beat to the gods." She's laughing at whatever it is the redhead and Bookstore Guy—as I've now coined him—are saying. As she giggles, she reaches out and grabs his arm, giving it a squeeze before gently brushing her hand down the length of it.

The gesture is both comfortable and affectionate. *Of course* he has a girlfriend. Yesterday I had been too flustered to really take him in, but looking at him now, I can see how attractive he is. His dark hair hangs over his forehead, stopping short of covering his earthy brown eyes. His jaw is chiseled and defined, his full lips come complete with a cupid's bow, and both arms are scattered with tattoos.

Yup. He's hot. And now I'm staring. I pull my bag higher up on my shoulder and cross the threshold of the classroom.

When he sees me, the smile on his lips disintegrates. He holds me in a chilling stare and, just like the first time in the store, looks at me as if I'm an equation he's trying to find the answer to. I feel my heart beating fast against my ribcage, and then he quickly drops my gaze. I suck in a couple of deep breaths and try to even out my heart rate, hating the reactions he brings out in me. The girl glances in my direction but pays me about as much attention as you would a passing breeze and goes back to the conversation at hand.

I start my walk toward the exit, all the while scolding myself for getting caught staring. Okay, he's good-looking and, sure, he has a lovely, deep, woody scent, like pine trees and fresh rain in a forest, all with a hint of mint underneath. But none of that means anything, because he has a *girlfriend*, and I want *nothing* to do with him. So we have a class together, what's the big deal? The lecture hall is huge. I'll arrive early and sit somewhere else next time and before I know it, December will be here, the class will be over, and I can pretend he doesn't exist.



BY THE TIME I get to the quad, Yazmine is waiting for me with two coffee cups. “Hey, you beat me here,” I tell her.

“Yeah, I was already on my way when you texted me. I was planning to head over early to scope out the scene.”

She’s right, the quad is filled with the hustle and bustle of “O-week.” There are various booths for different school clubs, a beer garden set up to the side, and a stage I assume will have a band playing later in the day, if the drum kit and mic setup is any indication. Students are chatting with each other and enjoying the last remnants of summer warmth. We head over to a stone picnic table and Yazmine hands me one of the coffees.

“Here, this is for you. Double-double, you said you like those, right?”

“Yes, thank you so much. I never got to make coffee this morning and I feel dead.” I catch her up on my morning and the impromptu classroom change.

She laughs. “Sounds like a hell of a morning. I’m sure your class this afternoon will go better.”

I nod. “I hope so.”

If I’m honest, I’m apprehensive about that one too. Math was never my strong suit, so I’m about as excited for calculus as one would be to walk on hot stones. Yazmine updates me on her morning, which was a lot more relaxing than mine, and tells me about the creative writing class she’s taking in the afternoon. Apparently, it fills up fast, so she’s excited to have gotten into it.

When it’s time for us to leave for lunch, we start walking to the Vietnamese restaurant located just five minutes away. I feel myself getting nervous about meeting her friend. I’m always awkward the first time I meet new people, and now I’m crashing their lunch.

“Are you sure this is okay? Does she know I’m coming?”

She casts me a look out of the side of her eye and smiles. “Yes, *he* knows you’re coming. I told him I was bringing a friend.”

We get to the restaurant and walk inside and Yazmine points him out. “Oh, there he is!”

Sitting at a table for four, in the corner, is one of the most handsome guys I have ever seen. He raises his head and gets out of his seat to greet us. He's black, tall as hell, way over six feet, has a clean haircut, and a smile that takes up his whole face. Right away it makes me feel like we've been friends forever. When we get close to him, he pulls Yazmine into a tight hug, and immediately I feel like I'm intruding on a personal moment. *Is there something going on here?* I make a mental note to ask Yazmine about it later. After they exchange their hellos, he turns his focus on me.

"You must be Desiree." His voice is like velvet, smooth and rich, making me feel comfortable with alarming immediacy.

"I must be," I say with a smile.

"I'm Jaden. Sit, sit." Yazmine joins him on the same side of the booth and I sit in front of him. "What's your story? Yaz told me a bit about her new roommate, but I know she's not to be trusted," he says with a teasing smile aimed at her.

The rest of the lunch goes by with ease, and my fear that I would feel like an intruder is laid to rest. It's almost impossible to feel uncomfortable around Jaden. He listened intently as I gave him the quick rundown of my move to the city, and he told me more about himself. He and Yazmine met last year, in the school photography club. I'm amazed when he tells me that he spent the summer in Australia taking pictures for a travel blog that one of his friends runs.

"How are you with a camera?" he asks me.

I scoff. "I know how to point and shoot with an iPhone, that's about it."

"You should join the club. It's great! Yazmine was a total amateur last year, she couldn't even use her iPhone camera, but you would never know that now." She laughs and playfully punches him in the arm.

"That isn't true!" she proclaims. "But he's not wrong, Des, you should join! It would be fun."

I shake my head. "I don't know anything about photography. And I don't have the money for a camera right now."

"That's fine," she assures me. "When I started, I wasn't sure if I would stick with it, so I just joined the group and took pictures on my phone. You can get some great pics with that alone." She pauses thoughtfully. "But I have two DSLRs now and you can borrow one if you want."

"Oh, wow." I'm shocked that she would offer to let me use her equipment since those cameras aren't cheap. "I appreciate that. I'll definitely think about

it.”

“Okay, good! The first meeting for the club is on Thursday, so just let me know. Everyone is super nice and you’ll fit right in, I promise.” She smiles

When I glance at my phone, I’m shocked at how quickly the time has flown. Yazmine heads off to her class, and I decide that with an hour to kill, I might as well go back home; maybe I’ll get to talk to Stella and see how she’s doing. Today was her first day as well.

When I get back to the apartment, I plop onto the couch and call her. Two rings later I see her face on the screen. My heart squeezes, she looks the same as always and it feels so comforting to see a familiar face. I wish I could give her a hug.

“Des? Is everything okay? Why are you crying?” Stella asks, concern in her voice.

Jeez. I hadn’t even realised that tears were coming out of my eyes until she pointed it out. *Why am I crying?*

“I just miss you, that’s all,” I whisper. It was my decision to go to school where I knew no one, and I had accepted how hard it would be to separate from my best friend, but I don’t think anything could have prepared me for how much I would miss her. My whole heart aches for her to be with me.

“I miss you too, babe.” Her smile is sad and now it looks like she’s fighting back tears too. “How was your first day?”

I catch her up on all of the morning’s antics, leaving out the bit about Bookstore Guy, unsure what to say. If I’m being honest, I’m afraid that if I talk about him, he’ll take up even more space in my mind when he shouldn’t be there at all. She tells me about her first classes, and before I know it, I’m already feeling better and it’s time for my next lecture. We promise to speak to each other again on the weekend and then I’m out the door, hoping for a better experience than earlier.



“Eli, you okay?” Devin’s voice snaps me back to reality. I’m standing in the middle of Merchant, an old-fashioned dive bar where our band practices, staring off into space while my friend and bandmate observes me with concern. I had been so caught up in my thoughts, that I hadn’t even noticed him walk right up to me.

“Yeah, I’m good,” I respond, trying to shake off my daze.

To say I’d been shocked when I saw the girl from the bookstore come through the door is the understatement of the century. I’d turned my head to stare at her as she took her seat next to me, unable to stop myself. She must have felt it, but she’d refused to look at me, only spurring me on.

When she’d faced me, making direct eye contact, I couldn’t explain the uncomfortable way my chest had tightened. I’d looked away, forcing myself to relax, satisfied that I had finally gotten her attention.

Why did I even care? Once again, I’d found myself getting annoyed with the reactions she brought out of me, so I’d spent the rest of class refusing to even look away from the professor. And it proved to be harder than it should be.

When class ended, I’d wasted no time getting up and out of that room. Nate and Sadie were already waiting for me so we could all head over to practice together.

Nate had clapped me on the back, sending shock waves through me. The guy is only a couple of inches taller than my six feet, but he’s built like a brick house and even his joking hits could take me out.

“Good, you’re out of class,” he says with relief. “Save me from having to listen to Sadie talk about her ‘vision’ for the Halloween show.”

I look at her. “Your vision?”

“Yeah.” She smiles proudly. “I’m thinking you boys can go shirtless and wear masks. The girls in the crowd will go wild for it and—”

“Babe, if you want to live out your mask kink, all you had to do was ask,” Nate replies with a dirty grin.

I’d chuckled, while Sadie laughed harder than necessary given what was said, and grabbed on to my arm. Nate had said something else, but I didn’t hear him because at that exact same moment, I noticed *her* watching me from the classroom door. My body had locked up with tension, even though my heart was racing. *Get your shit together.*

I’d stared back at her blankly, hoping my bored expression wouldn’t expose the actual chaos inside me. Sadie had noticed I’d dropped out of the conversation and had followed my gaze.

For whatever reason, I hadn’t wanted Sadie looking at the girl for too long.

“Sorry, no way in hell am I playing a show shirtless. I don’t care what your vision is.” I watch out of the corner of my eye as the girl from the bookstore walks away.

Sadie leans in with a wink. “Don’t worry, I’ve got time to convince you.”

“There isn’t enough time in the world to make me change my mind.”

“Plus, Eli really doesn’t have the build to play shirtless,” Nate says with a laugh.

Sadie unnecessarily jumps to my defense, “Not true! Look at Travis Barker—he acts like he doesn’t even own a shirt.”

I’d tuned out their back and forth as my mind drifted back to when the girl had realised she had to sit next to me. Ironically, she had been just as flustered—and *attractive*—as she was at the bookstore. I couldn’t help my amusement as she’d stumbled into her chair. I’m starting to think this girl may just be clumsy.

Her scent still somehow envelops me now; it was light, floral and sweet, and so familiar. *Why was it so familiar?* It reminded me of... of spring days back home and baking with my mom in the kitchen as a kid—

My jaw clenches. The fact that my subconscious has already dug up parts of my past I have tried to bury as a consequence of just being near her tells me I should put space between us. I refuse to let myself get caught up with

anyone, much less *her*. She looks like the type of girl who wants to find “the one,” not the kind who is down for a quick fuck. I’m no one’s Mr. Right. *That’s for damn sure.*

“Eli?” Devin calls again.

I startle and give him my full attention.

“Sorry, just tired.” I reach out to grasp Devin’s extended hand as he pulls me into a bro hug with a pat on the back.

I met him, Tristan and Nate during my gap year before I started at UofW. I was bussing tables at Merchant and they would come in after class, every Friday, without fail. I moved up as a bartender and we all became friends, regularly hanging out late into the night and watching the local bands that would come in to play.

“How’s it going, man?” Devin asks as he releases me.

“It’s been all right.” My heart races as I look over at my drum kit on the stage, familiar excitement coursing through me as I anticipate playing.

Technically, it’s not fully mine since I’ve only paid for half of it, splitting the cost with Mickey, the owner of the bar. When bands don’t want to haul their own equipment to the bar, Mickey allows them to pay a rental fee and use it, but given I co-own the drum kit, he lets me lug it around to any basement shows we do. He also allows us to practise at the bar and play the occasional show here. Our next big gig is on Halloween night, which always pulls in a huge crowd at Merchant. In the past, more popular bands always used to get the slot but, this year, *we* are the bigger band, and getting to play is monumental.

“How’ve things been with you?” I ask him back, not wanting to go into details about my summer with my family.

I haven’t seen him since I left the city back in April. I feel bad about abandoning the band during the summer. Although they don’t know everything about the situation back home, they understand that my dad needs help and that Elliot, my little brother, isn’t a reliable source for it. The joy I felt seconds ago at the idea of playing shutters as I think about him. I promise myself to check in and text him tonight to see how he’s doing, even though I’m sure I won’t receive a reply.

Devin sighs. “Honestly, it’s been rough. Zara has been sick for the last week, so it’s hectic at home, and work has been mentally exhausting every single day.”

Zara is Devin’s two-year-old daughter; he and his girlfriend, Alex, had

her while they were still in school. Alex was in her final year of university and Devin was in his third year when they found out she was pregnant. They worked hard as hell, being parents to a newborn while they finished their degrees. I remember being envious of how much their families had stepped in. If I'd been in their situation, my dad wouldn't have helped me out at all. Now, they're both totally self-sufficient. Devin works as a freelance graphic designer, which gives him the flexibility to practise in the middle of the day while the bar is closed, and Alex is a music teacher.

“Sorry to hear that, man. How's Alex doing?”

He shakes his head. “Worse than me. I know she's exhausted, but the doctors say Zara should be turning the corner soon, so we're banking on that.”

“Let me know if you guys need anything, okay?”

“Will do, I appreciate it. I'm guessing the guys told you about the show at Dreamland?”

“Yeah.” I shrug my shoulders. “It was a long shot anyway, but it would have been fun.”

Dreamland is another bar not too far from campus, and they always throw a huge party the first weekend of the semester. A live band performs, and we'd been vying for the chance to play that night, but they decided to go in a different direction; it's nothing new but the rejection still stings.

“Okay, you guys ready?” Tristan calls out from where he stands on the small stage.

He removes the black elastic band from his wrist to put his hair up before grabbing his bass. Devin and I walk over to the small stage and go to our separate areas.

Devin is the frontman for the group, he's got the voice for it and is the only one of us who can scream. I tried once and lost my voice for a week. Vocalists who scream deserve a ton of respect, it's a crazy talent and requires a lot of control. Merchant Revival isn't a screamo band, but we definitely mix pop-punk and post-hardcore styles, and where some bands have two vocalists—one for screaming and the other for clean vocals—Devin does it all.

The second I sit in front of the kit my whole body relaxes. This is exactly what I needed today. We get started and I lose myself in the beat of the music. It's like we never took any time off. Well, I guess technically the guys didn't. I know they practised without me a few times throughout the summer, but we sound just as put together as we did months ago. The music echoes

through the empty lounge and I feel the bass line run through my body as Devin growls into the mic.

I think back to when we started the band. It was *rough*, to put it nicely.

One night, while watching a local group play, seemingly out of nowhere, Devin had said, “We could be up there, ya know.”

It wasn’t a question, I’m not even sure if he was serious at the time or if it was just the beers in his system talking, but it was true. All four of us could play the guitar, Tristan was good on bass, and I could play the drums. We had enough musical knowledge to get by as a band, and just like that, Merchant Revival was born. It took us a minute to find our sound and figure out our lyrics, but now we’ve got something really great going on between the four of us. Our songs are good and people actually come to our shows. The hope is that one day, Merchant Revival could really be something, but at the moment it feels like a pipe dream. Every band hopes to make it big, but the percentage that do? *Not so great*.

Before I know it, an hour and a half has passed and it’s time for me to get back to school for my next two classes. I get ready to leave the bar as Devin and Tristan rehash some lyrics from our newest song while Nate and Sadie talk marketing. She handles our social media, *thank fuck*, because none of us had the slightest interest in maintaining all the promotional stuff.

The breeze is crisp and cool as I leave the building. I reach into my pocket to grab my headphones out but come up empty. I must have forgotten them at home today. I throw my head back and curse my morning self. I never leave home without them. Without music to distract me, my mind begins to wander. I think about Elliot and my chest becomes tight, so I shove those thoughts away for later. Then the image of a certain curly-haired girl flashes through my mind again. She always seems to be in some sort of distressed state, usually because of her clumsiness. I can’t help but chuckle to myself. As soon as the sound slips out, I’m hit with an uncomfortable feeling. Why does she keep crossing my mind the second I don’t have a distraction to keep my emotions at bay? It makes sense that I would worry about my brother, but why is *she* plaguing my thoughts? I rack my brain for answers, though it’s no use. I want to understand why she has me so wound up, but I come to the conclusion that it’s better not to read into it too much.



THREE HOURS and two classes later, I'm back home. I'm exhausted as hell and ready to call it a night. Tristan made us dinner and caught me up on some changes the guys made on the lyrics to a song. I'm not a great lyricist by any means, Tristan and Dev tend to be the main writers for our music, but I like to be as involved in the process as I can, even if they're just spitballing ideas off me. When we finish our food, the guys decide to watch a movie, but I retreat to my room for the evening. I lie in bed and pull out my phone. I have one missed text from Sadie asking if I want to meet up. I ignore it.

I click on my brother's name.

Me: Hey, how's it going? Haven't heard from you in a bit. Hope everything is okay out there.

I press send and wait for a reply. I see three little dots at the bottom of the screen, Elliot is actually replying for once, but they disappear just as quickly. I stare at my phone for a whole five minutes before I put it down, accepting that my brother isn't going to answer. It hasn't always been like this between us. We used to talk all the time, but when he turned fifteen last year, it was like he flipped a switch, and turning sixteen only made it worse. He's always angry now and the kids he hangs around are no good for him. I had tried talking to him about it when I was home, but that just sparked a fight between us.

I roll over onto my side, letting sleep take over, and the last things I see behind my eyelids before I slip into unconsciousness are brown eyes, curly hair, and full lips that I can't help but want to taste.



I've navigated through my first two weeks of school and have only gotten lost a handful of times, so I call it a win. I'm surprised at how fast time has flown by. I decided to join Yazmine and Jaden in the photography club and found out that I enjoy taking photos. All the people in the club were so welcoming. And once I figured out how to hold the bulky DSLR camera without having it shake, it turned out I'm not half bad at it. I still have lots to learn but I've loved taking the opportunity to walk around the city to snap pictures. I even tested out some different angles in a city park and wound up with some nice shots.

When I'm not taking pictures, I've got classes to attend and homework to do. Yaz and I hang out every day, sometimes with Jaden as well, whom she swears is just a friend. Maybe it's strictly platonic on her end, but Jaden looks at her like she hung the stars in place. I've tried pointing this out to Yazmine, but she told me I was reading too much into it. Regardless, these last few weeks have shown me that, away from my closest friends and family, I can still have a full life. Of course, I miss Stella like crazy. We have a standing weekly FaceTime call and we text each other all the time, but I now know that I can live on my own without having to lean on anyone else as a crutch.

It's nine a.m. on Tuesday morning and I'm getting ready for class. So far, Art History is my favourite, Professor Loughlin has been so engaging, which makes it easier to get myself to class in the morning. As for the guy from the bookstore... There have been no further awkward encounters; in fact, we've been sitting on opposite ends of the classroom since. Every once and a while,

I catch myself sneaking glances at him, and I chastise myself every time. He's captivating, even though I'm pretty sure he's an asshole. A fact proven by the few interactions we've had, which involved him laughing at my expense. He may be attractive, but I refuse to let myself become infatuated with someone who clearly sees me as a joke.

When class is almost over, Loughlin explains our class presentation.

He claps his hands together enthusiastically as he leans against the whiteboard. "This class does not have a formal midterm exam, as you all already know, but there will be a project worth thirty percent of your mark. The presentation will be done in pairs and is due in about a month, so I want to encourage you all to pick your partners today and start working on it as soon as possible."

Partner work. *Great.* I'm not against working on group presentations but, in high school, it often meant that I would be handling the majority of the assignment while everyone else took credit. Having thirty percent of my final grade left in the hands of someone I barely know seems like risky business, but I can't do anything about it. Hopefully, my partner pulls their weight.

"Pick two different art displays, whether that be sculptures, paintings, or portraits, from two different historical art periods, and compare them. Each presentation should be twenty minutes." The class lets out a cumulative groan, but the prof continues on, unfazed. "I would like to see you really dive into the different aspects of the art periods. We've got ten minutes left, so I'll leave you all to discuss amongst yourselves. If you are unable to find a partner for your presentation, please contact me through email or feel free to stop by during my office hours."

He walks to the desk and starts packing his stuff. There's a buzz in the room as students begin talking to each other in an attempt to find their partners. I cautiously look around, hoping to find someone who appears approachable when, all of a sudden, a tall, blonde boy walks up to me.

"Hi, I'm Thomas. Do you have a partner?" he asks. I can see the hesitancy on his face as he wipes a palm on his jeans. He's cute and looks vaguely familiar. I realise that he's in my Intro to Canadian Politics class as well. His cheeks are flushed as if this has sucked out all of his social abilities for the week.

"Hi," I reply, still trying to figure out where he appeared from. "I'm Des and no, I don't have—" Before I can finish my sentence, I feel warmth at my back, as if someone is standing far too close. I'm overwhelmed by the smell

of pine and mint.

“Yeah, she has a partner,” a deep voice says from behind me. I don’t even need to turn around to know who it is and, looking at Thomas’s face, I can tell he won’t even try to argue with the person behind me.

He sputters and his pink cheeks turn red before he nods and hurries off with a muttered, “Sorry, I didn’t realise.”

My annoyance sparks and, in no time at all, becomes a flame of anger as I turn and find myself face to face with Bookstore Guy. He’s watching me intently, his hands in his pockets, and I stare at him for a beat too long before I remember to speak.

“We are not partners,” I say matter-of-factly as I wave a finger back and forth between us in a flustered attempt to make it clear that I would rather work with the worst student in class than with him. I’ve been doing my best to keep him off my mind, with little success, and there’s no way that I’m now going to be subjected to working with him. *Not if I can help it.*

“Pretty sure we are now,” he replies, his full lips stretching into a smile that makes him even more attractive, if that’s even possible. *Who cares what he looks like? He. Is. An. Ass.*

“That’s not how this works. Pretty sure Loughlin said we were supposed to *pick* our partners, and I definitely didn’t pick you.” My frustration mounts, and I look over my shoulder to where Thomas ran off, wondering if it’s too late to claim him as my partner.

When I spot him, he’s standing with another guy and it seems like they’re about to exchange phone numbers. *Damn it.* As I take in my surroundings, I realise that most of the class has already left. When my eyes land back on *him*, he’s got a smug look on his face, one that says he knows that my options are now bleak. It’s either pair up with him or admit to the professor I couldn’t find anyone. And if we both go to Loughlin to declare we are partnerless, we’ll just be put together. I swear under my breath.

“I must say, I’ve never had a stranger be so opposed to talking to me before.” There’s a playful glint in his eye as if he finds this whole interaction entertaining. “I’m Eli, by the way. You know, in case you wanted to know your partner’s name.”

“One, I am not opposed to talking to you, but I am opposed to being around people who seem to find entertainment at my expense.” His expression loses its amusement as he absorbs my words. “And two—I’m Desiree.”

I feel as though I'm admitting defeat by introducing myself. He got what he wanted and now thirty percent of my final grade rests in his hands. I don't understand why he's doing this. This is the first time we've spoken and it's not off to a great start. So why demand we team up? *Is there no one else he would like to torture?*

"Is it Desiree or Des?" Eli asks.

Huh?

"Des to friends and family. Desiree to everyone else," I reply quickly. He doesn't seem to like that answer. His eyebrow quirks up and his lips purse together as he bobs his head.

"So, Thomas over there, he was a friend? 'Cause your *friend*," he says in the most sarcastic way possible, "pretty much ran in the opposite direction when I came over."

"We could have been friends if you hadn't interrupted," I huff. This whole exchange is exhausting and is taking up my valuable time. I had hoped to go to the library and work on my econ homework between classes.

"What about you and me? Could we be friends?" His eyes darken as they focus on me.

The way he's looking at me feels deeply personal, like he can see right through me. I suck in a steadying breath and force myself to meet his eyes. "I don't know."

"Well, I guess we'll see." He pauses before pulling his phone out of his back pocket. "Put your number in."

"What? Why?"

Eli gives me a puzzled look as if he's trying to figure out if I'm serious. He lets out a sigh. "So we can talk about the presentation. Were you expecting us to communicate via smoke signals?"

Right. I had already forgotten about the presentation. I take the phone from his hand and put in my number before handing it back. He looks at the contact information and smiles to himself as he slips it into his pocket. We're now the last two people in the classroom.

He heads to the exit and, just as he reaches the door, turns to glance at me out of the corner of his eye. "See you around, *Desiree.*"

The way he says my full name sucks all the oxygen out of the room and sends a shiver down my spine.

I make it to the library, but any hope I had of completing my homework is gone. I replay the conversation in my head. Why does Bookstore Guy—Eli

—want to work with me? After our conversation, I think he just enjoys getting under my skin. The way he said my name sounded like both a threat and a promise. But I'm just not sure of what. I spend all of Calculus thinking it over, barely even paying attention to the lecture.

Yaz is in the kitchen when I get home.

“Everything okay?” she asks, looking up from the apple she's chopping.

Everything is certainly *not* okay. Although I don't know why. I'm spiraling about who my partner is for a project, which is silly, but it somehow feels like more. I might be going crazy but I need to talk about this with someone. While Yaz stands with the kitchen knife still in hand, I spill *everything*, from the first time I saw Eli at the bookstore to how he became my partner today. By the time I'm done, I feel a rush of relief. I hadn't realised how much I needed to tell someone what I had been keeping inside since I first laid eyes on him.

Yazmine bursts out laughing. “Oh my god, Des,” she says as she tries to catch her breath. “How is this the first I'm hearing of this?”

I shrug. “There was nothing to tell before today. What was I going to say? There's a strange guy on campus who likes to laugh at me? It was hardly worth mentioning.”

She puts the apple slices on a plate and gestures for me to join her in the living room. When we both sit down, she hits me with a sharp stare.

“Are you into him?”

“No.” I reply, but my voice doesn't sound too confident. “There's nothing to like, I don't even know him.”

“Okay,” she says, drawing out the word. “But you *are* attracted to him.”

“No.” I keep my tone firm. “He is *objectively* attractive, I guess, but he is also rude, sarcastic, and presumptuous which cancels everything else out.”

Yaz smiles like she knows a secret and grabs the remote, turning on the TV. “If you say so.”



I couldn't help myself.

I've spent the last two weeks in a bad mood because I just can't stop this insane attraction I have to Desiree; even from across the classroom my eyes always seem to settle on her. It's as if she calls to me without even trying. As Professor Loughlin explained the class presentation, the thought of pairing up didn't even cross my mind, but when I saw that blonde Austin-Butler-wannabe go up to her, I got irritated. *Of course* he wanted to work with her. I watched him approach Desiree, stumbling over his words, and my annoyance only grew stronger when I saw that she was embracing it. Before I knew it, my legs were moving toward them and I'd claimed her as my partner. I don't know what came over me; all I knew was that I wouldn't have a moment of peace over the next month if she was going to be working closely with him. *Smiling at him, laughing with him.*

I'm not the possessive type of guy. I've also never had anyone I've wanted to possess. But somehow, I'm greedy for all of her smiles, her scent, and her outright clumsiness. Just because I want those things, though, doesn't mean I get them. In fact, it seems like I get the exact opposite because the second she turned away from her "friend" Thomas to face me, the gentle smile on her face was replaced with a frown and a look of frustration. If she was annoyed, it had nothing on how I felt when she told me her name is *Desiree*. My jaw tightens again at the thought, and my hands curl into fists in my pockets. As if I hadn't just heard her tell blondie that her name was Des. He gets the "friends and family" nickname, but I get the government name.

Cool. I'm frustrated with myself for feeling this way over something so trivial and, since I marched over and essentially pissed a circle around her, I can hardly claim that I don't care. *Something else to be irked about.*

By the time I walk out of the classroom, my neck and shoulders are tight with stress as I try to figure out what the hell happened to me back there. I'm so caught up in my head that I don't even notice Nate walking toward me in the hall.

"Woah, dude," he says as he puts his hand out to stop us from a full-frontal collision. "You good?"

His words snap me out of my mental spiral. "Yeah, I'm fine," I reply, trying to convince myself as much as him. "I was just thinking about a presentation I need to work on for class."

He nods, seemingly appeased by my answer. "I've got a meeting with my advisor in..." He looks down at his phone. "Two minutes. It shouldn't take too long, but I'll be late to practice."

"I'll let the others know," I tell him as we part ways.

When I get to Merchant, Tristan and Devin are deep in conversation at a table close to the stage and Mickey is standing behind the bar, poring over some receipts. I tell the guys that Nate is running late before I head to the bar to grab a beer.

"It's barely noon," Mickey replies when I ask him for a drink.

"It's been that kind of day." Neither of us speaks while he gets my beer and I stew in my thoughts.

"So are you going to tell me what happened or am I going to have to pry it out of you?" Mickey asks as he hands me a frosted glass of Original 19. His grey hair is combed back, displaying the deep set of wrinkles on his face. I take a long swig of the cold beer and spill all my thoughts to him.

"And now"—I swipe a hand over my face, trying to cool myself down with the condensation from the glass—"instead of staying away from her, we're paired up for the class project." *And who's fault is that?*

Mickey gives a low whistle. "Sounds like this girl has got you wound up," he says with a chuckle. "I remember Salley used to get under my skin like no one else."

I stop him. "Desiree is *not* my Salley."

Salley was Mickey's wife of twenty-five years; she died in a tragic hit-and-run car accident five years ago. Although I never met her, I feel like I know her. Mickey has a Salley story for every situation, and her picture

hangs proudly on the wall of the bar. She meant the world to him, so I can say with assurance that there is no way in hell Desiree means the same to me.

He laughs. “Whatever you say, son.” I, however, do not find the joke funny. I’m cut off from telling him just how wrong he’s got it when Nate walks into the bar, closing the door louder than necessary.

“That didn’t take long,” I say to him as I take a sip of my beer.

“Yeah, it was pretty quick,” he replies, but he looks disappointed. “The advisor told me I won’t be able to graduate on time. Even if I take spring courses, I’ll need an extra semester.”

“Sorry, man, that blows.”

He shrugs. “It’s fine. Five years instead of four isn’t the end of the world,” he replies although his voice sounds far from fine. “I just wish I hadn’t spent so much of first year fucking around, you know?”

I understand his frustration. Nate is the biggest jokester you will ever meet. He’s the life of the party and you can always sense when he enters a room; his presence just takes up space and people are naturally drawn to him. He’s also the hardest worker I’ve ever met. The guy pulls straight As in every single one of his classes with minimal effort as far as I can tell. It wasn’t always that way, though. First-year Nate was a party animal. From the stories Tristan has told, Nate only took half a course load and couldn’t be bothered to attend classes. He’s been trying to play catch up ever since using spring courses, but I guess even that isn’t enough at this point. I feel for him, knowing all of his hard work isn’t enough this time around.

“I should have taken a gap year like you did,” he continues. “Given myself a better chance at figuring out what I wanted to do.”

I shake my head. “I only did that because I needed to work before I started school.”

“So you always knew you wanted to study philosophy?”

I laugh, louder than intended, and run a hand through my hair. “No. I picked it because I heard it was easy to bullshit your way to an A.”

“Then I should have done that instead,” he retorts with an amused grin.

“Nah, teaching is perfect for you, man. Don’t doubt yourself.”

“You never know. If the band takes off, maybe I won’t have to spend my future corralling kids for a living.”

“Sure as hell would be nice, because fuck if I know what I’m going to do with this degree once graduation hits,” I reply as I stand up. “But to get there, we should probably start this practice.”

He chuckles and walks over to his guitar. I sit behind the drums and instantly feel more at ease. This is where I feel my best, most of the time at least. The music starts and I let my brain and muscle memory take over as I play. I do everything in my power to focus on the present, yet in between songs, my mind still drifts back to *her*. At the end of practice, I don't feel much better, and I'm still faced with a major problem: I can't get Desiree out of my head. Music has always been my escape, whether I'm playing or listening to it. I tried my best to get lost in the beat, and I still left out of sorts.

Back on campus, I move through my next two classes in a fog. I struggle to remember the last time a girl had me this affected. Maybe in fifth grade? I don't like it one bit. I've pulled my phone out about ten times since my lectures ended, just staring at her contact information and contemplating when or if I should text her. It's pathetic.

In an effort to further get out of my head, I offer to cook dinner for everyone. The guys' shock is mildly insulting. It's not like I don't know how to cook, I just prefer ordering in if the option is presented. Tristan offers to help, but I think it's because he's not sure if I know how to chop vegetables. I prep the turkey burgers Nate convinced us to buy the other day "because they're healthier" and, while I wait for the grill to preheat, pull out my phone for the hundredth time today.

Fuck it. I'll just text her. She needs to have my number for the presentation anyway.

Me: Hey

My mouth feels dry, it took way too long to draft the message; I kept flipping between "Hey" or "Hi."

We have dinner and then riff on our guitars for a while, and I never once check my phone. I don't want to risk throwing it against the wall if she hasn't responded yet. When Nate suggests we play the newest *Madden* game, I decide to give in and have a look.

I have two notifications.

My heart rate skyrockets, and I try to calm myself down as the guys get the PlayStation set up.

Desiree: Hi

Desiree: Is this Eli?

I read the messages, but just as I'm about to respond, Tristan calls out. "Eli, you good, man?"

"Yeah, why?" I respond. *Except you haven't been good all day.* I itch to look back down at my phone.

"I've just never seen you smile at your phone so hard before," Tristan teases. "Did a girl send you nudes or something?"

"Let me see," says Nate as he walks over to the couch.

I quickly lock my phone screen and lay it face down on my lap.

"No one sent me nudes." I turn to Nate. "And if someone had, do you really think I would show you?" He just shrugs and gives me a smirk.

Was I really over here smiling at my phone like some twelve-year-old boy with a schoolyard crush?

I'm so fucked.



Hey. That was the first text I got from Eli. Not a “Sorry I was such an ass” or “I shouldn’t have said we were partners when we weren’t.”

No. I just get a *Hey*.

I text back, figuring I should at least confirm it’s him.

Hours go by without a response. I’m beginning to think that maybe someone texted the wrong number when my phone vibrates with a new notification.

Unknown: Were you expecting a text from someone else?

Unknown: Thomas, maybe?

I roll my eyes as I save his contact.

Me: No, you stepped in before he could give me his number.

Three dots appear instantly this time.

Eli: He didn’t want to give it to you badly enough, then.

Me: And you did?

My pulse picks up as I wait for his answer. All the blood in my body feels like it’s congregating in my cheeks when my phone buzzes again.

Eli: Nah, I saw an opportunity to mess up his game, and I took it. Didn't take much, honestly.

So this was all a game to him. *Of course*, it was just some weird attempt to embarrass me.

I let out a loud growl which startles Yaz, who is editing photos on her laptop on the opposite end of the couch.

"What's up?" she asks, giving me her full attention. Rather than explain my exasperation, I show her the text exchange.

"Ha!" She lets out a choked laugh. "He's clearly into you."

"What he's into is *embarrassing* me," I reply as she hands me back my phone. "Oh, and let's not forget how much he loves laughing at me. He can't help but get his jollies bothering me."

Yazmine stares at me blankly. "Get his jollies? Who says that?" She sputters as her laughter begins again.

"Whatever, you know what I mean." I lie down, exasperated. "Now I have to work with him."

"All I'm saying is that I can tell when a guy likes someone, it's my sixth sense," she says as she brings her fingers to her temples with more confidence and seriousness than a ridiculous remark like that warrants.

I give her a deadpan look. "But you can't see the obvious signs that Jaden is head over heels for you?"

"There's nothing to see. He's my friend, that's all," she replies hastily.

"Whatever you and your *sixth sense* say." I give her a wink, thankful that the conversation has moved past the absurd thought of Eli being interested in me. We aren't kids on a playground. If he was interested, he should have just said that. Trying to humiliate me is not the way to do it. I can't wait for this presentation to be done.

My phone buzzes again.

Eli: So when should we start working on the presentation?

I hesitate. I'm tempted to ignore him.

Me: What are you doing Thursday after class?

Eli: I have practice.

Practice? What kind of practice? I hadn't pegged him for an athlete, but

what do I know? I'm definitely *not* asking him. The only time I watch sports is when Dad and Dom take the living room TV hostage, and even then, I spend the whole time on my phone. I wouldn't even know what to say to him. Not that I want to chat with him—

Eli: My evening class on Thursday ends at five. Can we meet after?

Me: Sure. The Next Plate at five fifteen?

Eli: Sounds good, see you there.

I sigh, ignoring the way my heart races at the thought of spending an evening with Eli. Just as I finish getting ready for bed, another text comes in.

Eli: Goodnight, Desiree.

I can't explain why his goodnight makes my stomach launch up to my throat. Suddenly, it feels like I've stepped into sinking sand, and I worry that all the push and pull between us just may drag me down.



BEFORE I KNOW IT, it's Thursday morning. Yesterday passed by in a flash, and as much as I want to convince myself that I'm not nervous about meeting up with Eli, I know it's a lie. We haven't texted since the other night. Up until this point, our interactions have been limited to looks across rooms or passive-aggressive remarks, but today, we'll be forced to really talk to each other. It will be about art history, but *still*.

I woke up earlier than usual and so I take my time to get ready. The smell of coffee lures me into the kitchen after I'm done, and I find Yazmine already up and sipping from her mug.

She takes in my outfit and smirks. "Someone's dressed up for class."

Rather than just jeans and a T-shirt, I've chosen a white top with a square neck, and long puffy sleeves made of thin, sheer material, paired with black leather pants and my black booties.

“Sometimes a girl just wants to dress up. Is that such a crime?” I reply innocently, shrugging my shoulders. “Plus, I want to break these new pants in.”

Her smirk turns into a wolf-like smile. “And it has nothing to do with seeing Eli today, right?”

I blush, reaching for the coffee pot to fill my travel mug. “Nope, not at all.”

“Whatever you say,” she sing-songs. “Are you coming home between classes?”

I shake my head. “No, I’m going to the library after.” My micro econ midterm is in a couple of weeks, and I still have no idea what’s going on.

“Well, I want a full report this evening then.”



WHEN I WALK INTO CLASS, I take my normal seat and, before I can stop myself, look across the room to where Eli typically sits, but he hasn’t arrived yet. Ten minutes pass and he still doesn’t appear. The professor begins his lecture on the Rococo period, and I berate myself for even looking out for him. He skipped class, *so what?*

At that exact moment, he walks through the door, not at all flustered by his late entrance. Instead of taking his normal seat, he cuts across the classroom, heading in my direction, his gaze locked on mine. My head feels light and I have to remind myself to take a deep breath.

He plants himself in the seat right next to me, leaning in to whisper in my ear. “What’d I miss?”

The hair on the back of my neck stands up, the skin his breath touched feeling like it’s on fire. “Nothing much,” I mutter, afraid that if I say more, something stupid will come out.

Every once in a while, Eli fidgets in his chair and his knee bumps into my leg. Each time feels like a bolt of lightning, but I don’t move my gaze from the front of the class. I pretend that I’m entranced by today’s lecture topic but, in all honesty, I have no idea what the prof is talking about. Eli’s presence next to me is all-consuming.

When class ends, we both stand up at the same time. I turn to face him and he's already looking down at me. I open my mouth to speak, unsure of what to say, but he beats me to it.

"I'll text you when I'm on my way later." The cocky smirk that I've seen pretty often in the last month forms on his face.

I nod my head. My tongue feels thick in my mouth and my cheeks are warm. I fight the urge to press my cold hands against them. Eli follows me out and we walk in silence to the door. When we exit the room, I'm faced with the girl with black hair and tattoos. I haven't seen her since that first week of school. *He has a girlfriend*, I remind myself.

Remembering Yazmine's words about Eli having feelings for me, I feel vindicated. She couldn't have been more wrong, and if this girl is his type, I'm certainly not. He hasn't done a single thing to make me think that he even likes me as a friend, much less anything more. *And the feeling is mutual.*

When the girl sees him, she shifts off the wall, her eyes bouncing from me to Eli before landing back on me. I move over a bit to create more space between him and me. He glances at me, noticing my action, then looks over at her. I feel stuck, not sure if I should walk with him to greet her or walk away.

Deciding that cowardice is the best option, I address Eli. "See you later." I hope my voice sounds a lot more relaxed than I feel. "Have a good game!" I add with a wave. He looks a little confused and it makes me think he's already forgotten about our plan to meet later.

"See you later," he responds, still sounding puzzled.

I turn and head to the library, my cheeks flaming.



AT FIVE O'CLOCK, I get a text from Eli, letting me know that he's on his way to the cafe. I stayed on campus all day and tried my absolute best to study, but I found myself getting distracted way too often by my phone, and thoughts of *him*.

Giving up on studying altogether, I walked around campus and tried to call Stella, but it went straight to voicemail. She texted me fifteen minutes

later to let me know that she would call me back soon. I let out a disappointed sigh, Stella and I seemed to be growing more distant lately. I knew it would be hard, with the time difference and school keeping us busy, but I had hoped we would be able to talk more often.

I get to the restaurant and find Eli already seated at a table in the back corner by the window. I walk over to join him. When he sees me, the frustrated look on his face says he would rather be anywhere else which is confusing because, girlfriend or not, he basically forced me into being his partner. I thought we'd be able to get along for at least as long as we have to work on the presentation.

"Hey," I say as I approach him. "How's it going?"

"Good," he says, and the word sounds forced, like it pains him to talk to me. I sit down and take in my surroundings. It's not too busy, but there are a few people seated at tables throughout the restaurant.

"Okay," I say, drawing the word out. "Let's talk about the two periods we want to discuss for the presentation." Since small talk isn't in the cards for tonight at this point, I would like to go home sooner rather than later. "I was thinking Rococo versus Renaissance?" I suggest.

"Yeah, that sounds good to me," he replies, although his demeanour and voice suggest that he really doesn't care at all.

I let out a deep breath. "Which one do you want to do?"

He shrugs. "I'm good with either one."

I stare at him in disbelief. He's leaning back against the chair, bouncing his knee and looking around the cafe as if he can't wait to leave when *this* was all his idea in the first place.

I close my laptop. "Look, I get that this isn't the most exciting project, but you're the one who strong-armed me into being your partner." My voice comes out sharp. "You could at least pretend to give a shit."

He looks at me, raising his eyebrows at my snappy retort. But I don't care. I'm so over his attitude. If he didn't want to work on this with me, he should have let me partner up with someone else.

He pinches the bridge of his nose. "It's been a long day, okay?" he replies. It's not an apology, but he truly looks exhausted. "Let's do this," he says with a sigh.

I roll my shoulders back, determined to get through this. I pull out my textbook and lay it on the table, but there isn't enough room and it falls to the floor of the restaurant with a loud thud. I look around and register that no one

around is paying attention. I avoid Eli's gaze, but I hear a chuckle of laughter. I reach down to pick it up, but he gets to it before I do, handing it over to me. Our eyes lock as his hand grazes mine. My skin tingles where his calloused fingertips touched me. I have no idea how long we've been looking at each other when the waitress approaches our table.

"Hi, I'm Carly," she says enthusiastically, and we pull away from each other. When had we gotten so close? "Can I get you guys anything to drink?" I hold Eli's gaze before turning my attention to the waitress. Her eyes linger on Eli, but he's busying himself with his own notebook and doesn't appear to notice. I feel a flutter of something uncomfortable in my stomach as she openly peruses him.

A part of me wants him to look at me again, something in that moment had felt different. The other part of me feels smug that he's giving Carly no attention, despite the fact that she's ogling him without an ounce of shame.

"I'll just have water," he replies, running his hand through his hair.

She nods and then—with clear reluctance—turns to face me.

"I'll have an iced tea."

She scribbles on her notepad and leaves, but not before giving Eli another look. He glances at me again, but there's no longer any emotion or heat behind it. He lets out a sigh. "I'm going to the bathroom."

Once he's gone, I put my head in my hands as soon as he leaves. *How are we going to get through this?*

"Not crying again, are you?" I lift my head and see Tristan, the guy from the elevator, smiling down at me.

I let out a choked laugh and shake my head, thankful to have a normal person to converse with.

"No tears yet."

"How have the first few weeks of school been?"

"It's been good, actually. I joined the photography club and I've been making friends, and I *love* my roommate." I smile at him, already feeling more at ease. "How about you?"

"Classes are kicking my ass." He grimaces and we both laugh. "Actually, that's why I'm here," he continues. "I wanted to grab a cup of coffee before I start studying for midterms. You come to get some work done?" he asks, eyeing the closed laptop on the table.

I think of the presentation with Eli and his confusing mood swings. It doesn't seem like a whole lot is going to get accomplished with the two of us.

Not if he refuses to open his mouth to actually communicate. Looks like another group project where I'll have to do all of the work.

I groan in frustration. "Yeah, I'm working on a presentation with a partner for Art History. He's a complete ass though. I already need a break from school and it's only been three weeks."

Tristan gives me a sympathetic smile, a touch of pity in his eyes. Both times he's seen me, I've either been having a breakdown or looked like I was on the verge of one.

"Hey!" he says, as if remembering something. "Why don't you come to my band's show next week?"

I'm stunned.

"You're in a band?" is the only reply I can come up with. I'm not sure what I thought someone in a band looked like, but it wasn't Tristan. He just seems so clean-cut.

He chuckles. "Don't sound so shocked. Yeah, we're playing a basement show next Friday if you want to come."

"A basement show," I repeat, as I attempt to figure out how the hell that even works.

A grin spreads across his face. "Don't worry, it's not half as sketchy as it sounds. Think of it as an extremely small venue. It gives us a chance to play since we can't always afford a bigger stage, and we make a couple of bucks."

I try to picture myself standing around in someone's basement for the night, listening to music I don't know. It sounds boring, but Tristan is so nice and he seems quite excited.

"Okay," I agree. "Is it all right if I bring a friend?" Hopefully, I can rope Yaz into coming with me.

"Yeah, for sure." Tristan nods. "Here, put your number in my phone, and I'll text you the address for the show." I do as he says, and I'm hit with a flashback of doing the same with Eli's phone just a few days ago. At least this time, I don't feel sick about it.

Just then, Eli walks back to the table. A look of confusion is fixed on his face as he stares at Tristan.

"What are you doing here?"



When I come out of the bathroom, I'm confused to find Tristan chatting to Desiree as if they know each other. She's looking up at him, a big smile on her face, and a flare of annoyance that I have no right to feel runs through me. I know I've been a dick this evening, barely talking to her when she tried to make conversation.

For the first time in the last few weeks, my bad mood has very little to do with her, or at least it's not *all* about her. I left to go to the bathroom and try to get myself under control. I swear I never used to have this problem. My emotions were always under lock and key. Something snapped that day in the bookstore, which is ridiculous because we didn't even speak. Now, seeing her chum it up with one of my best friends makes my chest feel like it's on fire.

"What are you doing here?" I ask Tristan. When I get to the table, I'm sure I look as confused as I feel.

How does he know Desiree? If it were anyone else, I would think he was hitting on her, but Tristan is so fiercely loyal to his girlfriend, I know there's no way. But why is she handing his phone back to him? Did she give him her number? My mind is buzzing, as it always seems to do when I'm near her.

"Hey, I just stopped by to pick up a coffee," he replies, seemingly oblivious to my own confusion. "So you're Desiree's partner then?"

I nod. I don't think I can form a single sentence right now. Desiree, however, appears appropriately perplexed.

"You two know each other?" she asks, her eyes darting between us.

“We’re roommates,” I respond.

Her eyes go wide as saucers. She looks like one of those tiny animals on *National Geographic* who always end up cornered by much larger prey. We’re both staring at each other, and I’m trying to figure out why she looks so surprised.

Tristan nods, looking in Desiree’s direction. “Anyway, I’ve got to go hit the books, but I’ll see you around.”

I take my seat at the table. There’s a moment of silence at the table before I cave. “You and Tristan are friends?” I ask, hoping that I don’t sound too curious, but *what the fuck?*

“Not friends.” She pauses. “Friendly? I guess...” Her words trickle off as if she feels like she may have said too much.

I fold my arms in front of my chest and lean back against the chair. “*Friendly?* What does that even mean?”

“It means—” She rolls her eyes. “We met once before and he was *nice*. That’s all. Can we get back to the project now?”

Something about the way she emphasised “nice” really gets under my skin. It’s as if she’s comparing me to Tristan, and is letting me know that I don’t measure up.

“He’s got a girlfriend you know,” I mutter.

Immediately, I realise that this was the wrong thing to say.

Desiree’s eyes narrow as she shifts in her seat so that she can lean in closer. “*Yes. I know,*” she growls, and although she’s angry, I’ll be damned if it isn’t the cutest thing I’ve heard.

“Listen, as you said, you’ve had a long day and you’re making mine feel one hundred times longer, so let’s just wrap this up. How about you handle the Rococo period and I’ll do the Renaissance. We can meet sometime next week to review what we’ve got.” She’s already packing up her stuff before I can even utter a response.

“Okay,” I reply, immediate regret for being such an asshole washing over me. I stand at the same time as her, but she refuses to meet my gaze.

“I’m going to run to the bathroom before I go,” she says in a rush, almost looking panicked.

“I can watch your stuff while you’re gone if you want,” I offer, still hoping to get her to stay.

She looks at me as if I’ve grown two heads. I guess I deserve that; it’s not like I’ve gone out of my way to be kind to her.

“No, it’s okay. I’ll talk to you next week.”

She runs off to the bathroom, and I can’t help but feel like I’m the one she’s running away from.



I SPEND the entire walk back from the restaurant in a fog. I’ve had the worst day and it doesn’t seem to be getting any better.

I decided earlier to cut things off with Sadie and, honestly, I feel like shit about it. But it had to be done.

The two of us had planned to go to Merchant after class. When I left the classroom with Desiree, Sadie was waiting for me. I’d walked over to her and she’d grabbed onto my arm, leaned in close and asked if I wanted to meet up this evening.

It’s been weeks since I last hooked up with her, though not due to her lack of trying. Every time she’d ask, I’d give some half-assed excuse as to why I couldn’t. In reality, things were getting too complicated with her to continue. What I always appreciated about Sadie was that she never had any real interest in being more than friends with benefits. Lately, I’d gotten the sense that she wanted more. And I don’t do *more*.

Then, there’s the whole situation with Desiree. She’s been in my every waking thought, which is ridiculous. I barely know her and she’s made it pretty clear that she doesn’t want anything to do with me. The other night, when we were texting and she’d asked whether I wanted to give her my number, I froze and told her that I just wanted to mess with her and Thomas. I couldn’t admit I’d done it because I didn’t like the idea of her being with some other guy. That would have made me sound insane. It makes me *feel* insane.

And my last attempt to get her off my mind by sleeping with Sadie hadn’t made anything better; it had been a temporary fix that had left me worse off by the time I got home.

“I can’t,” I reply as we walk out of the building. I point my thumb over my shoulder in the direction Desiree went. “I’ve got to meet up with my partner for a class project.”

Sadie nods like she understands and immediately tries again. "Tomorrow?"

"No, I don't think so."

She looks at me out of the side of her eye and stops walking. "Listen, Eli, if you're hooking up with someone else, I'd rather you just say that."

We had never been exclusive. I know she's hooked up with other guys over the last couple of years, and I've been with other girls, too, but we always ended up back in bed with each other.

"I'm not sleeping with anyone else. I'm just thinking that this may not be the best idea anymore," I admit with a sigh, exhausted from making up excuses.

Sadie stays silent for a minute before taking a deep inhale. I can tell she's formulating her next words carefully.

"Okay. Yeah, that's fine. This was never serious, anyway. We were just convenient. I was just convenient."

While the implication that I was just using her wasn't true, it didn't stop the wave of guilt that washed over me.

"It wasn't about convenience," I say. "I just don't want this to get complicated. We're friends first. I don't want to lose that."

She purses her lips and sweeps her hair over one shoulder, the look she gives me colder than I'd ever seen. "Yeah, of course. Friends." She pauses. "Tell the guys I'm skipping practice. I just remembered I have a paper due on Monday that I haven't started yet."

I sigh. "Come on, Sade. This doesn't change anything."

"No. It doesn't, does it?" She shakes her head and sidesteps me to walk in the opposite direction. "See you later, Eli."

I had always hoped that this thing between us would end amicably. Now I'm not sure, but I do value Sadie's friendship, so I hope we can sort this out with time. Regardless, the whole encounter had put me in a shit mood for the day, one I couldn't shake even by being in close proximity to Desiree. And it doesn't help when I realise that my attraction to her may just be part of the problem.

On top of all that, I'm worried about Elliot. I still haven't heard back from him since that text I sent him weeks ago. When I called home and asked Dad how he was doing, all I got was a grunt and a "you know how teenagers are."

I do know how teenagers are, but I also know that Dad isn't doing shit to

try to make sure that Elliot is okay. I'm worried that if someone doesn't rein him in soon, he could get into a lot more trouble than a couple of after-school detentions.

As soon as I get through the door of the apartment, I call out to Tristan.

He pokes his head out of his room. "Back already?"

"Yeah, Desiree had to leave." I keep it vague, not wanting to admit that my attitude was the reason she almost bolted out of the door. "Listen," I start, unsure how to phrase the question without sounding like I've lost my mind but damn it, I *am* losing my mind. "How do you know Desiree? Do you guys have a class together or something?"

He opens his door all the way and leans against the frame, his eyebrow furrowed, clearly surprised that this is what I want to talk about.

"No? She was crying in the elevator a while back." He shrugs. "I talked to her for a bit. Why?"

Wait, what? A picture of Desiree's beautiful eyes filled with tears makes my stomach drop. I have the irrational urge to fix whatever it was that upset her. *What is happening to me?*

"When was this?" My head hurts as I try to make sense of everything after the day I've had. I can't decide if I need a late-night coffee or to go to bed early.

"A week or two before classes started, I think?" He still looks mystified as to why I'm asking about any of this. "She was upset about her parents leaving or something. I'm not sure, I was coming in and she was heading up to her apartment, crying. I tried to cheer her up a bit. She seemed nice."

I need to sit down. He met her in our building, going up to *her* apartment. She lives here. Of course she does. I laugh out loud while Tristan watches me with confusion, his head tilting to the side. This girl—who I didn't even know existed until a few weeks ago—is suddenly everywhere I turn. I walk to the living room and sit on the couch as my mind processes. Tristan follows me.

"She lives in *this* apartment block?" The question comes out somewhere between a croak and a groan. I tilt my head back and rub my hands against my face. Her Olympic-track-runner exit makes sense. When I said that Tristan and I were roommates, she must have realised what that meant. She was so shocked to find that the *asshole* from class lives in her building, she basically sprinted away. I'm an idiot.

"Yeah, didn't you guys walk back together?" he asks.

I just shake my head.

She lives here. *We're in the same damn building.*



I'll admit it wasn't my most mature response. I hid in the bathroom, waiting for what I thought was the appropriate amount of time for Eli to leave the cafe. Thankfully, I didn't spot him on my walk back, so I guess I succeeded in letting him get far enough ahead. I know my reaction was a little bit ridiculous, but when I realised that we lived in the same building, my mind went haywire. He'd been an asshole all evening and the last thing I wanted was to walk back home with him. Of all the place I could live in, of course it's the same as his. *Just my luck.* I know it's not logical, but as long as he doesn't know that we're in the same building, I can pretend it's not true.

When I close the front door, Yaz jumps off the couch like a shark who smells blood in the water.

"So, how did it go?" she asks in a sing-songy voice. I swear she's six seconds away from batting her eyelashes.

"It was fine," I respond, letting as little emotion as possible show on my face as I put my bag down.

"Des, I swear to god, if you don't tell me what happened on your date tonight, I will lock myself in my room and go on a hunger strike," she threatens.

I can't help but laugh at her theatrics. If she ever decides to give up photography, she could give drama a serious go.

"It wasn't a *date*," I say, still chuckling. "And there's barely anything to tell. He was a complete asshole for about ninety-five percent of the time we were there."

“What about the other five percent?” she asks, shimmying her shoulders toward me.

“The other five percent was filled with me quite literally trying to escape the situation.” I shrug my shoulders. She looks deflated, I can tell she had been hoping that there would be more to the story, and I decide to put her out of her misery.

“There is one thing though.” I pause to collect my thoughts. “He, um, well, he lives here,” I stutter.

She grabs my hand and pulls us over to the couch to sit. She crosses her legs and focuses on me.

Yazmine’s eyes open so wide, I swear I see where they connect to the back of her head. “Here, as in this building?!” I nod and she squeals. “Oh, my god! Des, way to bury the lede!”

I sigh. Really. *What are the chances?* I think back to that night when I thought I saw him picking up a food delivery on the fourth floor and realise that, despite my wishes, it couldn’t have been anyone else. *My life is a joke.* He’s just one floor below us.

“Could this be any more perfect?” she continues. “It’s like a rom-com, but better, because this is real life. I still think he sounds like he’s into you, even if he’s a bit of a dick.”

“Relax,” I say, holding my hand up to silence her excited squeals. Yazmine takes the opportunity to gulp in some very much needed oxygen. “He isn’t *into me.*” I put air quotes around those last two words. “And I’m pretty sure he has a girlfriend anyway.”

Her face falls. “What?”

I tell her about the girl with tattoos I’ve seen with him.

“Maybe it’s his sister?” she asks weakly.

I shake my head. “They were way too close to be siblings.”

“I don’t know,” she rebuffs. “Some families are just super close. Have you ever seen those ‘dating or siblings’ pictures...? It’s harder to guess than you would think.”

“It should never be *that* hard to guess.” I exaggerate a shiver. “There’s more, his roommate was at the cafe too, and it turns out I already knew him.”

I go over how I met Tristan right before school started, the time I thought I saw Eli in the fourth-floor hall, and everything that happened at the cafe this evening.

“Tristan’s in a band and *we’re* going to see their show next Friday.”

“I’m down!” She claps her hands together. “What kind of music do they play? We’ll have to dress accordingly. We need to go shopping before the show, and I bet Eli will be there, you can show him what he’s missing out on.” She winks.

Ugh. I hadn’t thought of that, but she’s right. They’re roommates and probably friends, so there’s a good chance that Eli will be at the show. I consider if it’s too late to back out. I’m sure that Tristan wouldn’t care, but then I think of how happy he seemed when I accepted.

Screw Eli. I’m not going to spend my first year of university hiding from him. If he’s there I’ll just ignore him.

“I’m not sure, but it’s a basement show. No one is going to care about our clothes,” I protest.

“We’ll care,” she says, shaking her head at me like I’m the crazy one. “Plus, you’ll want to look hot when you’re meeting the rest of the band! Musicians are...” She pinches two fingers together and brings them to her mouth in a “chef’s kiss” gesture.

“You always look hot,” I say, hoping to get her off of my case by buttering her up.

“Flattery will get you most places, but not out of this. Me, you, mall on Saturday. We can use my discount!” Yaz works part-time at the mall, so she gets a small percentage off at all the stores. Nothing crazy, but every bit of savings counts. I need to start looking for a job as well, but I decided to wait until my second semester so I could first get situated with classes and my new surroundings.

“Okay,” I relent. “Only because I want your discount,” I joke, but a girls’ day at the mall doesn’t sound half bad, even if it’s filled with Yazmine trying to be my professional stylist.

I hear the buzz of a text notification on my phone and grab it off the coffee table. I have two messages.

Unknown: Hey, Desiree. It’s Tristan. I just wanted to let you know that next week’s show is at 1517 Forrester Ave.

Me: Thanks! See you then.

Next, I look at the second message.

Eli: So, we’re neighbours. Is that why you ran off?

Now I feel stupid, because obviously he was going to find out whether I told him or not.

Me: No, I just figured we weren't going to be productive, and I wanted to go home.

Eli: Sorry about that.

Eli: Like I said it was a long day.

I nearly drop the phone. He apologised. I was beginning to think he didn't have a remorseful bone in his body.

Me: It's fine. We can work on the assignment next week.

The most I can hope for with Eli is that we pass this presentation without murdering each other.

Eli: Sounds good.

I put my phone down and lean back on the sofa. Yazmine is addicted to watching *Hell's Kitchen*, so she turns on an episode and I settle in to watch when my phone buzzes again. I sit up and grab it, expecting it to be Stella or Dom. Both of them have been rather silent the last couple of days. Instead, I'm surprised to find another text from Eli.

Eli: Have you watched anything good lately?

Part of my brain rings an alarm bell; Eli is extremely hot-and-cold with me. One moment, he's being a complete jerk and the next he's asking me about my latest TV obsession. Still, I can't help the dumb smile that stretches across my face as I tell him about the hours' worth of *Hell's Kitchen* that I've binged this week.

Yaz notices my grin and looks at the phone in my hand. She doesn't say a word, but raises an eyebrow, smiling to herself as she turns back to the TV.



ELIJAH

I WAKE EARLY Tuesday morning and try my hardest to fall back to sleep, but after hours of tossing and turning, I give up. I decide a cup of coffee is my best option and head to the kitchen. I'm not surprised to find Tristan already up and functioning, but I am shocked to find Nate with him. It looks like they're having a heated discussion when I walk in, but the second they see me, the conversation stops. *Not suspicious at all.*

"Is someone going to tell me what's going on?" I ask. "Or will I have to play twenty-one questions to figure it out?"

They both share a look and then Nate speaks up. "What happened with Sadie?"

The question lands like a rock in my gut. It's been days since Sadie and I last spoke. I know that it wasn't really a breakup since we weren't together, but it sure as hell felt like one. I tried to text her the following day, but I was met with stony silence. I hadn't talked to the guys about it. I mean, what could I really say? *Hey guys, I don't want to hook up with Sadie anymore, I'm too busy thinking about a girl who barely tolerates me.*

"Nothing happened with Sadie," I reply as I reach for a thermos and pour myself some coffee. "We were hooking up. Now we're not, that's all."

I try to keep my tone even, but I don't know what kind of spin she put on the situation. Truth is, there really isn't much to tell them.

"She said you found someone else." *Oh, for fuck's sake.* Nate's voice is monotone, and I can tell he's less than impressed.

"I'm not sleeping with anyone else," I grind out. "And even if I were, it's not like we were exclusive. She knew that from the start."

He doesn't have a comeback to that because he knows I'm right. I've never felt the need to share my reasons, but after being around me for three years, it's pretty clear that I don't do relationships.

"It's just that Tristan said—" At this, Tristan elbows him in the arm and Nate shuts up immediately.

I narrow my eyes, turning my head to look at Tristan. "What did Tristan say?" I ask slowly.

He just rolls his eyes and huffs out a breath. "When Sadie said you were hooking up with someone else, I just thought it could *possibly* be Desiree."

I'm too stunned to speak. My cheeks warm, and I curse the fact that my body has picked now to start blushing like a preteen. He doesn't seem to

notice my silence and keeps talking.

“I mean, she said you were being an ass, but I thought I picked up on some weird tension between the two of you.” He shrugs his shoulders.

“If I were hooking up with her, don’t you think I’d have known where she lived?” I exhale in irritation. I love these guys like they’re my brothers, but it’s too early in the morning to get grilled.

He shrugs again with a frown.

“The tension you picked up between us was her barely tolerating me,” I continue, looking him dead in the eyes. “We aren’t together. I’m not with *anyone* right now.” I say that last bit directed at Nate because he seems to be the one with the real issue.

I screw the lid on my coffee, suddenly feeling claustrophobic in the small apartment kitchen. It’s better once I get outside and let the crisp, fall air hit my face. My mind is all over the place this morning, from worries about Elliot, to whatever Sadie is stirring up in the group, and *Desiree*. I’m so consumed by my thoughts that I walk twice as fast and end up outside the art history classroom in record time. The room is empty, so I walk in and take a seat next to the chair that she normally sits in. Minutes tick by and students begin to filter in, talking to one another as they take their seats.

When Desiree enters, all the air in the room vanishes, everything else becoming background noise. I have to remind myself to breathe.

She looks the same as always. *Stunning*. She’s dressed casually in jeans and a crewneck sweater that says “Roughriders” across the chest. There’s a look of confusion on her face when she sees me next to her usual spot but after a moment of hesitation, she takes her seat.

If I could bottle her scent, I would. It’s overpowering in the best way, as if someone found just the right mixture of floral and candy, and said *Yes, this will drive Eli insane*.

“Hey,” she says timidly, her head tilted to the side as she eyes me.

“Morning, Desiree.”

A deep flush comes across her cheeks, fascinating me.

Loughlin walks into the room and immediately begins the lecture, and she looks thankful that she’s been saved from having to speak.

I spend the rest of class failing miserably to focus on the subject. Everything about Desiree requires my full attention. The way she bites her lip when she takes notes or how she drums her fingers on the desk when Loughlin goes on a long-winded tangent about art shows he’s been to in the

past. I want to memorise every single one of her little idiosyncrasies. The feeling lights me up and terrifies me.

Before I know it, class is over and we're packing up to go. I feel someone's eyes on me, but Desiree doesn't seem to notice. I look over across the room and catch Thomas staring at us. He's giving me the evil eye as if he wants to fight, which has to be a joke. I've never seen anyone who seems like they could take a beat down better than him. I assume his mug is because of Desiree who is still wonderfully unaware. She peers up at me, oblivious to the silent battle that I've just been a part of, waiting for me to move.

When we exit the aisle, I sling my arm over her shoulder. "What are you doing?" she asks me, startled.

I toss her a quick wink. "Just go with it," I respond as I glance over my shoulder. Sure as shit, Thomas is still staring, and if looks could kill, I would be a goner.

But with my arm around Desiree, nothing can take me down. I resist the urge to flip him off and give him a smirk to let him know that I've won this round.

Outside the classroom, I find Nate leaning against the windows across the hall. When he spots me and notices my arm slung over Desiree's shoulders, he straightens, a smirk appearing on his face. I drop my arm so fast that my shoulder almost pops out.

Desiree's eyes ping-pong between me and Nate, clearly wondering what the sudden change is about. I liked having her pressed close to me. Hell, that's all I've thought about for the last few days. Granted, when I have those thoughts, both of us are usually wearing a lot less clothing. And that's *exactly* the problem. I held on to her like she was mine so that pretty boys like Thomas would know to back the fuck off, when I shouldn't even *care*.

"Are you going to introduce me to your friend?" Nate asks as he waltzes over to us, amusement lacing his tone. The entire walk from school to Merchant will be filled with questions about her.

"Nate, Desiree," I say briskly. "Desiree, Nate."

"Desiree," he says, drawing her name out, obviously connecting the dots from our conversation this morning.

"You can call me Des," she replies with a smile. I grind my teeth.

"You want to come with us to Merchant?" His question is directed to her, but he's looking at me. I'm sure he senses how uncomfortable I am and is reveling in it. I want to reach out and deck him in the face.

“What’s Merchant?” Desiree asks, curious.

“Local bar,” he says in an animated tone as if they’ve been friends for ages. It’s one of the things I envy about Nate. He’s instant friends with everyone he meets. I couldn’t be further from that. I’m not interested in becoming buddies with every person I meet. Maybe it wouldn’t kill me to be a little more trusting of people, but that leaves you vulnerable, and if that’s the cost, then I’m not interested. “It’s closed during the day, but we’ve got an in with the owner,” he jokes, tossing her a smile that’s a little less friendly and little more flirtatious.

She laughs and I roll my eyes. *Give me a break.*

“I can’t. I’ve got Calc in a bit,” she replies and Nate grimaces.

“Rough.”

I’m starting to feel like an awkward third wheel in this conversation, so I decide to pipe in and end this fun little introduction.

“Right. Well, we’ve got to get going,” I interrupt before Nate starts up with some new topic of discussion. At this rate, he’ll be asking her if she wants to come over for dinner tonight. “Our friends are waiting for us.”

Desiree glances up at me with a question in her eyes, and I see a brief glimpse of what looks like hurt flash over her expression, but she schools her face.

“Okay,” she says, her voice soft, her head dipping down. I have to fight the urge to stretch my hand out and tip her chin back up. To slide my palm against the soft skin of her face, letting my fingers tangle in the curly hair around her shoulders. *Aaand this is why we don’t let our imaginations run wild.* “I’ll see you on Thursday, I guess.”

I shake my head at her. “No, I have to skip class on Thursday.” We’ll be setting up for the show the next night. I’ve never once felt bad about not going to class, yet the fact that I’ll be losing an opportunity to spend time with her, even if it’s with Loughlin droning on in the background, makes me feel disappointed. *Which is odd.*

“Okay, I’ll let you know what you miss,” she says, turning away from us.

“Sounds good,” I reply. “We’ll talk later.”

I don’t know why I felt it necessary to tack on that last part, but I didn’t want her to think that I wasn’t interested. Which is stupid because *I. Am. Not. Interested.* At least not in the way that girls like her probably would expect. Where I am firmly anti-relationship, Desiree screams long-term relationship through every pore in her body. Girls like her want a courtship, some sort of

whirlwind romance.

The second she turns the corner, Nate grins at me.

“So, *that’s* Desiree,” he says this as if things are suddenly making sense to him.

I glare at him as I take my headphones out of my pocket.

“Not another word,” I respond, popping them into my ears and turning up the volume.



Midterms are next week for most of my classes and profs are starting to crank out the last bits of material they want us to know before the tests. Every minute that I haven't been in class, I've been studying. *Sleep? Never heard of her.* But I'm trying to keep my eye on the ultimate prize. *Reading Week.*

Thanksgiving is the Monday after exams, and we have the entirety of that week off, which means I'll be back in Stars Valley for the first time since I moved. I'm excited to spend time with my parents, although I wish Stella and Dominic could be there for more of it. UBC's Reading Week in November, so they'll only be able to stay a few days.

By the time Friday morning comes around, I'm exhausted.

I haven't seen Eli in a couple of days. I think back to when we were leaving the classroom and he flung his arm around me, drawing me close to him. I'm sure he must have read the shock on my face, but I didn't pull away and he didn't let go. *Just go with it.* His words play in my mind. I had to physically stop myself from leaning my head onto his shoulder and breathing him in. His heat and scent wrapped around me like the best sort of present. Until Nate spotted us. Eli had dropped his arm so fast; I swear I saw him wince.

The whole interaction after that had been odd. Nate was nice, but Eli seemed like he couldn't get away fast enough.

I walk over to the library, still wondering what it could all have been about, and then the obvious hits me. *He has a girlfriend.* A girlfriend that

Nate certainly knows about. I don't know why he did it in the first place. *Except I do.* I'm a joke to him.

When I get back home in the afternoon, Yazmine is taking part in her new daily yoga obsession. She sees me and grins, letting go of her downward dog pose to pause the video she was following.

"Are you excited about this evening?" she asks.

It's a fair question. A couple of days ago I may have said yes. But now? I don't know. The idea of seeing Eli tonight causes my stomach to twist. My face must betray the war of emotions in my mind because she laughs.

"I guess I'll take that as a no."

"It's not that. I'm just—" I'm just what? Anxious about whether or not I'll see this guy that, try as I might, I can't get off of my mind.

"I'm just tired from the week, that's all."

Yaz nods at me, but her eyes make it clear she doesn't buy what I'm selling.

"I'm going to get ready," I say as she hits *play* on her video, getting back into her yoga position.



A RIDICULOUS AMOUNT of time later, I'm ready to go. The show doesn't start until nine, so I'm an hour early. I knock gently on Yazmine's bedroom door.

"Come in!" she yells, sounding exasperated.

When I walk into her room, it looks like her closet has exploded. Clothes are scattered around every inch of the floor and on the bed.

"I can't figure out what to wear," she complains.

I push some clothes to the side and climb onto the bed. "Isn't this why we went shopping?"

Yaz had insisted I text Tristan before we went shopping to ask what type of music his band plays in order to determine the outfits we should be purchasing. His response was pop-punk mixed with some type of hardcore? I hadn't fully understood it when he explained. I had a brief obsession with My Chemical Romance in middle school, but that's as far as my knowledge of what I think that genre is goes. When I told Yazmine, she let me know that I

owed her... *big time*.

“Yes, but I’m a different person now, and I hate everything I bought,” she says dramatically.

“A different person from last week?” I snort.

“Yes!” she exclaims, and I can’t hold back my laugh.

I watch as she tries on outfit after outfit. I’m wearing black knee-high socks, a dark red-and-green plaid skirt, and a sheer mesh crop top with a black bralette underneath. Yaz settles on a low-cut red top, and I let her borrow my leather pants. Thankfully she has a car, so we don’t have to walk. Since the weather has changed, it’s even chillier come nighttime.

I plug in the address Tristan sent me into my phone’s GPS and we head out. Ten minutes later, we pull up to a white house in a fairly nice residential neighbourhood. The place is rather unassuming, and I’d think we had the wrong address if it weren’t for the porch lights and people drinking beers on the lawn. Yaz parks on the street and we walk down the sidewalk to the house.

The door is wide open, with the screen door being the only barrier to the outdoors. A large guy with shaggy brown hair stands in the entryway, chatting with another person. When we approach, he turns his attention to us.

“Entry is five dollars,” he says. “Everything is set up downstairs.”

I pull out a ten-dollar bill and put it in the red bucket next to him. Yazmine looks like she wants to speak up about me paying for her admission, but I just hold up my hand.

“I’ve got it,” I say. “I appreciate you coming with me.”

“Anytime, girl,” she says, locking her arm around mine as we head down to the basement.

“Holy. Shit.” She coughs out as we reach the last step.

My mind echoes her sentiments as I take in our surroundings. Dark blue LED lights wrap around the ceiling of the open space and cast a dark glow around the room. There are speakers attached to the walls, and music I don’t recognise is blaring through them. I can feel the base shaking the floor.

The basement reeks of weed and is packed with people—way more than I had expected. Most of them are drinking and talking as they wait for the show to start. I’m pretty sure it has to be breaking some maximum occupancy law.

I freeze in place as I will my heart to stop racing. The whole place is stimulation overload. I don’t know where to look first. I’ve never been

around this many people in such a small space before. Even the biggest parties in Stars Valley were a lot smaller than this.

“Let’s get a drink,” Yazmine yells so I can hear her over the music, probably sensing my nerves.

“Okay,” I yell back. “Let’s find Tristan.”

The show is BYOB, but Tristan texted me earlier telling me not to worry about it, and we were welcome to drink from what the guys brought. It takes me exactly one second to identify the area that’s supposed to be the “stage” and another to identify Tristan, Nate, and *Eli* standing with another tall guy covered in tattoos. I’ve never seen him before, but the four of them together look like they’ve stepped out of an *Alt Press* cover.

“Over there,” I say to Yaz, nodding in the direction of the guys.

“Damn,” she says, taking in the sight. “Which one is Tristan?”

I feel my cheeks warm and thank the heavens for the low lighting.

“That’s Tristan and Nate on the left.” I hesitate, then let out a rough sigh. “That’s Eli next to Nate, and I don’t know who the other guy is.”

Yazmine squeezes my arm tightly. “So *that’s* Eli.” Her smile is mischievous. “Well, let’s go say hi then!”

She takes off and I have to do a small jog to catch up with her. When Tristan looks up and sees me, the smile on his face is wide and genuine.

“Desiree!” He greets me first, pulling me in for a hug and swaying on his feet. I realise that he’s slightly tipsy.

“Hey! That’s *my* new best friend,” Nate says in a whiny voice as Tristan lets me go.

Nate wraps his arm around me in a sideways hug and I chuckle. He turns me just enough so that I’m now face-to-face with Eli. He has a beer bottle in his hand and nods at me as he takes a sip, his eyes darting from my face to where Nate’s hand rests casually on my shoulder. He doesn’t say a word. *Screw him.*

“This is Devin,” Nate says, introducing me to the tattooed guy next to Eli. “He’s our lead vocalist.”

Our? Nate was also in the band?

Devin tips his beer toward me as a hello. “How’s it going?”

“Uh, good,” I manage, stumbling over my words. “This is... interesting?”

Devin takes a look around and chuckles. “Yeah, something like that.”

A light snort comes from behind me, and I realise Yazmine has been watching this interaction with fascination.

I take a step back, bringing her to my side. “This is my friend Yazmine.”

She gives everyone a wave and a smile, and then turns her attention to Tristan. “I was told you’re the drink supplier.”

He lets out an easy laugh. “Yeah, follow me.”

Yazmine trails him to the edge of the room to a cooler. Nate’s talking to Devin, leaving me and Eli to stare at each other.

His eyes scan my body, drinking me in from head to toe. Goose bumps appear on my arms despite the fact that I feel extremely warm. I don’t know what’s going through his mind, and I’m tempted to ask what his problem is, but a stark reminder of why it doesn’t matter walks up to us in black ripped jeans and an oversized Black Veil Brides T-shirt tied up into a crop top.

“Can we talk?” the tattooed girl asks Eli, completely ignoring my presence.

Nate and Devin both stop talking. Eli’s eyes bounce back and forth between the two of us before he gives the slightest nod and walks off with her. I tell myself that I don’t care where he goes or what he does, but I still track the two of them as they walk to the back of the basement and enter a room off to the side, closing the door behind them.

When I avert my gaze, I’m met with two sympathetic half smiles from Devin and Nate. They both look as though they would like to run to the nearest exit. Devin clears his throat, and Nate rubs the back of his neck as if trying to physically remove whatever tension he’s feeling. I don’t understand why things seem to have gotten awkward, but they’re watching me with pity, which makes me feel pathetic. I look down at my phone. It’s already nine thirty.

“So, when does this thing start?” I ask, attempting to keep my voice light. I want them to stop looking at me like a puppy that just got abandoned. But it doesn’t work. They both just look over to the room where Eli and his girlfriend disappeared.

“When E and Sadie are done,” Devin replies.

“Right.” I put on what I hope doesn’t look like a fake smile, trying to keep up my cheery facade.

Sadie. My mind runs wild with different scenarios of what it is they could be doing in that room. Each one causes a lump in my throat that I do my best to swallow away.

Luckily, Yaz returns to save me from my own thoughts with two beers in hand. I could not be more thankful and take a large swig from the glass bottle. I’m not a huge beer drinker, but this one has a light flavour that isn’t

completely horrendous.

A moment later, Eli and Sadie exit the room and neither of them look happy. Eli, stoned-faced, heads back toward us and Sadie hangs a left and stands against the wall. She catches me looking over at her. I try to look away as quickly as possible, but she hits me with a glare that causes me to flinch.

It takes me a second to notice Eli taking a seat at the drum kit, not bothering to talk to anyone.

“All right, I guess we’re starting,” Nate mutters.

And then it clicks. *Eli is in the band. I’m at a show for his band.*

My palms begin to sweat and my mouth feels dry. I look over at Yazmine and I can see she’s reached the same conclusion as me, only she’s loving it.

“Did you know?” she asks with a laugh.

“Do I look like I knew?” I retort, taking another large sip of beer.

She laughs harder, and I’m pretty sure I hear her say “this is gold” as we move to the back and lean against the wall, watching the small audience crowd to the front. The guys quickly tune up, Eli calls out the count, and then they’re playing.

The people here seem to actually know the words to the songs which surprises me. It was naive to think that just because they’re a small local band, no one would have heard of them. The audience is singing along, and although I don’t know the music, the energy in the room is contagious. The bass is heavy and I feel it shaking my whole body. I find myself swaying, a smile on my face, while Devin sings to the crowd. His vocals don’t at all match the tone he was speaking in earlier; his voice is deeper, sort of gravelly, but melodic at the same time. It’s almost as if it’s scratching an itch I didn’t know existed in my brain.

I look over at Yazmine and she looks just as absorbed as I feel. I watch as Tristan plays, his fingers moving quickly on the bass guitar. He’s completely in the zone, rocking his head in time with the music. Nate is hamming it up around the “stage” with his electric guitar, having the time of his life. He gets close to the mic and Devin immediately turns sideways. Nate turns as well so they’re leaning on each other, back-to-back. The space is small, but they’re owning it. Rockstars in their own little world.

But the person behind them is the one I’m transfixed by. *Eli.*

His hair sticks to his forehead with sweat as he beats the drums like his life depends on it. He tosses one stick up and it flips midair. He doesn’t even look at it as he catches it and brings it back down on the drum. If the others

look like they're in their own world, he looks like he's in his own universe. He never misses a beat, and I can't tear my eyes away from him.

If I thought he was attractive before, it's got nothing on him now. The way he moves as he switches from drum to drum, hands crossed over each other, controlling the rhythm.

I mean, seriously, someone who looks like him shouldn't be allowed to *also* have musical talent. It's unfair. *It doesn't matter, he's an asshole*, I remind myself.

When the song ends, he smashes the cymbals and throws his head back, his eyes closed. He swipes a hand across his forehead and lowers his head, and when he opens his eyes, his gaze is fixed on *me*. There's an intensity in his stare that I haven't seen before and it makes my whole body buzz with awareness. We're *just* classmates. I try and fail to convince myself.

The next song starts and the second Nate plays the first chord, there seems to be a steady hum of anticipation around the room. Devin begins to sing, a slow, almost dreamy feel to the sound. There's an edge to his voice, like maybe this isn't just a sweet ballad.

*All the sleepless nights
I had because of you
And I'd do it all again
Just to see us through*

Except, I'm only guessing that the last word he sang is "through" because rather than singing it, Devin growls it into the mic. This is clearly the moment everyone has been waiting for as people start jumping up and down, and the people at the very front throw their elbows. Devin has a smile on his face, eating up the crowd's reaction as he continues to scream into the microphone. But I can no longer make out a word.

I'm so captivated by the antics of the people up front I startle when Yaz taps me, holding up a phone screen that displays an incoming call from her mom.

"I have to take this. I'll be right back," she says directly into my ear.

I nod and wave her off as I take another sip of the beer I've been nursing. When she's gone, I watch as everyone continues to feel the music. Some have their hands in the air, others are headbanging to the music. Even though I have no idea what's going on at the moment, I'm surprised to find that I'm having a good time.

At least until I realise that, at some point, Sadie had sidled up beside me. I

fight the urge to run up the stairs and find Yazmine. *What is taking her so long?* When the song ends, Devin announces that they'll be playing a cover of a song I've never heard of. It's much quieter compared to their last.

Sadie takes the change in pace as an opportunity to speak up. "I see the way you're looking at him." Her voice drips with disdain. Whether it's for me or Eli, I'm not sure. I would pretend not to know what she's talking about but we both know I can't take my eyes off of *him*. "If I were you, I wouldn't get your hopes up. He's not exactly *available*."

I finally turn to look at her. She's even more stunning up close, and I'm instantly intimidated. Her eyes gleam, like she's in on some secret I'm unaware of, and it makes me feel nauseated. Has he talked to her about me?

"Do you want another drink?" she asks with faux sweetness in her voice. I just shake my head; not sure I trust my voice. She shrugs her shoulders and leaves my side. "Nice to meet you, Desiree."

The words feel like a slap for two reasons. One, this clearly wasn't a friendly interaction. She was here to inform me to back off. Two, I never told her my name, so who was she talking to about me? I have a feeling I already know the answer.

The band finishes the song and moves on to another, but I'm no longer paying attention.



DESPITE HAVING JUST REJECTED Sadie's drink offer, I pass through the throng of people and head to Tristan's cooler. I grab another beer and crack it open, drinking down at least half before walking back to my spot. A few minutes later, Yaz comes down looking slightly panicked.

"I'm so sorry, I have to go," she yells.

"What's going on?" I ask, trying to calm her down a bit.

"My dad got admitted to the hospital. They think he had a heart attack." My heart sinks. She's close to bursting into tears. I lead her to where Eli and Sadie had been earlier. When I flick on the lights and close the door, I'm able to take in the room. It seems to be an unused, spare bedroom with walls that are painted a deep forest green. I can still hear the music in here, but not quite

as loud, and at least our talking won't bother anyone.

"Will he be okay?" I ask, looking her in the eye. Yazmine's lip quivers as she tries to take a deep breath. My eyes are focused on her as I try to come up with some way to help, but there's nothing I can do. My chest tightens. I can't imagine what I would do if one of my parents was sick while I was away.

"I'm not sure," she responds, the panic rising in her voice. She looks around the room as if trying to spot her next move. "The doctors are still running tests on him, but my brother is out of town for work and my mom is freaking out. I just have to—"

"Take a deep breath," I say, cutting her off. "Go to the hospital. Seriously, it's okay."

She bites her lip with worry. "Okay, I can drop you back home on my way."

"No, it's fine." Even though the idea of staying here by myself does not appeal to me. "And there's no need to come back for me. Go straight home from the hospital. I'll get a ride with Tristan."

She takes a deep breath and exhales. "Yeah, okay. I'm gonna go."

I pull her into a hug and squeeze her tight.

"It's going to be okay, Yaz," I whisper. She nods, then leaves.

I step out right after her. It feels surreal that the show is still going on. I could hear the music before, but Yazmine's news tuned it all out. I guess that's how a lot of big moments in life are. They leave you feeling like everything has stopped; meanwhile, everyone else carries on as normal.

I chug my beer back which I regret right away. The alcohol instantly goes to my head. I'm not a huge drinker, so having two beers makes me more than a bit tipsy. Enough that, when Devin starts the next song, I remove myself from the wall and mix in with the people grouped close to where the band is playing.

I jump to the beat and throw my head back and forth. I feel the bass throughout my whole body. It's exhilarating. The LED lights in the room rotate through a host of different colours, casting the audience in different hued shadows.

I look up to where the boys are playing and, once again, find Eli staring at me. For a second, as we make eye contact, I forget where I am and what I'm doing. His gaze is electric and I'm caught up in it.

Another person bumps into me, causing me to stumble, and I laugh as I

right myself. When a slower song follows, I close my eyes and tilt my head back, letting my body sway with the music. I vow to myself to try and see more live music shows.

There's something about concerts; no matter how small the crowd may be, they're just so freeing. I don't know any of the people here, but we're all a part of this experience together. I'm unsure of how many songs have passed, but I'm caught off guard when Devin closes the set.

"We're Merchant Revival! Thanks for coming out tonight!"

There are cheers across the room, and I'm surprised to find I'm disappointed that the show is over. I'm even more shocked when I notice that my buzz has worn off. The girl jumping around with everyone else was just me. Somewhere along the line, I let loose and allowed myself to have fun. Regardless of how silly I may have looked, I'm smiling as I watch the guys start to put their stuff away. I walk over to Tristan and tap him on the back.

"Hey," I say when he turns around. "Is it okay if I catch a ride back home with you?"

His hair is no longer tied up and now hangs freely around his shoulders.

"I'll take you." The response comes from behind Tristan. I look past his shoulder at Eli, whose gaze is focused on me, making my skin grow hot. I briefly replay the memory of him watching me during the show. It had felt like it was just the two of us in the room and nothing else mattered.

"You don't have to do that." I hope the dim lights cover my blush.

"Doesn't look like you have many options," he replies, his tone smug, reminding me of the day he made me his partner. And of all the reasons I shouldn't be alone with him.

I turn back to Tristan with a plea in my eyes.

"He's driving Sadie back home," Eli adds, as if knowing that I'm ready to protest.

Tristan scrunches his eyebrows and looks over at him. Eli gives him a slight nod.

"Right, I forgot about that. I'll go look for her and get going. Hope you enjoyed the show." He smiles at me before running up the stairs, abandoning me with *him*.

Nope. Nope, nope. I am not doing this. In the short time I've known Eli, he's been consistent in one thing: being a *complete dick*. Sure, there have been moments where I get a glimpse of someone warmer, but it takes no time at all for him to revert back to his normal asshole behaviour.

“I’ll ask Nate then.” I barely know Nate, but I’m sure he would give me a ride if I asked.

This only elicits a glare from Eli. “He came with Tristan.”

Of course he did.

“I’ll walk,” I grind out, letting my exasperation show and ignoring the part of me that tingles at the thought of being alone with him.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he scoffs. “It’s almost midnight and it’s a twenty-minute walk. We’re going to the same place.”

“Fine,” I breathe out, doing my best to look defeated. “I left my coat upstairs. Let me go grab it and I’ll be right back.”

He locks eyes with me and my stomach does that weird twist that happens every time I’m the focus of his attention.

“Okay.” His voice is different, raspier.

I walk toward the stairs with a smile on my face. He might have been able to strong-arm me into working with him in class, but he’s about to learn that he can’t always get his way. When I get to the top of the steps, I check my phone and find one new text message from Yazmine.

Yazmine: At the hospital now. They’re keeping my dad here for the next few days under observation. I’m going to spend the night with my parents. I’ll see you tomorrow.

My heart aches for Yaz; I hope her dad gets better soon.

Me: Okay, keep me posted! See you tomorrow x.

I step outside and the cool night air hits me. Have I made a mistake? *No*, I tell myself. Refusing to question my decision. Despite being cold, I know I’ve made the right choice. I can’t risk getting swept up in him and that’s exactly what would happen if I had gotten in his car.

The street is dark, only illuminated by the street lights, and I pick up my pace, wanting to get home as fast as possible.

In Stars Valley, it was pretty rare for Stella and me to be out this late without each other, but on the occasion that we were, we would always call the other. Whether we were walking home or talking on speaker on the drive, we made sure that the other got home safe. So I pull out my phone and call her out of habit, feeling an edge of relief when she picks up.

“Hey, babe, hold on a sec!” she shouts. It’s loud wherever she is, but the music and the voices slowly dissipate as she walks away. I hear a door click

and she comes back on the line. “What’s going on? It’s late.” She sounds worried.

“Nothing. I’m just walking home from the show,” I say, my voice hushed, which is ridiculous considering there’s no one else on the residential street. I had spoken to Stella earlier this week to tell her about the show. She’d laughed at the idea of me in a stranger’s basement, listening to music from an unknown band, but she had taken a real interest in Eli.

“Ahhh.” She hums in understanding. “Why are you walking home by yourself? I thought you went with Yazmine.”

“I did. She had a family emergency and had to leave before it was over to —” I’m cut off when I see bright headlights glowing up the street ahead of me. I look over my shoulder and notice a car coming down the road, slowly. So slow, it’s suspicious. I face forward again and walk at a faster pace, pressing the phone to my ear.

“Des, you still there?” There’s a slight edge of panic in Stella’s voice. I would like to reassure her, but I’m a bit freaked out myself.

“Yeah,” I say as I hang a left onto the main road, praying the car will go in the opposite direction. “I’m still here.”

I take another glance over my shoulder, and my heart rate picks up. I realise the car has not only turned in the same direction as me, but has opted to stick to the curb lane against the sidewalk.

“There’s a car following me,” I say to Stel, my shaky voice not even a whisper now. My throat feels tight and it’s hard to swallow.

“What?!” she exclaims. “Oh my god, Des, is there a safe place you can go? What buildings are near you?” Her hysteria adds to my own panic and I freeze to look around. That pause allows the vehicle to come to a complete stop next to me. I squeeze the phone in my hand and my heart thunders in my chest as I watch the car window roll down.

Of all the ways I could die, never once had I thought it would be from being snatched off the street walking home from a late-night basement show.

From the sidewalk, I peer into the car where the driver’s eyes are intently focused on me. Right away, my panic and fear are replaced with annoyance.

“Stel, I’ll call you back, okay?” My voice sounding a little bit sturdier.

“What?!” she screams. “Are you insane? Don’t you dare hang up this phone, Desiree.”

“I promise I’m okay,” I reassure her. “I’ll call you back.”

As I hang up, I stare back at the driver, whose smirk I would know

anywhere.

Eli.



I don't have a big ego, but something inside of me really snapped when Desiree said she would rather walk than catch a ride home with me. Still, I'd let it go when she seemed to relent and agreed to let me drive.

I had grabbed my stuff and was waiting for her to come back down, when Tristan appeared with Sadie at his side. She'd looked pissed, arms crossed in front of her, refusing to make eye contact with me. She was the least of my worries in the moment.

"I thought you were driving Des home?" Tristan asks, a look of confusion on his face.

"She went to grab her jacket from upstairs."

"Umm." He looks back in the direction he just came from, hesitantly. "I just saw her leave. Are you sure you weren't supposed to meet her outside?"

My jaw clamped shut and my molars ground together. *She didn't.* It was late and cold out, and the show wasn't in the safest neighbourhood in the city. Despite all of these facts, she'd still walked out in the dark, alone.

I stood there, speechless with anger, not sure what to do.

Part of me thought *fuck it.* If she wants to walk home, that's her business. I'd offered, that's all I could do. Whatever happened to her out there didn't matter to me. But I knew that was a lie. The thought of her being in danger or getting hurt made me feel sick.

I ran out the back door, hopped into my car, and raced out of the lane and onto the front residential road, hoping to find her quickly. Sure enough, she hadn't made it far and was talking on the phone, not even paying attention to

her surroundings.

Doesn't she realise anything could happen out here? Who could she be talking to at this hour?

I stayed behind her. If she wouldn't let me drive her home, then I could at least make sure that she made it there safe. It's the kind thing to do. *Yeah, because I'm notorious for my kindness.*

I can't help the laugh that comes out of me now at her expression as she notices my car following her. There's absolute panic in her eyes. She thinks *I'm* the one she needs to be worried about. Maybe she should be. The fact that I'm doing this proves I'm not in my right mind. She speeds up her steps, and I follow, turning onto the main road right after her.

Suddenly, she stops, and I tap the brakes, bringing the car to a halt right beside her. I roll down the window. Smug satisfaction washes over me as I witness the moment she recognises me. I can't believe she thought she could sneak away and I would be none the wiser.

She hangs up her call and tucks her phone away. I know she must be cold as fuck in that outfit. She's wearing a shirt so thin, I can see her bra underneath, and the only material covering her legs are some knee-high socks below her *very* short skirt.

My cock twitches in my jeans at the sight, but I keep my face neutral.

"What are you doing, Eli?" Desiree asks, breaking our silent stare down.

"You wouldn't accept a ride." I shrug my shoulders, giving her a tight-lipped smile, as if this is a good enough reason to be following her down the road like a stalker.

She looks at me as if I've lost it. "You can't just follow me!"

"I'm making sure you get home safe. So, you can either get in or we keep doing this," I say, tired of the back and forth. She watches me, and I can see that she's contemplating whether or not she should just keep walking. My annoyance roars. "Just get in the car, Desiree."

She takes one more look ahead. She's got about a fifteen-minute walk left, but it's only a five-minute drive. I hear her mutter something under her breath, then she approaches the car.

The instant she opens the door and sits in the passenger seat, I see the problem in my "white knight" plan; my car has now become my own personal torture chamber. Her proximity is intoxicating as she envelops every single one of my senses. Her scent fills my car, and I don't know how I'll ever get it out. Worse, I don't know if I even want to. Instead of driving, my

gaze has been latched onto her and she doesn't miss the opportunity to call me out on it.

"Okay, I'm in the car," Desiree says, rolling her eyes. Her tongue darts out to wet her lips, and I do my best to readjust the thickening cock in my pants without drawing attention to myself. "Are you going to drive or does this thing only move when you follow girls around at night?"

I snort. I've seen Desiree embarrassed, flustered, angry. Hell, I even caught a glimpse of her letting loose tonight. However, this little pouty and sassy outburst may be the cutest of them all. I press down on the accelerator and begin the drive home.

"So," I say, in an attempt to distract myself from how badly I want to reach out and place my hand on that small stretch of skin between her socks and where her skirt has ridden up. "How did you like the show?"

"It was..." She pauses. "Different. Different from what I expected."

I let out a low laugh. "I'll assume that's a good 'different' based on how I saw you joining the crowd."

My eyes are on the road, but I don't need to look at her to know she's feeling self-conscious. I swear I can feel the warmth from her blush heat the car. There's nothing about her that could go unnoticed by me right now.

I glance at her and find her chewing on her bottom lip.

"Yeah. I had a bit to drink, guess I got carried away," she admits, looking out the window.

Her getting carried away was one of the hottest things I've ever seen. It felt like a privilege to watch her let loose with everyone else. As much as I would love to focus on that aspect, I'm stuck on what she just said.

"You had too much to drink and you still thought it was okay for you to walk home by yourself at night?" My voice is tight, my earlier annoyance rising to the surface again. What if it hadn't been me following her? My stomach sinks at the thought. "Did you even consider what could have happened?"

"I would have been fine," she bites out, as if annoyed by my concern, which is rich, considering she's the one who risked her safety. "Why do you even care?" she huffs out.

I'm pretty sure the question is rhetorical, but it hits me like a ton of bricks nonetheless.

Why *do* I care? If someone had told me a month ago that I would chase this girl down to insist I give her a ride, I would have said you've lost it. *But*

here I am.

“I don’t know,” I mutter under my breath.

“Figur—” The word is interrupted by a gasp as the driver in front of me brakes suddenly, causing me to slam on mine. The car comes to an abrupt halt and I reach out to stop Desiree from jostling in her seat. *Apparently, protectiveness is my new thing.* My hand lands right on her thigh, on the sweet patch of skin I had been looking at just minutes ago. She looks down at where I’m touching her, and I feel the muscle in her thigh tighten. She swallows before our eyes. I give her a gentle squeeze, wanting to reassure her that she’s okay. I let my fingers linger a second longer before I retract my hand back to the steering wheel.

If I wasn’t hard before, I sure as hell am now. I can hear the blood rushing in my ears. Her skin was so soft, just begging to be kissed and licked. I hold back a groan. I still feel her warmth on my palm as I hold on to the wheel for dear life, my eyes trained on the road ahead of us. Traffic is moving at a snail’s pace. What would take us five minutes under normal circumstances, has taken us fifteen and counting and, since our near collision, neither of us has said a word.

When we approach the intersection, I see what the hold-up has been. A stalled car sits in the centre lane as police direct traffic around it.

“Eli.” Desiree’s soft voice breaks the silence. “Why are you doing this?”

“I told you,” I start. “It isn’t safe for you to be—”

“Not just tonight,” she interrupts me. “The day we picked partners in class, the way you acted at the coffee shop. You didn’t even acknowledge me at the show until you decided it was your responsibility to drive me home.” Exasperation laces every word she says as she clenches and unclenches her hand repeatedly. “You have a *girlfriend*, so why are you doing this?”

That catches me off guard. They’re valid questions—ones that I’ve asked myself—and I have no answer. Apart from one. “I don’t have a girlfriend.” I’m confused about where she got that from.

“Sadie,” she says. I take my eyes off the road to look at her and she’s staring at me like I’m stupid. Maybe I am. She thinks Sadie is my girlfriend? I suppress a laugh.

“She basically told me to stay away from you tonight,” Desiree continues.

Anger. Pure, unfiltered anger courses through me. The fact that Sadie spoke to Desiree, as if she has any say in what I do, has me wanting to punch my steering wheel. Instead, I take a deep breath in, letting the light scent of

flowers calm my senses.

“Sadie isn’t my girlfriend,” I respond as we make our way past the intersection and turn to enter the underground parking garage of the apartment building.

“Really?” She sounds almost snarky. “She sure sounds like—”

This time it’s my turn to cut her off. “I don’t know what she sounded like,” I say, annoyed. “And I don’t particularly care. Sadie isn’t and *never* will be my girlfriend. We’re friends. If I wanted her, I wouldn’t be here.”

Desiree’s eyes go wide at my words. “But you are here.”

“I am.” I grip the wheel tight as I park my car. My body is buzzing with both energy and anxiety. Adrenaline is common after shows. The feel of playing live for people, no matter how small the crowd is, never gets old. It’s a constant feedback loop. We play hard for the audience and give it our all and in turn, they give us all their energy, and the cycle continues. By the time a show is done, I’m always wide-eyed, feeling like I could run a marathon, and unable to sleep. The anxiety part? That’s all *Desiree*.

She nods, but doesn’t say another word as we get out of the car and enter the elevator. I can almost see the gears turning in her mind. I lean against the wall, observing as she pushes the button for the fifth floor and steps back. The elevator begins to move up and she looks at me expectantly.

“Aren’t you on four?” she asks.

I nod my head, keeping my eyes trained on her. There’s a different type of tension between us now and I feel my heartbeat speed up. I take her in from head to toe. The heavens must have designed her with the intent to destroy me. She reaches out to push the button for the fourth floor and I move closer to stop her.

“I told you,” I say, taking another step. I feel every ounce of self-control evaporating from my body. “I’m making sure you get home safe. That means to your door.”

“That isn’t necessary.” Her breathing is shallow, her eyes are darting around my face as I move closer into her personal space. I glance up and see that the elevator has passed the second floor. I let my hand gently run down her arm and my fingers intertwine with hers. She looks at me like she’s in a daze.

“Maybe not, but it’s the way it is.” I whisper.

She opens her mouth to respond just as the elevator door opens to the fifth floor.

“Which way?” I ask as I step out, still keeping her hand in mine.

“Last door to the right.” Her words are coming out choppy and her cheeks are red. When we stop at her apartment, she looks down at our hands then back up at me. I haven’t stopped staring at her face once.

“Um, okay,” she says on an exhale. “Thanks. I’m home and safe now.”

I take a small step forward so that her back is pressed against the door. She scans my face, and I can feel a small tremor in her hand as I squeeze it in mine. The speed of my own breathing has increased, but there’s nothing that can be done to help it right now.

I bend my head so that my nose grazes her neck, breathing in my new favourite scent.

“You’re definitely home.” I let out a low chuckle. *I don’t know about safe.*

I feel her shiver, and the knowledge that I’m affecting her just as much has me curious to see how far I can push the boundaries. I press a soft kiss at the base of her neck and she tenses. For a second, I think she’s going to push me away, but she releases the most delicious sigh, and I know neither of us wants this moment to end. I continue pressing kisses up the column of her neck until I reach her jaw. When I pull away, her head is pressed against the door and her eyes are shut.

“Desiree.” My voice sounds hoarse, even to my own ears. She cracks open her eyes to look at me and, for a second, I get lost in them. “What happened to your roommate tonight?”

She seems caught off guard by my question. “Family emergency. She had to leave.” She bites her lip again, and I just know I won’t be satisfied until I have it between my teeth.

“So there’s no one else behind that door?”

“No?” she answers, confused. “But I’m safe. Seriously. The building security has got it from here.” In between every few words is a choppy breath, and seeing how much those few kisses affected her has me wild.

“Yeah”—I brush my mouth over hers, not quite a kiss but enough for me to want more—“I’m not thinking about your safety anymore.”

I push against her just enough so she can feel exactly where my thoughts are at. I’m tired of being cautious, I’m tired of pretending that this isn’t what I want. That *she* isn’t what I want.

Maybe I just need to get this out of my system.

She lets out a little gasp, which makes me wonder what she’ll sound like

when she comes.

Desiree's lips begin to open and I place a small peck at the corner of her mouth. "You're the only one on my mind at the moment. You feel that, right?"

Her eyes search my own, and I hope she finds whatever answers she's looking for in them.

"Open the door, Desiree."

She lets out a sigh and then gives in. She turns around slowly as if debating what she's about to get into. *That makes two of us.* Opening the door to the apartment, she flicks on the light.

"Do you want something to drink?" Desiree asks, a slight tremor in her voice, as she tosses her keys on the counter. I move toward her and put both hands on either side of the countertop, trapping her.

"No, that's not what I want," I whisper into her ear.

Then, I kiss her.



Eli kisses me, and it isn't as soft and tender as the ones he placed along my skin in the hall, nor is it like the quick peck he pressed against my lips.

This one is searing and desperate, a small groan escaping from his mouth. I melt under his burning intensity.

My fingers tangle in his dark hair as I attempt to pull him closer, the locks so much softer than I expected.

He's kissing me as if he fears I might disappear in an instant and it's too much yet not enough. His scent is heady, like being in a forest after it rains. It's deep and woodsy but so refreshing. No matter how much I breathe it in, *I want more.*

Typically, I'm not very forward. I'm the exact opposite. Sometimes I wonder if that was part of the problem with Liam. I know that his cheating had nothing to do with me and everything to do with him, but maybe if I hadn't been so scared to say exactly what I wanted, he wouldn't have gone and found someone else.

There's something about Eli that makes me feel bold. Maybe it's the fact that every time he looks at me, it feels like he's staring directly into my soul, as if he sees what makes me *me* and doesn't shy away.

Whether it's expressing my frustrations, my annoyance, or what I want, I know that he can take it.

His hands move from where they had me caged against the counter to my hips, so tight that I think I'll feel where he's holding me for days to come.

“Couch,” I gasp as his lips continue burning a path down the tops of my shoulders.

He makes a noise deep in his throat and I feel it flow through every inch of my body like electricity. He removes his lips from my skin and takes a step back. His eyes are filled with lust and I already miss his touch.

I have to force myself not to run and dive onto the couch, pulling him with me, the desperation to feel him against me again all too real. The second we’re seated, his lips are back on mine and he leans forward, pushing me onto my back on the plush seat. The change in position does nothing to slow him down. If anything, it spurs him on.

Eli dips down to where my skirt has completely ridden up, exposing my lacy underwear. He places a kiss on the inside of one thigh, and then gives it a small bite. I gasp at the slight sting, but don’t have time to focus on it as he moves to the other leg, repeating the same motions.

He stops and my hips buck, already knowing where I want him to kiss me next. Instead, he moves back up and crashes his lips onto mine once more. There’s a lopsided grin on his face as if he senses exactly what I was thinking.

“You’ve been driving me wild in this outfit,” he whispers against my mouth.

I’m about to respond when he grinds himself against me. I let out a moan as he continues to thrust harder where I’ve been aching since sitting in that oxygen-deprived car.

Holy fuck.

“My thoughts exactly.” He laughs, speeding up his movements.

My cheeks flare with heat as I realise I said that out loud. The embarrassment fades as he hits a spot that feels too good for us to still have clothes on. My legs tighten around him and another moan leaves my mouth. This time, he gently bites down on my lower lip and tugs.

“I’ve been wanting to do that all night.” I feel the vibration of his voice everywhere and, without permission, my hips thrust up to meet him. I need more.

“Fuck.” His voice is different, huskier than normal. “That’s it. Chase after what you want.”

Eli holds himself almost completely still and I groan in frustration, moving faster so that I can get the friction I crave.

“Move,” I beg between clenched teeth. I can’t believe how desperate I

sound right now.

A small smile plays on his lips and he shakes his head. “You look so good like this. Let me watch.”

I let out a gasp when he gets onto his knees on the couch, places one hand on each of my hips, and quickly lies down, pulling me on top of him.

“Take what you need, Desiree.” His words send a shiver down my spine and he smirks.

“I love the way you react when I say your name.” He sounds strangled as I reach down to undo the buttons on his jeans. “No,” he says, his tone suddenly stern, and I’m caught off guard because I can see just how much he wants this. “Come here.”

He grabs my chin and brings my lips down to his, claiming me all over again. With one hand in my hair, the other urges my hips to move, and I do. I start slow but move quicker as my body demands more and more.

Our tongues tangle and I revel in the minty flavour of his mouth. Every touch of his hands, how he grips my hips, encouraging me to move faster, drives me wild.

He tugs on my hair while he explores my mouth and nips on my lip. Each action has me teetering toward the edge.

I remove my hands from where they had been resting on his chest, and hold on to his shoulders as I rock against him with reckless abandon. I come with a silent scream, his tongue in my mouth, and I shudder when he gently runs his hand down my back as I return to earth.

“Fuck,” Eli says, staring at me like this is the first time he’s seen me. “That was—”

He’s cut off by the sound of my phone ringing on the kitchen counter. I recognise the ringtone, the one I have assigned to Stella, and realise it’s been almost an hour since I hung up on her.

“Shit!” I say as I scramble off of him and run toward my cell, picking up on the third ring. “Hey, Stel!” I’m out of breath, and I don’t know if it’s because of my mad dash to the phone or because of my orgasm courtesy of the guy still currently lying on my couch. *Either way, I need to up my cardio.* “What’s up?”

“What’s up?!” she yells, skipping the hellos altogether. “That’s all you have to say after you hung up on me in the middle of the night! After telling me that someone was following you, may I add, then never calling me back? I swear to god, Desiree Clarke, you better explain yourself!”

I take a deep breath and press my hand against my forehead. I look over to the couch and see that Eli has sat up. He looks over at me and mouths, “I’m going to go.”

I’m not sure what I was expecting. He obviously wasn’t going to spend the night, but I didn’t think he’d leave right away.

Still, I don’t want to ask him to stay, and Stella will probably keep me on the phone anyway. I give him a small smile and wonder how things escalated so fast.

What just happened between us isn’t like me. *But it could be.*

“Goodnight,” I whisper.

He nods, a soft smirk curving his lips. “Goodnight.”

And just like that, he slips on his shoes, unlocks the door, and leaves. I immediately feel the absence of him in the apartment.

“Excuse me?!” Stella screeches through the phone. “*Who* are we saying ‘goodbye’ to?” Even with the phone pressed up to my ear, I had almost forgotten she was there.

I cringe. “Eli.”

“I swear, Des, you have thirty seconds to spill.”

I walk into the kitchen and pour myself a glass of water. “He drove me home, and then he just... stayed a while.”

My mind drifts back to the ride home. I spent the whole time hoping that if I said as little as possible, I wouldn’t get myself into trouble. I couldn’t believe he had *followed* me in his car, but another part of me—a part I’m desperately trying to squash—*loved* it. Knowing that he cared whether I made it home intact.

“And...?” I can hear the excitement in her voice. “It’s one a.m., cut the shit. What were you guys doing? Did I interrupt anything?”

I recount the events of the night, which takes twice as long as it should because she keeps stopping me every two minutes to either squeal, ask questions, or get me to repeat things.

“Oh my god,” Stella shrieks when I get to the kiss. “How was it? How do you feel? Do you want to see him again? Tell me everything.” She fires off her questions in rapid succession.

“Great. Amazing.” I answer her questions in order, pausing to think about that last one. Do I want to see Eli again? Even though I try to deny it, I know the answer. “Yeah, I do.”

I recap the kiss, right up to the point she called.

“Sounds like you guys would have done a lot more than kiss if I hadn’t called.” Stella lets out a laugh.

I groan as my cheeks warm. We really did get carried away; before the phone rang, I hadn’t even been thinking of where things were going, but Stella is right. It would have been hard to stop there; I know I didn’t want it to end.

By the time I hang up, it’s nearly two o’clock and I’m exhausted. I crawl into bed and lie down, thinking over the unexpected turn tonight took.

I’ve been wanting to do that all night.

Eli’s words play back in my mind, and I don’t know what to make of it all. Today has felt ten years long. I flip over and groan into my pillow, letting sleep wash over me.



I can no longer deny how attracted I am to Desiree. I want her *bad*.

I'm not sure what that means, though, or what I want from her. I don't even know what I can even offer. *Not much, that's for damn sure*. But I know that trying to stay away from her is more stressful than it's worth.

It's been two days since the night of the show and I can't forget the taste of her, the feel of her lips on mine. Her skin had been smooth and soft to the touch. *Addicting*.

I could spend an eternity with my lips on her and it wouldn't be long enough. The thought concerns me.

I don't even remember the last girl I kissed; it must have been in high school. For the last few years, I've always been crystal clear with anyone I hooked up with that I don't do kissing.

At least, not on the mouth—I'm not a complete ass.

It's always felt too intimate, and I never wanted to give anyone the wrong idea, but something came over me the other night. I didn't just want to kiss Desiree, I *needed* to.

That exact feeling is the reason I hesitated before texting her the following day.

Me: Hey, we should probably meet up for the presentation this week.

Yeah, it's just about the project. Nothing else, at least that's what I told myself as I fidgeted in my chair, tapping out the beat to a new song as I

waited for her reply.

Desiree: Sure, Next Plate again?

The reply was so casual, maybe it had just been a run-of-the-mill make-out session for her. I let my mind drift back to the way she took control, rocking herself against me until she couldn't take anymore. The look on her face as she came, *angelic*.

Me: I have a better idea. How about we meet at the Art Gallery?

When I first found out that the Winnipeg Art Gallery was having a feature on different art history periods, I hadn't given it much thought. But now? It seemed like the perfect thing to check out, given the project.

Desiree: Okay. Thursday after class?

Me: Sounds good to me.

Fifteen minutes passed and I realised that the conversation was about to die off, and I just couldn't let it go. I couldn't let *her* go.

Me: Still watching Gordon Ramsay yell at people?

I remembered her telling me that her roommate had gotten her hooked on *Hell's Kitchen*.

Desiree: Yup! Season 12 now, and I think that if I got on the show, I would actually know how to avoid him yelling at me.

Me: Do you cook?

Desiree: Does frozen pizza count?

Me: Sorry to break it to you but he would yell at you.

Desiree: I think I could win him over.

Me: You don't win over Gordon Ramsay. It just doesn't happen.

Desiree: We'll see about that.

Me: Don't you have to be a chef to go on the show?

Desiree: Yes.

Desiree: What about it?

Me: Are you going to apply with a recommendation from Delissio?

Desiree: Don't be silly, of course not. I'm more of a President's Choice girl.

Me: Who prefers President's Choice pizza over Delissio?

On and on we went and now here I am, five days later, and I've texted her every minute I wasn't at practice with the guys or working. And if I'm being honest, I've texted her during some of those times, too, sometimes accidentally getting the drinks wrong for customers.

The more I get to know her, the more attracted I am.

So when Tuesday morning hits, I don't know how I'm going to deal with it. I'm up at the crack of dawn and no amount of trying to force myself back to sleep works. I check my phone to see if she texted me but there's nothing.

I can't remember the last time I looked forward to getting a text from a girl, but here I am, and I haven't even *been* with her. I groan, suddenly very aware of the morning wood in my pants and how the thought of sleeping with Desiree doesn't help.

I get up and start getting ready when I see a notification pop up. I pick it up, embarrassingly fast, and I'm thankful no one is around to see how glued to my phone Desiree's made me. I know Tristan would love the opportunity to mock me about it, considering how much shit I used to give him about his phone calls to Angelica.

Now I'm in the same position but worse because Desiree isn't anything to me. *Just the girl who haunts my every waking thought.*

But instead of a text from her, I'm met with a message from Elliot. I hold my breath as I open it.

Elliot: I'm fine. Stop asking Dad about me like he doesn't have enough going on.

I clench my jaw. Only took him a month to respond. *Great.* It's not like

I'm unaware that Dad is busy back home, but he needs to get it together, *damn it*. At least until Elliot graduates.

When Mom left, Dad crumbled. The man who had been so strong and was larger than life, folded in two. I watched the father I idolized shrivel. Physically he was still there, but mentally and emotionally, he was distant, doing the bare minimum with me and my brother. He was in no position to raise an eight-year-old and a four-year-old.

In middle school, we were taught that when snakes grow, they shed their skin. It was sort of like that with Dad. Except, instead of being left with a larger, stronger version of him that grew from the tough circumstances, Elliot and I were left with just the husk of who he used to be.

I still recall with clarity coming home from school after my mom left. Aunt Rosa had picked both Elliot and me up from daycare and school and drove us home. The ride had been quiet, which was odd because Aunt Rosa was *always* chatting about something.

When we got home, Dad was sitting on the couch. The TV wasn't on, he just sat there with a blank expression. I tried to talk to him about my day at school but when he looked at me, his gaze had been empty. He just stood up and went to his room and closed the door behind him.

I remember not understanding what I'd done to upset him. Aunt Rosa ushered me out of the family room and wiped the tears from my small face.

Looking back, I know that father was grief-stricken as he mourned the loss of a wife who *chose* to leave him.

As I got older, I vowed to myself that I would never be anything like him. I would never let anyone, especially a woman, break me down and reduce me to nothing.

No love is worth that.

Me: Then maybe you could text me back next time?

Elliot: Texting you now, aren't I?

I frown. I don't know what I was expecting. Elliot was never going to have some sort of brotherly heart-to-heart with me. He hasn't always been like this. In some ways, I feel like it's my fault. When I moved to the city from Brinkley, three years ago, he just fell off the tracks. He used to follow me and my friends around everywhere, but when I moved, he found new friends. And these guys? They aren't good. I've met a few of them and it's

just bad vibes all around. One time, I saw a couple of them at a bonfire and they looked strung out. They were definitely on something.

I tried asking Elliot about it the next day but he brushed me off, telling me that I needed to “loosen up,” which didn’t make me feel any better. I was left wondering what he got up to when I wasn’t around.

Each year I go back for the summer, he gets more and more reserved and distant. He’s always got an attitude, leaving the house at all hours of the night, and Dad can’t be bothered to do shit about it. He keeps touting the party line that Elliot is in a phase.

Fuck that. Dad’s just too damn lazy to do anything about it. I love my dad, but he clearly gave up some time ago.

I’m about to text Elliott back when a new notification comes in. I sit in the kitchen, smiling as I read the message.

Desiree: If you watch *Pride and Prejudice*, I’ll watch *Bad Boys*.

Last night, before we fell asleep, we’d been talking about our favourite movies.

Me: Deal. I can’t believe you haven’t seen *Bad Boys*.

Desiree: I can’t believe you haven’t seen *Pride and Prejudice*!!

I grin. All I said when she mentioned that she loved *Pride and Prejudice* was that it made sense, I never said I hadn’t seen it. She just assumed so, but I don’t bother to correct her. I’ve seen the movie twice, both times were for English classes. It’s not bad, just not necessarily something I would watch on my own, but it’s a classic for a reason.

Me: Who hasn’t seen *Bad Boys*?!

Desiree: Fair enough. But *Pride and Prejudice* is about two people overcoming obstacles to find their true love. I bet you can’t say that about *Bad Boys*.

I scoff as I type out my next message.

Me: Sounds like you’re prejudiced against *Bad Boys*.

I lay my phone on the counter as I pour myself a cup of coffee. By the

time I take my first sip, there's a new text waiting for me.

Desiree: HAHA. I see what you did there.

Desiree: Not at all, I just would much rather watch a movie about the triumphs of love over cops and car chases.

Me: Bad Boys is more realistic.

Desiree: Why? Don't believe in one true loves? Lol

Me: I haven't seen any proof of it outside of a movie screen.

The dots on the bottom of the screen pop up and disappear several times before I send another message.

Me: But I have seen a few car chases in my time.

Desiree: WHAT?!

I chuckle and lean against the countertop, texting her until I'm late for class.



Thursday afternoon comes faster than I expected. I've seen Eli twice since the night in my apartment—both times were in class—and we'd barely spoken. Only quick hellos and heated glances before Loughlin's lecture, and when class ended, Nate would be standing outside the door to whisk Eli off to Merchant.

Despite some stilted in-person conversations, our text exchanges haven't stopped. Still, I'm nervous that the ease that we've developed with each other through messaging won't translate face-to-face.

I'm ready to go to the gallery, and I'm about to text Eli that I'm leaving, but I hesitate, chewing on my lip as I decide what to do.

Yazmine knocks gently on my door and I look up at her with a nervous smile.

"What's the matter?" she asks right away. It's funny how in such a short time, she's already picked up on my facial expressions and knows when something is bothering me. "I thought you were excited to go to the art gallery."

"I was. I mean, I am." I stumble over my words. "I'm just not sure what to do. If I text him now and tell him I'm ready, he'll assume I want to walk over there with him. I don't know if I should just meet him there?"

"You're overthinking it," Yaz replies, reaching out her hand. "Give me your phone."

I do as she says. She types something and hands it back to me. "He'll meet you in the lobby in five. Easy." She winks at me and spins on her heel,

leaving me in my bedroom. “No need to say thank-you!”

Sure enough, when I look down at my phone, I see that Eli has agreed to “my” suggestion to meet in the apartment lobby in a few minutes. By the time I get downstairs, he’s already waiting for me. Without class as a distraction, or the safety of my phone, I’m even more nervous. My tongue feels thick in my mouth.

Eli scans me head to toe as I croak out an awkward, “Hey!”

He dips his chin in acknowledgement. “You ready to go?”

“Yup!” *Maybe next time we can try putting two words together.*

Thankfully, the walk to the art gallery is short because it’s filled with awkward silence. I would pay good money to know what’s on his mind, but he never gives a hint.

When we get to the building, the woman taking admission payments doesn’t even ask if we would like to split the admission. She just groups the two rates together and pushes the debit machine in front of us. I’m about to ask her to split the amounts when Eli takes out his card and pays for us both.

“It was my idea anyway.” He shrugs off my protests.

We head upstairs where the *Art Through the Ages* exhibit is happening. To my surprise, and adding to my nerves, we have the place to ourselves. Every step we take echoes through the hall, and I’m extremely aware of how close Eli is to me as we stop to stare at a painting from the Renaissance era.

“Are we supposed to be taking notes or something?” he asks.

“Umm.” In all of my hustle to get ready, I hadn’t thought much about what it was we would be doing here, and I forgot my notebook at home. “We can just look around and get the vibe of each period and then use that in our notes for the project.”

“Right.” He pauses. “The vibes.”

Straight away, I feel stupid for my choice of words. The awkward yet charged silence returns as we walk around. When we cross over to the Rococo area, Eli breaks the silence.

“So are you an art history major?”

“No.” I shake my head, keeping my eyes on the ground. No matter how many times my friends and family have reassured me that it’s normal not to know what you want to do right away, I still feel slight embarrassment over the fact that I have no clue what I want to study. “I haven’t declared my major yet.”

I raise my eyes from the floor to find that Eli’s sole focus is on me.

“What are you leaning towards?” he asks.

“Well.” I sigh. “I’m not sure. I like Art History but I’m also really enjoying my politics class. It just feels like a big decision and I don’t want to mess it up.”

Eli’s gaze is piercing and I turn back to look at a display, unable to stand his scrutiny after I admitted that I’m pretty much directionless.

“You’ve got plenty of time to decide.” His voice is soft and comforting. It surprises me. “You’ll figure it out.”

“Thanks,” I say, eager to move on to a different topic of conversation. “So how long have you been in the band? I didn’t even know you were a part of it until that night.”

My cheeks flush as I’m assaulted with memories of everything that came after the show. Eli smirks as if he can read my mind.

There’s suddenly a very different kind of tension between us as our gazes lock again. Flashes of our kiss, his words, and what happened on the couch go through my mind.

I’ve been wanting to do that all night.

You look so good like this. Let me watch.

Take what you need, Desiree.

Eli clears his throat and looks away, breaking the weird spell. “It’s been a few years now.”

“Is that what you want to do?” I’d almost forgotten what we were talking about.

“That would be amazing.” He shrugs. “But it’s also a long shot. So until we get a break, I’ve got to stick to the back-up plan.”

“Which is?”

“Graduate and probably get an office job that doesn’t make me hate my life.”

“Sounds like a good plan.” I laugh. “Is your whole family musical?”

The lightness that was in his eyes just seconds ago disappears. “No, just me.” He glances down at the watch on his wrist. “We should probably hurry; the gallery closes soon.”

I nod my head, unsure of what I said wrong. “Yeah, okay.”

We go through the rest of the exhibit quickly and then walk back to the apartment in silence.

For a moment, things had felt “normal,” almost *friendly* even, and now I’m wondering if the chemistry between us that night was all in my head.



EXAM WEEK HITS HARD. I write three midterms in five days. All my time is spent either studying at The Next Plate—where the Manager, Jean-Luc, has now coined me “Dessy”—or at the library. A good night’s sleep feels like a distant memory but, despite my utter exhaustion, exams are the perfect distraction from whatever is going on between me and Eli.

There’s a dangerous undercurrent between us. We still text each other regularly, but it’s been platonic for the most part, with a bit of flirting here and there. Neither of us have made any moves to see each other since the art gallery. Maybe the kiss was just a one-time thing and I need to accept that.

I pull out my phone as I leave my morning econ exam. The final was hard. Even after hours of preparation, I don’t know how well I did.

I scroll through my missed notifications and see four new text messages. My heart begins to race as I click on them.

Eli: Good luck on your exam today.

It was sent right before I started the test. My heart flutters.

Eli: Nate says hi.

There’s an eye roll emoji next to this message which makes me chuckle.

Eli: Can I see you this afternoon?

Eli: If you want.

My heart flips and sinks at the same time. I hadn’t mentioned that I was going home for the break. It wasn’t like I was trying to hide it, it just didn’t come up in conversation. It’s midday now, and I have to leave for the airport in a few hours.

Me: Raincheck? I’m going home for Thanksgiving. I’ll be back after Reading Week.

There’s a delay and I think he won’t reply at all, but after a couple of

minutes, his name pops up again.

Eli: After Reading Week then.

I do my best to fight the smile that comes across my face, but I'm left grinning the whole walk home.



I hate this. *Every. Single. Minute.*

Thanksgiving, and pretty much any holiday centred around family, feels like a prison sentence in the King household. I'm not sure why we bother with a big dinner. I'm sure Dad wouldn't care if we skipped the festivities altogether, but Aunt Rosa, his sister, insists on having some semblance of normal family traditions. Initially, I wasn't planning on coming back here for the break, but then I thought of Elliot, stuck at this stupid table by himself, and decided to make the three-hour drive home early Thanksgiving morning. Not that he cared at all. He stayed in his room from the moment I got home until the minute Aunt Rosa announced dinner was ready. When he saw me, he just tipped his head in greeting, and didn't even bother to say hello.

Dad, however, was very surprised I showed up. Can't say that I blame him. He gave me an awkward side hug and patted me on the shoulder. He has never been great with physical affection, which is fine because it wasn't something I ever desired from him. "Good to see you, son." There was a smile on his face, but it was as surface level as it could get.

I don't make a habit of coming home much outside of summer break and Christmas. Last year, I skipped Thanksgiving and spent the week in Banff instead with Nate and his extended family.

As soon as I walked into the house, I could smell the food being prepared for tonight's dinner. Aunt Rosa always cooks for family functions, and no matter what, she goes all out, despite the fact that it's only the four of us. My

memories from before Mom left may be limited, but I do remember the holidays well. The house would be packed with both sides of the family. My mother was one of seven kids which meant there were always aunts and uncles around. As a child, I loved it, there was constant noise, music, food, and a mountain of gifts, which I couldn't get enough of. This also meant that I noticed their absence even more once Mom left.

When she disappeared, so did *everyone* else. I once saw one of my aunts at a grocery store and she couldn't have gotten away from me fast enough. Her face had gone white and she all but abandoned her grocery cart in an attempt to get out of the small store.

So, now, these are our family holidays. Dad eating hurriedly before heading to the couch to plant his ass on it for the rest of the night; Elliot picking at his food with a perma-scowl on his face,

"How are your classes going?" Aunt Rosa asks me.

I finish chewing and then reply, "So far, so good. It's been a pretty easy semester."

"That's great, and your favourite class?"

I think over my various philosophy courses and then respond, "Art History." And it has *nothing* to do with a certain partner.

"Oh!" She beams. "That must be interesting! You know, when I was in university, I dated an artist."

His eyes still fixed on his plate, Elliot lets out a grunt that can only be described as sarcastic.

"He was so sweet," she continues to reminisce. "Very in tune with his emotions. A little too in tune, if you know what I mean," she says with a wink.

I, in fact, do not know what she means, and probably don't want to know, either, but I nod, hoping to end the conversation.

"And the band. Tell me how everyone is doing."

"We're doing good. Playing at the bar on Halloween."

"Vince, did you hear that? Your son has a big show coming up." Aunt Rosa looks at him expectantly, but I'm more wary.

My dad glances in my direction. "Congrats."

It's the least genuine *congrats* I've ever heard, but I still mutter a "thanks" under my breath.

When dinner is over, Elliot pushes back his chair with such force, there's no doubt he's scratched the floor. Aunt Rosa grimaces.

“I’m going out,” he grunts as he heads toward the door.

She frowns but doesn’t respond, and Dad just stares at the TV, not even turning his head. *Okay, I guess I’ll ask.*

“Where are you going?” I call out just as his hand touches the knob.

“Nowhere you need to worry about.”

And just like that, Elliott leaves, slamming the door behind him; I assume I won’t be seeing him for the rest of the night. I feel a knot of anger in my chest, and I wonder where the fuck everything went wrong with him.

“It’s those kids he’s hanging out with,” Aunt Rosa whispers under her breath as she begins to collect the dishes. Neither Dad nor Elliot could be bothered with bringing their plates to the sink. I stand up and begin helping her clear the table. “They have him cutting classes to go smoke behind the school.” She lets out a sigh. “He’s out almost every night doing God knows what, and I know that some of those boys have been caught stealing. He’s going to get himself into trouble.”

“And what is anyone doing about it,” I retort, not bothering to whisper. Dad should hear this, he’s the parent. It’s on him to keep Elliot straight, not Aunt Rosa and certainly not me. *But here we are.*

She places the plates in the sink before raising her hands in the air and looking up to the ceiling.

“I tried,” she says, pinching the bridge of her nose. “I really tried to talk to him, but he’s stubborn. Oh, my word, you should hear the way that boy talks to me when he’s angry. I didn’t know he could curse like that.”

She shakes her head, causing her short, silver hair to sway around her shoulders, as if attempting to remove whatever conversation they had from her mind. I want to deck Elliot for talking to her like that. She’s the reason that we even got by after Mom pulled her disappearing act. In the initial months after she left, Aunt Rosa all but moved in with us. She packed my lunches, took me to school, and babysat Elliot all day. She did her best to make sure we were taken care of.

Whenever she would leave to go back to her own home, Elliot and I would cry and beg her to stay, all while Dad stared at us, his face betraying no emotion. I know that he deserved better and was suffering—*all of us were*—which is why I don’t hate his guts. But it’s hard to forgive the absolute lack of a parental figure he’s been, especially when I needed my father’s guidance as a teenager. I dealt with it okay, but Elliot? I’m not so sure. He needs help now more than ever. Aunt Rosa can’t get through to him, and I’m not in town

often.

I help with the dishes, then head to my room. The walls are painted a deep navy blue, my favourite colour. When I was ten, I begged Dad to paint my all-white room and he agreed. I think he did it mostly to shut me up, but a win is a win, and ten years later, it's still the place I feel the most comfortable in the whole house. It's yet to be determined whether that's because of its comforting colour or because it's the one area where everyone leaves me the fuck alone. I flop onto my bed and pull out my phone. There are a few new notifications from the group chat with the guys. Just general Happy Thanksgiving texts and a picture sent from Devin of him, Alex, and Zara happy as can be together. No message from Desiree though.

She's been pretty silent since she went back home, a few sporadic messages here and there over the last couple of days, nothing significant. I keep reminding myself that it doesn't matter. We don't have to talk every day. In fact, it's probably better that we don't. Still, I can't help but open our chat and stare at the last message I sent this morning.

Eli: Decided to go home as well. Happy Thanksgiving.

I don't know why I decided to give her that update. I'm not sure if we're the type of friends who do that. Hell, I don't even know if we *are* friends. I've jerked off to the memory of her coming on top of me more times than I care to count. *Or than can be medically safe.*

Just the thought of it now has me ready to go again and I groan in frustration. I lay my phone down on the bed next to me and place a hand over my eyes.

I thought seeing her in a less charged situation, like the gallery, would help me forget about what happened between us but, if anything, it made things worse. I need to get her out of my system once and for all.

"HELLO?" a voice yells out, sounding both near and far. I must be losing it because it sounds just like *her*. "Eli?"

I snap up, grab my phone, and look at the screen. *Fuck me.* Desiree's name is displayed across the top. I must have dialed her by accident when I put the phone down. I consider ending the call, but that hardly seems like an appropriate response. Instead, I clear my throat and raise the phone to my ear.

"Hey," I respond. I can hear a lot of background noise on her end, and I realise that she must be in the middle of whatever Thanksgiving plans she had going on. Not everyone's holiday ends with them alone in their room

before nine p.m. “Sorry, I called by accident.”

For a moment, she says nothing, then her voice comes through the line soft and low. “Oh, okay.” There’s another pregnant pause on the line. “Well, Happy Thanksgiving, Eli.”

The softness in her voice makes me feel like she had hoped the call was intentional and damn if that doesn’t do something odd in my chest. Suddenly, I’m not ready for her to hang up.

“Are you busy?” I ask. A stupid question, given that it’s a holiday.

“Dom is trying to force everyone into karaoke.” She laughs. “Does that count as busy?”

Her laughter brings a stupid smile to my face, and I purse my lips tightly in an effort to squash it before I start full out grinning all alone in my room like a moron. I can tell that she’s walked away from where she was as the background noise becomes more distant.

“And Dom is?” I ask her, wishing that I knew all the important people in her life.

“Dominic, my brother,” she replies, casual as ever. As if us talking on the phone is just a regular everyday occurrence. “How has your day been?”

“Good.” A lie. “I decided to come up and see my family.” Sort of true.

“Right. I saw your text. Sorry, I didn’t get a chance to respond.”

I shrug my shoulders as if I hadn’t just been wondering where she was minutes ago. “It’s okay. I know the holidays are busy.”

“What do you have planned for the rest of the night?” It’s an innocent question—I asked her the same thing a second ago—but I tense. I can’t be too honest and let her know what a mess my family currently is. At the same time, I don’t want to lie to her. It somehow doesn’t feel right.

“Um,” I utter, as I take a moment to think about how I want to answer. “My family doesn’t tend to do a lot for the holidays. There aren’t many of us, so we keep it pretty minimal.”

“Oh.” There’s a slight note of pity in her tone. My grip on the phone tightens. *I hate that.* I hear distant voices calling her name before she speaks again.

“Eli?” Her voice is quieter now than before. “Can I call you back later?”

“Yeah,” I respond quickly, almost *too* quickly.

I hate talking on the phone. It’s long and drawn out for no reason. I’d rather shoot off a text and have it done with. So my willingness to speak with her on the phone in a “non-accidental” way throws me off balance.

Everything about her seems to have that effect on me. I can't think straight around her, all coherent thoughts go out the window.

Once I'm in bed, I flick on the small box TV in the corner I picked up at a garage sale when I was in high school. It's shit and the picture is grainy as all hell, but it's one of the first items I bought for myself and I like being able to watch TV at night. An old sitcom episode begins and I lie back, letting it play as I wait for a call I didn't know I needed.



My week at home is passing far too quickly for my liking. Dominic and Stella both headed back to school right after Thanksgiving, so I've had a lot of quality time with my parents. It's been fun. I hadn't realised how much I missed them until I saw them at the airport and my eyes began to swim with tears.

Moving away has shown me that I am capable of being on my own, but it doesn't mean that I won't always need my parents. They're such a huge source of comfort to me. The tears kept flowing when I finally got to see Stella.

That entire first night was spent holed up in her bedroom. We talked about everything that had been missed in our weekly chats. As a joke, I'd called her out on being a lot slower to reply over the last few weeks, and she'd confirmed my suspicions. There's a new boy she's been obsessed with.

"I don't know how to explain it, Des," she squeals to me. "He makes me so happy." The genuine smile on her face has me excited for her.

Naturally, I begin pressing for details. "Tell me about him. Where did you two meet? How old is he? I want details, lady!"

An emotion I can't quite place flashes across her face, and I wonder if I've said something wrong. We never keep secrets from each other, so I can't figure out why she wouldn't want to talk about this new guy in her life.

"He's twenty," she says.

"Same age as Dom," I reply. And Eli, I think to myself. Stella clears her throat.

“We met at school... sort of.”

I don't get a chance to follow up on that “sort of” because she barrels on with questions of her own.

“But enough about me, tell me about Eli. What's going on there?” she asks.

“Nothing is going on at all,” I groan, looking up to the ceiling. “I haven't even seen him since last week at the art gallery.”

“You haven't seen him.” Stella is obviously disappointed that I don't have juicier details. I wish I could provide her with some, but instead, all I can give her is a lame shoulder shrug.

“We've been texting.”

“Dirty texts?!” she replies, excited, wiggling her shoulders and making me giggle. God, I've missed this.

“No!” I laugh at the absurdity of what she's just said. “It's all been pretty PG. He did ask if I wanted to meet up again right before I left.” I rub a hand over my eyes. “I don't really know what that means though.”

She flips over onto her stomach, head on her hands, and watches me. “Please tell me you said yes?” she pleads, and this time I don't disappoint.

“I said yes,” I reply, my voice quiet, as my cheeks grow warm.

Days later, I'm waiting for what has now become my regular call from Eli. We speak on the phone for hours every night. Talking about our days, lives, or whatever pops into our minds in the moment. Sometimes, he'll just keep the phone line open as he listens to music and I scroll on my phone. I've become so attuned to the sound of his breathing that I can tell when he's gone from alert to sleepy. It all just feels too easy.

Which is how I know there's an issue when I pick up the phone and his breaths sound erratic.

“Are you okay?” I ask, feeling a twinge of panic and concern that I'm unsure what to do with.

“Yeah, I'm just stressed about Elliot.” I nod my head as if he can see me. A few nights ago, in a rare moment where he had been willing to divulge some personal details about his life, Eli had explained that he struggled to get along with his teen brother. I sensed that there was more to the story, but I didn't want to push him, so I kept my questions to myself.

“Oh, I'm sorry,” I reply, unsure of what to say and whether to ask more.

He breathes out and it sounds as if he's pacing. “Yeah. If you could distract me, that would be great.”

“Oh,” I repeat, sounding like a broken record. Distract him? What should I say?

“Do you ever plan on talking about what happened the night of the show?” I rush out.

For a few seconds, I no longer hear his rapid breaths on the other of the line and he doesn’t say a word. I want the earth to swallow me whole. Of all the things I could say, why did that have to be the thing I blurted out?

“I was just curious,” I say timidly, unable to stand another second of silence.

He hesitates before responding. “I’m not sure what happened,” he starts. I press the phone tight against my ear. “I just—I had been thinking about kissing you for a while and you were being so stubborn. I won’t lie, it was annoying, but cute as fuck. I had a drummer’s high, and I just had to know what your lips tasted like.”

The words flow out of him in a rush, his voice low and rough. He doesn’t even take a breath, and I struggle to catch them all. This time, it’s my turn to be stunned into silence. I don’t know what answer I had expected, but that had not been it. He chuckles into the line as I stay mute.

“I don’t really have a reason to lie to you, Desiree.”

I don’t like how my stomach somersaults when he says my name or the flare of heat that courses through me at the sound.

“You know, you *can* call me Des.” I choose to ignore what he said about that night. I don’t know why I thought it would be a good idea to bring it up.

I hear a rustle, then his voice comes out in a low whisper. “I’ll stick with Desiree. I like the way your breath hitches every time I say it.”

I don’t have a response to that either. I remember he said the same the night of the basement show, and my body behaves the same way, with a full shiver. I make a note to myself to not let my reactions be so obvious. It’s embarrassing.

The noise on the line begins again and I move the phone away from my ear so that it’s not so loud.

“Where are you right now?” I ask.

“In bed,” he replies and immediately his voice is much clearer as if he moved the phone closer to him. “Sorry, I keep moving around, this mattress is shit. Where are you?”

“Bed.” *Great. And we’re back to one-word responses.*

“Hmm,” he hums and the vibrations of his deep voice resonate

throughout my body. It's crazy how a little over a month ago, he was a stranger to me. I wanted nothing to do with him. Now, I'm talking to him every day and my body will flip a switch at the smallest sound from him. "What does your room look like?"

I know he's asking about the childhood bedroom I'm in right now, but I swallow the sudden dryness in my throat at the thought of what would have happened if we had gone to my room in Winnipeg, instead of staying on the couch. I'm turned on at just the thought of it. I cross my legs and squeeze my thighs together, hoping the slight pressure will help me out. *Not working.*

"It's all white and pink." I respond, my voice breathy even to my own ears. I clear my throat. "Nothing crazy."

I'm downplaying it a lot. My room is my favourite place in the house. My sanctuary. In the summer, between grades eleven and twelve, Stella and I ended up bingeing an absurd amount of HGTV shows and decided that we were just as good as interior designers. Our parents were ridiculously supportive of us deciding that we needed to redo our rooms. I haven't made any changes since then. It's sleek, modern, with all-white walls and a pink tufted headboard. Pink and white sheets cover the bed and a fluffy white rug covers some of the hardwood flooring of the room. A collage of me and Stella through all the stages of our lives, and friendship, hangs above the desk on the other side of the room.

"Nothing crazy," he repeats as if he doesn't quite believe it. "And what are you wearing in this very ordinary pink and white room?"

If I wasn't feeling so hot right now, I would be annoyed by his teasing tone, but my mind is blitzed by his question.

"What am I *wearing*?" I echo. My mouth feels dry, the space between my legs the complete opposite.

"I didn't stutter." His tone is normal, but I hear a slight catch in his voice as if he's just as unsure about what's going on. "I'm just want to get a visual."

A stupid, nervous laugh slips out of my mouth. "A Def Leppard T-shirt and running shorts."

"In the winter?"

"It's not winter yet." Although this fall season has been cold in the prairies, definitely colder than usual. "And the house is warm."

"Are you a big Def Leppard fan?"

"I'm a big fan of this shirt," I reply with a little bite. If he wants to be

snarky, I can be it, too. “What are you wearing?”

“Nothing.” Silence. Dead silence. Both on the phone line and in my brain, until I start to cough. Apparently, when it comes to him, I need to remind myself to do normal bodily functions like breathe.

“What do you mean nothing?” I squeak out.

The familiar sound of his laughter flows through my ears. “There’s an absence of clothing. Not sure how else I could phrase it for you. I am under the sheets if that makes you feel better.”

“That makes me feel...” My words trail off as I think about Eli in his bed with no clothes on, talking to me. The very real pulse between my legs picks up, and I stifle a groan.

“That makes you feel what? Use your words.”

“I don’t know how it makes me feel.”

A bald-faced lie if I’ve ever heard one. I’m more turned on now than I was five minutes ago.

“Let me ask you a question.” His voice is raspier than ever before, and I wonder if he’s struggling for control as much as I am at the moment. “What would you do if I told you to take your shorts off?”



There's nothing but shallow breathing on the other end of the line. I smile to myself. She's shy but I know I've got her right where I want her. If she was bothered, she would have hung up the second the question left my mouth.

"Take them off," I direct her.

She stays silent, only the sound of her breathing on the line, and I hear the shifting of sheets. I feel my semi-hard cock harden even more.

"They're gone," she breathes into the phone.

"Good girl," I whisper, and I hear a tiny hitch in her breathing. *She likes that. Interesting.* "If I were to touch you right now, how wet would I find you?"

"Very," she murmurs, her voice shaky. I love hearing her unravel. I wish I could see it with my own eyes.

"I want your panties off," I continue. "Are they still on?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I'm not ready to take them off yet," she huffs, and I can picture her rolling her eyes at me. The thought has me wanting to reach down and fist my cock, *but not yet.*

"Cute, but you're not calling the shots here," I reply. "I want them off. I won't say it again, Desiree."

I hear a sharp intake of breath. I love the way she reacts every time I say her full name. I went from being annoyed that she wanted me to call her

Desiree, to never wanting to call her anything else.

“They’re off.” Her voice is barely above a whisper. If the house wasn’t dead quiet right now, I wouldn’t be able to hear her. Dad is already asleep and Elliot went to the last bonfire of the season with his friends, or at least that’s what he said. Who knows if he’s telling the truth, getting that much information out of him was like pulling teeth.

“Touch yourself, baby.” The term of endearment slips out accidentally, but a soft sigh demands my attention, and I don’t have time to think about where the fuck that came from. The sigh is followed by a short gasp, and I have to press my hand against the now rock-solid erection demanding my attention I give myself one quick stroke before turning my attention back to the beautiful girl I have on the line. She hasn’t said a word, but her breaths have gotten harsher, more ragged.

“Slow down,” I instruct. “You can’t come until I say so.”

She lets out a sound of frustration and I stroke myself once more before I speak again. “I want you to bring one finger down to your entrance, okay?”

I’m met with only a shallow “mm-hmm.”

“Get that finger nice and wet for me, then bring it back up to your clit. Slow circles.”

That earns me another moan, and I pump myself with my fist, the precum allowing my hand to glide up my shaft with ease. As much as I want to keep this slow, it’s killing me, and I don’t know how much longer I can keep at this.

“Why did you bring up that night?” I ask her. My heart hammers in my chest and I’m aware that my breathing has quickened as the pace of my own hand picks up. “Do you think about it often when you lie in bed at night with your hand between your legs?”

Another moan. She sounds like sin come to life, and I would gladly risk heaven for her.

“Tell me,” I demand. My voice sounds firm, but I feel like I could break at any given moment. “Have you touched yourself and thought about us?”

“Yes!” she exclaims. “Fuck, Eli.” A whimper now. “I need more, please.”

I don’t know what makes me snap, her admission that she’s touched herself thinking about us, her moaning my name, or the way she begs for it. Regardless, any restraint I had left is gone. My body is so warm I feel like I might combust.

“Move your fingers faster,” I command, unsure where I’m even finding

my ability to speak. I'm too busy imagining what it will be like to fuck her. "I want to hear you come. Pinch your nipple for me."

I assume she does as I say because I'm met with a desperate, "Oh my god, I'm close."

I close my eyes and get lost in the sound of her heavy breathing.

"God, I wish I was there right now to see you." I try to gain back some control. "I wouldn't touch you just yet, I'd watch. I know firsthand how sexy you are when you're needy and ready to come." My memory is assaulted with flashbacks from that night and I hope she remembers it too. "Don't hold back, Desiree. I want you to let go for me."

As if she was waiting for me to say the words, the most delectable moans come through the phone, one after the other, the sweetest chorus I've ever heard.

"I'm coming," she bites out before her orgasm steals her words away.

That's all I need to hear before I let myself go, too. Hot spurts of cum hit my stomach. My eyes are squeezed shut and my jaw is slack. Desiree is panting on the line, and I feel like I've won a damn gold medal, knowing that I've made her come twice.

There's a minute of pure silence on the line, as we each catch our breaths and come down from the high we just experienced.

"That was my favourite call yet," I say between deep breaths.

She lets out a light chuckle. "Eli!"

"I'm telling the truth," I say, amusement coating my own words.

There's another moment of silence on the line.

"Eli?" she whispers.

"Yeah?" I respond. I love the sound of her voice right now. It's soft and sweet, just like her.

"If you could go anywhere, where would it be?" Her question catches me off guard, but not more than the first answer that pops into my head. *Wherever you are.*

Instead, I laugh. "Outer space."

"Really?" She giggles, and I find myself wishing I could bottle the sound. "Why space?"

Honestly, I said it because my actual thought freaked me out, but I can't admit that. And there *was* that brief time as a child when I wanted to be an astronaut. Doesn't every kid?

"Seems... peaceful," I answer. "A place where all the shit that

preoccupies us here doesn't matter anymore.

"Huh," she mutters. "I didn't have you clocked as a guy looking for peace, being a drummer and all. It's probably the least 'peaceful' instrument out there."

"That's where you're wrong." I reach to turn off my bedside light and stare up at the ceiling, letting my eyes adjust to the darkness of the room. "Quiet doesn't necessarily mean *calm*. I'm never more at peace than when I'm playing the drums or listening to music. I get lost in it all and everything else just fades away."

"Music is your happy place."

She sounds tired, and if I'm being honest, so am I. My eyes feel heavy with sleep, but I'm not ready to hang up.

"I guess it is," I reply, trying to keep my voice from betraying how sleepy I feel. "Where would you go?"

There's a pause on the line and I think that maybe she's fallen asleep. "Santorini."

"In Greece?"

"No. Downtown Toronto," Desiree mutters, laying the sarcasm on thick. "Yes, in Greece. It looks beautiful. Stella and I always talked about taking a trip there together."

"Best friend?" I ask. My speech is slow and my eyes are droopy. *I should probably just say good night.*

"Yeah, she's basically my sister." She yawns. "I miss her."

"Where does she live?" I pry. There's silence on the other line and my eyes close as I wait for her response.



I WAKE to sunlight streaming through the window next to my bed. My phone is lying next to me where I had it before I fell asleep last night. I don't know what time it was when we hung up. I don't even remember hanging up.

I pick my phone up to check the time and feel a tinge of confusion when I raise it and see Desiree's name on the screen. I feel my stomach start to sink as the morning fog lifts, and I register that the timer on the call is still

running. Ten hours, thirty-eight minutes, twenty seconds, and counting. I consider what my next move should be. Do I hang up and pretend this didn't happen? That's probably the best course of action.

I can't believe that I, Mr. I-hate-talking-on-the-phone, have been making nightly phone calls—let alone falling asleep on the phone—to a girl I'm not even with.

The whole situation feels far too intimate. Something that long distance couples like Tristan and Angelica, who can't bear being apart, do. *Not mere classmates.*

I'm about to click the button to disconnect the call when I'm reminded that my life is one colossal joke. At that exact moment, I'm hit with the sudden urge to sneeze, *loudly*. It takes me by surprise and causes me to drop the phone and wake Desiree up on the other end.

"Eli?" her scratchy and sleepy voice croaks as I realise my plan to hang up is now down the drain. She sounds good in the morning. *Too good.*

"Uh, hey," I say lamely. "I guess we forgot to hang up last night."

"Oh." There's shuffling and I wonder what she's up to. "Well, good morning."

"Good morning." My voice sounds stiff, like I'm out of practice with holding human conversation, but to be fair, this sort of thing isn't really my forte. I don't usually stick around long enough for good mornings with the women I make come at night. Not that many of them actually want me to stay. Usually, they're more than happy to have me out and on my way once we've fulfilled our mutual needs, but Desiree is different. I think back to the way she sounded on the phone last night. Her moans were sweeter than sugar, and if I could replay them all day long, I would.

She is *different*. She would be the type of girl that *wants* to stay up and cuddle for hours after a night of fun, she would want me to spend the night. I've been acting as if I can just fuck her out of my system, but I couldn't even hang up the damn phone last night. *No*. As much as I would relish the opportunity to fuck her, I can't think rationally around her.

"Eli? Are you still there?" Her angelic voice rings through the line, and I hate that I feel guilty about what needs to be done.

"Yeah." I cough, trying to clear my throat. "I'm here." I'm stalling, even more evidence that this is the right choice. *So why do I feel like shit about it?*

"Last night was..." she starts, unsure, but trails off, and I think that I've found the perfect segue.

“A mistake.”

“Unexpected.”

We both speak at the same time. I hear her sharp intake of breath when she realises what I said.

“A mistake?” Desiree questions, her voice trembling a little.

I swallow hard and try to keep my tone neutral. “It shouldn’t have happened.”

“Oh. Okay?” The confusion in her voice is clear and it matches the way I’m currently feeling. Neither of us speaks for a second and I consider trying to walk back on what I said. “I’ll see you next week, then, to work on the project,” Desiree continues, her tone cold.

Fuck. It’s one thing to call it a mistake over the phone, I don’t know if my new resolve to stay away from her will hold when we’re face-to-face.

“I’ll work on my section and email it to you,” I say. The phone line is so quiet you could hear a pin drop. “Or if you want to send me your half, I can put it together. We’ll just present our sections.”

“Okay.” This time, it’s not a question. She sounds annoyed, which makes sense since we fell asleep on the phone, post-mutual-orgasms, and now I’m giving her the cold shoulder.

She doesn’t see the issue, but I do.

With this morning came clarity. One taste of her could never be enough, and she will always want more than I can give, so this needs to stop. The phone calls. The obsession. *All of it.*



I'm at the airport, waiting for my flight, when an email comes in from Eli. It's his half of our class project. Five pages of notes on the Rococo period. I can't believe he pulled this together before I finished mine. We will be presenting at the end of this week. I had already gathered some notes, but assumed we would meet before the presentation to go over everything and make sure it made sense.

There is no text in the email. No subject line, no *hey, here's my half!*

Just a blank email with a word document attached. I guess the desperation to make sure he never speaks to me again must have spurred him on.

He completely flipped a switch yesterday morning, and I have no idea why. The conversation the night before had been fine. *More than fine.* My cheeks heat as I think back to what we did.

But when we woke up, he was colder than ice. At first, I was confused. It's not like I had forced him to do something he didn't want to do. In fact, he was the one who initiated it, but if he thinks it was all a mistake and wants to avoid me, then to hell with him.

Still, a niggling voice in the back of my head wondered what caused the shift. By the time my plane touched down in Winnipeg, the voice had become a persistent shout, and I was fighting back the urge to text him and call him out on his bullshit.

What could I really say, though?

Hey! You made me orgasm twice, so the least you could do is tell me why you don't want to talk to me. No. He made his feelings clear, and I will not

make a pathetic plea for his attention. I won't stoop that low.

This is good for me. It's the reminder I needed of what a jackass Eli is. I can't believe I allowed myself to develop a crush on him, but this was all it took to remind me *exactly* who he is. Besides, I know it'll take a few frogs to find my prince. I'm not as lucky as my parents were. Times have changed.

When I walk through the door, all the lights are on in the apartment and I'm hit with the most delicious smell. Yazmine told me on the phone yesterday that she would make brunch for us when I got home, which I emphasised was unnecessary. I have been gone for just over a week and she acts as though it's been months. Clearly, she didn't listen to me because the kitchen counter is filled with an assortment of dishes. Waffles, bacon, eggs—both scrambled and fried—and toast.

All this food and no Yazmine.

As if my thoughts summoned her, she runs in from the hallway and screams.

"You're back!" She throws her arms around me, making me chuckle. "I kept up with your flight the entire morning and timed it perfectly! I just finished cooking."

"You didn't have to do all this." I look at the massive spread, amazed.

"I know I didn't have to," she says with a smile, taking a step back. "But I wanted to! It wasn't the same without you here."

My eyes well with happy tears as it hits me out of nowhere just how much I missed her. She's become like family to me, and I can't imagine not having her to come home to.

"I missed you," I say.

"Me too," she replies. "So, how was your week?"

"Good, spent most of my time with my parents." I hesitate as I grab a plate from the cabinet, unsure if I want to get into details about Eli. However, that voice from earlier now urges me to vent, so I do. I spill it all. The nightly phone calls, the conversation that turned into more, and the bullshit that followed.

"How did none of this ever come up when we talked?" Yazmine asks, her voice raised an octave.

"Not the sort of thing you text?" I offer as a lame excuse.

"What are you going to do?"

That makes me laugh, although it sounds hollow to my ears. "Nothing," I respond with a shrug. "He made his position clear. I'm not going to beg for

his attention.”

She nods her head in agreement. “So you’re just going to ignore him on Tuesday?”

My stomach drops a little at the mention of having to see him again.

Honestly, I haven’t given much thought as to how I’m going to deal with him for the rest of the semester. In theory, it should be easy.

“Yup!” I respond. “We can just go back to the way things were in the first place.”

The little voice that has haunted me all morning reminds me that Eli doesn’t seem like the type of person to make anything *easy*.

“And if he approaches you?” Yaz asks, as she begins to fill her plate.

“He won’t. He made it pretty clear that he had nothing else to say to me.”

“Maybe.” She points a fork at me. “He’s just not a morning person. I mean, even I’m only ninety percent of my normal charming self when I wake up.”

I chuckle before sobering. “No. This was definitely more than morning grumpiness.”

She frowns. “If you want me to go downstairs and ask him what his issue is, I’ll do it right now.”

“That won’t be necessary, but thank you.” I laugh, wanting to move away from this topic. “Anyway, let’s dig in.”

We spend the next hour eating as Yazmine gives a quick rundown of her family’s Thanksgiving, and we both cackle as she tells me about her dad’s reaction to her mom making a “heart-healthy” dinner.

“I’ve never seen a man so mad about having to consume mushroom gravy in his life!” Yaz laughs. “You would have thought my mother was trying to poison him.”

By the time we’re done catching up, it’s already mid-afternoon, and I feel the exhaustion of the past week hit me like a brick wall.

I leave Yazmine in the living room to take a quick nap, but when I wake up, it’s dark out. I check my phone and see that it’s eleven-fifteen p.m. I swipe a hand over my face. *Damn*, I didn’t mean to sleep that long. I must have been more tired than I thought I was. I groan as I realise that my day, and potentially the whole week, is about to be thrown off-kilter because of this stupid nap that I’ve taken.

I make myself some tea, accepting that I’m no longer tired. There’s no way I’ll be able to fall back asleep. My laptop is still on the coffee table

where I left it earlier and I click on the email Eli sent this morning.

The notes are extremely detailed. How did he pull this all together in twenty-four hours? I go to my own file with the document I had been working on and start typing.



IT WAS after four in the morning when I dragged myself to bed and eight a.m. when I turned off my alarm and decided I would skip my first class. Exhausted is an understatement when it comes to how I feel today. On the plus side, I finished my section of the presentation. Once I got into research mode, it was pretty easy, and now all that's left to do is combine our notes into PowerPoint slides.

By the time I drag myself out of bed, it's mid-morning and Yaz has already left for the day. I make myself a cup of coffee, revelling in the scent as it pours from the machine into my mug. I lean against the counter and contemplate what I want to do with my free day, then it clicks. Photography. I missed it while I was away. I snapped pics here and there on my phone but it wasn't the same. I missed the weight of the camera in my hand, the joy of walking around a new area, finding seemingly mundane places and showing just how beautiful they really are.

The further into October we get, the colder it becomes, and I've accepted that soon enough, casual walks outside may no longer be realistic. I pick up the camera off my desk and feel myself get excited to go out and do something to take my mind off the one thing it keeps coming back to. *Eli*. No matter how hard I try, my thoughts always seem to circle back to him. It felt like we were actually making progress. I'd let myself begin to anticipate seeing him after the break and the rug was pulled out from under me. I can't stop myself from trying to figure out where things went wrong.

I spend the afternoon walking around the West Broadway area of the city and, with every step I take, I'm thankful that this is what I decided to do today. It's the perfect way to get out of my head.

The fall air is cool and crisp, calming me in a way I hadn't realised I needed. The community is gorgeous. It has an older feel, yet it's not at all

outdated. There are plenty of local businesses and restaurants, and I take note of them all, vowing to eat my way through the area.

I pause when I pass what looks like a dive bar called Merchant. The name of the bar is printed in large letters on a black canopy that provides cover to the front door. I recognise it as the place where Eli had mentioned their band practices. *So much for not thinking about him.*

It's closed at the moment, but I see a bit of light through the window, and I wonder if the guys are in there right now. The thought makes my stomach sink. How am I going to handle seeing him in class? *That sounds like a problem for tomorrow me.* I snap a quick picture of the outside of the bar and continue on my walk. By the time I get back home, it's dark and my legs feel like Jell-O. Any concerns about my ability to fall asleep tonight have been completely erased because I'm already drained.

I devote the rest of the evening to finishing the art history presentation, and when it's finally completed, I fight the urge to send Eli a text to let him know that it's done. Common sense wins that battle, so I close my laptop and go to bed. If he wanted to know what was happening, he could have asked.



WHEN I GET to class in the morning, I take my normal seat. Most of the class is already here, but *he* isn't, and I briefly wonder if he's going to skip today's class. That both eases some of my anxiety and annoys the shit out of me. The mixed feelings I have about the whole situation are short-lived when Professor Loughlin walks into the room and Eli strides in behind him. He's wearing all black and looks tired as hell. He makes eye contact with me as he enters, and I hold my breath. For a second, I think he's going to sit next to me like he has been, but he crosses the classroom and takes a seat on the opposite side of the room. I exhale and open my notebook. I should have known we wouldn't sit together. If he can't even be bothered to talk to me outside of class, why would I think he would acknowledge me now?

I do my best to focus on the lecture, but halfway through the class, I feel a prickling sensation flow through my body. Against my better judgement, I turn my attention away from Loughlin and look at Eli. Sure enough, his eyes

are fixed on me. He's looking at me with intensity. I hear blood rushing in my ears and my mouth goes dry. Where others would look away when caught staring, he holds my gaze unbothered, and it reminds me of our very first encounter. I turn my head back to the professor and do my best to listen, but I can't absorb a word while his eyes are on me.

It fills me with anger. He can't say he wants nothing to do with me, then days later, spend a whole class staring at me from across the room. The irritation that I feel only continues to grow and by the time Loughlin dismisses us, I leave my stuff behind and march directly over to the boy whose eyes haven't left me for over an hour.



I almost skipped class today. I couldn't decide if it would feel worse seeing her and not talking to her or not seeing her at all. In the end, my inner masochist won and I went to class. I couldn't tell you a damn thing that Loughlin said for the entire hour and fifteen minutes, but I could give you a very detailed description of Desiree from across the room. It's been over a week since the last time I saw her, and I swear she's more beautiful than before. Her dark curls cascade around her shoulders as she squints her eyes and bites her lip while she tries to pay attention to whatever the professor is saying.

After twenty minutes, she becomes aware of my staring and breaks her focus on the lecture to look at me. There's an emotion behind her eyes that I can't quite place, she definitely doesn't look happy with me, but if she thinks she'll make me cower away, she won't. It just spurs me on. I stare at her face, her brown eyes are flecked with hints of gold, those lips I know are pillow soft. In fact, this brings me back to the first day I saw her in the bookstore. It feels like ages ago, and if I thought she was a problem for me then, it's got nothing on the issue she is for me now.

Still, I'm surprised when class is dismissed and I see Desiree leave her stuff at the table and walk toward me. There's clear determination in her eyes and I hold back a small smile. She looks cute as shit even when she's upset. She comes to a standstill in front of me, not saying a word, clearly waiting for me to speak up. When I remain quiet, I can almost see the smoke pouring out of her ears.

“Can I help you with something?” There’s a bite to her words, and I can tell it has taken her equally by surprise that she’s in front of me right now.

It’s the first time I’ve heard her voice since that morning, and as much as I want to deny it, I missed talking to her.

“You came to me,” I point out, keeping my tone neutral as I lean back in my chair. “Did you get my email?”

I had sent her all my notes on my section of the presentation, but never heard back. After our last conversation, I suppose that shouldn’t have surprised me.

“Because you were staring at me.” Her exasperation and clipped sentences are a dead giveaway to her level of annoyance, and it begins to rub off on me. Did I handle everything perfectly? No. But she walked over to me, so she should cut the attitude a bit. “I got the email. I finished the presentation, so we’re good for Thursday.”

I nod my head as I continue to hold her gaze, refusing to shy away. *That’s not in my nature.* I know I should get up and go. Class finished five minutes ago and most of the students have cleared out. I don’t have a lot of time until Nate comes barging in here looking for me. I don’t need him to come in here and pick up on any tension between the two of us.

I love him like a brother, but after his reaction to what happened with Sadie, who hasn’t spoken to me since telling me off the night of the basement show, the last thing I need is for him to think I’ve messed things up with Desiree too. *Not that there was ever anything between us to mess up.*

“Great. Sounds good,” I say as I begin to stand.

She casts me a withering glare and turns around to head back to her desk, but she stops and snaps back to face me at the last second. This time, there’s no questioning the untamed anger in her eyes. If I’m honest, I accept it.

I’m being an ass.

I know it.

She knows it.

I can see the fury in her eyes, making me feel like shit, and that somehow makes me angry too. Why do I care how she feels? *I don’t owe her anything.*

“I knew you were a dick,” Desiree starts, “but you really laid it on thick. I didn’t ask for constant communication, you did that on your own. You’re the one who inserted *yourself* into *my* life. As far as I’m concerned, I didn’t do anything to you, so I’m not sure why you’re acting like I killed your cat all of a sudden.”

I can't help the laugh that slips out of me. "I don't have a cat," I reply.

She glares at me again, and if looks could kill, I'd be dead and buried. "*Fuck you, Eli,*" she spits and then turns away.

Something about those three words coming from her really riles me up, and I snap.

"You want to know why I'm not interested in you?" I say, not needing to raise my voice to be heard. We're the only people left in the classroom, she can hear me loud and clear. "Because of this right here. You couldn't do 'simple' if you tried." I drum my fingers against the table. "I talked to you for a couple of weeks and what? You *miss* me? Sorry, sunshine. I don't do *this*. I'm a no-strings-attached guy and you're wrapped up in them."

Her shoulders tense at my words, but she stays quiet, still not facing me as she grabs her stuff.

I leave the classroom, feeling like shit. What I said was true, even though my delivery was harsh. I never meant to let her get under my skin, but she does every single time. If I did ever want to talk to her again, today made sure that that's not going to happen. Part of me wants to run back into the room and apologise, and I hate it.

Fortunately, there's an annoyed redhead waiting outside of the classroom for me.

"What the fuck took so long?" Nate asks as he pushes off of the wall. "I didn't think you were ever going to come out."

I ignore his question. I'm not feeling particularly talkative at the moment. "Let's go," I mutter at the same moment Desiree storms out the classroom door. *Fucking hell.*

Nate spots her immediately and a big old shit-eating grin plasters itself on his face when he realises I wasn't alone in the room.

"Des, hey!" he calls, drawing her attention over to us. I want to kick him in the kneecaps for it.

She looks at us, and I'm left baffled when she smacks a big smile on her face and walks over.

"Nate," she exclaims as she hugs him. Not one of those quick side hugs that you give your cousin you haven't seen in five years. A full-frontal, arms-thrown-around-his-neck, squeezing-him-tight hug.

There's a second of confusion on his face before Nate, being Nate, hugs her back just as enthusiastically, while I watch in disgust, my teeth grinding together. "How was your Reading Week?"

Nate gives her a quick rundown of his time in Banff, and I grow more and more annoyed with the cheery way Desiree responds to him. Gone is the surly tone she was using with me, and the anger in her eyes has softened as she playfully taps his arm.

Is she actually flirting with him right now? My jaw locks.

“Nate,” I say, cutting him off mid-sentence. “Let’s go.”

He looks at his watch and curses under his breath when he realises just how late we are.

“Sorry, Des.” He looks at her apologetically. Meanwhile, she’s back to glaring at me as if I’m dragging away her new best friend. “We’ve got to run. We’re late for practice and the big Halloween show is coming up.”

No.

I cast a quick look at Nate and let out a cough, a beg for him to shut up right now. The last time one of the guys told her about a show, she ended up in the audience. He doesn’t even glance in my direction, his eyes fixed on Desiree.

“Halloween show?” she questions.

Please, no.

I can tell by the tone of her voice that she’s wondering why this is the first time she’s heard about it. In truth, it never came up in conversation. It didn’t seem important enough to bring up. And that’s surprising since there was a time not long ago when the Halloween gig at Merchant felt like the most important thing in the world.

It still is, but *she’s* become a distraction, taking up every bit of free space in my mind. Yet another reason I needed some distance from her.

“Yeah,” Nate replies, enthusiastically. I wonder what it would do to our friendship if I took a solid swing at him right now. “We’re playing at the Merchant on Halloween night. You should come.”

Fucking fantastic.

“I’m sure she has better things to do on Halloween,” I interject, no longer able to stay quiet.

The stare Desiree pins me with is ice cold, and a small, devious smile curves onto her lips. It’s not one of the cute smiles that she’s given me in the past. It’s the smile you get from someone right before they do something they know will piss you off.

“I actually don’t,” she replies, her focus back on Nate. “I’ll be there. Bye, Nate.”

She turns around and struts down the opposite end of the hall.

Nate looks over to me, a grin on his face, totally oblivious to the way Desiree just ignored me. “You’re welcome,” he whispers as if he’s done me a favour.

I stare at his back for a second, wondering if he’s had one too many protein shakes and it’s altered his ability to read the fucking room. I follow him, reminding myself that he’s my friend and that I *shouldn’t* strangle him in his sleep tonight.

When we finally make it to Merchant, we’re fifteen minutes late. Tristan, Devin, and Sadie all look pissed. Sadie hasn’t come to a practice in weeks, ever since our conversation, but maybe this is a sign that she’s ready to move past everything that went down.

“Where the fuck were you guys?” Devin snaps. “You could have at least sent a message to let us know you’d be late.”

“Sorry,” Nate begins. “We got caught up talking to Des outside of his class. Lost track of time. Let’s get started.”

This man’s motor mouth is running my last nerve.

“Oh. Well, as long as you were late for a good reason,” Sadie chimes in, her tone dripping with sarcasm. *I guess all isn’t forgiven.* “It’s not like you’ve got a big show coming up.”

“Lay off, okay,” I snap at her. She rolls her eyes at me, but stops talking. “I’ll skip my next class so we can catch up.”

“It’s fine,” Tristan speaks up, always the peacemaker in the group. “Sadie was just giving us Halloween ideas.”

“What kind of ideas?” I ask, a bit skeptical, remembering her suggestion that we play shirtless with masks a few weeks back.

“Face paint,” Sadie replies, keeping her eyes down on her phone. “It’s just a suggestion. You can do whatever you want.”

I nod. It’s better than her first idea, I’ll give her that. Between dealing with Desiree earlier and the tension with Sadie, I’m itching to let out some steam, and drumming is the best way I know how.

“Are we playing or what?” I ask no one in particular as I walk toward the drum kit, picking up the sticks on the stool before I take a seat.

Sadie glowers at me for a second from where she stands, then moves to the other side of the room and leans against a table. I’m no longer fazed. From the second I pick up the sticks, nothing else matters. The smooth wood in my hands makes me feel more in control.

The guys take no time finding their spots, and we spend the next two hours practising our set. My arms move at a fast pace as I slam down on the drums, hitting them quickly, not once dropping the beat. I throw my whole body into it as I allow the music to rock through me. With each strike to the drums, I feel my tension roll away, and by the time we're done, my hair sticks to my forehead with sweat. I played just as hard as I would have if we were performing for a live audience, and I feel re-energised.

That is, until I pick up my phone and the stupid habit that has crept up on me over the last two weeks makes an appearance. I check my phone for a new text from Desiree, only to remember that we aren't speaking.

The buzz I felt just minutes ago disappears, and I wonder whether I'm more fucked with or without her.



I'm a no-strings-attached type of guy and you're wrapped up in them.

Eli's words have rung in my head constantly over the last forty-eight hours, and I hear them clear as day as I get ready for class. It's presentation day.

Who the *fuck* does he think he is? He thinks he knows me so well.

I am not wrapped up in strings. *Am I?* Sure, I've never had a casual relationship before, but that doesn't mean that I can't do it. I wasted three years dating Liam with absolutely nothing to show for it. Nothing but proof that words of commitment aren't always what they appear.

I consider that thought throughout most of the class, not hearing a single word from the first three presentations. When Loughlin announces Eli and me for the next turn, I'm startled and forced to gather myself. Eli gets up from his seat and walks to the front with a couple of papers in his hand. I walk to the side of the room where the professor's desk and computer are located and plug in the USB drive that holds our presentation. Once the opening slide shows up on the screen, I grab the remote to control the PowerPoint and join Eli at the front.

I glance over at him, but he's careful to avoid my gaze, staring down at the notes in his hand. We never had a discussion about the flow of the presentation, so I figure it would be best for me to start.

I spend the next ten minutes explaining the impact the Renaissance era had on art history and its defining characteristics. When I finish, Eli picks up right where I left off as seamlessly as if we had rehearsed it. He discusses the

Rococo period with ease and compares and contrasts it to the Renaissance era. The twenty minutes spent in front of the class fly by and before I know it, we're done. This ridiculous project that has loomed over our heads is finally complete.

I sit back in my seat, feeling a lot lighter. I hadn't realised how much stress this project had caused me. There's one more presentation after ours, then Loughlin dismisses the class, and everyone files out.

I briefly consider going up to Eli, but I don't know what to say. It's laughable, but it's the one thing he got right the other day. After a couple of weeks of constant communication and two mind-blowing orgasms, *I did miss him.*

We make eye contact for a second from across the room, and my heart begins to race in my chest, but he looks away almost immediately. For a moment I thought he was going to speak up, and maybe even apologise for his cruel words the other day. Instead, he quickly stands and exits the room, making my decision a lot easier.

If he thinks he has me all figured out, I'll show him that he doesn't know me half as well as he thinks he does. I don't know why I can't let what he said go, but I'm desperate to prove him wrong.

Eli won't get the last word.



“ARE you sure you're okay going on your own?” Yazmine asks me for the hundredth time as we get ready to go out.

It's Halloween night. I'm going to see Merchant Revival play while Yazmine and Jaden are off to a party hosted by one of the photography club girls. I had considered going too, but I told Nate I would be at the show, and I want to stay true to my word. *It has absolutely nothing to do with the hot as fuck asshole who will be playing tonight.* To her credit, Yaz did offer to skip the party and come to the show with me, but I told her it wasn't necessary.

I'm hoping to make it an early night. I doubt I'll stay for the whole show. I'll just pop in, have a couple of drinks, and leave. I texted Tristan to confirm if it would be a costume party, and he let me know that people would

definitely be dressing up. I didn't have time to get creative with my costume, so Yazmine bought me matching black angel wings and a halo when she picked up her own costume.

"I'm sure," I reassure her. "I'll be safe. I'll take an Uber there and back, it'll be fine."

"Okay," she says, concern still etched on her face as she puts on her lipstick in the mirror.

"You look hot," I tell her as I spray myself with my go-to Miss Dior perfume.

She is going as Cat Woman, dressed head to toe in a leather jumpsuit and cat mask.

"We *both* look hot," she replies with a wink.

I examine myself in the full-length mirror. I'm wearing a fitted black strapless minidress. I've got the wings and halo on and my knee-high boots are waiting for me at the door. I'm all set.

I pull out my phone and check where the Uber is and realise I only have five minutes until it arrives. I give Yazmine a quick hug and run to the front door, yanking on my boots, and nearly fall over in the process.

Tristan and Nate both offered to drive me, but I declined, knowing they would need to be there much earlier than I cared to arrive. Plus, if their roommate was travelling with them, I wasn't sure everyone would make it to the bar alive.

I have no interest in fighting with Eli; when he got to say his piece the other day, it caught me off guard and I went mute. I stood there, unable to process the words that were being said to me, as tense rage flowed through me. He told me exactly what he thought of me and I should have that same opportunity. Hopefully, once I get that closure, I'll stop thinking about him every day. But that won't be tonight. If I'm lucky, he won't even notice me. I'll just be another face in a crowded bar on Halloween.

By the time my Uber driver pulls up in front of Merchant, I wonder why I've decided to come. I'm sure Nate invited me to be nice, but no one would have cared whether I showed up or not.

When I enter the building, I'm hit with the fact that I don't know a single soul here. It's busy, not as crowded as I expected, but it's still early. The place is dimly lit with booths against every wall, except for the very front one where there is a small raised stage with equipment set up on it. Music plays from an overhead speaker, but I don't recognise the song.

As I look around, my eyes get caught on the black-and-white checkered tile of the room. The style of the place is eclectic, at best. It's a dive bar, but it also feels like a retro diner at the same time. It's loud, yet calming.

Most people are dressed up in well thought out costumes and it makes me feel stupid with my skimpy, last-minute excuse for a costume. Groups of people are scattered around; every booth is taken and I don't see any of the guys anywhere. Right behind the stage is a wooden door; if I had to take a guess as to where they were, I'd say they're behind it. I let out a deep sigh. I figure my best bet is the bar where a couple of stools are still available.

An older man is working by himself, although he doesn't at all seem stressed by the number of people here. In fact, he's leaned against the bar, laughing away with a customer, not a care in the world. He must be in his late sixties, a few deep wrinkles crease his face as he smiles, and his full head of grey hair looks like it's streaked copper from the overhead lighting.

When I take a seat at the bar, he pushes off the counter top, cutting his conversation short, and walks over to me.

"What can I get you, sweetheart?" he asks as he polishes a glass. His voice is smooth and calming, and I instantly decide that I like him. He looks entirely different but has a presence that reminds me an awful lot of my dad.

"I'll have a Jack and Coke," I say, ordering the first drink to pop into my head.

He taps his hand against the bar and smiles. "Coming right up," he replies as he measures out a generous shot of whiskey, pours it into a short glass, and fills it up with coke. "Are you new to the area? I haven't seen you before."

I shake my head and accept the glass that he hands me, taking a sip.

"I'm from Saskatchewan, I just moved here for school in September," I explain. "I'm Desiree."

He raises an eyebrow when I say my name, but then reaches his hand out to shake mine.

"I'm Mickey." He looks around the bar. "I'm the owner."

The ease I noticed before makes more sense now. He was hanging out at the bar as if he were at home, and I suppose in a way, he is.

"This place is..." I pause, struggling to describe the bar. "Really nice."

He chuckles, the sound rumbling out of him.

"It's something, all right. I've owned it for the last twenty-five years, so I suppose I'm just happy this place is still standing."

I laugh as I turn my head to examine the bar more closely. The walls are

wood-panelled and the pool table off to the side where a group of guys are playing, looks slightly worn, but nothing else would give away that the establishment is older than I am.

“I’m guessing you’re here because of Elijah?” he asks.

The question catches me by surprise, and I nearly choke on my drink.

“No. I mean...” I stumble over my words, and I feel my cheeks heat. “I’m friends with some of the guys playing tonight?” My statement comes out as a question. Are we friends? We’ve only met a few times, but each time, they make me feel as though we’ve known each other for ages. And as far as Eli goes, *we’re nothing to each other.*

There’s a knowing smile stuck to Mickey’s face and he leans further across the bar to speak to me, as if we’re sharing a secret.

“I’m sure I’m not supposed to say this, but that boy is too stubborn for his own good.” I have no idea what he’s talking about now, but the lights of the bar begin to dim, distracting me, and the room descends into near darkness. “In all the years I’ve known him, he’s never once come to me to talk about a girl. But you seem to have him wound up tight.”

My heart starts to race, but it feels as if my brain has slowed down. “Are you sure you’re talking about Eli?” I ask him.

I’m not able to compute what I’m being told right now. As soon as the question leaves my mouth, the door behind the stage opens, and the guys walk out.

Or at least I think it’s them because they’re all completely covered in face paint.

Nate walks out in full Pennywise face paint, Tristan’s is marked with white dots on one side and dark lines everywhere contouring him to look like something out of a Pop Art piece. Devin has fully committed to his look; he’s done up like the joker, right down to the hair that is dyed green and slicked back.

As impressed as I am with the effort that all of the guys have put into their appearances, the one that has me transfixed sits behind the drums.

Eli is dressed in black pants and a matching black leather jacket. Notably absent is a shirt. I can see his bare torso, scattered with various tattoos, and I’m hit with the urge to fan myself. I tear my gaze from his abs and look up.

His face is painted as a skull. And it’s hot. *Really* hot. I’m starting to question my sanity. Who sees a guy in skull face paint and needs to cross their legs to try and keep the ache at bay? *Me, apparently.*

Mickey gives the bar top a tap and winks at me before going to serve a guy who has just sat down at the end of the bar. The man is wearing a suit and looks out of place amongst the partygoers. He doesn't even order a drink, but chats easily with Mickey. They seem to be around the same age, and I wonder if they're friends.

My nosiness gets interrupted when the overhead music gets cut off, and I hear Eli's voice call out, "One, two, three, four."

Then, live music takes over the room. I'm barely paying attention, my mind still stuck on what Mickey said. Why would Eli talk to him about me? Mickey made it pretty obvious that he thinks Eli is interested in me. But he didn't hear Eli's harsh words the other day.

Eli point-blank said he wasn't interested in me. I wonder if that had more to do with me or his assumption that I couldn't do something casual. That I would always want something serious.

I bring my eyes back to the man behind the drums, playing as though his life depends on it. His arms move at a crazy speed to the beat of the music. I've done a poor job all week trying to keep my mind off the insane attraction I feel toward him, but seeing him in his element again, I realise that I am well and truly fucked.

It's not fair that a man painted to look like a damn skeleton should look as good as he does right now. My body practically vibrates on the bar stool as I watch him throw a stick in the air, catch it, and continue to play without missing a beat.

Mickey's words opened the floodgates in my brain. If the only thing holding Eli back is the fear that he can't give me what he thinks I want, then he is wrong.

At the moment, all I want is *him*, and I couldn't care less about plastering a label on it.

I slam back the rest of the drink I've been sipping on and make eye contact with Mickey, signaling that I'd like another. He leaves the man he'd been in deep conversation with and makes me a second drink in no time.

Everyone here seems to be really into the show, but I can't focus on anything except what I want to say to Eli when this is all done. My plan to leave early went out the door once I made up my mind to speak to him tonight, anyway. A part of me wants to chicken out, go home, and text him instead, but what I need to say should be said in person. *If only I knew what that was.*

Unlike the first time I attended the band's show, I stay seated the entire time, splitting my focus between how I should approach him and keeping my jaw off the ground as I admire him play.



It's two fifteen a.m. Yazmine got home an hour ago and texted me to make sure I was okay. She offered to come and keep me company, but I assured her that it wasn't necessary.

After the band's set ended, almost everybody vacated the bar. I heard murmurs of another party happening at a nightclub down the street.

When they finished playing, Nate, Tristan, and Devin stopped by to say hi, and I congratulated them on a great show, even though I had spent the entire time distracted by the only member of the band who isn't speaking to me.

Eli simply looked at me for a second from across the room, his face emotionless, before he got up and went through the backstage door. The guys invited me to hang out in the back room, but I declined. When I finally get the chance to talk to Eli, I want it to be one-on-one, instead of around a group. Still, Tristan insisted he give me a ride home at the end of the night.

The third drink of the evening has me feeling courageous, maybe a little too much, and I decide that it's time to cut myself off. I pull out my wallet, ready to close out my tab.

When I get out of my seat and stand, I feel the weight of each drink and stumble just a touch. Mickey definitely doesn't do a light pour. I walk slowly to the other side of the bar where he's cleaning up, doing my best to make sure I don't falter again. I'm the last person in the lounge, and I'm thankful that no one is around to see the snail's pace I'm moving at.

"It's on the house," Mickey says when I finally approach him. "Any friend of Eli's is a friend of mine, and between me and you, I think you'll be good for him."

He fills a glass of water and pushes it toward me with a knowing smile. I laugh and accept, drinking it in two sips before handing it back to him. *So much for no one noticing.*

I take a step up onto the stage, and walk toward the door at the back but it opens before I get to it, and then I'm standing face-to-face with Eli.

I thought he looked good from across the room, but it's nothing compared to being in close range. I can see every line drawn on his face to sketch the skull, and all I can think about is how much I wish he would kiss me again. I internally curse myself, Halloween face paint is *not* supposed to be a sexy turn-on, but I'm starting to think that there's nothing about Eli that my body won't react to.

We face each other, not saying a word, and I feel a rush of warmth as he openly peruses my outfit. His gaze is hot on my skin and feels like a caress over the curves of my body.

"You're still here," he says once his eyes reach my face. "Why?"

Okay, off to a rocky start. The liquid courage I had just minutes ago evaporates, along with every word I had planned to say to him.

I hear a cough from behind me, and it dawns on me that we're not alone. Mickey is still in the room.

"I'll go and let you kids talk," he mutters as he heads for the same door Eli just came through.

He whispers something in Eli's ear, then shuts the door behind him. Eli shakes his head as if trying to unhear whatever was said to him, and I force myself to swallow, desperately wanting to run back to the bar and grab another glass of water to ease the dryness in my throat.

"I wanted to talk to you." My voice echoes in my ears.

"I didn't think we had anything left to say," he says, his tone flat.

He walks past me and takes a seat on the stool in front of the drum kit. I spin around and watch as he runs his hand through his hair, messing it up in the most beautiful way. The ache between my legs grows, demanding attention.

I stifle a groan. *Focus. This is not the time.*

"Yeah, well, you said a lot. I didn't say anything."

"I know I was harsh." He lets out a heavy sigh, avoiding my gaze. "But nothing has changed." I move closer to him, and I detect the faintest smell of beer, though it's not enough to erase his usual intoxicating scent. "You're still—"

"I'm still what, Eli?" I whisper as I take another step. I'm in his space now and he looks up, surprised. I no longer feel the alcohol coursing through my system, but the courage that it spawned in me is back in full force.

“You know, I think you *assume* a lot about me. But have you ever considered that maybe you don’t know me as well as you think you do?”

“I think I know enough,” Eli responds, although his voice isn’t as confident as usual.

“I know that we’re *very* different.” He lets out another exhale and leans forward, as he runs a hand through his hair again, looking torn. “You *want* a *Pride and Prejudice* romance. I don’t want that.”

He looks me in my eye at that last bit, his gaze, firm and unwavering.

“Did you ever think to stop and ask me what I want?” I glare at him.

I’m tired of him acting like I’m some sort of doll that needs to be handled with care. If Eli believes I want more than he can give, then I’ll show him he’s wrong.

I take one more small step, so close now that my legs touch his, and he spreads them further apart, letting me stand between them.

“*I* think,” I say as I bend forward, hinging at the waist. He stares at me with a mixture of confusion and wariness.

I place my hands on his thighs. Our noses are almost touching, our breaths intertwining. A mere inch separates our lips, but I don’t move, no matter how desperately I want to kiss him again. “I know what you want.”

I move my hand farther up his leg until I feel the evidence of how much he wants this, too. His body tenses, hunger in his eyes.

“Tell me you don’t want me.” I bring my mouth close to his ear, keeping my voice low, not moving my hands from where they are.

“*And don’t lie.*”



I don't know if I've found my own personal heaven or hell, but I'm staying.

One minute I was coming up front to tell Mick we were leaving, the next I'm on the drum stool with Desiree between my legs.

She's dressed in a sexy black outfit with matching angel wings and a halo. My very own dark angel sent to test my limits. Every single part of my brain is focused on where her hands rest on my upper thighs and the blood rushing to my cock.

Don't mess this up, son.

Mick's words before he exited the room play through my mind. I open my mouth to respond to Desiree's question, and close it just as quickly when I realise I don't know how to answer.

Do I want her? *Yes.*

Should I have her? *No.*

Am I teetering on the edge of taking her anyway? *Yes, again.*

She's like a shark smelling blood tonight, and when she senses that I'm struggling to answer, her plump lips form a small but devious smile.

"You can't say it, can you?" she gloats. I still can't seem to find anything to say.

"That's what I thought."

She looks as if she has more to say, but I decide to shut her up, wrapping my hand around the back of her neck and pulling her toward me. I relish the feel of her soft hair against the back of my skin as I close the distance

between us and kiss her.

Since the first night I kissed her, I've spent every day thinking about what it would be like to taste her again.

I had accepted that it was a one-time occurrence.

I've never been more thankful to be wrong in my life.

The feel of her is even better than I remembered, and as my tongue slips past her lips and into her mouth, I'm met with the most delicious sound imaginable. She lets out a small gasp, but I hold her head firmly, keeping her pressed close to me, and take the opportunity to explore her more.

She pulls away and I growl in frustration, already longing to kiss her again. But when she lowers herself to her knees before me, my mind goes blank as all the blood in my body rushes from one head to the other.

"Fuck." The word slips out between my teeth when she strokes through my jeans.

She looks up at me with big innocent eyes, but when her tongue darts out to wet her lips, I realise there's nothing *innocent* about her at this moment. Every reason I had conjured up as to why we shouldn't spend time together is gone, and I come to the conclusion that I would have to be six feet underground to not want the girl in front of me.

"I want this, too," she says, her hands making quick work of my belt and the button of my jeans. "It doesn't have to be complicated. I can *do* casual."

Her words come out hurried and uneven. She doesn't have to tell me; I can see her want plainly written on her face. Despite that, there's an underlying vulnerability to her words. In the last couple of weeks I've spent getting to know Desiree, I know she's not usually this bold.

What she's doing right now is far beyond her comfort zone and, somehow, that turns me on even more, knowing that she's willing to take a risk for *me*.

"Then take what you want, sunshine."

Desiree drops her gaze and turns her focus back to the task at hand. I watch as she slowly tugs the zipper down, and the relief I feel from no longer being so constrained causes a rush of air to leave my lungs. I lift my hips a bit to help her ease down my pants and she wastes no time pulling me out of my boxers.

The second her palm touches my cock, I know this will not last long. I tilt my head to the ceiling and squeeze my eyes shut. As much as I would love to watch her, keeping my eyes on Desiree certainly won't help my restraint.

She strokes me, slowly at first, but when my hips thrust into her soft hand on their own accord, she picks up the pace. With my eyes closed, I've found the key to lasting. But that theory is short-lived when I feel her warm, wet mouth over the head of my cock.

"Desiree, I—" I have no clue what I want to say, and my words dissolve into a desperate sound as she takes me further into her mouth, causing her to gag.

Fucking hell.

Forgetting where I am, my arm shoots back, desperately needing to stabilise myself. My hand slams against the hi-hat and the cymbals ring throughout the room. The sound startles Desiree and she removes her mouth from me.

Without the feel of her sucking the soul out of my body, I'm able to think clearly again.

Regardless of how good it feels, we're not alone. Right through that door and down the hall, Sadie, Alex, Mick, and the rest of the guys are waiting for me. Although, I'm sure Mick let them know I was talking to Desiree.

"We can't do this," I say as I try to straighten my posture on the stool.

She rolls her eyes at me. I'm beginning to question how much she's had to drink tonight.

"I think we can."

Her tongue darts out and licks the bottom of my shaft all the way to the tip where she plants a small kiss on it. I almost let her continue, but the thought of any of the guys finding Desiree on her knees, her lips swollen, has me seeing red.

"We can't do this *here*," I emphasize. "We aren't alone and no one but me is allowed to see you on your knees. Let's go."

She looks a little lost as I tuck myself back into my boxer briefs.

"Tristan said he would give me a ride..." Her words trail off as she sees the look on my face. I can't tell if she's kidding. Two minutes ago, my dick was touching her tonsils and now she wants to catch a ride with another guy? Sure, it's Tristan, but I don't care who it is at this point. She's delusional if she thinks she's going home with anyone but me.

"I'll take you," I respond as we both stand. I always like to drive my own car to these things just on the off chance I don't want to stick around as long as Tristan and Nate. Now, I'm just thankful that it means I'll have Desiree in my car alone again.

She nods and steps aside so that I can walk past her toward the door that leads to the dimly lit hallway at the back of the bar. When I open it, I'm happy to hear music still playing, which probably means none of the others could hear anything happening out front.

I poke my head in. "We're leaving."

I don't give any further explanation. They know exactly who *we* is, and I'm hardly going to have a conversation while my cock is still hard in my pants.

Tristan makes eye contact with me and tips his head in a nod before continuing his conversation with Mick, who's standing at his side with a knowing smile on his face. Nate is still on the couch, and looks pleased as shit.

"That's ten dollars." He laughs, glancing across the room. "I told you he would come to his senses."

I glare at him before I look over my shoulder at Desiree. She's leaning against the wall of the hallway typing away on her phone, *thankfully* not paying attention to what my boneheaded friend is saying.

Alex, Devin's girlfriend, takes a ten-dollar bill out of her purse and hands it to Nate.

She looks over at me with a grimace and a shrug. "Sorry, but everyone knows what an ass you can be."

I snort. She's lucky I like her. Alex is one of the few platonic female friends I have and I love her like a sister, despite the fact that I don't see her half as often as I used to since she and Devin graduated.

Everyone in the room has acknowledged me in some way, except for the surly, black-haired girl sitting on the couch next to Nate. Sadie pretends to be entranced by whatever is on her phone. I don't buy it for a second, but I'm thankful she's not coming at me with any of her bullshit snarky remarks.

I begin to close the door when Nate calls out to me.

"Hey, Eli!" I pause, holding the door so that I can still see him. "Your paint is a little smeared." He points at his own face. The makeup Sadie begrudgingly painted me with earlier must be smudged from my kiss with Desiree.

I flip him off as I shut the door and turn to face Desiree. "Let's get out of here."



Being in Eli's car for the second time is no easier than the first. It may actually be worse.

The tension in the vehicle is palpable, his scent invades my senses, heightening my already sky-high arousal. My heart has been racing from the second I saw him come through the stage door tonight and it's not showing any sign of slowing down soon.

When we pull out onto the main road, I notice that my dress has begun to ride up, I try my best to shimmy and get it back down, but Eli stops me, moving my hand to the side and placing his on my bare upper thigh.

As his fingers trail a little higher, my breath gets caught in my throat, coming out in a sharp exhale. I try to squeeze my thighs together, but Eli gently squeezes my leg, while keeping his eyes on the road ahead.

"Don't get shy on me now, sunshine."

He looks at me out of the corner of his eye, a small smile tugging at his lips, which turns into a full-blown smirk when I spread my legs apart for him. He's right. I laid my cards out on the table, and there's no use in being timid. I've never wanted someone to touch me more.

He doesn't waste any time moving his hand underneath my dress, and he releases a deep throaty sound.

"No underwear, Desiree?"

I inhale sharply and shake my head as he runs his finger over my wet center. The dress I'm wearing is so form-fitting, there was no way I could wear underwear without having the most obvious panty lines, so I skipped

them altogether. I've never been more thankful for a decision I've made.

"And this is all for me?" His voice is rough, almost strangled. I nod my head. He doesn't seem satisfied with my silent response. "Words, sunshine."

"Yes. For you." My words are a sharp staccato.

He moves his fingers up and gently circles my swollen clit. I writhe underneath his touch, desperate for more. I can feel the slickness between my legs growing with the anticipation of what's to come.

Eli pulls his hand away from me as he turns the car into the apartment parkade. It's three a.m., yet it feels as though the night has just begun.



THE ELEVATOR HAS NEVER FELT SMALLER. When we get in, Eli hits the button for the fifth floor and steps back, his dark eyes fixed on me, making it clear exactly where he is going.

I can feel his gaze on my back. My skin grows hot knowing I've got his full attention. I knew I was taking a risk with him tonight. It took every ounce of courage I had as I channeled my inner Stella, asking myself what my best friend would do in my position.

The second his lips touched mine, I knew that the risk was worth it.

The apartment is in complete darkness, save the small light over the stove, and I feel a sense of déjà vu. So much, and yet absolutely nothing has changed since the evening of the basement show, but tonight feels like a turning point.

Right before we left Merchant, I texted Yazmine to let her know I was on my way home, but I never received a reply. I guess she's fast asleep.

Eli walks in and, within ten seconds, has me pushed up against the door. He kisses me roughly, his desperation matching my own. I can't help the whimper that escapes me as my hand tangles in his hair and his tongue sweeps through my mouth.

When he steps back, I'm breathless.

He kicks off his shoes with ease, and then leans against the counter, watching as I struggle to remove my boots. When I nearly topple over, he reaches out, grabs my arm, and tugs me close to him.

“Up,” he says, his voice hushed.

He waits for me to follow his command. Once I’ve hopped onto the kitchen counter, Eli bends to unzips my left knee-high boot. As he drags the zipper down, he trails kisses down my calf, and I’m unsuccessful in trying to keep my breathing even. I watch as he leaves smudges of black paint on my legs where his lips touch my body. He slips the boot off, placing it on the ground, before he repeats the same action again with the other shoe.

Once he’s done, he brings both of his hands to my hips and drags me forward so that I’m right at the edge of the counter. I yelp in surprise and smack a hand over my mouth, remembering that Yaz is asleep down the hall.

“Shh,” Eli murmurs, silencing me. A smirk curls his lips as he places both hands on my knees and whispers, “We wouldn’t want someone to hear.”

He spreads my legs farther apart. There’s a gleam in his eyes that tells me he wouldn’t care if we woke the entire apartment block right now. His gaze is now focused right where I’m wet and throbbing, making a mess on the counter. With my legs spread, he pushes back the top hem of my dress and then, without any hesitation, his mouth is on me.

That night I touched myself with him on the phone, my mind had wondered exactly how this would feel. To my complete shock, it’s better than *anything* my imagination could have come up with.

I struggle to keep myself quiet as I cover my mouth with my hand, biting my palm. My other hand grips the edge of the kitchen counter, surely turning my knuckles white.

He alternates between sucking and licking, as if he’s starving and I’m his only chance of nourishment, but when he grazes his teeth against my clit, I see stars.

“Holy *fuck*,” I hiss out.

Eli removes his mouth from my pulsing core and my hips surge up, searching for something, *anything*, to bring back the sensation that was building inside of me.

“I love it when you swear for me.” He gives my pussy a firm lick, and I bite my lip to stifle the moan that tries to escape me.

“That’s when I know I’ve got you,” he murmurs against me, “*right*”—lick—“where I”—suck— “want you.” Another long lick that has me panting.

I cry out as he returns to sucking my clit with just the right amount of pressure. I writhe against his face as I feel myself getting closer to the edge. *More, god. I need more.*

As if hearing my thoughts, Eli moves one hand from where it was resting on my hip and presses two fingers against my opening.

He hesitates for a second, looking up at me through his eyelashes, and I realise he's seeking permission. I nod my head and his digits bury inside of me, fucking me with ruthless abandon.

Yes, yes, yes.

"Oh. My. God. Eli." Each word comes out as a desperate plea. "I'm so close."

He doesn't stop, keeping the same mind-bending rhythm. He hums against me in satisfaction and I feel the vibrations of it *everywhere*. That, combined with his fingers thrusting in and out of me and his tongue focused on my clit, sends me careening over the edge.

Only when my body finally relaxes does he move his head from between my legs.

"You taste so sweet, sunshine." He moves up to kiss me and I can taste myself on his lips.

"Which way is your room? We're not staying on the couch again."

He helps me get off the counter and I lead us down the hallway on unsteady legs, trying my best to keep quiet. When we enter my room, Eli lets go of my hand and shuts the door behind us. The space is dark, illuminated only by the moonlight coming through the window. It's just enough for me to make out the sharp lines of his face, of which the bottom half barely has paint on anymore.

I sit on the edge of the bed and he points to my head. "You may want to take that off."

Damn. I forgot that I was still wearing the costume halo. I had taken the wings off when we left the bar and tossed them in his backseat. I quickly remove the halo and place it on my nightstand.

"What? Not into angels?" I quip.

Eli chuckles and, even with the minimal light in the room, I see his eyes darken. "There's nothing holy about what I want to do to you. Lose the dress."

He begins to undo his belt as I make quick work of removing my dress. I take my push-up bra off as well, wanting to be free from the constricting undergarment.

Eli's now standing before me in only his boxers, while I sit on my bed naked. He's watching me, desire evident in his eyes as they sweep over my

face and then move lower, focusing on my breasts where my nipples are already hard.

“Lie back.”

At this point, I may as well be hypnotized with how easily I follow his every command.

He removes his briefs and I scan him from head to toe, taking in all the various tattoos that scatter his arms and torso. My eyes pause when they reach his cock; hard, large, and dripping with precum. *How the hell did I fit that thing in my mouth?*

“See something you like?” Eli smirks.

I pretend to look around the room. “No, not really. Why?”

He walks over to the bed and positions himself over me. He has me caged in, one hand on either side of my head. He lowers his head so that when he speaks, I can feel his lips brushing against mine.

“I hope you keep that sense of humour when I’m done with you.”

“I will,” I say, laying the sarcasm on thick.

He lets out a growl, then kisses me roughly, bringing his hand down between my legs. I gasp and he takes the opportunity to bite my bottom lip, giving it a tug.

“So ready for me.” He removes his hand from my center and puts two fingers in my mouth as he begins kissing down my neck and along the top of my chest. I’m surprised by the action and a part of me feels like I shouldn’t be enjoying this, but I do.

I suck on his fingers, *hard*, licking up every drop. As my tongue keeps moving, he makes a guttural sound and pulls his hand back. “That mouth of yours is going to be the end of me.”

Eli stands, grabs his wallet out of his pants on the floor, pulls out a condom, and gets back onto the bed in record time. I watch as he rolls it on and lines up his thick cock with my entrance.

He pauses for a second, his eyes seeking mine. Holding his gaze, I give him a nod.

“Yes,” I whisper.

Needing no further prompting, he pushes inside me, inch by inch. It’s torturously slow and my body craves more.

“Eli,” I say through clenched teeth as I try my hardest to remain quiet.

He goes still for a moment, smirking as he watches my body writhe under his as I seek out what I need.

“Is this what you want?”

He slams into me, filling me so completely that it steals the breath from my lungs. I have to fight back a scream. Just as I start to adjust to the size of him, he pulls out, looking down at me with a devious grin.

“Tell me what you want, Desiree, and I’ll give it to you.” With each word, my skin tingles with anticipation. I’ve never wanted anyone as badly as I want him and my pussy clenches, already missing the feel of him. “But I need to hear you say the words.”

“I want you,” I whisper, looking into his eyes.

He plants a kiss on my lips and then replies, “Not good enough. What do you want from me?”

I squeeze my eyes shut. A wave of embarrassment hits me, but it’s nothing compared to the lust and need I feel in the moment. *Here goes nothing.* “I want you inside of me. I need you to fuck me. *Hard.*”

That earns me another hard kiss. “Your wish is my command, sunshine.” And he thrusts back into me, hitting a spot I didn’t think existed.

“Oh god, oh god, oh god.” The only words I can form. *Oh god, this is too much.*

“*Fuck, baby, you feel so good,*” Eli groans, and then adds under his breath, “*Too good.*”

He pounds into me relentlessly, the sound of our bodies echoing through the room. When he slows his pace a touch and begins grinding against me in slow circular movements, I can’t help the loud moan that slips from my lips. He holds himself up with one hand on the bed above my head and covers my mouth with the other.

“Quiet.” His tone is both firm and teasing. “Or do you want your roommate to know just how well you’re taking me?”

I can’t respond with his hand over my mouth so I just huff out a breath through my nose.

He picks up the pace once again, fucking me harder into the mattress, and my eyes roll back in my head. I’ve never felt anything like this before. I’ve only had sex with one person in my life and it was nowhere close to this. Sex with Liam had been fine though nothing memorable, but with Eli, it’s the kind of sex you’ll remember when you’re eighty years old, recalling *the good ol’ days.*

Eli lifts his hand from my mouth and places a searing kiss against my lips, but I can’t help the cry that comes out when he moves his hand lower

and makes circular motions on my swollen bud. He takes one of my nipples into his mouth and gives it a small bite. Before I can fully register the pain, he's swirling his tongue around it to ease the sting.

"Oh, shit." An intense sensation starts to build in my lower abdomen. "Eli, I'm going to come."

We're both panting, desperate for all that the other person can give. My hands run along his firm, tattooed arms before tangling in his hair, holding on for dear life as I raise my hips to meet each of his strokes. If I'm hurting him, he gives no indication.

"Say it again." His voice cracks, and I know he's nearing the edge as well. "Say. My. Name. Desiree."

Each word exits on a sharp breath. But hearing my name come from his lips in a frenzied moan is what undoes me.

"Eli!" I cry out as my orgasm washes over me, my walls pulsing around him as he pumps into me wildly.

He gives a satisfied groan and kisses me once more. With his tongue exploring my mouth, I feel his cock pulse as he reaches his own climax.

When we've both come down from the high, he pulls out flipping over onto his back beside me. My heart is still pounding, but my body feels boneless. I'm completely blissed out.

He swipes his hand over his face. "That was... unexpected."

"To say the least."

"I want this again." He sighs. "I need more of this, but—"

I stretch and place a peck on his lips.

"Let's not make it complicated. It's just sex," I whisper.

He looks into my eyes, as if searching for something. An unreadable expression crosses his face before he smirks and pulls me on top of him.

We've barely caught our breaths but we're somehow ready to go again.



“**Y**eah! We could meet up Saturday morning to go over it!” I hear Desiree’s voice before I see her as I wait outside her politics class.

It’s been a few days since Desiree and I started seeing each other—casually—and this obsession only seems to be growing. I came here straight from practice. I wanted to catch her before she left.

When the guys asked me where I was running off to, I lied and told them I had a project to work on. I know neither of them believed me, but there’s no need for them to know just how much I already can’t stay away from a certain curly-haired girl.

Desiree walks out of the class and my eyes narrow. Standing next to her is none other than *Thomas*, her wannabe art history partner. I had no idea they had another class together, or that they even spoke to each other.

“Perfect,” he says. When he notices me, his face turns smug. My fists tighten. “I’ll see you then.”

He walks off as Desiree makes her way over to me, all smiles. “Hey. What are you doing here?”

She had mentioned the day before that she had gotten a perfect score on her Canadian Politics exam. She had been so happy that I thought I would buy her a little celebration gift. *As her friend, of course.*

I shrug. “Second class got cancelled, so I thought I’d come to see you after practice. Here—” I hand her a small bag and a cup of coffee I picked up on the way.

She looks at me, bemused, accepting the coffee cup and gift. “What’s this

for?”

“You were so excited about your exam yesterday.” I scratch the back of my head. “I wanted to get you something to celebrate... for *us* to celebrate.”

Her eyebrows shoot up in surprise. I suppose showing up outside of her class with a gift doesn't seem to follow the “casual” agreement.

“I was going to give it to you later,” I continue. “But Mickey asked me to cover the bar tonight, so I won't be home.”

After seeing her walk out of the class with Thomas, though, I'm even happier I decided to do this now.

“Okay, I'll open it here!” She begins walking over to a bench in the hallway.

“Not here. Come with me.” I grab her arm, pulling her back. I have a better idea.

“So, you and *Thomas* have more than one class together?” I ask as we walk side by side in the direction of the library.

She looks at me with a sly smile. “Yeah. Is that a problem?”

“No.” Yes. I hate the stupid knot of jealousy I felt seeing them together. They make sense. Someone like her, intelligent and beautiful, winds up with a guy like him. *Not me*. “I just didn't realise you two were friends. You're hanging out this weekend?”

She squints at me. “Not hanging out. He asked me to help him, he's having trouble understanding the functions of the different levels of government.”

I bet he is. That little shit probably knows everything there is to know. He just wants to spend time with her. Can't say I blame him.

When we make it to the doors of the library, Desiree stops walking, looking even more confused than before.

“You want me to open your gift in the library?”

I chuckle. “Trust me, would ya?”

I walk over to one of the librarians behind the counter.

“Hi, my classmate and I forgot to book a study room to work on our project,” I lie smoothly. “Is there one available that we could use now?”

“Let me check.” The woman smiles at me before tapping away on her computer. “You're in luck. There's one available for the next two hours.”

“Perfect.” I grin at her. “We'll be out of here before then.”

She hands me a set of keys to the room and I begin to walk away before turning back to her.

“The room is soundproof, right?” I ask innocently. “We’ll be practicing our presentation and wouldn’t want to disturb anyone.”

“It’s soundproof,” she reassures me with a nod. *Excellent.*

I walk back over to Desiree, dangling the key from my finger. “Let’s go.”

“Eli,” she whispers. “What are you up to? We don’t have a presentation. Why couldn’t I just open this in the hall?”

I look at her with a smirk, not responding until we’re inside the small space of the study room and the door is shut. “Because I want you to test out your gift, sunshine.”

Desiree sets down her coffee cup and cracks open the bag, removing the tissue paper warily. When she sees what’s in the bag her eyes widen.

“Oh my god!!” She blushes. “Eli!”

“I told you it was for *us* to celebrate. I chuckle darkly. “Go ahead and take everything out of the bag.”

Her cheeks turn a deep red as she slowly pulls the first item out of the bag. A sheer black lace bodysuit. I had seen it on a mannequin at the mall and knew that she would look fucking incredible in it. And even better while I took her *out* of it.

“Lingerie?!” she exclaims. “I’m not putting this on right now! Are you insane?”

I shake my head. “No, we’ll save that for another time. It would be a distraction with the next gift.”

Apprehension lines her face as she reaches in and takes out a box. When she realises what the item is, her eyes nearly pop out of her head.

“A vibrator?!”

I push off against the wall where I’ve been watching her. “They were out of dahlias, but it’s still cute.”

The little vibrator is shaped to look just like a rose, and I got it in her favourite colour, a light purple.

“The women at the store really hyped it up,” I say as I step closer, my dick already twitching. “They did reassure me though that if there were any defects, we could exchange it for a new one.”

I bring my nose to her neck, trailing it down to her collarbone and back up again. “We should make sure it’s in working order,” I whisper into her ear, relishing in her shiver. “Now.”

“Eli,” Desiree says on a ragged breath.

I undo the top button of her jeans and pull the zipper down. “Take these

off.”

There’s a moment of hesitation before she does as I say and shimmies the tight jeans over her hips, letting them fall to the floor. She steps out of them and stands before me in a blue thong. My heart rate accelerates and I flex my hand beside me, resisting the need to touch her

“On the table.”

She bites her lip. “Someone could come in.”

“The door is locked,” I remind her, patting my pocket that holds the key. “Get on the table.”

She moves back and sits on the edge of the desk in the middle of the room, clearly waiting for further instructions.

“Go ahead,” I encourage, once again taking my position against the wall. “Take it out. Let’s make sure it works.”

Desiree takes the small, round vibrator out of the box and spreads her legs. She presses a button and it comes to life, the buzzing sound taking over the room.

“You know what to do.” My voice comes out husky, and I fight the urge to stroke myself. This isn’t about me.

There’s a hole in the centre of the rose and she places it on her clit. Her eyes shut the instant it touches her.

“Ohhh,” she moans. “Oh my god! Fuck!”

She throws her head back and I can feel my blood pulsing as it rushes to the tip of my dick.

“Yes, yes, yes,” she whines, rocking her hips against the toy. She clicks the button again, and new buzzing pattern fills the room. Her moan is more guttural now, deep and desperate. Whatever setting she just found, she likes it. *A lot.*

I watch the knuckles on her other hand go white as she grips the edge of the table. It’s taking every ounce of restraint I have not to knock the vibrator out of her hand and have her finish with my tongue buried deep inside of her.

“Eyes open, Desiree,” I command. “I want your eyes on me when you come.”

Another desperate cry falls through her lips, but she opens her eyes, looking at me. Her breathing is heavy and erratic. The hand holding the rose begins to shake; I’m unsure whether she’s doing this intentionally, or whether she can no longer hold her hand steady. Either way she appears to be enjoying the sensation it causes.

Our eyes are locked in on each other, neither of us looking away, and it seems to make her more frantic.

“Oh fuck, Eli.” The needy way she draws out my name has my cock spasming in my pants. “I’m going to... oh my god, I’m going to—”

The words are stolen from her as her lips form an O, silent scream leaving her mouth. I can’t take it anymore. I stride over to her, taking the toy from her hand and placing it on the table. I lower myself to my knees and lick her pussy clean as her body convulses through her release.

Every lap of my tongue elicits delicious little sounds from her. Her body trembles under my touch. I press my hand against my crotch in an attempt to find some relief.

Once I’m done, I stand to kiss her, letting my tongue sweep through her mouth so that she can taste herself.

I pull back. “Looks like it works,” I say with a rough chuckle as I look down at the deceptively small gadget on the table.

She lets out a large puff of air. “I’d say.”



DESIREE

I HAVEN’T SPOKEN to Stella since before Halloween. I think it’s the longest we’ve ever gone without talking. I tried calling her the day after Eli and I hooked up to tell her, but she’d been busy and couldn’t pick up.

She texted me saying she would call me back, but things got hectic with school and now, almost two weeks later, we still haven’t had that call.

We’ve texted here and there, but I want to be able to hear her voice when I tell her about Eli.

I look at myself in the mirror once I’m ready. I still have thirty minutes until Eli is supposed to take me to a photography exhibit in the exchange district so I decide now’s my chance to call her. I wonder how she’ll feel about my being in a “friends with benefits” situation. I doubt she’ll believe it.

Yazmine has pointed out that it seems more like a relationship, but I’ve explained to her that Eli and I are simply leaning into the *friends* portion of

the “friends with benefits.”

“If you say so,” Yaz had said with a smirk.

Taking a seat at my desk, I click the icon to FaceTime Stella, hoping she’ll be free. The phone rings twice before her face pops up on the screen.

“Des, hey!” she exclaims with a suspicious amount of animation in her voice. She also sounds a bit out of breath, like she’s been running. Except I know my best friend, and she would sooner swim through molten lava than run for fun. Neither of us has ever been the overly athletic type.

In high school, we would walk laps around the gym rather than run the three miles that Mrs. Petros, our phys ed teacher, requested, irritating her to no end and landing us with the worst grades of all of our classes.

“I was planning to call you today. How’s it going?” Stella continues.

“I’m surprised you picked up,” I joke.

“I know, my bad. School’s just been kicking my ass,” she replies with a grimace.

I nod my head in understanding, school is a lot more time consuming than I think either of us thought it would be. Still, I wish we could talk like this more often.

Her breathing is more even now, but rather than looking at the screen, she seems to be focusing on something beyond the camera.

I raise an eyebrow. “Everything okay over there?”

My question seems to snap her out of whatever daze she was in. “Yep.” She smiles, giving me her full attention. “Everything’s fine! You look cute, where are you going?”

“Eli found a free photography exhibit happening in the city tonight. We’re going to go check it out,” I continue. “Stel, I have so much to tell you!”

“Lay it on me.”

“We slept together. Me and Eli.”

“WHAT?!” she squeals, just as a crash sounds in the background.

Stella looks up above the camera once more, her eyes widening.

“Seriously, is everything okay over there?”

“Umm.” Stella pauses and that’s when I put the pieces together. How out of breath she sounded picking up the phone—she isn’t alone.

“Is *he* there with you right now?” I whisper, referencing her new mystery man. She’s refused to give me details on him. Apparently, it’s too soon and she doesn’t want to jinx it. I made her swear it wasn’t a professor and that

was good enough for me.

She places a palm over her forehead. “Yeah, he just got out of the shower.”

“Hey, there!” I call out loudly, hoping this guy will at least give me a voice reveal, but I get nothing,

Stella laughs. “I think we should have *this* conversation when I’m alone.”

I nod. “Tomorrow?”

“I promise.”

“Okay, I’ll talk to you then!” I reply.

“Oh, and Des,” Stella says just as I’m about to hang up the call. “I can’t wait to *meet* him!” She raises her eyebrows twice in quick succession.

My stomach flips. With all that has been happening with me and Eli, I almost forgot that next week Stella and Dom are coming to visit for a few days during their break.

Despite the sudden nerves, I feel my heart soar in my chest and can’t contain the smile on my face. I’ll be in the same place as my best friend again. “I can’t wait to see *you!*”

“Same!” she squeals. “Okay, have a good night.”

An hour later, Eli and I are walking side by side in the Exchange District, looking for the location of a boutique art studio that’s holding this photography exhibit. I can barely contain my excitement. When Eli brought it up, and suggested going together, knowing how much I’m enjoying photography club, I almost jumped on him. *This doesn’t mean anything, Des. Any good friend would have mentioned it.*

“I think it should be this one,” he says as we stop in front of a brick building.

We open the door and follow the signs leading us upstairs to where the action is happening. As we get closer to the top, I hear footsteps and people chatting.

I’m amazed when we enter the space. It’s no bigger than my apartment, but every inch of the walls is covered with pictures. Landscapes, portraits, wildlife and street photography. Each photograph is different, but still beautiful, and I don’t know where to look first.

“This is”—I try to find the words—“insane!”

When I look at Eli, I find him staring at me, a small smile on his face. “I’m glad you like it; I thought you might.”

“Like it?” I exclaim. “I love it!”

I grab his hand. “Let’s start over here.” I drag him with me before realising what I’ve done. We’ve only ever held hands once, the night after the basement show. Although there have been many times where I wanted to reach for his hand, I’ve always refrained, aware it could seem too “intimate.”

When I go to pull my hand back, Eli holds it tighter. Something about the look in his eyes reassures me that this is okay, so I go with it, letting my arm relax as we walk around.

He stops in front of one photo in particular and really stares at it. It’s of two boys who appear to be racing each other on bikes down a dirt road. The child ahead has a huge smile on his face as he looks over his shoulder to see where his competition is.

“I used to race with my brother just like that when we were younger,” Eli says, his voice low.

“Did you guys spend a lot of time together as kids?” I ask as we continue to study the photo.

I can feel his whole body tense at the question, and when I turn to him he seems thoughtful, regretful somehow.

“Yeah, we were with each other all of the time. He was almost like my shadow,” he responds. “But he’s in high school now, and going through a bit of a rough patch...” He shrugs. “I don’t know. I worry about him, but hopefully he’ll be okay.”

I know Eli doesn’t like to talk about his family, and it causes warmth to spread through me knowing he chose to share this with me.

“I’m sure he will be,” I respond, unsure what to say.

“Yeah. I hope so.” He keeps staring at the photograph, not sounding at all confident.

We spend the rest of our time looking around the small exhibits at the different pictures lining the walls and, before I know it, we’re ready to go.

“Thanks again for bringing me to this,” I say as we step out into the night, unable to hide the smile on my face.

“It was my pleasure, sunshine.”

He smiles down at me before leaning over for a kiss.

Winter

“You are summer to my winter heart” - Gemma Troy



“**Y**ou really don’t have to do this,” Desiree insists for the tenth time. “They could have just taken an Uber.”

“We’re ten minutes away from the airport, sunshine. We aren’t turning around now.”

She leans back in the passenger seat of my car and a smile settles on her face. Her best friend and brother are coming to visit her from UBC for their midterm break, and she’s been in a bubble of barely contained excitement since they told her. When she mentioned she wished she had a car to pick them up when they arrived, I volunteered to drive to the airport.

Since Halloween night, we’ve spent almost every day together, hanging out late into the night. And I’d be lying if I said I wouldn’t move heaven and hell to see her smile like she is right now.

“They’re here,” she exclaims. “Stella just texted me. They’re waiting for us outside.”

I grab her hand and give it a gentle squeeze. I can practically feel the enthusiasm vibrating off of her. Me? I’m nervous as hell. I’ve spoken to Stella once when she called Desiree while we were in bed one evening, but it was a quick call. And I’ve never spoken to Dominic. But it’s pretty clear from the way she speaks about them both that they’re two of the most important people in her life. Their impressions of me could impact how she feels about me. *Not that I should care, it’s just casual.*

It shouldn’t matter, but the idea of Desiree not wanting me anymore makes my stomach sink. We pull up to arrivals at the airport and she squeals,

having spotted her guests. “There they are!”

She’s pointing to a tall, black guy. His hair is buzzed short and his beard is lined up perfectly. She told me her brother played football in school, but the guy looks like he should take up modeling. Beside him is a slightly shorter brunette who’s bouncing up and down as she tries to keep warm.

I pull up to the curb beside them. We don’t even come to a complete stop before Desiree jumps out and hugs Stella, both of them squealing. I place the car in park and pop the trunk before hopping out. When I walk around the front, she’s in her brother’s arms.

Desiree takes a step back from him and gives them both a nervous look before speaking. “You guys, this is Eli, my…” Her words trail off as she struggles to describe what I am to her.

We’ve had this conversation multiple times in the last two weeks. I’ve made it clear that I’m not interested in a relationship right now *or ever*. At the same time, I only have eyes for her. Desiree swears up and down that she doesn’t need anything more than that, but sometimes, like right now, I wonder if she’s lying to herself.

I step in, not wanting to leave her floundering. “Eli. I’ve heard a lot about you both.”

Dominic looks at me warily before he nods. “Nice to meet you, man.”

“I’ve heard a lot about you, too,” Stella cuts in, her eyebrows moving up and down twice in rapid succession. “But not nearly enough.”

I laugh out loud, my breath floating in the air due to the low temperatures. Desiree had told me how straightforward her best friend was, and I could see now that she would not hold back despite us having just met.

“Let me help you with your bags,” I offer, picking up the large suitcase next to her.

When I pick it up, my eyes widen. It’s ridiculously heavy for someone who is only visiting for a few days.

Seeing my reaction, Dominic lets out a low chuckle. “I told her she packed too much, but she refused to listen to me.”

He grabs his own bag and throws it into the open trunk as I shuffle with the heavy suitcase, popping it on top of his and slamming the door closed.

Once we all settle into the car, Stella proclaims, “It’s cold as balls outside!”

“Pretty sure the expression is ‘hot as balls,’ Dominic remarks.

“Why? There’s nothing hot about balls.”

“There’s nothing cold about them either.”

I look over at Desiree, her shoulders are shaking with laughter. Clearly, this type of conversation is not new to her.

The talking dies down and when I look in the rearview mirror, I see that Stella has her eyes closed. However, that’s not what surprises me. When my eyes drift down a bit, I see both Stella and Dominic’s hands lying flat in the middle seat. Dom’s pinky finger moves slightly over Stella’s. It’s a small gesture, but it reminds me of the moments when I can’t bear to avoid touching Desiree. It’s as though there’s a magnet between us, and I need to be connected to her in some way, no matter how inconsequential.

Desiree never mentioned they were together, her best friend dating her brother doesn’t seem like the sort of thing that she would just gloss over. I focus my eyes back on the road. *It’s probably nothing.*



Eli brings Stella's bag up to my apartment and then gets ready to leave for practice. He's got this anxious air to him right now, but I can't peg down what's wrong. At some point during the drive home, he became silent, and I can tell he's itching to go play because he can't stop fidgeting. He's explained to me before how relaxing he finds drumming to be, so I hope that he'll be back to normal when he gets back. Before he leaves, I slip out into the hallway with him.

"Is everything okay?" I ask him quietly, not wanting Stella and Dom to hear me.

"Yeah, of course," he replies.

He still seems off, though. I spent the whole day worried that maybe it was too much for him to meet my best friend and brother. Sure, he's met Yaz, but that's just because we're roommates.

I don't want him to think I'm trying to make this into something it's not. He's been up-front with me about wanting to keep things casual, and I've reassured him multiple times that it's fine. And it is, I just have to make sure my feelings are kept in check.

"Okay." I reach up on my tiptoes and press my lips to his. "Go, don't be late. Tell the guys I say hi."

He pushes me against the door and kisses me again, and I swear I feel my insides melt. Leaving me breathless, he turns and walks down the hall to the elevators.

When I enter back into the apartment, Dom turns to face me. "I'm beat,

Des. Where's my room?"

I roll my eyes. "You're in it." I reply, looking at him pointedly.

"I'm sleeping on the couch?"

"The very one you're sitting on."

"Shouldn't you sleep on the couch? You know, give your guests the bed?"

Stella's shoulders tense and I begin to laugh. "You're going to share a room with Stella?"

He looks at her out of the corner of his eye briefly, then shakes his head. "Couch it is."

"Let's let Dom sleep." Stella claps her hands, as she hops up from the couch. "It's time for boy talk!"

She tosses a wink over her shoulder to Dom and grabs my hand, dragging me to my bedroom. Once the door is shut and we're safely sealed away from my brother, she pins me with an intense stare. "Okay, spill!"

"Spill what?"

"This is Eli, my..." she says, reminding me of my awkward words at the airport earlier. "What was that?"

"That was a mental glitch," I respond with a sigh as I sit on the bed. "He's not my anything."

I lie back on the mattress, exhausted, and she follows suit next to me.

"No, he just drove you to the airport to pick up your best friend and brother." I can hear the sarcasm in her voice. "And he looks at you like you hold the answers to the earth's greatest mysteries. He certainly isn't anything at all."

I cover my face with both hands and groan. "I can't let myself go there, Stel, I can't."

"You like him. A lot. I know you, D, and I know when you're into someone."

"We're keeping things casual."

She says nothing, just lets out a hum that tells me she doesn't buy it, but she won't push me.

"Tell me about your guy," I say.

"There isn't much to tell."

My eyebrows furrow, this is the first time in my life where Stella has been into someone and not been gushing about them non-stop. I flip over onto my side, but when I do, I find that Stella's eyes are closed and her

breathing has slowed.

I lie back down, deciding that a nap doesn't seem half bad right now.



THE SAYING “TIME flies when you're having fun” is a perfect description for the last couple of days. I took Stella and Dom to some of my new favourite restaurants in the city, we had an amazing spa day—that Dominic pretended to hate—and Eli even scored us tickets to all go see a comedy show. We all laughed the entire drive home recounting some of the jokes. After a jam-packed few days, we decided that for their last evening, a night in would be best.

We have a dinner reservation for all of us plus Yaz at Gusto's, a restaurant I haven't tried yet, but Yazmine swears is the best, and then we'll have a classic rom-com marathon.

We're all seated at a round, marble table at the restaurant, and my heart feels full having everyone together.

“Oh my gosh.” Yazmine laughs. “What do you mean your high school principal was the town mayor?”

Stella's shoulders begin to shake as she giggles. “I guess it wasn't enough to boss around the students. He was so annoying.”

“He meant well!” I interject.

“You only say that because he had a soft spot for you.” Stella rolls her eyes and looks back toward Yazmine. “He *hated* me.”

“He did not,” I say. “He just...”

“Tolerated me because you were my friend.” Stella gives a dramatic sigh. “I'm convinced he's harbouring a grudge against me because he dated my mom in high school and she broke up with him for my dad.” She grimaces.

“It really is a small town.” Yazmine's eyes are wide with surprise.

The conversation flows easily throughout most of dinner as we talk about school and Stars Valley, and Eli talks about Merchant Revival. When Stella starts animatedly talking about how excited she is to apply to nursing school, is when things start to go awry

“Hey, babe,” Dominic calls from across the table to... Stella? “Could you

pass the chilli flakes?”

It must be a slip, I tell myself. Except, it's not. Because without a second thought, Stella picks up the shaker and reaches across the table to hand it to him.

No one else seems to notice, except for Eli. He's watching me with a concerned look on his face. The kind of look you give to someone when you're not quite sure how they're going to react to something. Stella keeps talking about school, but my mind is now elsewhere as I try to play catch up.

I think about all the times Stella gushed about the new guy she was dating. She kept things vague, but I had assumed it was because she wasn't ready to talk about him yet. But when has Stella ever held back from telling me about someone she was interested in? Usually, she's so forward, I have to beg her to stop.

Dom's comment from the other day about the guests having the bedroom replays in my mind. I had laughed at the time thinking that it had just been him misspeaking, but what if it wasn't?

“Are you two together?” I hear myself blurt out the question, but my voice doesn't sound like mine anymore. It sounds hollow. I think I'm having an out-of-body experience. I can hear the blood in my ears rushing in time with my heartbeat.

The conversation at the table ceases immediately and Stella looks at me with eyes wide.

“Des...” The way she says my name is enough for me to know that a confession is on the tip of her tongue. “We were going to tell you,” she whispers.

The tension at the table now is palpable. Eli tries to hold my hand on my lap, but I snatch it away, not wanting to be touched. My skin feels too hot. I want to crawl out of it. “How long?”

It's the only question I can think of to ask in the moment. Never once in our lives have Stella and I kept secrets from each other. We've told each other everything, from the day we first got our periods to the first time either of us had sex. There has never been a moment where we weren't completely honest with each other.

“Maybe we can talk about this when we get home?” Her voice is laced with panic and a tinge of desperation.

“No,” I say, no longer feeling like I know the person in front of me. “We can talk about it now. How long?”

She glances down at the table. “A couple of months.” The words exit her mouth and my world begins to shift. Not because she’s dating my brother, but because they kept this a secret for so long.

“We wanted to tell you in person.” Dominic’s voice pulls me out of my spiralling thoughts, and I cut my eyes away from Stella to look at him. He appears more composed than her; however, his eyes dart back and forth between us. My ears begin to ring. I glance at Yazmine and Eli, and they both look extremely uncomfortable.

I fight back the urge to scream. “Okay, so why didn’t you tell me at Thanksgiving? You were both there. We were *in person*.”

They glance at each other across the table, both looking dejected as if they’d already had this conversation in the past. Stella seems like she’s near tears, and I suppress the urge to run to the other end of the table and comfort her.

My best friend and my brother. My best friend and my brother have been lying to me for *months*.

I feel claustrophobic, despite the open concept of the restaurant. “I can’t do this right now,” I snap. “I’m going to the bathroom.”

Stella slides her chair back. I can see the tears rimming her eyelids as she looks at me pleadingly.

“Don’t you *dare* follow me,” I say, my voice cold as ice. I walk to the bathroom, step into a stall and lock the door. I lean against it, feeling the cool metal through my shirt.

My mind races to catch up with the events that just transpired. Never have I felt so blindsided. My pulse picks up and my breathing becomes erratic. I try to take in deep breaths, but I can’t seem to get enough air. Angry tears fill my eyes and I swipe harshly at my cheeks as they fall. *What the fuck?* I do my best to process the information.

I hear the door to the bathroom open, and my whole body tenses.

“Des.” I hear Yazmine’s soft voice on the other side of the stall. “Are you okay? Can I do anything?”

“No.” *I am certainly not okay.* “I just need to be alone for a minute. Please.”

“Okay,” she says and I hear her footsteps head toward the door. “I’ll take them home, take your time. Call me if you need anything.”

I hear the door open again, and then there’s silence.

I close my eyes and breathe in for four seconds, and breathe out for four

seconds, continuing the pattern until my heart no longer feels like it's hammering in my chest. It's a breathing technique that my mom used to get Dom and me to do whenever we got upset as kids, and I still use to this day.

When I finally muster up the strength to leave the washroom and walk back to the table, I find Eli sitting alone.

"Yaz took them back to your place."

I nod. Right. My place. Where I was now meant to share a bed with Stella.

As if reading my thoughts, Eli stands, handing me my coat. "You can stay with me if you want."

If my brain wasn't so preoccupied, I would be more stunned about the offer. Not once over the last two weeks have we spent an entire night together. No matter whose room we'd be in when all was said and done, the other person would get up and go to their own apartment.

"Thanks," I say, truly grateful that I have somewhere else to go.

When we get back home, Stella is sitting at the countertop, her face red and blotchy, mascara running down her cheeks. Dominic is next to her, rubbing her back in gentle circles.

The second Stella sees me, she stands, nearly toppling over the bar stool she's on. "Des, please," she begs as more tears fall from her eyes. "Just let me explain."

"There's nothing to explain," I say, moving past her quickly, and walking to my room.

I reach into my closet, grab my backpack, and throw in a pair of my pajamas before heading to the bathroom to pack my toiletries. All the while she shuffles behind me sniffing.

I don't hear any talking from out front, but I know that both Dominic and Eli are out there.

"Please, Des," she repeats from where she watches at the entryway of the bathroom. "We didn't mean to hurt you. I don't want to lose you. I love you."

Those words send a pang through my heart. "I love you, too," I respond, despite the fact that I'm not feeling a lot of that love right now. "I just need some space to process. I'm going to spend the night at Eli's."

Stella nods her head, and she looks so sad, I want to wrap her up in my arms and reassure her that all is forgiven. But then, I remember she had ample opportunity to tell me the truth and chose not to. My resolve hardens, and I walk out to where Eli is leaning against the wall, seemingly in some

sort of stare off with Dom.

“D, just hear us out,” Dominic says in the tone he uses when he thinks I’m acting immature.

It only serves to make me angrier. “You know what, Dom,” I reply, keeping my voice cool. “I really *don’t* have to hear you out about shit right now!”

Dom stares at me, eyes wide with shock, but I’m already turning away from him.

Eli opens the door for me and we walk out together, the heat from his palm on my lower back makes me feel secure even though I’m still reeling from the dishonesty of my two closest people in the world.



Nate and Tristan are in the living room playing video games when I walk in with Desiree behind me. As soon as they see us, they're all smiles for her.

"Hey," Nate says before turning his eyes back toward the television. "You're just in time to see me kick Tristan's ass."

Tristan gives him a swift punch to the arm before greeting her.

"How was dinner? I hear Gusto's is..." His words trail off as he sees me shaking my head. "Not that great?" he continues.

Desiree doesn't seem phased at all, simply kicks her shoes off, places her backpack on the ground, and walks over to the couch, flopping down beside him.

"The food was great," she responds. "Finding out that my brother and my best friend have been dating secretly behind my back for months? Not so much."

My chest tightens at her words, I hate knowing that she's upset and there's nothing I can do to fix it.

"Oh," Nate and Tristan say in unison while I open up the fridge in the kitchen.

"Do you want a drink?" I call out.

"Yeah, sure, thanks!" Nate replies back as if I was speaking to him.

"Get up and get it yourself, you lazy ass. I was talking to Desiree." I look over my shoulder at her. "What do you want, sunshine? We've got coke, beer, water, and orange juice. Take your pick." I see Nate and Tristan share a

look when I call her sunshine, but they don't say anything.

In all honesty, the nickname started as a bit of a joke, but I can't think of a name more fitting for her. Even on my worst days, she's that little sliver of sunshine that peaks through the clouds.

"I'll have a beer," she responds, *Yeah, it's that kind of night*. I grab a couple bottles of the shitty, light beer that Nate bought the other day and join them in the living room.

"That one tastes like piss water," Nate comments.

"You bought it," Tristan states blandly.

"And I'm telling you it tastes like piss."

I hand a bottle over to Desiree and she takes a tentative sip. "I like it," she says before taking another, larger gulp.

Nate looks at her with a shrug. "It's all yours."

And she really takes his words to heart. Two hours later, she's on her third beer, seated on the floor between the guys, playing *Mario Kart*. I watch her tentatively from my place on the couch, trying to determine how she's doing. She seems to be having a good time, but I'm worried she's just putting on a brave face.

I can tell she's feeling the effects of the alcohol because her trash talk has gotten progressively worse throughout the game. So, when she stands up and declares that she's going to get another drink, I figure it's my time to step in.

"Baby, maybe we should call it a night."

She sways a little on her feet, a silly smile on her face.

Nate and Tristan watch this whole interaction with unfiltered amusement.

"Oh, is Des staying the night?" Nate sing-songs. He and Tristan elbow each other, and I'm thankful that Desiree is too tipsy to pay them any attention.

They've been going on and on for the last two weeks about Desiree and me, if we're in a relationship or not, and no matter how often I tell them that it's nothing serious, they refuse to believe me. Truthfully, I'm starting to have a hard time believing it myself.

"You've only called me baby once before." She stands on her tiptoes to whispers in my ear. "Do you remember?"

Of course I do. The night I got to hear her pretty moans on the phone. Right before I nearly fucked everything up.

"I remember," I respond, willing myself not to get turned on by the memory.

“That was a good night, wasn’t it?” Desiree darts her tongue out and licks my earlobe. My whole body reacts. *So much for not getting hard.* “Let’s do it again.”

I don’t say anything as I take hold of her hand, grab her backpack off of the floor, and head to my room. Immediately, she peels off her clothes and I begin unzipping her bag to get her pajamas out.

“I don’t want to wear those,” she whines. “I want to wear this!” She grabs a black Merchant Revival tee that Sadie made for the whole band and she spins around in a circle waving it in the air. I drop the bag on the floor.

“Have at it,” I say, trying to hold back my laughter.

She slips the shirt on and it falls down to her knees, and I wonder to myself if I’ve ever seen her look more beautiful.

I follow her lead, stripping down to my underwear, and walk around the bed, lying down on my side. She lifts the covers and crawls beside me.

“Eli,” she says softly.

“Hmm?”

“Thank you for tonight.”

“I didn’t do anything,” I reply.

“You were there for me.”

My heart constricts and it’s as though I can’t get enough air. Most of the time I’m so lost, trying to help out my brother, and no matter what I do, it’s never enough.

Knowing that my presence for Desiree is enough, makes me feel like maybe I’m not the fuck up I thought.

She stretches just a touch and kisses me on the cheek; I can still smell the beer on her, but mixed with her floral scent, it’s somehow comforting. A near painful emotion clogs my throat before I respond.

“Anytime, sunshine.”

“Eli,” she says once more before letting out a yawn. “I’m tired.”

I look over at her as her eyelids begin to droop and her breathing turns heavy. I turn the bedside light off and allow myself to drift to sleep with her next to me.



THE SMELL of pancakes brings me out of my dreams. I reach my arm out, but when I touch the other empty side of the mattress, my eyes snap open. *Desiree.*

I fell asleep not long after her and slept soundly through the night, where normally I toss and turn for hours. I didn't even hear her get up. At first, I thought having her here would be uncomfortable since I'm not used to sharing my space. Instead, it felt... effortless.

As soon as I leave my room, I hear her voice, and then Tristan's. I head toward the kitchen. They're both at the stove, laughing and moving about easily as if this is their regular morning routine.

"Am I interrupting?" I joke once I'm within ear shot.

Startled, Desiree turns around. She's still wearing my T-shirt over the red plaid pajama pants she packed last night. Her curly hair is no longer tied on top of her head but is now hanging loose around her shoulders and down her back. I search her face for any sign that she's upset about last night's events, but she isn't giving me any hints.

"Nope." Her eyes sparkle. "We made breakfast!"

"I see that," I say as I walk toward her, not able to resist the urge to hold her in my arms.

I press her against me and inhale her sweet scent. I've never woken up to a girl in my home, but right now, I'm thinking I could get used to it. She looks like she's meant to be here. The thought should cause alarm bells to go off in my mind, but somehow, I'm not panicking.

There's a plate piled up with bacon beside the stove and another with pancakes. Right on time, as if sensing that people are about to eat, Nate walks out of his room, shirtless.

"Des, you need to stay over more often if it means that we get a proper breakfast," he says to her, essentially ignoring both Tristan and me.

"I make breakfast all the time," Tristan counters.

"Yeah, but you're not as cute as Desiree."

I know he's joking around, but my arms tighten around her body.

"What happened, Nate?" I ask. "Run out of clean shirts?"

He winks at me and claps me on my shoulder. I feel the reverberations throughout my body. Based on the little grimace I see when I look down at Desiree in my arms, she felt them, too.

"I think Des can handle a little chest."

She wriggles out of my hold and walks towards the counter where Tristan

has now placed the food.

“If you two are done,” she says in a mock-stern tone, grabbing herself a plate. “Then we can eat.”

For the next fifteen minutes, the only sounds are of forks and knives scraping against plates and murmurs about how good the food tastes. When everyone is done, we disperse into different areas of the apartment. Tristan heads to his room to make his Saturday morning call to Angelica, Nate leaves for the gym, and Desiree and I are left alone in the kitchen. I wash while she stands next to me drying.

“So,” I start, not knowing how to broach the subject. “How are you doing? Really?”

She looks up at me and the eyes that were twinkling earlier now showing a glimpse of sadness. “I’m okay, I guess.”

I pass her the last plate and dry off my hands, leaning back against the counter. “You guess?”

She lets out a big sigh. “I don’t know how I’m supposed to feel. I always knew Stella had a crush on Dom, I just didn’t think they would ever actually become a thing.”

I nod, letting her continue.

“I’m not even mad that they’re together. It’s weird, but I can deal with that. It’s the secrecy, you know? For months, the people I love the most in the world have been lying to me, and I don’t know how to forgive that.”

“It’s always the ones we love the most that hurt us, because they’re the ones we let get close.” I pause and consider my next words. “I’ll admit, I don’t know either of them well, but I don’t think they were trying to cause you pain. They just didn’t handle things the way they should have.”

She releases a breath. “I should probably go see them.”

“Probably.” I chuckle. “We’re taking them to the airport this evening. You might want to talk to them beforehand, or it’s going to be a *long* car ride.”

“You mean I can’t just hide out here?” Desiree asks, a half-hearted attempt at a joke.

“Whenever you want, sunshine.” And I mean it.

I reach out and pull her toward me by the hips until she’s pressed close and kissing me. Her hands tangle in my hair and I let out a groan.

“I might never let you leave,” I whisper.

“I may just want to stay,” she responds in an equally hushed tone.

The feeling I had last night of being choked with emotion returns. I straighten my posture a bit, suddenly feeling too warm.

“Want to watch a movie before you go back home?”

She smiles up at me and *damn* if it doesn't make me feel like a million bucks.

“*Pride and Prejudice?*” she asks, batting her eyelashes at me. I pause a beat just to make her sweat. She's been begging me to watch the movie with her for the last week, and I've been dodging it, but right now, I would do anything to lift her mood. So, I agree.



“IT'S GOOD, RIGHT?!”

It's almost midday and the movie credits are rolling. I'm on the couch, Desiree snugly tucked into my side, her head leaning on my shoulder.

“Yeah, it's good,” I reassure her. “I thought so the first time I watched it, too.”

She straightens up at my confession. “You said you'd never seen it before!”

“No,” I reply. “You assumed I'd never seen it before. I just never corrected you.”

“Why didn't you say something? We could have watched a different one,” she insists.

“I didn't mind. And I figured after everything that's happened, you deserved to watch your favourite movie. Even if the hand flex is severely overrated.”

“Take that back!” She shoves my shoulder. “That hand flex is swoon-worthy.”

I can't help but laugh. “If you say so.”

Her face softens. “Thank you, and not just for the movie.”



I think I'm in love with him.

The one thing I swore wouldn't happen is happening. All I had to do was keep my feelings in check, but Eli was right, I can't do casual. Now what? I can't imagine not having him in my life.

I don't even know when it happened. But when he held me in the kitchen, kissing me slowly and helping me process everything that happened with Dom and Stella, I realised that somewhere along the line, he became my safe place to land.

I always thought the moment I fell in love would be beautiful and explosive. Like something out of the movies, but that is not the case.

There were no fireworks or big confession of love. *Not at all.* It was so soft and quiet, in all of his actions, that it snuck up on me.

Eli made his position on relationships crystal clear, and telling him how I feel now would do nothing but scare him off. A part of me hopes he may come around with time.

But the advice my mom gave me when I first started dating comes back to mind.

You date someone for who they are now, not who you hope they will become. You can't date your own expectations.

I hear her words loud and clear in my head as I change my clothes in Eli's room. I may not be dating Eli, but I can't waste my time hoping he may change his stance on relationships.

For now, I can keep these feelings under lock and enjoy this a bit longer. *I*

think.

As I'm doing the final button on my jeans, I hear the bedroom door open and click shut again. He doesn't say a word, but I don't have to turn to know it's Eli. He tends to be quiet, but his presence is all-consuming. When he enters a room, I feel him everywhere. Every hair on my body stands at attention, my heart begins to race, and my pussy begins to throb.

I feel his body heat against my back and then he's gently moving my hair to the side, kissing down the column of my neck down to my shoulder. I lean into him and he presses himself against my backside so I can feel just how turned on he is.

I turn to face him. I laugh as his eyes zero in on my bra as if he can see through it.

"None of that," I say with a smirk. "Or I'll never go back upstairs."

He raises his hands in mock surrender and lets loose a sigh. "Fine. You can go, but next time you aren't leaving without me hearing you whimper my name."

Liquid heat courses through my body as I reach up to kiss him. I let my tongue explore his mouth, delighting in the minty flavour.

"Deal," I say softly as I pull back.

I pull on a shirt, sling my bag over my shoulder, just as I'm about to walk out the door he calls out to me.

"You've got this, sunshine."



I ENTER my apartment and find Stella and Dominic sitting together on the couch. When they see me, Dom drops his arm he had wrapped around Stella, and she practically flies to the other end of the couch, putting as much space between them as possible. Her eyes are puffy, and I wonder if she even slept last night.

They watch me with apprehension as if they're afraid I might attack.

"This"—I point back and forth between them—"is weird. I don't know how I feel about it and it will take a while for me to get used to."

Stella sucks in a deep breath and presses herself even more firmly against

the couch. Dom stays seated, his face showing no emotion, but that in itself is telling for someone who is always full of smiles and laughter.

“But I *will* get used to it... eventually,” I continue. “But you both lied to me for months, and I don’t know how to wrap my mind around that.”

“I know.” Stella is the first to speak up. “And we’re so sorry. We wanted to tell you before, we just worried about how you would react.”

I don’t miss how she continually refers to the two of them as a unit.

“In Stella’s defense,” Dom cuts in. “She did want to tell you at Thanksgiving. I convinced her not to. I didn’t think the holidays were a good time.”

“And what was your excuse for this weekend?” I ask, feeling that spark of annoyance flair again. “At any point over the last few days, you could have mentioned something, but you still kept it to yourselves. What was the plan? To tell me when you got to the airport?”

From the look the two of them exchange, it’s clear that was, in fact, the plan. I let out an incredulous laugh. *Unbelievable.*

“Look it wasn’t a *good* plan,” my brother begins to speak again. “But there was never a good time and we didn’t want to spoil the weekend.”

I look over to Stella again. “We don’t keep secrets,” I say to her, the hurt evident in my voice. “You more than anyone know how much honesty means to me.”

“I know,” she whispers. “I’m really sorry, Des. I love him and I should have told you.”

“And I love her,” my brother cuts in.

Their words feel as if they have knocked the wind from me. I think back to the conversations where Stel had told me about how happy this new guy made her feel. I suck in a deep breath, just wanting to hear the truth.

“Okay, tell me how this started. From the beginning.”



WHEN ELI and I get back to my apartment after dropping Stella and Dom off at the airport, the place is in darkness.

“So you guys are okay then?” Eli responds as I go over my conversation

with Stella and Dom.

“We will be.” I shrug. “It’ll take some time to get over the lying, but they make each other happy. That’s the important thing.”

“Well, I’m proud of you. I know that it wasn’t easy for you,” Eli says as he flicks on the lights. “Yazmine’s not home?”

I shrug and check my phone. Sure enough, there’s a text from Yazmine from forty-five minutes ago that I somehow missed.

Yazmine: I’m spending the night at my parents! Dad’s got an early appointment and Mom has to work, so I’m taking him.

I shoot off a quick reply before tucking the phone back into my back pocket.

Me: Hope everything is all right, let me know if you need anything xx

“She’s sleeping at her parents’ tonight.” I look over at Eli who is standing in front of the large windows, his hands in his pockets. The streetlights illuminate his face, and cast the dark room in a slight orange glow.

He turns and faces me. The smirk that I once hated but has now become my personal favourite is etched on his face. He extends his arm just a bit, tilting his head to the side in an invitation for me to join him.

When I’m right in front of him, his gaze feels almost warm on my skin. I flush under his clear perusal, burning up from the look on his face that tells me he’s satisfied with whatever he’s found.

“Do you hear that?” Eli’s voice is so low I need to lean in slightly just to hear him.

“Hear what?” I ask, unsure what I’m supposed to be listening for.

“Silence. I don’t think we’ve ever had a place to ourselves before.”

I think about it and he’s right. Over the last few weeks, we’ve never been fully alone since both of us have roommates.

His hands reach out, pulling me close, and he kisses me *hard* as if he’s trying to mark me as his with his lips alone. When he moves to my jawline I pull away, taking hold of his hand, ready to lead him to my room.

“Where are you going, sunshine?” he questions, using the grip on my hand to yank me back toward him. I let out a little yelp of surprise. “No one’s here, no need to run back to your room.”

Before I can even utter a word, his lips are back on me, kissing down my

neck, all the way to the edge of my shirt before he takes it by the hem and pulls it over my head.

I gasp when he gives my collarbone a bite and then continues kissing me, and a shiver runs down my spine. He reaches the top of my breast and falls to his knees, his mouth pressing short kisses down my stomach until he reaches the top of my jeans and begins undoing the button. Eli unzips the pants and pulls them down along with my underwear in one swift movement causing me to I inhale a sharp breath.

I'm now standing naked in my living room—save for my bra—with my jeans and underwear pooled around my ankles.

“Against the glass, baby.”

My mind falters, trying to keep up with what's going on and the insane rush my body experiences anytime I'm near him.

“What?”

His hands whisper against my hip bones, guiding me toward the window.

“Lean against the glass. If I do this and you can still support yourself, then I'm not doing it right.”

I inhale sharply. “Maybe we should go back to the room?”

He makes a sound low in his throat, and I think that he's about to rise, but instead, he just looks up at me from where he is on his knees, pure desire in his eyes. “I'm good right here.”

I hesitate for a second. *Fuck it.* I step out of my jeans and shuffle back just a bit so that my back is now pressed against the window. I flinch when the cold glass touches my flaming hot skin, the sensation a slight shock to my system. I don't have time to dwell on it, because Eli has moved forward as well and wastes no time bringing his lips back to my skin. He places one gentle kiss against my pelvis, and then lower, and lower, until my eyes close and my head falls back against the glass. My nipples tighten. No longer concerned about the cold, I whisper under my breath, “*Oh my God.*”



Some guys say they hate going down on the women they're with. They either do it grudgingly or refuse to do it at all.

A bunch of pussies every last one of them, they might as well just fess up to the fact that they either:

A. Don't know what they're doing.

B. Can't find the clit.

Most times it's some combo of the two. If a study was done, I bet ninety percent of the guys who say that shit are single, or well on their way to being single. Because for every boneheaded man who says it there's another guy out there who loves it. I'm in that second category.

The taste of Desiree on my tongue is as close to a religious experience as I'm getting. The way she throws her head back and begins chanting my name under her breath is the only prayer I'm interested in.

"Eli," she says my name through gritted teeth as her hands tangle through my hair, holding my face even tighter against her pussy. "Oh god, that feels so good."

I continue focusing on her clit as she squirms. Her hips thrust out while the top of her body is still leaning against the window, creating an angle that she loves, judging by the guttural sound that leaves her mouth.

I press a hand against my now hard cock that's painfully confined in my pants, and let out a groan of my own. I can tell she likes that, the grip on my hair is so tight I wouldn't be surprised if she's pulling hair clean out of my scalp. I don't care. She could leave me with a bald spot and I still wouldn't

move. Nothing could stop me right here, right now, from making this girl come on my face.

“Eli,” she whimpers. “I... I think... *oh god...* I’m going to come. Fuck me, I’m so close.”

I keep with the same rhythm, I suck and swirl my tongue on her clit, enjoying the feel of her as she drips down my chin. I pull my hand away from where I’ve been stroking myself through my jeans and place two fingers at her entrance. Slowly, I begin to fuck her with them in time with my mouth. Her moans get louder, more frenzied. *God, I love hearing her fall apart for me.*

I’m overcome with greediness. I pull my fingers out from her and replace them with my tongue. Thrusting it in and out as my thumb moves in circles on her clit.

I pick up the pace, fucking her with my tongue as I work her bud with my finger. That does the job, and she comes with a cry and stream of curses. Only when the aftershocks of her orgasm stop do I pull my head away.

I stand up and watch her chest heave as she desperately tries to take in oxygen. There’s a sheen of sweat on her forehead and a few of her curls cling to her face. I’ve still never seen anyone more beautiful.

I interrupt her harsh intake of air by kissing her. I delve my tongue into her mouth so she can understand just how good she tastes and why being on my knees for her may just be my favourite place in the world.

“Turn around,” I whisper into her ear.

“The window,” is all she says, still gasping for breath, as if she’s read my mind. “Someone could see.”

“You weren’t concerned about it when I was tongue fucking you against the glass. I wouldn’t worry about it now. Turn around.”

She follows my instructions and places her hands on the window pane. Anyone could see us up here. It’s unlikely, but not impossible. It’s not a stretch for someone to look up from the sidewalk and see us right now, five stories above, light coming from the kitchen.

But I couldn’t care less. Let them see us. See me with this girl who makes me want to claim her even when I know I shouldn’t. Desiree brings out emotions in me that I didn’t even know I could feel anymore.

I unhook her bra and she removes her hands from the glass so I can slip it off of her.

With her hands back against the window, I remove my own clothes with

far more speed than I thought possible, but hell, I'm highly incentivised right now. I wrap my arm around the front of her body, squeeze one breast, and then tweak her nipple.

Her head lolls to the side and onto my shoulder; her eyes are closed, but the small smile on her face and the hum of pleasure tell me she's enjoying it. I move my hand and pinch her other nipple between my thumb and forefinger. A gasp escapes her as her eyes fly open, and I can't help the smirk that forms on my lips.

"You good, sunshine?"

"Mm-hmm."

"We've had this conversation before." I nibble at her ear. "Your words. Use them. I want to hear exactly how much you want this. How much you want to be fucked against the window where anyone can see you."

There's a small pause and I wonder if she's going to refuse to speak, but then I hear her voice, breathy and shallow. Music to my ears.

"Yes."

With one hand around her waist, I slip the other down her body, trailing my fingertips over her soft skin.

"Good girl," I growl out, remembering how much she loved the words of praise when we were on the phone. "For everyone else, you're sweet and shy, but for me..." I pull her earlobe between my teeth just as my fingers find her centre, hot and wet. "You're dirty and eager."

I remove my arm from her waist and her knees buckle slightly as I line myself up at her entrance before pausing.

Fuck.

"I don't have a condom," I say, not bothering to hide the bitterness in my voice. I curse myself out for not having put one in my wallet before I left home today, and for almost fucking her without one.

She pushes herself against me before panting out. "We don't need it. I'm on birth control, I trust you."

Those words may as well be an aphrodisiac, every last drop of blood rushes to the tip of my cock.

"I'm clean," I promise. I'd gotten myself tested the day after the basement show.

I catch her reflection in the glass of the window before I sink into her, feeling her inner walls clench around me. This is euphoria, what people refer to as floating on cloud nine. I bring my arm back around her waist to keep her

up and steady. Her hands are still on the glass, but they aren't providing much support, her sweaty palms have slid down on the window.

I keep her pressed tight against me as I thrust into her. No matter how many times we've had sex over the last few weeks, every time feels like the first time.

"This sweet pussy was made for me, Desiree."

She turns her head to the side, and tilts it upward, seeking out my lips. I kiss her, gently at first, then harder, slipping my tongue into her mouth. They tangle, and it's sloppy and hot and brings us each closer to our tipping point.

I move my fingers faster on her clit as I continue pounding into her. "Say my name, Desiree." I'm breathless. *How can it feel this good?* "I want to hear you say my name when you come. Tell me who's doing this to you."

She lets out a moan and squeezes tightly around me, three times in rapid succession, and I swear my soul leaves my body. When a desperate groan escapes me, the sound of her giggling snaps my eyes open. *Fucking hell, she did it on purpose. She's a succubus.*

I withdraw and slam into her again. "You're a little devil, sunshine," I growl, keeping my fingers focused on her clit. "I need you to be good and come for me. *Right. Now.*"

"Eli!" Desiree screams my name as she comes. Her pussy clenches around me and it pushes me over the edge.

"Fuck, that's it, baby, just like that," I say, feeling my balls tingle with anticipation. I pump into her a few more times and then lose it, coming so hard that I see stars as I fill her with every last drop.

When I pull out of her, she turns around, throws her arms around my neck and kisses me fervently. She pulls back and looks me in the eyes as if searching for something before she speaks.

"Look." There's nervousness written all across her face. "I know that we don't spend nights together. Finding out that my brother and best friend are dating was the exception, but do you want to stay tonight? I mean, I have the place to myself and it seems like, I don't know..." Her words trail off.

She's right, we don't usually spend the night together. It's never been something I was interested in, and with one floor between us, it never seemed necessary. But right now? I would do whatever it takes to wipe that anxious look off her face, and I'm not ready to say goodbye to her. So, the answer comes easy enough. "I'll stay."



It's late. I don't know how late, but I've been laying here in Eli's arms for so long that I've lost track of time. I'm so comfortable that I don't want to move an inch, having this time alone with him feels perfect.

We've been playing a stupid game of truth or dare—minus the dare—as we lie here. Most of the questions have been simple, things I would have offered up to him without any prodding at all. So, when I ask him a more serious question, I can tell it throws him for a loop.

“Why are you so against relationships?” I ask quietly, he pauses for so long that I almost wonder if he's not going to answer. “I'm not trying to change your mind or anything. I just want to understand.”

He closes his eyes and I feel him tense under me, as he decides how to respond.

“I grew up in Brinkley, a small farming town three hours outside of the city,” he starts. “Memories from my childhood are pretty limited. But there are some things that are impossible to forget. Good memories. Trips to the zoo with my parents, the first time I rode a bike without training wheels, when Dad got me my first drum kit—god, mom *hated* that.”

I smile at the thought of a young Eli, banging on the drums in the house.

“But nothing sticks out to me more than how in love my parents were. And that's saying something, because I don't think that's the sort of thing a seven-year-old boy typically registers, but they were *always* touching. They held hands, cuddled on the couch, kissed each other every chance they got. That sort of thing. Dad worshipped the ground she walked on.”

I don't speak, allowing him the space to talk. He absently trails his fingers up and down my arm. I squeeze him closer, hoping that the feel of me being near will help calm his anxious energy as he opens up to me.

"I don't remember them ever having so much as an argument," Eli continues. "One day she was with us, the next she was gone. I don't know what happened, and Dad will be damned if he ever talks about it. All I know is that the woman I called Mom for eight years left me and her four-year-old son behind. She disappeared and never looked back. No explanations, not that I'm searching for them now." His jaw clenches.

"My dad crumbled. If a human can be described as being hollow, that was him. She was his world. When she left, she might as well have taken him with her. After that, he did the bare minimum for me and my brother, he could barely look at us. Aunt Rosa, his sister, says it's because we're spitting images of our mother, but I think that's a pretty bullshit excuse for not caring for your own kids."

I feel a knot of anger form in my stomach. How could a mother abandon her children in this way? And his father? I'm sure he was suffering, but his children needed him. I wish I could turn back time and do something to make young Eli feel more protected.

"If it weren't for my aunt, I don't know what we would have done. She stepped up when Dad stepped down. Took me to school, took care of Elliot, and made sure that we had proper meals... all of it. After some time, Dad started coming around; he's better now, but not by much. I'm gone most of the year, so it's not like I need any of his attention, but Elliot is still in high school and has been getting into trouble. No one can reign him in. Not that my dad has tried." He lets out a deep sigh. "If that's what love and relationships can do to a person, take someone who is strong and full of life, and reduce them to nothing... I'm good."

I stay quiet, absorbing his words. I'm not sure what reasoning I had expected from him, but that wasn't it. What I feel for him expands in my chest until it's as if I might explode.

Yet, I remain quiet, realising now more than ever that I cannot tell him how I feel. In no way is he ready for that, it would only terrify him.

I raise my head, placing a kiss on his cheek.

"Thanks for telling me," I whisper into the darkness.



PARENTS CAN REALLY DO a number on us, I think to myself as I grab my camera off of the shelf.

It's been two weeks since the night Eli told me about how his mom left. It absolutely broke my heart. I could tell he wanted to sound indifferent, as if it didn't bother him anymore. But I can see what an impact it's had on him.

Clearly, we had very different childhoods. My parents' relationship was everything I've dreamed of having for myself one day, whereas his parents broke his heart so thoroughly that he would rather throw away the pieces than try to reassemble them.

My cell phone buzzes and pulls me away from my thoughts.

Eli: Here.

I put the strap around my neck, letting the large camera hang in front of me, and walk to the door. Yaz is in the kitchen, headphones in her ears as her hips sway to whatever music she's listening to. When she sees me, she pops out one of her earbuds.

"Going out?" she asks, with a wiggle of her eyebrows.

"To Merchant." I grin, rolling my eyes.

"Have fun!" She puts the earbud back into her ear and resumes dancing. I feel like I haven't seen her much recently, as most of my time is spent either studying or with Eli, and she seems to be hanging out a lot more with Jaden. I make a note to self to plan a catch-up session for us; I need to know what's going on there.

I grab my big winter jacket and slip my arms through each sleeve, then step into my boots. Winter is in full effect, a cold front has passed through the city, making it impossible to be outside for more than five minutes without the air hurting your face.

I open the door and find Eli leaning against the opposite wall, donning his own black puffer jacket and shoes that do not seem warm enough for this weather. Our eyes meet and a lopsided grin stretches across his face. My heart flips.

"Ready to go, sunshine?"

I smile at the nickname. I doubt it will ever get old. The first time he called me that, I wanted to hit him. Now, every time I hear it, I glow inside like the words are actually uncovering a little ray of sun inside of me. “Yup!”

He reaches out his hand and I grab hold of it as we walk over to the elevators. The hallway is quiet, except for the swishing sound of our two coats brushing against each other.

“You taking pictures?” he asks, eyeing the camera around my neck.

“Yeah, I was hoping I could take some of the band while you play,” I respond as we step into the elevator. “To show at the next club meeting. Maybe I could submit some of them to the school newspaper, too,” I add this part quietly, feeling nervous all of a sudden.

The university photography club and the school newspaper often collaborate. They have club members take pictures to go with some of the articles, as well as a dedicated section where they sometimes display members’ work. I’ve been way too nervous to submit anything. The only people who have even seen my pictures are Yazmine, Jaden, and Eli; but they’ve all been encouraging me to send some pictures in.

“You know I think you should submit your pictures every month,” he says, tossing me a look out of the corner of his eye as we walk to his car. “I don’t know shit about photography, but your pictures are great. They deserve to be seen.”

I smile at him, once again glowing from his words. It’s little moments like these where it’s hard for me to keep my emotions in check. I haven’t told him how I feel, especially now that I know where his relationship phobia stems from. I don’t want to push him away.

Still, at times like this, I think the label isn’t even important. Every day we’re together, I’m more and more sure that he’s got my back, just as I have his. *What else could I need?*

We reach the back parking lot of Merchant, and I’m just about to get out of the car when Eli speaks up. “Sadie’s going to be in there.”

Something tightens in my chest as I settle back into my seat and look at him. He’s got his eyes fixed on the cobblestone wall of the building, refusing to meet my gaze.

“That’s fine,” I say, trying to convince myself. Over the last month, my interactions with Sadie have been far and few between. Partly because she goes out of her way to ignore my entire existence, but also because she terrifies me. If intimidation took a human form, I think it would be Sadie.

One look from her has me wanting to sprint to the nearest exit. Plus, she hasn't really been coming to rehearsals much recently.

"You sure?" He sounds apprehensive.

"Well, you didn't leave me with a lot of options here," I reply, not wanting to argue with him right now.

He runs his hand through his hair, making it messy and making him look more attractive than ever.

"I'm sorry, I should have told you before." He lets out a sigh. "I don't know how to handle this. She's friends with the guys, and she helps out the band, so she's around. I just wish that she wasn't so... Sadie." He grimaces. "I actually think you guys could be friends."

"Give that speech to her, not me," I say as I open the door and step out into the frosty air.

I hear him mutter something under his breath, but it sounds a lot like *I tried*.

If Sadie has a problem with me, then that's on her, although I wouldn't mind avoiding the tension when we're in the same room.

I hear the guys as soon as I enter the building, their loud voices carrying through the stage door that's been left slightly ajar. When Eli and I walk into the lounge, Nate stops talking mid-sentence.

"Look at what the cat dragged in." He ambles over and hugs me tight, spinning me around in a circle.

"Put me down, you idiot." I slap uselessly at his back as I hear both Tristan and Devin offering normal greetings to both Eli and me. "You're going to break my camera!"

Nate puts me back down with a laugh and I look over my shoulder to find Eli scowling, his gaze directed at Nate. He hates how affectionate Nate is with me, but over the last few weeks, I've gotten a lot closer to the guys, they're like brothers to me. Devin tends to be quieter, which is hilarious considering his position as the front man, but he's always kind. Every now and again, his girlfriend and cute-as-a-button daughter come to their practices. They may just be the most adorable family I've ever seen.

I personally love when Alex shows up and there's another girl in the room who will talk to me and doesn't hate my guts. Doesn't seem like today is that day, though.

Nate steps aside, and I suddenly wish he could spin me right out of the room. Sadie pins me with an icy stare that makes the outside weather feel

downright balmy in comparison. Ignoring me completely, she offers Eli a lackluster greeting before going to a table in the middle of the room. *All right, then.*

I leave the guys and walk over to the opposite side of the room to where Mick is looking at some receipts behind the bar.

“Hi, Mick,” I say, hopping up onto a stool.

He smiles warmly at me. “Des, you still keeping that boy in line?”

He chuckles and then goes back to the receipts in his hand. I laugh along with him. “Trying to.”

I glance over at Eli who now has two drumsticks tucked into his back as he bends over to move some chords around in the stage area. He looks way too good. The kind of good that will probably wind up with me on my knees.

“He’s treating you right, though?” Mick’s voice pulls me away from my dirty line of thought.

“He does.” I smile. “He’s... sweet.”

Mick laughs to himself. “Eli? Sweet? Don’t let him hear that.”

I tip my head back and laugh again. Eli probably would take that as an insult. Sweet may not be the right word to describe him, but he’s not the asshole I once thought either. He is so attentive, caring and thoughtful. I know if I asked him right now to drop everything and run laps around the city perimeter with me, he would do it, if he thought it would make me happy. My throat tightens when I think of how out of control my feelings for him have gotten and I try to brush them away for later.

The guys start playing, and I pick up my camera. I’m careful to keep my distance from Sadie who’s also taking pics and videos on her phone. She’s their social media manager by default. The first time I came to practice and got in her way, I thought she was going to bite my head off. She probably would have if Eli hadn’t stepped in. Rehearsals ended early that day, and I vowed to stay away from her. For the most part I’ve succeeded, since she hasn’t been coming to rehearsals much recently, or at least not the ones I’m at.

By the time the guys wrap up, I’ve got over a hundred pictures. The January deadline for the paper has already passed, but I’ve still got my work cut out for me to sift through all of these in time for the February issue.

“You ready to go?” Eli saunters up to me with a big smile on his face. He never looks happier than after he’s finished playing. It’s like everything in him comes alive when he’s up on stage. He places a peck on my lips and my

body is instantly thrumming, aching for more. “I can drop you back home before my shift.”

I nod. My least favourite nights of the week are when Eli works the bar at Merchant. I don’t get to see him until the following day since his shift ends late and I’m asleep when he gets home.

The drive back to the apartment is spent in comfortable silence until Eli clears his throat. “When are you going back to Stars Valley?” he asks out of the blue.

“The twenty-first, why?”

Final exam period starts next week and mine are all packed at the very end, which means that I won’t be going home for winter break until the very last moment. I’m excited to spend a couple of weeks with my family, although things are still strained with Stella and Dominic.

“Devin and Alex are having a ‘Friendsmas’ dinner.” He looks pained saying the word, and I can’t help the giggle that slips out of me. “The weekend before you leave. They invited both of us.”

“Oh.” I don’t know why the invite makes my stomach flips with nerves.

“You don’t have to come if you don’t want to. I know we aren’t—”

I cut him off, not interested in hearing the rest of that sentence. “No, I want to! Thanks for inviting me.”

I look out the window with a smile on my face, ignoring any concerns about what the future holds for us.



The house is brightly lit and filled with the scent of delicious food. If there's one thing Alex does, it's go all out for the holidays. She loves to decorate her home and host parties.

"Merry Christmas!" Alex exclaims as Desiree and I arrive at the house. She gives Desiree a quick hug before taking her jacket to hang it up in the coat closet by the door.

"It's not Christmas yet," I respond dryly as I slip my coat off.

"It is today, asshole," she shoots back.

"Merry Christmas," Desiree chimes in, interrupting our nonsense. "Your home is beautiful." She passes Alex a bottle of red wine we picked up on the way as she looks around. The house is open concept so you can see the kitchen, dining room, living area, and the stairs to the next level from where we are at the entrance.

"Thanks," Alex says, beaming. "I've only spent the last forty-eight hours cleaning. Come in, come in! You guys are the first ones here."

"We're here, we're here." Tristan's voice comes from directly behind us. I hear the storm door open and a cold breeze hits our backs as Tristan and Nate both shuffle in, forcing the three of us forward.

"Let's get this party started!" Nate bellows.

"Merry Christmas, you guys. Come in and shut the door," Alex says as she and Desiree walk toward the kitchen, intent on opening the bottle of wine. Desiree and Alex are whispering to each other and I hear Alex tell her that Zara is with her grandmother for the night.

“Everyone here?” Devin asks by way of greeting as he comes running down the stairs taking the steps two at a time.

Alex replies from the kitchen. “Waiting on Sadie, babe. Can you text her and see where she’s at? I don’t want the turkey to get cold.” I notice Desiree tense.

“No, we wouldn’t want the world’s worst holiday food to get worse now, would we?” He rolls his eyes, but obeys his wife regardless.

Part of me hopes that Sadie just skips tonight. It would probably make things a lot more comfortable for everyone. She and Desiree have a strained relationship at best, if that’s what it can be called. Whenever they’re in the same room, they give each other a wide berth and Sadie spends most of her time perfecting her ability to turn Desiree to dust with a single look.

I’m not even sure what it’s about anymore. Sadie seems to have moved on from our situation. Nate told me she was hooking up with someone else now, and if I didn’t know better, he looked a little peeved about it. So why she’s determined to go out of her way to make Desiree uncomfortable is beyond me. To her credit, Desiree is handling it all pretty well.

Still, when Sadie walks into the room a while later, dressed in all black—always in the holiday spirit—I see Desiree shudder just a bit. As if wishing she could hide in a corner. My jaw clenches and, before I know it, I’ve moved across the room and slung my arm around her, unable to stop the need to try and soothe her.

Luckily, Alex doesn’t notice a change in the atmosphere, or chooses to ignore it, and claps her hands to get everyone’s attention. She then raises a glass filled with red wine.

“I just want to say thank you all for coming.” She’s in complete hostess mode now. I grin as I see Devin watching her with pure adoration. “I know exam season is upon you all, so I appreciate it. The food is ready to go, so dig in!”

Needing absolutely no further instructions, Nate and Devin, by far the two biggest guys in the room, grab plates and make a beeline for the food.

“If you guys could leave some food for everyone else, that would be great,” Alex calls out blandly.

Dinner goes well and if there is any tension at the table, Alex quickly diffuses it, refusing to let it fester into more. When everyone is done eating, she convinces the six of us to play a game of Uno. The game dissolves into chaos when Nate wins the third round of the night and we all begin to get

suspicious.

“There’s no way he can win this often! He’s cheating!” Devin remarks, eying Nate with clear distrust.

I’m not particularly invested in the game, but I’m still ready to erase the shit-eating grin on Nate’s face. “Check him, he’s probably holding cards.”

Bingo. Nate’s face falls and no one misses a beat. Suddenly, accusations begin to fly, fingers are pointed, and I’m having the time of my life. Even Sadie joins in, dropping her attitude for a minute.

When Devin stands and begins to approach him, Nate presses himself further into the sofa putting his hands out in front of him.

“Back off, man, I’m not cheating.”

“Bullshit!”

Nate sticks out a foot so that Devin can’t get any closer to him, but nothing can stop Devin from seeking justice.

“Hold him down,” Dev says to no one in particular. Desiree and Sadie, both laughing, stand from their seats. They pause as they assess each other, and I swear for a moment all the levity of the moment is sucked out of the room. Everyone is focused on whether there’s about to be a different, much bigger issue at hand. However, the moment passes and they both turn their gazes back to tonight’s target.

Sadie pushes down on one of Nate’s shoulders while Desiree holds down the other. He tries to shake them off, but is thrown off when Devin grabs him by the legs, causing him to shift in his seat, and when he does, a single card falls from underneath him.

Alex doesn’t miss a thing. “Cards!” She points as a second, and then a third, slide from beneath him.

Nate struggles to fight off his three attackers as more and more cards fall from underneath him.

“You’re such a fucking cheat.” Tristan laughs watching from the other side of the room. “I knew there was no way you were winning this much.”

Sadie walks away, shaking her head with a grin as she goes to grab the glass of wine she abandoned when she went on the attack. Desiree is still laughing and shifts her position on the couch. The lights from the Christmas tree in the corner light up half of her face and I have to stop myself from staring. Our gazes lock, and something warm spreads through my chest.

“Just keeping you guys on your toes, that’s all,” Nate counters.

“Mm-hmm.” Desiree purses her lips in an attempt to stifle her laugh. “I

think I agree with Tristan. You're a cheat." She looks at all the cards Nate hid and bursts out laughing again, hard. The sound's contagious and it makes my soul feel lighter than it's ever felt as I join in. Tristan reaches out his hand and high-fives her.

"Whose side are you on, Des?" Nate complains.

"Not yours," she responds, struggling to catch her breath.

I'm in awe of her. She'd told me how nervous she was moving to Winnipeg because she didn't know anyone here, but looking at her now, you would never know that, just a few months ago, she was this shy, timid girl who probably hated my guts. She fits in so well here with my friends, joking with them as if she's known them her forever.

It's hard to imagine there was a time where she wasn't a part of my life. Every moment before her was a waiting period I didn't know I was being forced to endure.

She turns her face toward me, her eyes twinkling.

And just like that, I know.

I'm falling for her.

Fuck.



Christmas break back home was filled with the typical holiday traditions; listening to Christmas music while we put up the tree together, full days dedicated to holiday movies, nights of baking, and Stella and I going on our annual midnight skate on Christmas Eve. Things are still a bit awkward between us but we're slowly working toward getting back to how we were before.

It was exactly what I needed after final exams, most of them kicked my ass, except for Canadian Politics. I did surprisingly well in that class, and it turned out to be my favourite of the term.

So much so that I ended up registering last-minute for another Political Science course.

Still, when I open the door to my apartment I'm hit with an overwhelming sense of peace. I missed Yazmine, and this cozy place I've grown to consider my home away from home.

But most of all, I missed Eli. My guy who isn't actually *mine*. I can't wait to see him.

We spoke on the phone every night, reminding me of the fall Reading Week. When we weren't talking, we were texting each other. There were moments where he seemed a bit off or distracted, cutting some conversations short, but I assume it had more to do with him being back home with his family.

My parents laughed at me for being glued to my phone, but Dominic stayed relatively quiet on the subject. We're also trying to patch things up

between us. Sometimes, I can't tell if the lying hurt more coming from him or Stella.

Dom never told me what his thoughts were on Eli, and I never asked. After all that happened in Winnipeg, my brother's thoughts and opinions on my own love life didn't really seem all that important to me anymore.

I have a feeling there was some sort of exchange between Eli and Dom when Stella and I were in my room, but Eli said that everything had been fine. I still don't quite believe him, but I let it go all the same. If neither of them want to talk about it, then it probably wasn't that big of a deal.

I text Yazmine to let her know I'm back home. She's working a day shift at the mall today since classes don't start until tomorrow.

Yazmine: Welcome back! Check the fridge for a surprise ;)

I open the fridge and see a plate of chocolate-covered strawberries drizzled with white chocolate. My mind drifts back to the evening before I left for the break, Yaz and I had one of our typical nights of watching shows on the Food Network, and we'd started discussing what the best and worst food combinations were.

"Okay, what's the best?" I ask.

Yaz purses her lips for a second, deep in thought. "Hmmm." she leans back. "Chocolate and strawberries?"

"One hundred percent!" I agree. "There's nothing better than a chocolate covered strawberry."

"Okay," she continues. "But what's the worst food combo?"

I don't even have to think about it.

"Ketchup on mac and cheese."

She twists her face as if she just tasted it. "People do that?"

"Tons of people." I grimace. "My brother is one of them."

"Ew. I was going to say peanut butter and hamburgers."

I look at her in absolute horror.

"There are some fucked-up people out there." She laughs.

Me: You made these???

Yazmine: I had a craving... figured you would appreciate it.

Me: You weren't wrong, thank you. I hope you're not planning on switching roommates next year, because I'm not letting you go!

Yazmine: Never! Love you.

I take the plate out of the fridge and put a few of the strawberries into a bowl. When I've settled onto the couch, I dial Eli's number. He picks up on the second ring, and I hear a ton of background noise. I try to recall our last conversation, but I don't think he was working today.

"Hey, sunshine." His voice is low and tempting. Even through the phone, it leaves my body warm. "Welcome back."

I hear Nate's laugh in the background, and I'm done trying to guess where they could be.

"Hey!" I try and fail to keep my voice from betraying how happy I am to speak to him even though we were in almost constant communication over the last week and a half. "Where are you right now? I was thinking we could hang out."

"Mickey decided to take us out for an impromptu lunch." Eli sounds confused, as if the concept of going out for lunch is new to him.

"Can't a man be nice?" I hear Mickey say in the background.

"I'll swing by your place when I get back home," Eli says.

"Perfect, I'll see you then." I almost tell him that I missed him, but think better of it. When it comes to talking about how I feel, I have to be careful. Sometimes it seems like Eli is a horse, and if I say something wrong, he'll get spooked and run away.

After we hang up, I kick my feet up on the coffee table and flip through the channels until I find a cheesy small-town rom-com, movie and begin eating the strawberries.



HOURS PASS, the movie is over, and Yazmine has come home. We had a bit of a catch-up before she left for her room for a post-work nap. I'm scrolling through my phone when there's a knock at the door.

I check through the peephole before opening the door. When I see Eli, I all but fling it open. “Hey! You didn’t tell me you were on your way.”

He places a quick kiss on my lips. “I wanted it to be a surprise.” He’s holding two red Tim Hortons’ cups and hands me one. “Double double.”

“Well, it worked! Thanks,” I say, accepting the cup of creamy goodness. “How was lunch?”

His brows furrow at the mention of his outing, and I’m not sure why I suddenly feel nervous.

“About that.” He hangs his coat on one of the hooks and slips off his shoes, not quite making eye contact. “You won’t believe what Mickey wanted to tell us.”

I’ve gotten pretty good at reading Eli’s expressions over the last few months, but I can’t figure out what he’s feeling right now. He looks apprehensive, as if he’s worried I won’t like what he’s about to say.

I lead us back to the living room, putting my cup on the coffee table, trying to ignore my nervous jitters.

“What did he say?” I don’t know why I feel like I’m about to throw up. Surely, Mick wouldn’t take them out for lunch to deliver bad news.

“The night of the Halloween show, a talent scout came to watch us play. Apparently, he and Mick went to university together. The guy, Jeremy, had a layover in Winnipeg and so Mick asked him to stop by.” Eli is speaking so fast that my mind struggles to keep up.

Halloween night feels like forever ago. So much changed that night for me and Eli, and potentially for the band as well, it seems.

I think back to that night, *and then I remember*. The guy wearing a suit at the bar. I thought it was weird that a businessman had just showed up in the middle of a Halloween function, but I didn’t pay him too much attention. *I guess I was focused on other things*.

“Mick said he wasn’t planning on telling us unless he heard back, and I guess Jeremy liked what he saw because he gave him a call over Christmas.” Eli takes a breath.

“He wants us to play at a small venue in Alberta next month.” I can see it clearly now, the light in his eyes. He’s buzzing with excitement. This is the kind of break every small band hopes for, and Merchant Revival is getting it. “If the show goes well, he’ll have us set up with someone to record music. In an actual studio, Des!”

My cheeks hurt from smiling so hard. From the day I first laid eyes on

Eli, I don't think I've ever seen him look this happy. He does his best to keep his emotions close to the vest, so to see him so openly excited makes my chest feel like it's cracking in two in the best way.

"This is amazing, Eli!" I squeal, throwing my arms around him and squeezing him tight. "I don't know why, but when you walked in, I thought it was bad news. You seemed anxious. But this is amazing. Are the rest of the guys freaking out? I bet Nate is losing his shit right now."

"Yeah, they're all pumped." His voice is a little lower now, the excitement in his eyes replaced by some other emotion. "But that's not all."

The nervous look from earlier is back, and so is that sinking feeling in my stomach.

"If everything goes well in Alberta, Jeremy would set us up with a mini tour in June across different provinces." I'm confused as to why he seems so uneasy when I know this is something that he's wanted for ages. "It would be small venues, bars mostly... maybe some local theaters, but it'll be good exposure. And all of the travel and expenses would be covered by Jeremy's company."

"Eli," I say looking him straight in the eye. "This sounds like the break you've been waiting for. Why do I feel like you're not as excited as you should be?"

"It's not that." He pauses, and I can almost see the gears turning in his head as he tries to figure out how to word whatever it is that he wants to say. "I'll be gone for the *entire* month of June."

He really emphasizes "entire" and I finally pick up on what the issue may be.

"Okay." I try to keep my voice even. "A month isn't that long. Maybe I can come to a show!"

"Yeah?" I see a spark of excitement flash through his eyes.

"Absolutely! And we'll talk all the time. I'll be able to live the life of a rockstar vicariously through you."

He laughs, though the smile on his face doesn't quite reach his eyes. "Yeah, okay. We'll figure it out."

Internally, I'm screaming. *We'll figure it out*. He was worried about going away for a month. This is the first time I've ever even heard him refer to us in any kind of future sense. And my body is thrumming with heat over it. I throw one knee over his lap so that I'm straddling him, and bring my forehead down to his.

“I’m so happy for you, Eli.” I plant a soft kiss on his lips. His hands grip my waist as I grind down against him where he’s already hard. “You guys are going to kill it, I can feel it,” I whisper.

I rock my hips a bit faster, loving the way he feels. Loving *him*.

“Is that all you feel?” He smirks against my lips.

I laugh and he kisses me harder.

We’re broken out of our own little world by the sound of someone clearing their throat from the hall. Not *someone*, Yazmine. I had forgotten that we weren’t alone.

I scramble off of Eli’s lap, trying to fix my shirt which has now somehow twisted to the side.

“Am I interrupting?” Yazmine asks in an innocent tone, and she seems to be holding back a smirk.

“No!” I rush out.

At the same time, Eli says, “Yes.”

I kick him in the leg with my foot. “No, you’re not interrupting,” I side-eye him. “I was just... congratulating Eli. He’s about to be famous!”

Eli laughs as Yazmine raises one eyebrow, walking further into the living room.

“Consider me intrigued.”



I want to throw up.

I don't think I've ever been this nervous about a show in my life.

Usually, I feel good, eager even, to get out there and do our thing. Today, though? I would like to crawl into a hole. Every one of us has dreamt about this moment for years, about finally getting the chance to be heard outside of the Winnipeg scene. Yet, here we are in Canmore, Alberta, and we all look like we're about to pass out and die. The nerves are real.

We're playing at a small dive bar called The Raven. If the bust of Edgar Allen Poe in the corner of the bar is any indication, I think it's a reference to his poem. Nestled at the bottom of a dead-end street with the Rocky Mountains as a backdrop, the woodsy cabin look of the building gives absolutely nothing away about the dark interior of the pub. The place almost reminds me of another version of Merchant; that should provide me with some peace and comfort, but no.

I peek out from behind the edge of the curtain that closes the stage off from the rest of the bar, to see who's out there. Not a lot of people are here, and those that are probably just came to enjoy a night out, not for our show. From what I could tell driving into town, there weren't a lot of options. Jeremy is standing in the back, talking to a woman he introduced as his colleague Samantha, Sammie for short.

Fifteen minutes and we're on. I close the curtain and step back.

Devin is pacing back and forth from one end of the area to the other, Tristan is leaning against the wall with his eyes closed, and Nate keeps

muttering under his breath and shaking his hands out. *We're a mess*. It would be funny if it weren't so damn sad.

My phone starts to ring and I snap out of my panicked daze to pull it out of my pocket. I see an incoming FaceTime call from Desiree. I don't hesitate to pick up. I hate to admit it, but we haven't even been here for two days and I miss the fuck out of her. She feels an ocean away even though we're in the same country.

"Sunshine," I say, as I'm greeted by her smiling face on the screen. Instantly, my anxiety starts to ease.

"Hi, I just wanted to wish you good luck before the show. How are you feeling?"

"Nauseous," I respond truthfully.

She makes a face that says she doesn't love that. "The guys?"

I turn the camera so that she can see my surroundings. They're all so busy psyching themselves up that they haven't even batted an eye at my phone conversation. I flip the camera back to myself.

"Yikes." She winces. "Well, I was going to tell you this when you got back home, but it sounds like you could use the distraction."

"Hit me with it, baby," I plead, laughing as she makes the cutest little face in reaction to the endearment. It happens every time I say it, like clockwork, and I love it.

"Okay." She sets the camera down and sits back. "It's totally no big deal, but my pictures are getting published in *The Uniter*."

I'm not surprised, her pictures are all fantastic. There was no doubt the school newspaper would accept her submissions. "That's amazing! We'll have to celebrate when I get back."

"We'll celebrate that and your show."

"Let's see if there's anything to celebrate first," I reply grimly. Looking at my bandmates, I'm not feeling optimistic.

"Just the fact that you're out there is worth celebrating. Now, go kill it! Call me when you get back to the hotel."

"Yes ma'am." I salute and then hang up, the sound of her laughter ringing in my ears.

As I put the phone back in my pocket, I find that my heart rate has returned to normal and my nausea is nowhere to be found.

The effect she has on me is dizzying. I spent more time than I care to admit over the holidays trying to figure out how to handle my feelings for

Desiree. I had thought that what I felt for her was a simple attraction; I hadn't anticipated falling for her.

In a moment of panic—which took me a while to escape—I even considered breaking things off with her, but couldn't bring myself to do it. *It will be fine.* Despite my current emotions, we aren't in an actual relationship. And if my parents proved anything, it's that love isn't a permanent condition and can fade with time.

I can wait this out, and still have Desiree in my life.

I am in control. I won't become like my father.

I don't need to label what I'm feeling. I can just enjoy my time with a gorgeous girl who makes me laugh and forget about my issues for a while.

Desiree was right though. The fact that we're here right now is worth being excited about. Anything that comes after this is just icing on the cake. We can't let all the anxiety about what's to come ruin the current moment.

I take a couple of deep breaths, pick up my drumsticks, and begin twirling them between my fingers, doing my best to ground myself.

“You guys,” I say, attempting to rally the troops. “We've got to get it together.”

All of them turn to me.

“We've worked too hard to come this far and chicken out,” I remind them. “Whether or not Jeremy likes our performance doesn't matter. Let's just play and have a fucking good night!”

The guys nod their heads and murmur their agreements, and then I hear the MC speaking into the mic on stage.

“Please join me in welcoming our performers tonight. Coming from Winnipeg, Merchant Revival!”

It's our time to shine. We walk out onto the stage and take our positions. I count us in, and then the lights are on us.



THE SHOW GOES BETTER than we could have hoped. As nervous as we were, it didn't translate into the performance at all. The guys worked the stage and I didn't miss a beat. Three weeks' worth of constant practise paid off, and

we're all buzzing with energy.

"Holy shit!" Nate shouts when we get backstage.

"I'm dead," is Devin's only response.

I grab a bottle of water and chug it while Tristan throws himself into a nearby seat. We barely get a chance to catch our breaths before we hear hands clapping. I turn my head and see Jeremy and Samantha walk into the backstage area.

"You did a fantastic job, all of you!" Jeremy exclaims. "Don't you agree, Sammie?"

"I do, I do." Her dark hair is held in a ponytail that bounces with each word. "You guys did great."

"Here's what we're going to do," Jeremy says as he begins to pace, his hand running over his face. "Once you boys get home tomorrow, you can expect an email from me within forty-eight hours. That will give me enough time to organize a slot for you all to record. I'm thinking of an EP. No more than six songs. Of course, I'll need to hear some snippets of any other songs you have beforehand, so that I have an idea of what we're getting, but I'll leave most of the creative direction up to you guys."

I nod, doing my best to keep up with the information being thrown at us right now. *Recording an EP*. I can barely believe what's happening.

"How much will this cost us?" Devin jumps in, always the realist and our voice of reason.

Jeremy laughs, not missing a beat, while Sammie stands next to him with a smile on her face.

"I'll shoot you straight, boys. There will be a fee, but I do think you'll find it reasonable. Fifteen percent of whatever earnings you make."

"Can we think about it?" Tristan pipes up.

"Of course." This time it's Sammie who speaks up. "Take as much time as you need. I think there's something special here that should be capitalized on, but you guys think on it for a few days."

We're all quiet for a moment as we absorb their words and the deal that seems too good to be true. It's the only thing we talk about the whole way back to the hotel, on the trip to the airport, and during the flight. By the time we touch down in Winnipeg, we've looked at it from every angle imaginable and have all agreed that we're going to take them up on their offer.

We're all amped up with excitement as we discuss our plans for June. So when Devin announces that he got a text from Alex, telling us to all meet at

my and the guys' apartment, we don't even question it. We all just pile into one taxi and head home.

Only when Tristan opens the door and we find the space decorated with streamers and a large congratulations banner hanging on the window do we clue in on what's going on. Standing in the middle of the living room are Alex, and Zara, Sadie, Yazmine, and *Desiree*.

"Congratulations," they yell in unison, Sadie rather half-heartedly, but I know that these sorts of things are not her forte, guaranteed she got dragged here by Alex. But this "congratulations party"—the decorations, food, music—has my girl's name written all over it.

My girl. The thought is laughable, considering I can't find the balls to tell her how I feel. Saying it out loud would make it too real, too risky, and it's not a chance that I'm willing to take.

Desiree steps away from the line, her arms reaching out toward me. "Congratulations, Eli." She presses a quick kiss to my lips and I have to resist the urge to back her against the table and pull her skin-tight jeans down. *Yeah, I missed her. A lot.* "To all of you!" She smiles at the guys.

Alex runs to hug Devin with one arm, their daughter almost squished between them, while Sadie and Yazmine watching the various displays of affection from the living room with a touch of awkwardness. Yazmine has been coming to a few of our gigs now, though she has yet to "click" with the others like Desiree has. I'm just glad Desiree now has an extra buffer when it comes to Sadie.

"You know," Yazmine starts to say. "It was alarmingly easy to get the superintendent to open the door for us to do this. I'm thinking Des and I should consider getting some extra security for the apartment." Desiree grimaces and nods in agreement and we all laugh.

Everyone starts digging into the food and drinks as they chat and laugh. Meanwhile, I think about how fucking lucky I am to have all these people in my life, when three years ago I had no one.

Not even my own family.



I walk to class with my jacket unzipped; I forgot how good it felt not to be constantly freezing.

It's the end of February, but the weather feels like spring. Both Yaz and Eli have warned me that I shouldn't get used to it, and that at any point we may get smacked with another cold front, but I'm soaking it all in now while I have the chance.

Second-semester classes have been a breeze, and I'm thankful because I definitely haven't been putting in as much time and effort into this term, compared to last.

Yazmine helped me get a job with her at the mall. The work isn't hard, mostly just folding clothes and inventory, but I've been picking up all the hours I can. I even opted to stay in Winnipeg over the winter Reading Week so that I could get some extra shifts. And to see Eli.

When I'm not at work, I'm trying to squeeze in moments with him. He's been even busier than me, with constant band practices and work taking up most of his time, as the guys prepare to record their EP in April. Needless to say, studying has fallen by the wayside. Finals are looming, with just over a month to go, and although I got by on pure luck on midterms, it's clear I need to get my shit together asap. Not to mention, I still haven't decided on a major.

When philosophy class ends, I go straight to the library. I swore to myself that I would spend the rest of the day studying. I have no work and Eli is going to be practising all afternoon, so my schedule is wide open. As much as

I would love to unwind on my couch and watch *Schitt's Creek* for the fiftieth time, I know that I need to get some actual work done.

And I do, for the most part. I spend nearly three hours at the library, working on my City Politics homework before my phone begins to buzz on the wooden table, earning me some glares from nearby students. I look to see who's calling and I'm surprised when I see Tristan's name on the screen. I definitely consider him a friend now, but normally he would text me if he had something to say. The fact that he's calling me when they're supposed to be in the middle of practice has me worried.

I silence my phone, and send him a quick message saying I'll call him back in a second. Quickly, I pack up my stuff and leave. Once I'm out in the hallway, I dial his number.

He picks up on the first ring. "Hey, Tristan. What's up?"

"Des." He sounds distressed and my chest immediately tightens. "I'm sure Eli would kill me if he knew I called you right now, but he wouldn't talk to us."

"Talk to you about what?" I ask as I start to walk, my panic rising, I desperately need to get out and breathe some fresh air instead of being surrounded by other students.

"We were practising when he got a call, he said it was his aunt, but whatever she said to him freaked him out. He pretty much ran out of here. We tried asking him what was wrong, but he just kept saying he had to go home."

"How long ago?" I ask as I finally step outside.

"Twenty minutes. We thought he would call when he got back to the apartment, but we haven't heard anything yet. Maybe he'll talk to you." I want to believe that's true. I pick up my pace and book it back to our building. If he left twenty minutes ago, then he must have made it home already.

"Got it," I say as I make it to the crosswalk. "I'm almost home. I'll text you when I have an update.

"Thanks."

"Of course."



“ELI! OPEN UP,” I call out as I knock on the door.

Finally, he opens the door wide for me. He doesn’t say anything, just turns his back and walks down the hallway where the bedrooms are. I step into the apartment, unsure what the hell it is that I’m walking into.

I close the door behind me, and slowly make my way to his room where I can hear loud music playing.

Chaos. That’s a nice way of putting what I find.

There are clothes strewn about on the floor, and he’s haphazardly throwing things into a duffle bag on his bed. “Eli,” I shout, trying to be heard above the music. “What’s going on, why are you packing? Are you going somewhere?”

“Brinkley,” he says the word like it’s a curse he can’t stand to utter.

I can’t take it anymore. I grab the remote to his stereo and turn it off. “Are you going to visit your dad?”

He laughs as if this is the most ridiculous idea. “No.”

“Okay.” I draw the word out, unsure how to break through to him right now. It’s like he’s in a trance. “So why the rushed trip home? Tristan said you left mid-practice.”

“He’s in the hospital.” His voice is so hushed, I can barely understand the words he’s saying.

“What?”

He spins on his heels and faces me. There are tears threatening to fall from his eyes. I’ve seen Eli in a lot of different ways, but never like this. Never so defeated and broken down.

“Aunt Rosa called. Elliot overdosed on God knows what, and he’s in the hospital.” His words are clearer now but still strangled and it tears my heart in two. I know how much he wants to help his brother, and the worry Elliott has put his family through recently, so I can’t imagine how devastating this must be for Eli. “I’ve got to see him.”

He begins to spin back to his bag, but I catch his arm and wrap my arms around him. Eli tenses for a second, before squeezing me back tightly, as if trying to pull me into himself. I shut my eyes tight, wishing I could take his

pain away.

“Eli,” I murmur. “You can’t drive home like this right now.” I can see that he’s not doing well, panic written all over his face. He’s not in the right frame of mind to be driving at top speed on the highways.

“I don’t have a choice,” he replies, finally turning back to his bag to zip it up.

“You do,” I say, sounding a lot more confident than I feel. There’s a good chance, knowing Eli, that he’ll flat-out refuse any help right now. “I’ll drive. Give me fifteen minutes to pack a bag and I’ll come with you.”

An unreadable expression crosses his face, shock, maybe? He may actually be appalled. “You want to come to Brinkley?”

I wouldn’t take it that far, it’s not on my top five list of places to visit, but it would be cute to see the little farm town he grew up in. And maybe... maybe I can help him right now. Be what he needs.

“I don’t know how long I’ll be gone for,” he starts again. “I want to be there until I’m sure he’s okay, and you have school.”

“So do you,” I persist. “I want to be there for you, Eli. Let me. I’ll take my laptop, and send profs emails when we’re there. I’m sure it won’t be that long.” I grab his hand and give it a quick squeeze. “*He’s going to be all right.*”

“Okay.” He’s looking at me as if I’m a unicorn and I’m sure I have the same expression. I can’t believe he actually agreed. *Without putting up a fight.* My heart soars, knowing that he trusts me enough to help him through this.

“Okay,” I say back to him and release his hand. “I’m going to pack. When you’re done here, come upstairs and get me, okay? And we’ll get going.”

As I’m about to head to the door he grabs me by the arm, swinging me back toward his body. He kisses me, forcefully yet slowly, like he’s trying to communicate using this kiss alone. It leaves me so dazed that I almost let *the words* slip from my mouth, but I catch myself before I make a mess of things while his emotions are already raw.

The last thing Eli needs right now is a love confession.

Once upstairs, I begin putting my stuff into a bag. I pack enough clothes for five days, hoping that will be enough, even though I bring at least a month’s worth of underwear. *You can never be too careful.*

I send a quick voice memo to Tristan, reassuring him that things will be

okay. I leave out the key details. It's not my place to tell him what's happened, that's up to Eli, but I let him know that we're going to Brinkley for a few days.

Just as I finish packing there's a quiet knock at the door. I grab my bag off of the bed and go to open it.

Eli stands there in his black leather jacket, and he looks so out of sorts. His hair is wild from having continuously run his hand through it. I wish there was something more I could do, but I'm at a loss.

"Let's go," I say, holding my palm out.

He watches me carefully for a moment before he drops the keys to his car into my hand, and then we're on our way out of the city.



Desiree and Brinkley. Two parts of my life that I never saw merging, but here we are.

We turn right onto the exit for town and I hold my breath in the passenger seat of my car. The drive down here was relatively smooth, Desiree didn't force conversation, allowing me time to figure out how I was going to handle things once I saw my brother.

"Let's go straight to the hospital," I say as we cross the town boundary. I would love to know what she thinks of this place seeing it for the first time. It's a quaint farming town where I spent every waking moment I can remember desperate to get out. I hardly ever saw any beauty in it.

"Sure," she says quietly, looking a bit dazed by her surroundings. I wonder if having her drive the whole time may have been too much. It's a drive I'm comfortable with, but if you aren't used to it, it can be taxing. I tried to make her switch with me halfway, but she refused and insisted she was fine. "Tell me the directions."

I guide her down a few roads before we pull up in front of the Brinkley Medical Centre. Typical medical centres are huge buildings, stories high, teeming with doctors and patients. *Not here though.* It's a one-story building, just a bit larger than the local high school. Nothing spectacular, but they have the necessary equipment. Patients in dire need are usually stabilized here and then sent to Winnipeg for further treatment.

The parking lot is near empty with only a few cars scattered about, and I spot Aunt Rosa's car in the visitors' area.

There's an elderly woman working the front desk of the hospital; she looks familiar although I can't quite place her. However, she must recognize me, because as soon as she notices me her eyes grow sad, almost pitying, and she points down the hall.

"Room 102, hun," she says, her voice a whisper. I'm not sure for whose benefit that's supposed to be since there's no one else in the waiting room. "I think he's asleep, but you can still go on in."

Suddenly, I'm in a fog and my feet are stuck in place. I *can't* move.

A small, warm hand grabs on to mine and pulls me out of the haze. I shift my eyes from where they were staring blankly at the floor and glance at Desiree. She watches me with a worried look but still puts a soft smile on her face.

"Let's go," she murmurs, as if we're in our own world instead of in a hospital lobby. "You can do this."

My throat feels dry and I force myself to swallow. Holding on to Desiree like a life preserver, I start to move down the hallway.

I never realised until right now how much I hate hospitals. It doesn't matter how big or small they are, they're always terrible. The overhead lights are harsh, the whole place smells like antiseptic. Nothing about a hospital ever feels welcoming, it's just clinical and cold.

The door to room 102 is closed and I assume that my dad and Aunt Rosa are already on the other side. I reach out to open the door, but Desiree releases my hand and steps back. I turn around in surprise.

"I think this is a family moment," she says, reluctantly. "I'll wait out here."

Part of me wants to beg her to come into the room with me, and let her ground me. But Desiree's right. The first time she meets my family *shouldn't* be while we're all gathered around my overdosed brother in a hospital room.

"I'll be back soon," I reply.

"Take your time, I'll be here."

I watch as she takes a seat on a bench in the hallway, and then I open the door.

When I walk into the room, the lighting is so dim that it takes my eyes a second to adjust.

My dad is leaning against the wall across from the hospital bed, watching as his sister sits in a chair next to it, holding on to Elliot's hand. Her eyes are puffy with tears and I swallow hard at El's sleeping form. He looks far too

peaceful.

I don't know why I assumed that he would have tubes and machines hooked up to him at every available point, but aside from one IV needle at the top of his hand, he's unattached. His face is gaunt, his skin pasty; definitely the appearance of someone who has been through it. If I couldn't see him breathing right now, I would think they swapped him out with a wax figure.

Dad and Aunt Rosa glance up as the door opens, but my aunt is the first to speak. "I didn't know if you would be able to make it here today." Her voice is shaky; she's probably been crying all day.

"I'm glad you're here, son," Dad says, taking a few steps over to me and clapping me on the shoulder. I shake his hand off and sidestep him. I resist the urge to scream at him and let him have a piece of my mind.

Sure, Elliot isn't exactly an open book, but how the *fuck* did Dad miss this?

I move to the opposite side of the bed and stare down at my baby brother, asleep and unaware of all the pain he's caused the people around him.

"What happened?" I croak, my throat suddenly clogged with emotion.

"He was out with his *friends*, and he took pills of some sort." I can hear the tinge of anger in her voice now. The way she's looking at Elliott, I'm not sure whether she wants to hug him or slap him. *Probably both*. I know I sure as hell want to.

"He took too much and fell unconscious. Thank god one of them had the sense to call for help when they couldn't get him to wake up. We're lucky he was still breathing." I can tell she's holding back a sob. I clench my hand into a fist and release it, wishing there was a way to make this better. "The doctor said that the paramedics gave him an injection of Naloxone on sight, and they've had him on this drip since they brought him here."

Naloxone. Jesus Christ. That means they think he overdosed on opioids. What the fuck was he doing?

I finally turn to my dad, trying to keep my voice even. "And where were you for all of this?"

"Home." If he's feeling anything at all, he's keeping it well under lock. "He told me he was going out late last night, and you know how your brother is. I couldn't stop him if I wanted to."

I scoff, I hear the blood rushing in my ears. "Did you even try?"

Dad looks at me, a spark of defiance and fury in his eyes as if I've just

insulted his stellar parenting skills. *Unbelievable.*

“Eli,” Aunt Rosa hisses. “Now is not the time for this.”

The words have barely left her mouth when we hear a small groan coming from Elliot. I can see his eyelids flutter. My heart races; I hadn’t realised until this very moment how scared I was that he wouldn’t wake up.

“I’ll go get the doctor,” Dad says, his voice gruff, before heading for the door. Aunt Rosa taps on Elliot’s hand, trying to get him to fully open his eyes.

Thirty minutes later, Elliot is awake and more alert, and the doctors have assured us that things are looking hopeful. If his blood work comes back clear, and he hasn’t suffered any organ damage, he’ll be able to come home tomorrow morning. I feel a rush of relief as Aunt Rosa begins chanting a prayer under her breath.

Dad is pacing around the hospital room, but he’s remained quiet since our earlier interaction. I don’t have the energy to spend on him right now.

Hours later, the doctor gives us the all-clear. Elliot will be okay. However, they still want to keep him overnight for observation, and to have him go through a psych evaluation, before he’s released.

The thought that El may have taken the drugs with the intent to harm himself makes my stomach twist.

“I swear, it was an accident,” Elliot protests, his voice slow and groggy. “I took the same amount as usual. It must have been a bad batch,” he mutters.

I can’t help the glare that I cast in his direction. “Is that supposed to be comforting?”

He winces, and I don’t know if it’s because he’s experiencing pain or he’s just heard himself back.

“This,” I say, gesturing to our surroundings. “Can’t happen again.” My voice cracks. “You hear me?”

His eyes look remorseful, but he nods.

When he drifts off to sleep again, Aunt Rosa begins talking to the doctor. Forcing him to repeat the same information he had told us earlier. I let her and Dad know I’ll see them at home, and then I step out.

Desiree is still on the bench where I left her, now fully stretched out with an e-reader in her hand. I stand and watch her for a moment, finding myself relax in her presence.

My heart jolts in my chest, that little sense of panic that appears whenever my feelings for her creep to the forefront of my mind. *It’s fine. It doesn’t*

mean anything.

I clear my throat. “Hey.”

She snaps her gaze up from her book, startled by my presence.

“How is he?” she asks, sitting upright.

I lift my shoulders in a shrug and release them, but it does nothing to ease the tension that I feel. “He’s had better days, but he’s okay. He’s just lucky there was no permanent damage done.”

“I’m glad!” Desiree stands, stretching her legs out. “And how are you?”

She watches me with big, earnest eyes.

“I’m...” I try to put my emotions into words. “Exhausted.” A wry laugh escapes me.

“It’s been a long day,” she says with a nod as her eyes flicker down the hall, and then to the closed door to Elliott’s room. “What’s going to happen to him now?”

“They’re letting him out tomorrow morning. I’d still like to stay for a couple of days, if that’s okay? Just to make sure he’s really alright.”

She wraps her arms around my torso and presses her head against my chest. I take a deep breath and ground myself in her sweet, flowery scent.

“Of course, we can take whatever time you need. I’ve already emailed all of my professors.”

I’ve spent most of my life in Brinkley hating absolutely everything about this place, yet standing in the middle of this hospital hallway with her in my arms, it almost feels like *home*.

“Let’s get out of here. They’ll meet us back at the house.”



I DRIVE US HOME, and when we arrive, I immediately begin to wonder if I’ve lost my mind. When Desiree offered to come to town with me, I had been so out of it that I hadn’t thought about what that meant, but as I park my car on the driveway, it all comes crashing down on me.

I have never, not once in my life, let a girl into my home here. Once I reached high school, I barely even let the few friends I had come over. It’s not like the house is embarrassing, it’s nice enough, but not a place I was ever

fond of. It was where I lived, but never where I wanted to be.

Now I'm carrying Desiree's bag into the house and down the hall to my bedroom, and I don't know how I'm supposed to feel about it all.

"Sorry, there's no guest bed," I say, scratching behind my head, suddenly feeling hot and unsure how to behave in my own room.

Her eyes slide across my face and then that pretty smile, the one that could inspire flowers to bloom on command, settles on her lips as she laughs.

"I would have wanted to stay with you anyways." She walks further into my bedroom and I watch as she takes in the blue walls. There's a shelf with a few recognition awards I received in my high school band above my desk, and Desiree stares at each one intently, running her hand over the wood as she does.

She turns her head looking at me over her shoulder. "So, you've always been musical."

"Since I was a kid," I respond.

"You play the guitar, too?" she questions as she notices the acoustic Taylor in the corner of the room.

I nod. "I don't play as often as I used to, but I sometimes I borrow one of Nate's back home so that I can practice."

She tilts her head, eyeing me carefully. "Winnipeg is *home* to you then?"

I pause at her words. I guess it's true. Outside of this house and the small family I have here, there's nothing in Brinkley for me.

I don't get the chance to answer her once I hear the front door open. My second issue has appeared. By the wide-eyed look on Desiree's face, I take it she's realised she's about to meet the King family, and I wonder if she's regretting her decision to come here now.

"Eli?!" I hear Aunt Rosa's voice call out.

I take a final look at Desiree, reaching out a hand to touch her face and tucking a curl behind her ear. "You ready?"

She smiles at me. "Yeah."

Good thing she is, because I sure as hell am not.



WE HEAD down the hall and toward the kitchen where we're faced with my dad and aunt. They both have differing expressions as they see Desiree right on my heels. Aunt Rosa's eyes are bright, and a big smile is plastered on her face, whereas dad looks between the two of us, intrigued. He clearly wants to say something, but knows better than to speak up first.

"Well, well," Aunt Rosa starts. "When Eli said he drove up with a friend he left out just how pretty this friend was."

"Oh, thank you!" Desiree responds. I don't need to look at her to know that her cheeks are reddening as she comes to stand next to me. "I'm Desiree. It's nice to meet you." I take a peek down at her and find the same determined expression I've grown to admire. "Eli's spoken so highly of you."

"Has he now," she says with a laugh. "Well, I guess that's something."

"And you must be Mr. King," Desiree says, addressing my father.

He musters up a smile on his exhausted face.

"Nice to meet you, Desiree." His eyes dart over to Elliot. "Although I wish it could have been under better circumstances."

A hush falls over the kitchen; you can always trust Dad to make things awkward even when they don't need to be.

"I'm going to get dinner started," My aunt says, saving us from the painful silence that has come over the room.

"I can help," Desiree pipes up.

"That's not necessary, hun, you go relax," Aunt Rosa says with a wave of her hand.

"No, really, I insist. I want to help."

A soft smile appears on my aunt's face, and I see some of the wrinkles that she's developed over the last few years crease on her face.

"All right, well then," Rosa replies, looking around the kitchen. "You start chopping veggies for the salad and I'll get started on the pasta."

Desiree seems pleased having received her marching orders; however, when Aunt Rosa instructs me and Dad to go relax in the family room, I'm less than enthusiastic. Still, I know that I need to talk to my father, and I suppose now is as good a time as any.

I hesitate to leave the kitchen, unsure if Desiree is comfortable being left alone with a woman she's only just met. Sensing my reluctance, she turns to me, her face shows no sign of concern as she mouths, "Go."

Dad has already found his way into the living room, and is stretched out on his recliner with the remote in hand. Before he has the chance to turn it on,

I sit on the couch and suck in a breath, *here goes nothing*.

“Dad, can we talk for a minute?”

He eyes me warily, and for a second, I think he’s going to say no and turn on the TV, but he grunts out. “Sure, go ahead.”

“This—” I use my head to indicate the room where Elliot normally spends all of his time. “Can’t keep happening.”

He gives me a glare, but I refuse to cower and lift my chin.

“Do you think I wanted this to happen, Eli?” He scoffs, “You think I woke up this morning and thought I would love to hear that my youngest is in hospital from a fucking overdose?” He’s spitting mad now. *Good*, at least he’s showing some emotion. “There’s nothing that I could do. You know how he is, even if I locked him in his room and told him that he couldn’t go out he would just crawl out the damn window.”

“I am not saying that you are responsible for *what* happened to him.” I grit my teeth and resist the urge to pull on my hair, or throw a sofa cushion across the room. “But you are responsible *for* him. You should know what’s going on with him so that it doesn’t get to this. You can’t just expect Aunt Rosa to pick up your slack all the time, while you stay at home with your ‘you know how teenagers are’ bullshit!”

“Pick up my slack?” Dad sneers, rolling his eyes as if I’m being ridiculous.

“Yes, *your* slack. Just because Mom left didn’t mean you were suddenly relieved of all your responsibilities. You still had two kids!” I ball my hands into fists. “I may have been able to get by without you, but Elliot is out of control. And it’s on *you* to figure it out. Not me, and certainly not Aunt Rosa.”

He straightens, moving to the edge of his seat, and stares me down. “Now, you listen to me, kid. Don’t bring up things you don’t understand.”

Honestly, I hadn’t meant to mention my mother at all. I think it’s best for all of us if she’s not thought about, but I’m running on nothing but anger and exhaustion right now, and I’m tired of tiptoeing around the subject that got us here.

“What don’t I understand, Dad? Please *enlighten* me.” I don’t give him a chance to respond, my voice rising with my anger. “When Mom left you may as well have gone with her! You checked right the fuck out when we needed you the most. Do you think you were the only one affected by her leaving? Did you think it wasn’t confusing as fuck for me as a kid, that one day my

mom just wasn't there anymore, and that my dad no longer gave a shit about me?"

I barely take in a breath. "If it weren't for Aunt Rosa, I don't know what we would have done. I did my best to help Elliot, but *the second* I leave town he's out all night doing drugs? Come on."

"No, *you* come on." Dad stands from his chair, and I follow suit, refusing to let him tower over me. "I'm sorry if you feel like my parenting wasn't up to your standards, but I did the best I could with you kids. And I'm not going to stand here and be read the riot act by a twenty-year-old who suddenly thinks he's a big man. You need to grow up, Eli."

He storms toward the back door that leads to the backyard.

"I did, and it had *nothing* to do with you," I shout back, my heart hammering in my chest.

He doesn't turn around to face me, just slams the door behind him, leaving me alone, like he did all those years ago.



Dinner is... tense. Rosa and I could hear Eli and his dad arguing from the kitchen as we'd prepared the meal.

"I don't know how much Eli has told you about his relationship with his father," she says as we begin to hear them raise their voices. "But it can be a bit rocky at the best of times."

"He's told me a bit," I answer. "About his mom."

Rosa looks at me, not hiding the surprise on her face. She hums to herself and smiles. *"So how long have you been dating?"*

Her question throws me off, and I lay down my knife. "Oh, we're not dating, we're just—"

"Talking? That's what the kids call it these days, right? No one wants to date." She laughs as she gives the pot of boiling pasta a stir. "Everyone just wants to talk. Things were a lot easier in my day."

"I bet." I smile.

Rosa was right; I have no idea what it is that Eli and I are doing. It *feels* like we're dating but we've never had that discussion. I've been too scared to even broach the subject.

"But I'll tell you this," she continues, bumping her hip against mine. "That boy... he doesn't talk about his mom with anyone. Not even me." I process this piece of information. "So if he brought her up with you? That means something."

Rosa quiets, as if lost in thought, before smiling at me and turning back to the food. *"I'm happy for him. He needs to let himself be open again."*

I decided then that, when we got back to the city, I would tell Eli exactly how I feel. I trust him and, even if he's not ready to say the words back, I want him to know where I stand.

That moment of lightness I'd felt when making the decision to tell him is completely eclipsed by the awkward tension at the table. Eli has had his eyes down on his plate for most of the meal, refusing to speak. His dad is shoveling food into his face at an alarming, and probably unwise, pace.

This just leaves me and Rosa as we chat and try to pretend that things are normal when they clearly aren't. She asks me about school and my family; I do my best to keep things light and fun, asking her questions in turn about her life here in Brinkley. Still, when dinner is over, I couldn't be more thankful.

I bring my plate over to the sink. "I can help you clean up," I offer.

"I appreciate that." she smiles. "But I think Eli needs you more than I need you scrubbing plates. And I want a word with my brother." She casts a glare in the direction of the living room, where Eli's dad ran off after dinner.

I nod and take a deep breath, and walk down the hall to Eli's bedroom. I don't bother knocking on the door, just push it open. The TV in the corner of the room is on and Eli is lying in bed, watching it absently. He doesn't move when I enter, but his eyes shift to me. He sighs.

"Sorry, I don't usually fight with my dad like that. I just couldn't deal anymore." He casts his eyes up to the ceiling. "I didn't mean to make you feel awkward."

"You didn't," I lie as I crawl onto the bed and lay my head on his shoulder. "Are you okay?"

He shrugs under me. "I guess it was good to get some stuff off my chest. I don't know whether it helped anything." He sighs and I feel his warm breath on my cheek. "Probably not the best time for it either. But it had to be said."

"Hopefully he thinks about what you said," I respond.

"I doubt it. Thanks for coming with me," he murmurs.

I press in closer, inhaling the scent that has become so comforting to me. "Of course." I tip my head up and plant a gentle kiss on his lips.

He takes advantage of the change in my position and yanks me on top of him. A laugh slips out and I kiss him harder while straddling him. *I guess we can talk later.*

When I break the kiss, he begins to protest, until I start moving down his body, which shuts him up.

I continue until I'm faced with the hardening cock in his sweatpants. He

must have changed after dinner, and it works to my advantage because, with the slightest shift in his hips, I'm able to pull down the pants and briefs. When they reach his ankles, he kicks them off so fast that I barely register the movement. I stroke him, slowly at first, and then a bit faster, loving the feel of him in my hand, and the sounds he makes as I pick up the pace.

I watch as a bead of precum glistens at the tip of his cock and I can't resist anymore. My mouth is practically watering at the sight of him. I lick the base of his shaft all the way up to the head before closing my lips around him. I swirl my tongue around the tip, savouring the taste of him and wanting more.

Eli makes a desperate sound, and I release him as I look up. His head is tilted back, the muscles on his neck standing out at attention. I bring my mouth back to him and cup his balls in my hand as I take him deeper than before. The loud groan he lets out tells me that he enjoys this, and I gently massage them, as I bring my head down as far as I can before I need to gag.

"Jesus, *fuck*," he cries out. "Just like that, sunshine. Open that pretty throat for me."

I feel his words all over my body. My nipples harden and I'm aware that my underwear is now soaked with the evidence of how badly I want this. How badly I want *him*.

I lift my head and try sucking in some air through my nose before I take him deeper. My eyes tear up and saliva leaks out from my mouth.

I'm a mess, and I'm loving every moment of it.

Knowing I don't need to always be put together for him, that I can drive him wild just like this. He lifts his hips off of the bed, and I gag once more as he fucks my mouth with reckless abandon. I can feel drool running down my chin and I'm barely able to get in a breath, but the sound of Eli groaning as he thrusts into me is like a shot of adrenaline.

"Your mouth was made for me, Desiree," he pants, and I can't control myself anymore. I slip my hand into my tights and beneath my underwear, and rub circles on my clit. I'm so wet and it feels good, but it's not nearly enough as my fingers slip on the sensitive bud.

"I'm going to come," he groans as if he's in pain. The knowledge that *I'm* doing this to him is almost enough to tip me over the edge. "So if you don't want me to come down your throat this is the time to stop."

I hear his warning and I ignore it. I bob my head in time with his thrusts. I feel his cock twitching in my mouth, as he releases down my throat. I lap

everything up.

When his breathing has returned to semi-normal, I lift my head, giving the tip of his dick one last lick.

Eli's staring at me. There's lust in his eyes, and something else, an emotion I can't read. I move up and place a kiss on his lips, wanting to tell him without words exactly how I feel. He flips me so quickly I don't even have time to process how I'm now pinned to the bed.

"You're too good," he growls against my mouth, grinding himself into me as he kisses my neck. I wonder for a moment how he can be ready to go again, but I'm way too caught up in how good he's making me feel. Every inch of my skin is burning up.

I raise my hips as he presses against me, desperate and wanting more. Eli moves his hands from where they were placed on either side of my head and peels my tights off of me slowly, so slowly that it's torturous. There's a wicked gleam in his eyes that tells me he's aware of just how agonising his movements are. He leans back, his eyes raking over my face as if committing me to memory.

"You still have too many clothes on." His voice is a deep baritone that promises pleasure.

I waste no time sitting up, removing my shirt and undoing the front hook of my bra, leaving myself bare to him, aside from my cheeky pink lace panties. When I raise my hips and hook my thumbs into the sides to remove them, he places a hand on top of mine and shakes his head.

"I like these." He plays with the lace between his fingers while he gazes down at me and it feels like fire consuming me. "Flip over."

My mind is moving at a snail's pace as I take in the words he's saying and also the emotions he's causing within me.

When I don't obey right away, he pinches my hip. I yelp at the sudden sting. The smile that appears on his face tells me he enjoyed the sound of my pain more than one would think.

"On your hands and knees, baby," he demands.

I do as he says, and I shiver as he moves my hair to the side and starts kissing down my spine.

He snaps the thin band of my panties against my skin and I bite back a moan, the feeling of his lips on me, combined with the gentle sting, almost too much to take.

Eli cups me through the fabric, his finger pressing against my throbbing

core where I want him most. When he pushes the soaking material to the side and begins to make slow, teasing circles on my clit I can't hold in my gasp. I push back, trying to grind myself against his hand, craving more friction.

He leans over me so that his chest is pressed firmly against my back. "You're so ready, sweet girl, look at you dripping down my hand." He pulls his hand away and straightens up.

I feel the loss of him everywhere and I let out a whimper of frustration.

I adjust my position so that I can turn my head enough to watch him behind me. I can see his hand glistening in the moonlight, covered in my arousal.

"You taste so good, do you know that, sunshine?" When I shake my head, he brings two fingers toward me and I instinctively open my mouth. The slight salty flavour of my own juices hits my taste buds and another moan escapes me. *Fuck*, everything about this feels so erotic, my skin is so hot I want to burst into flames. When my tongue begins to swirl against the pad of his fingers, he pulls the digits out, creating a popping sound.

"Save some for me," he whispers huskily. I watch as he sticks the two slick fingers that were just seconds ago in my mouth into his own. His eyes are fixed in me like I'm his favourite meal. I can feel the wetness at my centre dampening my inner thighs.

I open my mouth to speak but Eli's hand goes to the back of my neck.

"Head down." The only two words he says before he slides into me. I shudder as he starts fucking me senseless. Every thrust is deliberate and sure. It's bliss.

I try to scream, needing to release these intense sensations, but with my face down against the mattress the sound is muffled, a wet spot forming where saliva has dribbled onto the sheets. I reach my hands out desperate for anything to grab on to. It's like I'm about to float away from my own body.

I grip the sheets and do my best to suck in a deep breath. I'm rewarded with oxygen when he grabs a handful of my hair, using it to pull me up. My scalp tingles with pain, only enhancing the pleasure that sparks throughout my body.

"You're doing so good." Eli grunts out the praise, kissing my neck as he continues to pound into me. He releases my hair and I fall face down, boneless, onto the mattress once more. "Give it to me, Desiree."

My body requires no further prompting. The feeling builds until I'm nothing but a quivering mess, and Eli is right behind me, his fingers digging

into my hips as he comes. Being here, in the place where he grew up, I've never felt more connected to him. My entire body and soul tingle, I have to fight the urge to confess here and now just how much I love him. It isn't the right time, I know that, but the fear from before has dissipated. Once we get back to the city, I'll tell him.

When our breathing is no longer ragged, he speaks. "The bathroom is down the hall if you want to use it. You can grab a clean towel from the closet in there."

I tilt my head to place a gentle kiss on his lips before I stand. My legs feel like Jell-O, and my knees buckle. I hear Eli chuckle darkly behind me before he gets up as well.

When I get back from the bathroom, I expect to find him in bed, but to my surprise he's not back yet. Just as I sit on the bed he comes through the door, a tray in his hand. On it is a bowl of pretzels, some sort of chocolates and grapes, along with two glasses of water. I look at him with confusion as he places it beside me on the bed.

"I thought you might want a snack." He sounds sheepish, and I think it may be the cutest thing I've ever seen. "I wasn't sure what you would want, so I figured having both sweet and salty was the best option."

My heart warms, and I lean back against the headboard, popping a grape into my mouth. "This is perfect."

When we finish eating, he pulls me against him. We don't say anything, but words don't seem necessary.

I'm so at peace in his arms, I drift to sleep feeling relaxed and in love.



THE NEXT TWO days go well, or as well as one can hope given the circumstances that brought us here. The tension between Eli and his dad is thick enough to cut with a knife. Elliot has spent most of the time quiet, or closed up in his room, with Rosa constantly checking in on him.

On our third and final night, Eli finally had enough and went in to talk to his brother; after an hour and a half he came back and said he thought he had gotten through to him. Sure enough, twenty minutes later, Elliot was in the

living room with Eli and me, joining his brother in convincing me to finally watch *Fast and Furious*.

The bright spot through my time here though has been Rosa's daily visits. I've come to love spending time with her, and I can see now why she's so important to Eli. She's kind, funny, and very much no-nonsense.

Although Elliot is doing much better physically, she's still hurting over him, yet she's remained so positive; it's incredible to watch. So when we're getting ready to leave and she asks for a few minutes to talk with Eli, I think nothing of it.

However, the second Eli gets in the car with me I can feel a shift in his energy. Something is definitely wrong, his face is solemn and he grips the steering wheel so tight that his knuckles have turned white. When I ask him what the matter is he just says that he's fine. Because nothing says "things are good" like when someone insists that they're fine.

The car ride is completely void of conversation, the silence between the two of us deafening.

I try to come up with topics of conversation, but after I'm met with the third one word reply from him, I give up and stare out the window for the remainder of the drive.

When we get back to the apartment and enter the elevator, I press the button for the fifth floor and Eli presses the one for the fourth, meaning he won't be coming up to my place as he usually does. Something about that makes me snap.

"Do we have a problem?" I ask him as the elevator approaches the second floor.

He keeps his head straight, refusing to look at me. "We're good." He finally looks at me as the elevator doors open to the fourth floor. An unreadable emotion flashes over his face. "I'm just tired. I'll talk to you soon."

He places a peck on my lips before he exits, and I can't explain why that kiss feels a lot like a final goodbye.



“**H**ow are you doing?”

“I told you.” Elliott sighs through the phone. “I’m fine, you don’t have to worry. Or call me every day.”

“Well, I’m going to, so get used to it,” I respond. “You’re my little brother, it’s my right to worry.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he mutters. “How’s your girlfriend, anyway?”

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

It’s been exactly one week since Desiree and I came back from Brinkley, and I still can’t face her. I can hear Aunt Rosa’s voice in my ear echo in my head, clear as day.

The day we were leaving, Rosa pulled me aside while Desiree put our bags in the car.

I was feeling good. The night before, I’d had a long chat with Elliot where I all but begged him to get his shit together. Normally, my words would have gone in one ear and out the other, but even he realised what a close call he’d had. He promised he wouldn’t hang out with those guys anymore, even if it means that his last year of high school will be a lonelier one. He’s already looking forward to graduation next year and moving out of Brinkley, and if that’s not something I can relate to, I don’t know what is.

Things with Dad were the same as usual: tense, but we swept it under the rug, almost pretending that our argument hadn’t happened.

So when Aunt Rosa had pulled me aside to have a quick talk I didn’t think much of it.

She had wrapped her arms around me and given me a tight hug. When she'd moved away, there was a determined look in her eyes.

"I like her," Aunt Rosa says quietly, as if worried Desiree might hear her from where she's sat in the car. "She mentioned that you told her about your mom. She must be very important to you."

"She is." No use in denying it when Desiree drove up here at a moment's notice to be with me for a family emergency.

"Desiree also told me that you two haven't made it official." My aunt gives me a disapproving look, and then I realise where the conversation is headed and decide to nip it in the bud.

"We're just playing it by ear right now," I say as I look back to the car.

"You don't play it by ear with the ones you love." She tsks. And that's where I decide to stop her.

I hold up a hand. "There is no love here." Not a lie, but not the full truth. I can already imagine how Rosa would run with it if I told her how intensely I care for Desiree. She would be calling up wedding venues the second the car pulled out of the driveway.

"That's not what it sounded like to me when I spoke to her," she says with a knowing look in her eye.

"What do you mean? Did she tell you she loved me?" My heart races, slamming against my ribcage. I hold my breath waiting for her answer.

"Not in so many words." Her expression is smug. "But you don't make it to my age without being able to pick up on a few things, and I know love when I see it."

An odd feeling passed through me, disappointment almost. Why had I wanted Aunt Rosa to confirm whether Desiree had said she loved me?

And then it hits me, ice runs through my veins and trickles down my spine. Fuck. No, no, no.

I'm no longer falling in love with Desiree. I am full on head over heels in love with her. Probably have been for a while. I can't deny it anymore.

Bringing her to my childhood home was a mistake.

My breathing turns erratic and my palms begin to sweat. "No, it's not true. You're wrong. We don't love each other," I insist.

"Say what you want, kid. You look at her just like your dad used to look at your mom."

And in that moment, just like that, the ground fell from under me. What I had been trying to avoid for years, had actually happened. Anxiety squeezes

my lungs, just like it did then.

“Eli?” I hear my brother’s voice on the phone, as if he’s been calling my name for a while.

“Sorry, I have to go. I’ll call you later.”

I shake my head and get ready for practice; dread fills me for what comes next.



I’VE SEEN Desiree twice since we got back, one was a short visit to her apartment and the other time she came to a band practice, but left on her own because I stayed at Merchant until my bar shift started.

I know she senses something is up. I’ve been blaming our lack of interaction on the excessive band practices and class work, but truly, I can’t get my aunt’s words out of my head.

My worst nightmare has always been ending up like my dad. So when Aunt Rosa said that I had been looking at her just like dad looked at mom I felt sick. *And stupid.*

How had I been so reckless? Up until Desiree, I have always been so careful to make sure my hookups stayed casual. I should have known that she could have never fallen into the casual category. I had worried that she couldn’t do “no strings attached,” but in all honesty, it’s *me* who can’t do it with *her*.

I need space to sort myself out and let these feelings wither. I know that they will. The only reason I ended up feeling so strongly in the first place is because we’ve spent so much time together. Something I should have known better than to do.

I should have also known that Desiree wouldn’t just take my shit lying down.

It’s almost eight in the evening when there’s a knock on my bedroom door. I turn down the music and watch as my door opens. I expect to see either Nate or Tristan, but instead Desiree is staring at me from the doorway, a mix of both anger and sadness on her face. I feel like shit, but there’s nothing I can think of to say to fix this.

“Tristan let me in,” she says, skipping the pleasantries.

Of course he let her in. All of my friends, with the exception of Sadie, began begging me to talk to her the second they realised something was up and she wasn’t coming around.

Turns out, Desiree didn’t just make me fall for her, she made everyone else fall for her too.

That’s just who she is. You can’t be around her and not love her. Which is exactly why I need to put an end to this. No one is more pissed at me than Mickey though, when he realised something had gone down between Desiree and me, he just shook his head and basically began communicating with me through grunts. It’s fine, this is something I have to deal with on my own.

“I’ve given you plenty of space,” Desiree continues, eyeing me as I stay sitting on my bed. “But this is getting ridiculous. What’s going on?”

I sigh and sit up so that my back is against the headboard and I have a better view of her. Her hair is tied up—she looks beautiful as always—but I also notice dark circles under her eyes and I feel a tinge of concern that maybe she isn’t sleeping enough.

I shrug my shoulders. “Nothing.”

Desiree glares at me, attempting to melt me on the spot. “*Nothing*,” she repeats blandly. “So you’re not avoiding me then?”

“I’m not trying to avoid you, Desiree,” I reply. My insides feel like they’re collapsing as I accept what I have to do if I want to protect either of us. “I just don’t think this is a good idea anymore.”

Her face falls. Tears gather in her eyes, but she blinks and composes herself quickly.

“Eli,” she whispers, coming closer to the bed. I stay seated where I am. If I stand in front of her, if I get closer, with that sad look on her face, I won’t be able to think straight. It’ll take all of my energy not to hold her. “Please don’t do this. Don’t shut down. Just tell me what’s wrong.”

“Nothing is wrong. I told you I don’t do relationships when this started. It’s not my fault if you thought you could change that. The semester is pretty much over. I’ll be busy with band stuff; this just doesn’t make sense anymore.”

“Doesn’t make sense anymore?” she questions. Her lower lip quivers and I can see the heartbreak in her eyes as she struggles to keep her composure. “Eli, I love you.”

I’m sick. My breath lodges itself in my throat, and I don’t move an inch,

knowing that if I do the urge to comfort her may overtake me.

The words are everything I didn't realise I wanted to hear, and the very thing I feared the most. I'm now more confident than ever that she deserves someone better than me. Someone who's capable of loving her back the way she should be.

But in order to give her that, I have to break her first. A roll of nausea passes through me, my chest tight as a vise as I muster up the strength to say the words.

"Well—" I swallow, force myself to go on. "I don't love you." My heart cracks, the lie bitter on my tongue. I hold her gaze and watch as Desiree rears back as if I've slapped her. "This is over."

She stares, utter heartbreak in her features to match whatever it is that's crushing my lungs. Without another word, she turns and leaves my room—and my life—in one fell swoop.

Spring

“You cannot protect yourself from sadness without protecting yourself from happiness.” - Jonathan Safran Foer



One month later...

This has been the longest shift in the world.

Usually I don't mind. I've been picking up extra hours at work to keep me and my mind occupied. Today is a different story; I'm exhausted. The store has been so busy and I just can't keep up.

"Hey Des," my manager, Kelly, says to me. "Go take your break now and I'll help cover the floor."

"Okay." I put down the shirt I was folding, exit the store, and head to the smoothie bar upstairs in the Food Court. If I have to work this awful day, at the very least, I'm getting my favourite strawberry and banana smoothie.

I text Yazmine about what we should do for dinner tonight as I get in line, not paying attention to my surroundings, so I'm shocked when I realise I'm standing behind four very familiar backs.

Right in front of me are Nate, Tristan, Sadie, and *Eli*.

This isn't happening.

I turn around, ready to go back downstairs and forfeit my drink, when Nate looks over his shoulder and sees me.

"Des!" he says, a grin appearing on his face right away. "Long time no see. Did you move or something?"

"No." A strained laugh escapes me as the rest of them turn around. Tristan gives me a light smile as I continue talking. "I've just been busy."

I point to my work badge. Sadie smirks as if I've said something funny,

but otherwise remains quiet.

“I thought you were avoiding me,” Nate continues on with a chuckle. I keep my eyes fixed on him, refusing to look over to where *his* gaze is burning into my side. “We could ask Mickey to give you a job at Merchant. I know he misses you too. Isn’t that right, Eli?”

I’m unsure what to do. I want to run back to the store. *I should have just stayed in in the back room.* Instead, I awkwardly bounce my leg and turn to look at Eli.

The way he stares at me is so intense, it causes a shiver to run down my spine. Over the last month, I have often thought of what I would say to him if we wound up face-to-face, but none of the words I practiced in the bathroom mirror come to mind. Seeing him again *hurts*.

“Yeah.” His voice is stiff, it’s hard to imagine that this is the same person that I spoke to every day for months. “He misses you.”

I don’t miss the underlying meaning to his words. *Mickey misses you, I don’t.*

I swallow the lump in my throat as I feel tears rimming my eyes. I don’t even want the smoothie anymore. I glance at the rest of them, Sadie has already spun back around, not interested in what is being said.

“My break is almost over,” I lie. “I need to get back; it was nice seeing you guys.”

The look on Eli’s face indicates that he has more to say, but I don’t know how much more I can take, so I spin on my heels and head back to work.

All I can think about now is the last time I spoke to him.

It’s like I’m right back in that room, anxiously holding my breath.

I hadn’t planned to tell Eli that I loved him that day, but the words had just fallen out. And he’d *rejected* me.

I didn’t know how to get through to him, his face was ice cold, and I couldn’t get a read on his emotions as he sat there, staring at me. I couldn’t believe that after everything, he was shutting me out.

It’s not my fault if you thought you could change that.

Had I been trying to change that? Change him? No. I had never once pressured him, in fact I had gone out of my way to ensure he never felt like I was pushing him.

Well, I don’t love you. He’d said it so matter-of-factly. I’d felt my chest cave in as my heart cracked in two, but I didn’t cry in front of him.

Only once I was safe behind the doors of the elevator, did I let my tears

fall.

When I got back to the apartment, Yazmine was waiting for me on the couch. She'd taken one look at my tear-streaked face and reached out her arms, and I'd run headlong into them.

"Fuck him. Seriously, Des. If he doesn't appreciate what he has with you then fuck him," she says when I finish telling her everything.

"Yeah, you're right," I choke out as I get up from the couch, ready to call it a night. "I think I'll go back home for the summer."

She frowns. "Because of him?"

"Not exactly." I sigh. "I just think a change of scenery is what I need. Fresh perspective."

In all honesty, I had been debating what to do for the summer. Whether to stay in the city after exams in April and take summer courses or go back home to Stars Valley.

Kelly had assured me that if I did decide to go back home for the break, my job would still be available to me come September.

And as much as I hate to admit it, that day, seeing him again, had really solidified my decision.

I work through the rest of my shift in a daze, thankful that, in two weeks, I'll be able to get out of here for the summer.

A few months at home is just what the doctor ordered.



THE SPRING AIR is refreshing as I step out of the last final of my first year of university.

This exam period kicked my ass, mostly because studying has felt damn near impossible with the ache that now resides in my chest.

I haven't spoken to Eli at all since the run in at the mall. I've seen glimpses of him in our building, but I've managed to avoid any actual interactions.

When I get to the crosswalk on my way home, I feel a tap on my shoulder. I internally groan, seriously not in the mood to have to deal with some creep who feels entitled to my time. Especially when I still have some

packing left to do before I fly back home tomorrow. However, when I turn around, I find myself facing a tall, blonde-haired boy, smiling at me. *Thomas.*

“Long time no see,” he says as we wait for the signal to walk.

I laugh. “How are you?” I haven’t seen Thomas at all since classes ended. We weren’t exactly friends, but he was nice enough.

“Good, I just finished my physics exam.” He breathes out a sigh of relief. “I’m finally free.”

“Same here, I’m done for the year.”

“Nice.” He hesitates and then rushes out his next words just as the walking signal appears. “I’m actually going to grab a coffee at The Next Plate. Do you want to join me? If you’re not busy, I mean.”

I’m caught off guard by his request and am tempted to say no, but then decide *why the hell not*. “Sure, that sounds good.”

He gives me a million-dollar smile. I’m sure for the average girl it would inspire ten-page journal entries, but it does nothing for me and my broken heart.

Once at the cafe, we sit at a table and a waitress takes our orders. London Fog for me; a Hazelnut latte for him.

Thomas tells me about his classes and I tell him about my newly decided political science major. In an attempt to distract myself from what had happened between Eli and me, I decided there was no better time than the present to finally pick a major.

When I thought about the courses, I had enjoyed the most throughout the year, they were all poli-sci courses, and I knew it was the right choice for me. I’ve become more interested in it and enjoy getting involved in class discussions. Even if I end up changing my mind in the future, I’m confident about my choice right now.

My genuine excitement after the decision only confirmed it was the right one. However, when the waitress brings us our drinks, the universe decides to laugh at me as Eli walks in.

I try to dart my eyes away from him, but I’m not quick enough. He sees me and holds my gaze. I can’t pinpoint what the look on his face is, but when he notices who I’m sitting with, it becomes easy enough to decipher. *Anger.*

Screw him. What right does he have to get angry over me being out with someone else? Not that this is a date, but he doesn’t need to know that.

I listen intently as Thomas gives me a rundown of his plans for the summer. I glance over to where Eli was standing to check if he’s still there

and, sure enough, he's waiting in line to order. His eyes are still fixated on me, and my annoyance bubbles over.

When Thomas makes a joke about dropping out of university to be a world traveller, I laugh harder than necessary, reaching my arm out to playfully shove his shoulder.

I look back at Eli and if smoke could pour from his ears, it would. *He's fuming.* I feel a little sense of satisfaction knowing that I've gotten under his skin. Thomas always did seem to be a sore spot for him, I'll never understand why.

Noticing that my attention is now elsewhere, Thomas turns to where Eli is now waiting for his coffee. When the two of them make eye contact, Thomas just smiles and tosses Eli a wave. Any onlookers may think it's just Thomas being friendly, but I see it for what it is. A dick-measuring contest where I'm the prize. Eli's jaw locks and he tears his eyes away.

Suddenly, I'm not in the mood for any of this anymore.

I gulp down the rest of my tea, not caring that I've now burned my mouth, then settle the cup down on the saucer in front of me.

"Sorry, Thomas," I say, ready to get out of here. The little bit of peace I've been able to find for myself over the last month already feels as if it's being shredded to pieces just by being in the same vicinity as *him*. "I've really gotta go. I'm leaving tomorrow and I've got lots of last-minute packing to do."

He looks crestfallen, and I feel bad for leaving so abruptly. Not bad enough to change my mind, but still.

"I can walk you home," he offers.

"That's not necessary," I reply. "I'm just down the street. But have a good summer!"

He smiles tightly. "Yeah, you too."

I gather my belongings and exit the cafe, passing Eli without a second glance.

I sense him before I see him; every hair on my body stands at attention as I wait for the elevator on the ground floor of my building. I refuse to give in and turn around.

In the reflection of the metal doors, I can see him leaning against the white wall behind me, his eyes intently focused on my back. There's no coffee cup in his hand which means that he must have abandoned his order and followed me straight back home. *Unbelievable.*

As if shattering my heart wasn't enough, now he has to make sure he does his best to make me relive that pain.

When the doors open, I walk in, press the button for my floor, and then move to stand with my hip against the wall, keeping my head straight. He walks in after me and presses the button for his floor but, instead of moving to the other side of the wall, he stays where he is. Inches away from me.

I want to cry.

His scent envelops me, both woodsy and minty like the air after a spring rain. A smell that was once so familiar and comforting now reminds me of nothing but pain and sadness.

Eli takes the smallest step towards me in the already tiny space and I'm forced to put my back against the wall to create more space between us. The move also gives me no choice but to look at his face, and his eyes are burning down on me. I see a hundred different emotions flickering in his earthy, brown eyes, and I hope mine aren't betraying my own emotions.

We stare at each other, saying nothing, until he reaches one hand out to the panel and presses the emergency stop button, never once lifting his gaze from mine. The elevator comes to a grinding halt. My heart starts racing at triple speed, I think I may actually be having a heart attack.

"What the fu—" I start, but I'm cut off. I barely have time to register what's happening as he puts his hand on the wall next to my head and uses the other hand to grasp my face as he brings his lips down on mine.

The kiss is both electric and intoxicating.

My knees instantly feel weak; it's as if Eli's trying to lay claim to my entire being all at once. He pushes his tongue into my mouth, and it takes everything in me not to give in and wrap my arms around him and drown in this moment.

But then I remember how I felt standing in his bedroom while he looked at me like a stranger, and the anger I've been holding onto boils over.

I try to push him away, and he either doesn't notice or doesn't care, so I move my head to the side, breaking the kiss, lift my hand and slap him. *Hard*. The crack echoes in the small space and I see a red mark already forming on his cheek. No part of me cares about that right now though, the slight sting he may feel is nothing compared to the hurt I've felt for the last four weeks.

"Get the fuck off me!" I yell, trying my hardest to fight back the tears that are building behind my eyes. I press the emergency button again and the elevator begins to move.

Eli looks at me with something like desperation in his eyes, but does as I say, backing up a couple of steps. I suck in a breath willing my heart to slow down. “I’m sorry,” he chokes out.

When the elevator opens to the fourth floor he doesn’t get out. He just stays there, watching me.

Finally, the doors open to the fifth floor, and then he speaks.

“So you’re with him now?” he asks as I begin walking out. His voice sounds heavy, almost dejected, which isn’t fair. *He did this.*

Once I cross the threshold of the elevator, I turn to face him. “That’s not really any of your concern, is it?”

I take one last look at him before the doors slide shut.

Summer

“Apologies aren’t meant to change the past, they are meant to change the future.” - Kevin Hancock



June

Spring passed in shades of grey. Everything I had been looking forward to for ages, left me feeling empty. We recorded the first ever Merchant Revival EP in April and, while it went well due to endless rehearsals and countless all-nighters between Tristan and Devin poring over lyrics, none of it made me feel anything.

Because the one person I wanted to share it with is no longer in my life.

We've done nine of our scheduled shows of the tour across small bars in British Columbia, Alberta, and Ontario. Not even a drummer's high could save my terrible mood after each show.

Jeremy is ecstatic with our performances, the audiences haven't been huge, but that was to be expected. He's far more focused on the level of engagement that we're receiving from those in attendance, and the amount of EPs sold and streamed after a show. He swears there's "real promise" here if we keep it up.

Despite all of the good news, the guys are all absolutely sick of my shit and I don't blame them.

"Come out with us tonight," Nate says as he sprays himself with cologne. It's our final night in Toronto. We played two nights back-to-back at The Odyssey downtown, and by all counts it was a success. The first show went well and I guess people enjoyed it because the second night brought in a

bigger crowd.

Tomorrow we're flying back home to Winnipeg for our final show, and the guys are going out to celebrate. Though I don't know how they can tell what they're celebrating anymore, they've been going out almost every night after each show.

Personally, I'm content to stay in the hotel room, wallow in my self-made misery, and drink my shitty beer until I pass out.

When I open the mini fridge, I realise that we're out of said beer.

Well, fuck. I guess one night out won't hurt.

"I'll come," I say, standing up and slipping on my black Vans.

The look of shock on Nate's face is almost funny. I guess that, after three weeks of having me decline invites, my sudden acceptance wasn't expected.

"Seriously?"

"Seriously," I deadpan, and walk to the door. "Now, let's go."

When we arrive at the bar, I immediately regret my decision.

It's not a chill, low-key bar at all. It's a fucking nightclub, and a huge one at that; the music is loud and I can feel the bass in my chest. I internally cringe as I take in my surroundings. At least it wasn't a long walk from the hotel. I'll just grab one drink and get the hell out of here.

Tristan looks at my face and laughs. "Lighten up man! Try to have some fun."

"What about me makes you think I'm not having fun?" I ask, sarcasm lacing every word.

"Don't worry about him, T." Nate guffaws. "I'll make sure he doesn't bring everyone down."

"Good luck." Tristan snorts as he makes a beeline for a booth where Jeremy and Sammie are already chatting and drinking. Nate joins me at the bar.

I order a Kokanee and take a long sip when the bartender hands it over to me seconds later. Nate stares at the beer in my hand in disgust.

He turns and flashes a grin at the server. "Four whiskey shots, please."

I raise an eyebrow at him, but don't say a word.

He thumps me on the chest. "Two of them are for you, old man."

"We're the same age, idiot." I remove his hand from my chest. "And I'm *not* doing shots."

"Oh, but you are," Nate says as the bartender lines the shots up on the sticky countertop.



I DID THE SHOTS.

And then, with my impaired judgement, I did some more.

Fuck, this was not the plan. I'm drunk off my ass and the room is spinning. Jeremy and Sammie called it a night after a couple of hours.

Now I'm sitting at the booth, alone, while Nate is out on the dancefloor—fist-pumping like it's 2010—to some song I've never heard of, while Tristan has Angelica pushed up against a wall and his tongue down her throat. I know he's loved this stop in Toronto the most since it meant he got an extra chance to see her.

I chug back a bottle of water, hoping to get my shit together enough to leave, when a brunette slides into the booth next to me.

"Hey there," she yells in my ear so that I can hear her over the music. "You look lonely."

Her hot breath sticks to my cheek. She smells like cheap alcohol and even cheaper perfume. I turn my head to tell her I'm good, but before I can even get the chance, her lips crash on mine.

I pull away and try to take a deep breath, but all I can smell is her and I think I'm going to be sick. I slide around to the other side of the booth and make my escape. I can faintly hear her calling me back, but I don't turn around as I dash for the exit. Once outside, I feel like I can breathe again, the night air cooling me down.

I pull my phone out and text the guys that I'm going back to the hotel.

I'm about to put it back in my pocket when a little voice in my head tells me to text *her*. It's probably the alcohol. No, it's *most definitely* the alcohol, but I do it anyway.

Me: I miss you.

I watch as three little dots appear at the bottom of my screen and then disappear. I pinch the bridge of my nose; what did I expect?

When I called things off with Desiree, I felt like it was the only option, but I think I may have made a mistake. Instead of feeling better, I'm filled with so much regret that even alcohol can't remove it.

I sigh, tuck the phone away, and walk back to the hotel.



Aunt Rosa: Good luck for today! I sent you a surprise.

IT'S our Winnipeg show tonight and the official end of this tour.

Of course we're playing at Merchant. It was the only place that felt right. Aunt Rosa has been sending me good luck messages before every show, but a gift is new, and I wonder what it could be. It's unlikely that she would send me a bouquet of flowers, but I can't think of what else it could be.

We're all backstage, waiting for Mick to announce us.

"Is it weird that I feel more nervous for this show than any of the others?" Devin asks.

"Same here," Tristan says.

I stay quiet, but they're right. Somehow, playing at home feels more meaningful than any of the other shows we've done over the last month. And the bar is by far the most packed I've ever seen it.

So when Mick announces us, we all look at each other with apprehension before walking out on stage.

And then, I see Aunt Rosa's surprise. Or more accurately, I see him.

Sitting at the bar, talking to Mick, is my dad.

My father, who has never once visited me in the city since I moved here, and has certainly never come to any gig of ours, is sitting inside Merchant, ready to watch us play. We've barely spoken since the last time I was home. Just a handful of awkward conversations where we both couldn't wait to hang up the phone.

The spotlight hits Devin. It's show time. I count us in, trying my absolute hardest not to let my father throw me off.

As Devin starts to sing, I shut my brain off and just *play*. The music surrounds me and it's as if I can feel it rushing through my blood. My fingers grip the sticks in my hand tightly and I let myself soak up every bit of energy from the crowd. Every hit of the drums is a shot of adrenaline that keeps me going.

I get so swept up that at the end of our fourth song, I throw in an unplanned roll. Devin turns and looks at me, giving me a slight nod of approval. *This* is what I live for, being up here with my friends—*my brothers*—doing what we love. I give everything I’ve got; I even show off a bit at the very end, playing one-handed but never missing a beat.

When we get off stage, we’re sweating, but we all have huge smiles on our faces.

“We did that shit!” Devin exclaims, as we gather in a clumsy group hug, slapping each other on our backs. Nate hollers as Tristan and I laugh.

We really did, ten shows in a month, that’s more than all the shows put together from last year. We couldn’t have ended the month on a higher note.

“Drinks at my house tonight. Alex has been dying to have people over since remodeling the backyard and Zara’s with the grandparents for the weekend,” Devin says with a grin.

We all agree. Tomorrow is the first of July, Canada Day, which means a long weekend. My only plans include sleeping in, so I’m down for a late night. Plus, it will help keep my mind off of Desiree.

It’s nearing four months now. I thought space would help, but I guess the saying “distance makes the heart grow fonder” is true. I miss her more now than I thought I possibly could. She haunts my every waking thought.

The feeling of loving her hasn’t faded, not even a little bit. I thought denying myself of her would make things easier, but it hasn’t. And even worse is knowing how much I hurt her, the memory of her pained face before she left my room is burned into my mind.

Eli, I love you.

For a moment, I struggle to breathe, and pull myself back to the present. It still hurts, probably even more than before, so any chance I have to take my mind off of her, I’m taking.

But first, I’ve got to deal with my dad who’s sitting at the bar looking a bit bewildered. I avoided letting my gaze go to him at any point during the show, refusing to let whatever I might see on his face affect me.

I tell the guys I’ll catch up with them, and we go our separate ways. When I go back out to the main lounge, a lot of people have left, with a few regulars still milling around. Dad sits on his stool, looking uncomfortable, and I wonder when was the last time he went out for a drink.

I come to a stop behind him.

“Hey,” I say awkwardly and he spins around. “You’re... here.”

He clears his throat and then takes another sip of his beer. “Yeah, Rosa told me about tonight’s show and suggested that I come watch you play while she stayed home with Elliot.”

I know Aunt Rosa’s “suggestion” was most likely some sort of threat. But the fact that Dad even showed up is something I could have never imagined and, until now, wasn’t something I even knew I wanted.

“How is he?” I ask. I’ve been keeping in constant contact with my brother since the incident and I’m thankful that he’s actually been responsive. Still, further reassurance from my dad and Aunt Rosa makes me feel better.

“He’s good,” he says, finishing off his drink. “Been keeping his nose clean. Stopped hanging around those boys. I gave him a curfew and told him if I catch him breaking it even once, I’ll ship him off to Linda for grade twelve.”

Aunt Linda is my dad’s other sister who lives in Newfoundland; an interesting threat, but whatever works, I suppose. Elliot had mentioned this already and seemed genuinely concerned he would be shipped off to the east coast for his last year of school. I stifle a smirk.

“But I didn’t come here to talk about your brother,” he continues after an awkward clearing of his throat. “I wanted to talk to you.”

“About?” I ask, wary.

“I don’t like how we left things the last time we saw each other.” He sighs and casts a longing look to his now empty bottle of beer. “You’re my son, and I apologise if you felt like I abandoned you after your mom left. I didn’t know how to cope. That’s not an excuse.” He sighs again and scratches his stubbled chin. “I know you’re grown now and don’t need me the way you did back then, but I want you to know I’m here, however you’ll have me.”

I feel a ball of emotion in my throat; I’ve turned into a real bitch since I lost Desiree.

“I’m not going to stand here and say it was okay.” I release a breath. “But it’s done, and I appreciate you saying this now. I don’t want us to tiptoe around each other, I’d like us to move on. Just do right by Elliot for the next year, alright?”

“Thank you, son.” Dad nods his head, a brief moment of understanding passing between us. “Well, I better get back.”

I look at him in surprise. It never dawned on me that he would try to drive back to Brinkley tonight. I hesitate a second before I pull out my keychain and remove the key for my apartment.

“Stay at my place tonight. I’ll text you the address,” I say, handing it to him. “I’m going out for a bit, but you can take my room. I’ll crash on the couch.”

He takes the key, surprise written on his face. “Thank you.” He nods and stands up. “You did good tonight, son. I’m proud of you.”

Fuck. There’s that ball of emotion again.

“Thanks,” I choke out and begin to turn away. Something in me causes me to stop and ask a question I never dared utter before. “Dad, do you know why mom left? I’m not sure if you know, but I tried to find her when I first started university.” I sigh. “I had hoped she could help with Elliot, but there was nothing. It’s like she vanished.”

He looks at me, his face a little sadder now.

“I wish I could give you the answers you’re looking for,” he replies, releasing a long sigh. “I never saw it coming. Things were great until they weren’t anymore. I guess she wasn’t happy and I missed the signs.” He shakes his head as if that’s going to clear whatever memories have surfaced.

“You were probably too young to remember, but a year before she left, she landed a job at a newspaper here in the city. She was over the moon; it was everything she had wanted. Her dream job. And even though it meant that she would have to come to Winnipeg for a few days every month, I still encouraged her to take it.” He shakes his head and looks up to the ceiling for a moment. “Because I knew how important it was for her to have something she was passionate about, outside of the family. She became close with a man—her boss. She decided he was a better match for her. He could give her the things a struggling farmer in Brinkley simply couldn’t.”

Hearing the sadness in my dad’s voice right now is damn near torture. I wish there was something I could do to heal the wounds she left.

“I’ll never understand why she did things the way she did, or how she could leave you boys behind. I tried to talk to her after she left, but she wasn’t interested in speaking. She just told me to take care of her boys... I guess I should have done better.” His eyes drop to the ground.

I feel my blood boil. *She really was a piece of work.*

“Do you regret falling in love with her?” I ask, selfishly hoping the answer is yes so that I can confirm I made the right decision, no matter how much it hurts.

He shakes his head. “Even knowing how it would end up, I would do it all again.”

“You would?” I ask incredulously.

“Sure would.” A genuine smile blooms on his face as his eyes grow distant. “Having you kids and loving your mother will never be a regret for me. Not even for a second.”

I take a deep breath in through my nose, and exhale. I may not understand what happened with my mom. Why she decided that a shiny new life was worth leaving her children behind, but I’m not sure that the reason fully matters. What I do know is that, despite the hurt she caused my father, he still speaks about her like she’s the sun on a rainy day.

There are no guarantees in life, and I spent so much time doing my best to avoid acknowledging how much I love Desiree, just so I could spare myself from the potential pain it might bring. *Yet, here I am.* The agony and hollowness from pushing her out of my life are indescribable.

My body thrums with excitement as I accept what needs to be done.

Love is a gamble, but I would gladly risk it all to have Desiree at my side. If I was ever going to allow someone the power to break me, it would be her.

“Actually, you know what,” I say to him. “I’m driving out of town tomorrow, so I’m going to call it an early night. I’ll see you back at my place in a bit?”

“You sure?” he says standing from his seat. “I don’t want to ruin your celebration.”

“I’m sure.”

I need to rest up. I’m driving to Stars Valley *tomorrow*.



July

Yazmine: Can you come back? :(I hate living with a boy

Yazmine: I miss you.

I laugh at the message. My leaving for the summer had lined up perfectly with Jaden's lease ending. He's staying in my room and helping Yazmine cover my half of the rent for the summer until he moves into his new place mid-August.

Me: I miss you too. Any plans for the holiday?

Yazmine: Day drinking and fireworks! You?

Me: Hanging out with Stella, and fireworks for me, too.

Yazmine: Have fun!

Me: You too. Tell Jaden I say hi!

I flop onto my bed and close my eyes, already feeling tired despite only having been awake for a few hours.

I feel my phone vibrate next to me and expect it to be Stella to hash out

plans for the day. My heart stops for a second at the name on the screen.
I click on the notification.

Eli: Can we talk?

Right above it sits the last text he sent me a few weeks ago saying he missed me. I never answered, and I'm not responding to this one either. I don't believe him. His ego is just hurt because he thinks I'm interested in Thomas and he suddenly wants me back, when I was never *his* in the first place. He made that much perfectly clear.

I send Stella a quick message to confirm plans for the afternoon and then close my eyes, hoping to get a bit more sleep before tonight when I can wipe every last thought of Eli out of my mind.



I WAKE from my nap with a jump; someone is banging on my bedroom door. I pull the pillow over my head and groan.

“Des.” I hear my brother’s loud voice from from outside my room. “There’s something I think you’ll want to see.”

I peek my head out from under the pillow and check my phone for the time. One p.m. I guess I slept a bit more than I intended to.

“What is it?” I ask, forcing myself to sit up and wipe the sleep out of my eyes.

“You got flowers.” He chuckles, and I wonder if I’ve misheard him, but he keeps going. “A big ass bouquet. I’ve got to say, whoever sent them went all out. If you could not tell Stella that would be great, don’t want her to notice she never got any.”

I jump out of bed and open the door to find my brother leaning up against the wall in the hallway. He’s already fully dressed and looks ready to tackle the day while I’m still in an oversized tee and pajama shorts.

“What are you talking about? *Who* went all out?” I say, although my heart is already racing.

“Go see for yourself,” he replies as if I’m slow.

I book it to the stairs, taking them two at a time to the kitchen.

“Woah, slow down there,” Dad says when I see him. I don’t have time to even say hello, I’m far too focused on the huge bouquet of dahlias sitting on the counter. Dom wasn’t kidding, the arrangement is huge, and the flowers are beautiful. They range in colour from white, to pink and lavender. Their floral scent surrounds me as I get closer to them. I snatch up the card.

There’s only one line written in the centre and I can’t help the small laugh that comes out when I read it.

Nobody’s favourite flowers are dahlias - Eli

A THROWBACK to one night when I’d told him that my favourite flowers were dahlias. He had looked at me like I was crazy.

“Nobody’s favourite flowers are dahlias,” he says. “I’ve never heard anyone say that. It’s always roses or maybe daisies.”

“Dahlias are mine,” I say with a shrug. “There’s a flower shop in town, Divinity Flowers, and they have a greenhouse where they grow dahlias all year round. I worked there in high school and I was just obsessed with them.”

He nods his head slowly. “Dahlias, got it.”

When I look at the tag again, I see that they were actually sent from Divinity, and my heart skips a beat.

“Must have cost him a pretty penny,” mom says, looking at the card in my hand.

Although I’m melting at the sweet gesture, I can’t help but think that this is just him trying to *win*. I shrug my shoulders and give the flowers one last longing look before I turning and going upstairs to get ready.



Eli: Hope you liked the flowers.

Eli: Desiree, can we please talk?

Eli: I miss you, sunshine. Just let me explain myself.

Eli: I'm sorry.

THE SOUND of my phone buzzing wakes me up. Eli has been texting me constantly since the flowers arrived yesterday afternoon, but I have yet to respond.

I look at the messages and roll over. *When will he take the hint?* The flowers were beautiful, but not enough to erase my heartache.

I hear a thump from downstairs, and then the faint sound of whispers.

Odd. I should be the only one home right now. Both of my parents are at work and Stella mentioned she had plans with Dominic today.

I've made my peace with them being together. They're the happiest I've ever seen them, so I'd feel like a complete bitch if I drove them apart.

I force myself out of bed and grab my phone, on the off chance there's an intruder in my home and I need to call 911. I crack open the door, expecting to hear the noise again. I hear nothing, but sitting in front of my door is a small card. I pick it up and read the note.

“First, I must tell you I’ve been the most unmitigated and comprehensive ass.”

I laugh at the quote, right away recognising the words of Mr. Bingley in *Pride and Prejudice*. Confusion—and something like hope, which I immediately squash—runs through me as I try to make sense of how and why this is outside of my door.

Just then, I hear another noise. More like a knock against the wall and my heart begins to race.

“Dominic?” I call out. *Relax. It has to be him, this is Stars Valley. People’s homes don’t get broken into.*

“She’s awake!” I hear Stella’s unmistakable voice hiss, and my stomach turns. I may be on board with them as a couple, but if I have to walk in on them in a compromising position in the family room... I think I'll be sick.

“Are you guys decent down there?” I shout from the top of the stairs.

“Yeah.” Stella laughs. “I’m not going to be naked in your living room, Des.”

Relief courses through me. “What’s with the note?” I laugh as I start to

walk down the stairs.

Instead of answering my question, Stella appears and runs up the stairs with a smile on her face. In her hand is another card, just like the one I currently hold. She stops me half way down the steps and hands it to me.

“Stel. What’s going on?”

She mimes zipping her mouth closed. “I’ve been sworn to secrecy. Hurry up and read it, would ya?”

I look down at the card she’s given me.

“*You have bewitched me body and soul.*”

Another *Pride and Prejudice* quote. My skin tingles. *No. There’s no way.*

“Seriously.” I don’t know why my voice has turned into a whisper. “Tell me what this is for.”

“Put this on,” she instructs as she reveals a piece of cloth and gestures to my eyes as if she didn’t hear me.

“Are you insane? I am not walking down the stairs *blindfolded.*”

“I won’t let you fall,” she insists, doing her best puppy-dog eyes. “You trust me, don’t you.”

I sigh. “Yes, but if I so much as slip, you owe me *for life.*”

Her grin is the last thing I see before I descend into darkness.

Stella takes my hand and guides me down the last few stairs. I can tell we’re walking in the direction of the living room, and I’m still confused as to why all of this is necessary.

Placing her hands on my shoulders, she positions me in whichever direction she wants me to face and then lets go.

“Stel.” Another note is slipped into my hand as the others are taken away. “Can I take this off now?”

No response. I’m starting to feel frustrated with the lack of answers, and then, I hear the one voice I never expected to hear in my home.

“You can take it off, sunshine.”

My chest grows tight, like there isn’t enough oxygen. I force myself to breathe, suddenly okay with keeping the blindfold on.

When I remove it, I gasp.

Not only is Eli standing in front of me with Stella *nowhere* to be found, but my living room no longer *looks* like my living room.

The family photos home decor have all been taken down, the furniture

moved to the side. Covering every inch of wall space are photographs from this past school year. Pictures I took of Eli, the band, snapshots of Winnipeg and, most painfully, selfies of me and Eli, and some pictures that Yazmine took of us.

I feel my eyes brim with tears. It looks just like the exhibit we went to in the Exchange District months ago.

My heart cracks again as I focus on a photo where I'm gazing at him like he's the only person in the room.

"The last note—" Eli's voice breaks through the silence as I examine the gallery my home has become. I want to run out of the room, but I'm rooted in place. Rather than at him, I look at the final card in my hand.

"I love you. Most ardently."

At that, a tear finally breaks free. I wipe it away with the back of my hand before it slides down my cheek. I gather every ounce of strength I have and look up at Eli.

He gives me a tentative lopsided grin and it makes my heart hurt ten times more than before. Just when I thought I had recovered, when it felt like there was a way out and I could get over him one day, he shows up *in my house*, looking like the lead in a rom-com. His hair is tousled just enough to make him look edible and he's got a plain black tee on that allows me to see the scattered tattoos on his arms.

I will myself to stop ogling—*this is not the time for that.*

"What are you doing here?" I ask, skipping the pleasantries.

"I needed to see my girl," he says it so matter-of-factly I blanch.

"I don't know who *your girl* is," I retort. "Because you made it perfectly clear that it wasn't me. I don't know how you got Stella to help y—"

"Trust me." he laughs. I can't believe his cool confidence right now. "It wasn't easy, she is not my biggest fan."

"Neither am I."

"But once she heard me out on how in love I am with her best friend," he continues on, ignoring my comment. "And how desperately I needed to apologise for being a complete jackass, she caved and helped me out."

I stay silent as I drop his gaze and look around the room again. *How in love I am with her best friend.*

"Printed them yesterday. Your photos are great, sunshine."

The term of endearment slashes through me like a knife. My legs feel weak and I'm tempted to sit on the floor.

Months ago, hearing those words from Eli was all I wanted. Confirmation that he felt the same way I did. That I wasn't in this alone.

Now it's like having a bucket of cold water poured over me. I'm *angry* that he's turned such beautiful words into something empty.

"Go home," is all I can muster.

Eli's face shutters before he straightens up to his full height. "I'm not going anywhere until we talk. *Please.*" His voice cracks and my heart breaks for what seems like the millionth time this year. "Just give me a chance."

I hold my head up high, refusing to give in to whatever game he's playing.

"Go. Home." I turn my back and begin walking toward the stairs when he calls out to me.

"Please," he begs.

I spin on my heels, fuming. "You don't get to just show up here, *in my home* and decide when you get my forgiveness, Eli!" I'm yelling now; the windows are open and I'm sure the neighbours can hear me, but I don't care. I'm so drained. How much more energy am I supposed to give before I fall apart again?

"I haven't decided I get your forgiveness. I'm just asking you to hear me out." Eli's voice is so low I have to strain to hear it. "I'm not leaving. So I'll wait for you to be ready. A week, two weeks, hell"—he raises his hands up in the air—"if you want me to wait until the end of the summer, *fine*. But *I will* be here."

I laugh, but there's no humour in it. "Yeah?" I respond, sarcastically. "And where is it that you'll be staying for the next two months."

He points out the door. "The car worked all right last night."

My jaw drops. He slept in his car?

"You can't just stay here," I say, keeping my tone firm. "I'll call the police. This is stalking."

He laughs. *Actually laughs*. "Small town like this? Jail is probably more comfortable than my backseat."

"Ugh, fine! If you want to talk, let's talk. Say what you want to say and go."

"Let's go somewhere."

"Oh, now there are stipulations. Great."

“No.” He chuckles. “I just want to talk to you without your brother and best friend staring me down.”

I turn around, and sure enough, both Dom and Stella are in front of the window. When they see me, they duck. *Traitors.*

I sigh. “Where would you like to go, Eli? Tell me.”

“Morning Rae’s?” I stare at his hopeful expression in shock. He really listened to me, I’ll give him that. I think I must have mentioned Rae’s to him once in passing, ages ago. At the mention of the restaurant my stomach growls, reminding me that I’ve yet to eat today.

“Fine,” I say, wearily. “*Then you go home.*”



When Desiree goes back upstairs to change, I considered the possibility that she may not come back down. I'm not sure I would blame her.

Seeing her in person for the first time in months felt like a unique hellscape. I wanted so badly to touch her, pull her against me, and inhale the scent I've only been able to dream of.

Instead, I stayed feet away from her, giving her space, and watched as she regarded me with frustration and downright anger. *Also deserved.* When I told her I loved her, she didn't even bat an eyelash. I wondered for a second if I had said the words out loud. It wasn't half as painful as I had imagined confessing my feelings to someone would be.

Ten minutes later, Desiree comes back downstairs in a tank top and jean shorts that were clearly designed to make my brain short-circuit.

The short drive to the diner is filled with nothing but silence. She stares stonily through the window and I try my best to think of what I can say to explain why I pushed her away.

We take our seat in a booth at the back of the restaurant. The waitress comes and takes our orders and strikes up a conversation with Desiree.

Desiree is all smiles as the two talk about some Canada Day event they both attended. Saying that she's beautiful is an understatement, and I promise myself to do *anything* to make up for the hurt I've caused her. It looks like I have my work cut out for me, because the second the waitress leaves the table, the smile is wiped clear off her face and replaced with a frown.

"So," I start, hoping to break the ice a bit. "How has the summer been?"

She looks at me with no emotion. *Fuck. How did I mess up this badly?* “No, we aren’t doing this. You said you wanted to talk. So talk.”

She presses her back against the wall of the booth and stares me down.

Alright, then. I try to remember what I rehearsed in my mind but it’s suddenly empty. Desiree is looking at me like she’s two minutes from walking out so I open my mouth and pray that the right words come out.

“I’m sorry for how things ended and for what happened the last time I saw you in the elevator. I lost it when I saw you with him and I just couldn’t deal—”

She holds her hand out to stop me. “If you’re trying to tell me you want me back because you think I’m with Thomas, then I’m going to save you a lot of time and energy. He and I aren’t together. But neither are we,” she whispers sternly, waving her index finger between the two of us. “You don’t get a say in who I see and you *certainly* don’t get to harass me whenever you think I’m with someone else. I’m not a toy you can play with for a while, forget about, and then get jealous of when someone else picks me up.”

“That’s not what this is,” I say, trying my best not to sound like I’m floundering when I really am. “I just... I’m sorry, okay? I’m sorry for all of it. I’m sorry for telling you I didn’t love you when I *do* and I’m sorry for hurting you. I was scared.”

She’s watching me intently now, still not speaking but her gaze seems to have softened, so I suck in a deep breath and continue.

“I told you about how my dad was when my mom left, and that I never wanted that to be me. The day we were leaving Brinkley, my aunt said that she could see how in love with you I was and that I looked at you the same way my dad used to look at my mom.”

She drops eye contact with me, but I continue. “I freaked out. I got scared that maybe I was falling into the same steps as my dad. Hearing it out loud now, I know it sounds like a weak excuse for pushing you away, but it’s how I felt in the moment.” I can see the tension rolling off of her now.

“I’ve never felt like this about anyone before, I didn’t even think I could. All these feelings? I’ve kept them locked up so tight I thought they had died.” I swallow hard, not used to talking in detail about my emotions.

“I didn’t think I was even capable of loving anyone. And then I met *you*.”

Desiree’s eyes snap back to me and I push through my discomfort.

“I didn’t stand a chance. You’re the first person I think about in the morning, and the last person I think about before I fall asleep. You, Desiree,

are my revival.” Her breath hitches. I can feel my throat tightening. “You’re the only person that could have brought me back to life, and I swear to you, if you just give me a second chance, *one last chance*, to prove to you how much you mean to me. I won’t fuck it up. *Please.*”

I see water lining her eyes and I hold my breath. She blinks back the tears and gives her head a little shake.

“I get being scared. I really do, but you could have talked to me.” She twists her fingers together. Instead, you pushed me away, made me feel dumb for my own feelings, and told me you didn’t love me. I’ve spent the last three months trying to heal from loving you and now, you want me to just forget it all and pretend it didn’t happen.”

The waitress comes, laying our plates of food down in front of us. She must sense this isn’t a great time because she doesn’t try to make any further conversation with Desiree and leaves immediately. When she’s gone, Desiree picks up where she left off looking down sadly at the chocolate chip pancakes.

“I can’t do it. *Us.*” She refuses to raise her eyes from her plate. “You said we didn’t make sense and you were right. This, you and I, doesn’t make sense. Loving someone shouldn’t hurt this much.”

There’s a tight feeling in my chest, like I’m suffocating, but I just nod. I knew there was a chance that it wouldn’t be enough.

But I won’t give up. *Not this time.*

She stands and picks up her plate. “I’m going to get this packaged to go. Bye, Eli.”

I stay silent, refusing to say goodbye.



August

Eli: Good morning, sunshine. *heart emoji*

It's Saturday morning and I'm on the couch sipping my coffee when Eli's text comes through. It's been six weeks since I last saw him, and he hasn't missed a good morning or night text.

At first, I ignored them, unsure what the point was or if staying in communication with him was a good idea. I considered blocking his number altogether, but couldn't bring myself to take that step.

Eventually, I started texting him back. Now we send each other messages scattered throughout the day.

The day I left him at Rae's felt like a fresh heartbreak, maybe even worse than what happened in the spring because I believed what he was saying. I had no doubt that he was sorry, but I wasn't sure it was enough for me to open myself up to that kind of pain again.

Still, he's yet to relent. Sending me the sweetest messages, videos from practices, and updates on Elliot, who seems to be doing well. I know it's upsetting for Eli not to be back home this summer, when he wants to be with his brother.

He told me he used to go home every summer to help out his dad as much as he could, but with Merchant Revival gaining momentum and having more gigs throughout the city, he's decided to stay in Winnipeg and drive back to

Brinkley when he can.

“Eli?” Mom asks, sitting across from me on the couch with her brows raised. “That smile really gives it away.”

“Yeah,” I respond, feeling my cheeks flush. I hadn’t realised I was just staring at my phone up until this moment. My parents have become well accustomed to my regular flower deliveries. Every two weeks, like clockwork, Eli’s sends me a new bouquet of dahlias; no matter how many times I tell him it’s not necessary, he continues.

“Your brother told me Eli was quite intense about you, after he came to visit last year. Seemed as if Dom was impressed.” She gives me a smirk. I’m shocked; Dom never said a word about Eli other than an offhanded “he’s all right” he grunted out.

“Do you plan on seeing him when you go back?” The question seems innocent enough, but I know my mom, and underneath it lies about six hundred other questions.

“I’m not sure yet.” Truth be told, I have absolutely no idea what I’m going to do about Eli once we’re both in the same place again. He’s made it clear that he’s not going to stop pursuing me, and now I’m not sure that I want him to.

Mom eyes the dahlias on the coffee table, newly delivered yesterday. “Seems like he’s very interested.”

I release a sigh. “I just didn’t expect everything with him to go the way it did. He really hurt me. I’ve always wanted something easy, like what you and Dad have. Liam was easy.” I mutter that last part under my breath, but she catches it anyways.

“And how did that go for you?” Mom asks, watching me closely. “You have to decide if that hurt is something you can get over or not. It’s not something anyone else can decide for you, but let me just tell you that nothing your father and I have come *easily*. Relationships are hard work. You get out of them what you put into them. Sure, loving your father was the easiest decision I ever made, but we still had to put in the effort. If it looks easy to you, that’s just the result of us communicating with each other and spending twenty-three years of our lives as best friends.” She reaches out her hand and cups my cheek. “Nothing worth having in this life comes without putting in some work, sweetheart.”

I take the last sip of my coffee, absorbing her words. My brain mulls it over. I know that Eli is sorry, and he says that he loves me, but can I get over

my own hurt?



COMING BACK to Winnipeg for second year isn't even half as traumatic as first year. There were no tears as I got onto the plane, and when Yazmine picked me up from the airport in her new car, we squealed for fifteen minutes straight.

"Oh my god!" she screeches again once we start the drive back to the apartment. "You can never leave me for that long again, bitch!"

I laugh, my whole body shaking. *God, I missed her.*

"This is no laughing matter! I forbid you from leaving next summer."

"Okay, okay. We'll see." I raise my hands in surrender.

Yaz spends the rest of the drive home regaling me with stories of the not once, not twice, but three times that Jaden left the seat up, resulting in her falling into the toilet in the middle of the night. I try not to laugh, but I can't help it, and she casts me a glare out of the corner of her eye. "This is all your fault," she reminds me.

When we pull into the building's parkade, I notice Eli's car parked in his stall. My heart begins to race, knowing what I need to do. Yazmine doesn't miss a beat.

"Are you going to see him?"

I nod my head. "I have to talk to him."

I carry my bags up to the apartment and to my room and look around. It's the same as I left it, I can barely tell that Jaden stayed here at all.

In our typical fashion, we end up ordering pizza for dinner and watching TV on the couch and I'm amazed by how much this place, which I once felt nervous coming to, has now turned into my home.

When Yazmine heads off for her evening gym session, I decide that I can't put it off anymore. I text Eli.

Me: I'm back. Can we talk?

Eli: Your place or mine?

If I wasn't feeling so nervous and anxious, I would laugh at how quickly the response comes in. My heart threatens to beat out of my chest as I type my response. *I'm going to have a heart attack, perfect.*

Me: Mine.

Eli: On my way.

Five minutes pass, maybe less—it's hard to tell since I'm focusing on getting oxygen to my brain—before there's a knock at my door.

I take in one more pull of air and then swing it open. There he is, trademark smirk on his face, eyes gleaming. My heart, which was beating rapidly just seconds ago, comes to a complete halt.

"Welcome back, sunshine."

"Hi," is the only word my brain can formulate. I move out of the doorway so that he can step inside, and he doesn't hesitate, walking in confidently as ever.

He stops right at the counter bar top and leans against it. "You wanted to talk?"

At a second glance, I can see that he's clearly nervous as well as he fidgets with his fingers. He's slouched just a touch and his gaze isn't right on me, but focused just over my shoulder as if he's scared to make direct eye contact with me.

It's a weird sight: Eli, who never seems phased by anything, looking like he's not sure where he stands. As much as I hate knowing that it's because he doesn't know how I feel, I appreciate he isn't bothering to hide his own emotions from me. Not anymore.

"I've been thinking a lot, about us." I decide to jump right into it, hoping I don't make a mess of my words. "I'm not going to lie to you, the way things ended *hurt*. I asked you not to push me away and you did anyway. I spent *months* trying my hardest to forget about you." I pause to collect my thoughts.

"But when you showed up in Stars Valley, it felt like every ounce of pain I'd hidden away was being thrown back in my face. You were saying all the words I had wanted to hear, but it all felt too late and I didn't know what to do with that. Or if I could even trust you."

"I swear to god, I'm so—" Eli starts, but I shake my head and push on before he can apologise again.

“I know you are,” I reply. “I’m not looking for any more apologies. All this time, I thought that if things weren’t easy, then they weren’t worth it.” A hollow laugh slips out. “Which is hilarious, because from the first day I met you, you have never made things easy for me. In fact, if I remember correctly, you went out of your way to make things *harder* than they had to be.”

He smirks at this. I smack him playfully and his grin widens. When I go to withdraw my hand, he takes hold of it, as if needing to touch me to ground himself. I don’t pull away.

“Despite all of that you still became my best friend. And, sure,” I say, squeezing his hand, my voice becoming stern, “we have things to work on—like communication—but we can work on them, *together*.”

I see the relief on his face and take a step closer to him. A smile forms on my lips. “You’re the first person I think about in the morning, and the last person I think about before I fall asleep.” I repeat his words back to him, earning another grin.

“I forgive you Eli, but most of all, I *love* you.”

“No more than I love you, sunshine,” he whispers, and then his lips crash down on mine and I melt into this moment that feels like forever.

Epilogue



“We are all fools in love.” - Jane Austen

One year later...

“Do you want to see?” Desiree holds up her camera, looking at me from where she stands by the bed.

It’s October 31st, the band played our third Halloween show at Merchant. A new tradition. It went well; the bar was packed.

But the thing that exhilarated me the most? When I stared out into the crowd and saw *my girl*. The camera slung around her neck and held up to her face, a smile on those delicious lips. To say I’m lucky to have a girl like her in my life is the understatement of the century. Which is why I decided to splurge tonight, getting us a hotel where we could be alone.

I stride across the room and stand behind her, watching over her shoulder at the small screen as she flips through photos from the night. It’s surreal to see the band through her eyes. All of us are lost in the moment as we play, the lights shining down on us.

“These are amazing, sunshine,” I say softly as I place a kiss on her cheek. “I can’t wait to see them in print.”

“You know you don’t have to buy *every* issue,” she responds as she faces me.

Desiree has been submitting her pictures regularly to *The Uniter*, which means I now have a stack of school newspapers on my bedside table. I’m a proud-as-fuck boyfriend.

Boyfriend.

Not a word I ever thought would be used to describe myself, but one look at the girl smiling up at me and I know there’s nowhere else I would rather be.

“I don’t have to, but I want to,” I reply as I take the camera from her hand and place it down gently on the nightstand.

“I’m your number one fan, baby. Forever”—I place a kiss on her forehead—“and”—a peck on her nose, making her giggle—“always.” I kiss her lips, and she makes a soft sound.

Desiree turns and pushes her backside against me, causing my cock to harden. I let out a low growl. “Careful.”

“I don’t want to be,” she replies. Although I’m no longer looking directly at her, I can picture the little smirk on her face. She sweeps all of her hair over one shoulder. “Unzip me.”

She’s dressed up as a pirate, in a short white dress with an attached corset, the hat from earlier now abandoned by the door. The fact that I’m also in a matching pirate costume is the largest indicator that I love this girl more than words can say.

I slide the zipper all the way down, and the dress drops to the floor and pools around her ankles, leaving her in a black bra and panty set. My blood heats as I rake my eyes over her smooth curves and thank god that she gave me a second chance. *I’ll never let her go again.*

She crawls onto the bed, giving me a good view of her round ass as she does, before lying back.

“Don’t you think you’re a little overdressed?” Desiree asks, eyeing me. Her gaze stops on the bulge these pants do very little to hide.

She watches me, her eyes heavy with lust as I start to undress. I pause. “Why aren’t *you* naked yet?”

She lets out a small laugh as I remove my pants and briefs, but wastes no time removing the rest of her garments.

“Spread your legs for me, baby,” I say as I grip my cock and stroke it. She follows my orders, and I’m greeted by the sight of her glistening pussy.

My mouth waters as I resist the urge to get on the bed and dive face first between her legs. I can practically taste her on my tongue already. “Fuck, sunshine,” I breathe out. “You’re always so ready for me. Go ahead and touch yourself.”

Needing no further encouragement, Desiree brings her hand down to her centre and moves her fingers in a circular motion on her clit.

“Eli,” she whimpers. *I have never loved the sound of my name more.* “I need you. Right now.”

My dick twitches in my hand at her words. I get onto the bed, desperate for the tight feel of her surrounding me. I hover over her and place a hard kiss on her lips before putting two of my fingers in her mouth. “Suck.”

No questions asked, she pulls on my digits, swirling her tongue around them. There’s no way a simple act like this should feel so good, but the precum that drips from my cock says otherwise.

I pull my fingers back and bring them down to her swollen clit. The second I touch her, her hips buck.

“More,” she cries out. Her chest rises and falls at a fast pace with her shallow breaths.

I tap the head of my cock against her clit twice and watch as she squirms. “What’s the magic word, sunshine?”

She throws her head back in frustration, and groans. “Please!” she begs.

“That’s my girl,” I murmur, before filling her completely. Her eyes go wide and her mouth forms a perfect O as my eyes roll back. I don’t move, needing a moment to gather myself. Desiree doesn’t, though, as she lifts her hips upward, setting a pace that seems to be working for her, based on the frenzied “yes, yes, yes” she lets out one after the other. When she uses her inner muscles to grip me, I know I need a second.

“Not so fast,” I grumble as I pull out and kiss down her body until I reach her glistening pussy and draw her clit into my mouth, focusing on it until she is nothing but sweet moans, as she writhes against me.

Desiree tugs on my hair, as if I would ever dream of moving even an inch when I can see how close she is.

“Oh shit!” are the last discernable words out of her mouth, and then she’s coming. I feel her pulsing against my tongue; still, I refuse to move.

She looks sated, her eyes glazed over in bliss, unprepared for the moment I slide into her again. “Eli,” she pleads, but I know my girl and what she can take.

“You’re going to give me one more. Right, sunshine?” I whisper in her ear as I thrust into her at a rapid pace. I can already feel her beginning to clench around me, *thank god*, I’m so close that it’s taking all that I have not to come on the spot. She gazes into my eyes and nods her head. I bring my mouth down to hers once more. “Let it go, sunshine.”

And then she’s coming again. I follow right behind her, finally allowing myself the sweet release.

“I love you,” I whisper as I press my lips against hers. I can’t believe there was ever a time when I was afraid to say those words to her. Now they fall from my lips with ease.

She looks into my eyes. “I love you, too.” And then her mouth is back on mine.

Once we’re both cleaned up and in bed, Desiree crawls into my arms, her back pressed against me.

I hold her tight as she falls asleep, aware that this girl in my arms is the best thing to have ever happened to me.

My sunshine on a rainy day and the one worth risking it all for.

I drift off to sleep, knowing that the future will be bright, as long as she’s in it.

NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

You didn't think I would leave you hanging on what happened between Stella & Dominic, did you? Stay tuned... Their story is coming 2024!

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First of all, I wanna thank me. JUST KIDDING! I can't believe that I've reached the point of writing acknowledgements. I've wanted to be a writer for as long as I can remember and so to finally be publishing my first book, and seeing this dream come to life feels surreal. But none of this would be possible without all of the amazing people around me who supported me through it all. I'll never adequately be able to express how grateful I am to all of you. Saying thank you doesn't feel like enough but here I go...

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Danielle Sarah is a lover of romance and all things spicy. She grew up writing short stories and songs, and finally decided to release that passion into the world with her debut novel *Revival*. When she's not writing, she's reading a good smutty book, plotting her next story, working out on her Peloton, and watching binge-worthy shows. Her guilty pleasure is watching reality TV shows like *The Bachelor* and *Vanderpump Rules*.