



BEAUTIFUL CHAOS

MYLES ALAN

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DEDICATION

To the people that hurt me. Thank you. And to the people that helped put me back together. I love you, always.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Please Note: This book contains explicit content and dark elements that may not be suitable for some readers. It includes romance, mature language, violence, death, physical and emotional abuse and trauma. *Beautiful Chaos* is a M / M romance. This is book one in a series.

NOW

LYNDON

NEW YEAR'S EVE

Fireworks blossom against the midnight sky.

A flurry of sparkling light rushes skyward, erupting into a dazzling flash of red and gold over everyone's shadowy faces. Deep black silhouettes mask the horizon as thousands of speechless men, women and children take in the beautiful display of colour that ignite before them.

Another eruption blooms. A splash of purple, red and blue rain down over everyone, and just as quickly as the colours blossom into existence, they vanish.

Silence eludes, once more filling the crowd with an orchestra of endless noise. I look around at the people surrounding me, all smiling and cheering.

A cool pine steeped breeze sweeps over me, causing me to pull my legs up to my chest to keep warm. The ripped black jeans and white shirt combo I'd chosen to wear leave my arms exposed.

That is when I notice him looking at me; his eyes locked on mine as he breathes in my every movement. I'm not sure whether to turn away or smile. *Fuck it.* Feeling uncomfortable and insecure, I decide to smile anyway. What do I have to lose?

And when he returns my smile with one of his own boyish grins, I can't help my smile from growing wider.

His eyes are a fiery green, so bright and iridescent that I could have fallen into them and drowned. They lock on me instantly, and I feel like I could never look away, and then he smiles again — one of those devilish lopsided smiles that have me blushing. I watch as his mouth forms around the words 'hello', the cacophony of noise surrounding us, allowing nothing more than a whisper to carry across to my ears.

I breathe out heavily, trying desperately to catch my breath. “Hey —” I manage to breathe out, and I know my voice is lost to him over the noise.

I pull my eyes away from the handsome stranger, dressed in his black hoodie and jeans, averting my gaze to the midnight sky above. Shadows dance across the field, and people’s cheers begin to die as the fireworks blink out of existence, darkness enveloping the crowd.

One by one the streetlights slowly blink back into view illuminating the field in a warm glow. I unravel my arms from around my legs and jump up from the hard ground made suddenly aware of how cold the breeze has become. And then he’s there. His hand gently latched around my elbow, his fiery green eyes staring back at me.

I turn all the way around to face him; his breath warm against my face as he offers me another one of those irresistible smiles that I can’t help but return.

“I didn’t mean to frighten you,” his voice drips from his lips, smooth and deep. “I saw you sitting by yourself and just wanted to wish you a Happy New Year.”

“Happy New Year,” I reply shyly. “Do you have any resolutions?”

He looks out into the crowd, shaking his head thoughtfully. “I’ve learned to take the year as it comes, keeps it more interesting that way.” He looks back at me and shrugs. “Anyway, I’m Cole Chamberlin,” he speaks softly, his voice still deep enough that it causes goosebumps to crawl across my skin.

“L-Lyndon, my name is Lyndon Hargroves,” I reply awkwardly.

“Well, it’s been a pleasure meeting you, Lyndon. I’m new to town; maybe I’ll see you around.”

The way his voice rolls from his lips leaves me tongue-tied and speechless.

“Goodbye, *Lyndon*.”

He releases his grip from my elbow and the skin on my arm prickles with goosebumps in his absence.

My heart beats desperately as I watch him walk away. I want him. His smile. His eyes. I want all of him, and only him. But I know I can never have him.

“Bye —” I whisper.

DEAR LYNDON

My eyes snap open to take in the early morning light that streams through my bedroom window. I know I should have gotten out of bed hours ago. Instead, I pull the blankets tighter around my shoulders and snuggle back into the mountain of throw pillows surrounding me.

I listen contently as the old oak tree outside my window sighs softly against its trembling limbs. The sheer curtain that drapes from my ceiling, drifts quietly as the cool morning breeze wisps through the window, cloying with the lingering warmth from the sun.

“Lyndon.”

I breathe out heavily, ignoring the sound of my mother’s voice echoing from downstairs. I knew it wouldn’t be long before she marched upstairs and barged down my door, demanding that I leave the comfort of my bed.

I’d been so damn scared for this day to come around. And the fact that it is finally here genuinely frightens the *shit* out of me.

I force myself out from beneath the comfort of my blankets. Snatching my fluffy blue robe from the edge of the bed frame where it hung, wrapping it around my shoulders and sliding the bow into place around my waist.

My mother cries out for me again, a shrill motherly warning.

I close my eyes as I slip into my matching blue slippers. “This is it,” I blow out a breath that had been caught at the back of my throat. I shake my hands in an attempt to rid my growing nerves.

“Here goes nothing...”

“Lyndon!” Her body slams into my bedroom door without even a knock to warn me. “It’s arrived,” her tones

much calmer as she bursts in on a wave of pure apprehension. “The letter has arrived.” She lets out a breath she, too, must have been holding and offers an uneven smile.

Fuck! I gulp.

“Damn, Mum. Take a breath, for crying out loud. You’d think you were the one finding out whether you were accepted.” I smile mockingly to lighten the tension that had grown inches thick between us.

She swats the air in front of her, brushing off my comment. She allows herself to smile and while it is still anxious, it’s a smile, nevertheless. “You should be a little more excited, Lyndon.”

I shrug. “But there’s still the chance I’m not accepted. What then?”

She could see the concern clouding my expression. She presses her lips together in thought, not their usual painted red. “Lyndon, listen. They’d be fools not to accept you.” She says consciously. “Now get the hell downstairs and open that letter!”

As she turns to head back down the stairs, I feel a sudden shift in the atmosphere, and my heart begins to beat once more, and a flutter of excitement begins to creep back in.

I follow my mother down the hardwood stairs to the entryway, where a white envelope rests ominously on the floor.

It feels like everything in my life is riding on this very moment. And yet, I can’t even force myself to take the next steps forward to retrieve the letter from the floor. My body had been rendered unmoving — my feet plastered to the floor.

With my breath caught in the back of my throat, I shuffle towards the door where the letter had dropped through the hatch and left to fall onto the hardwood floor.

My robe cascades around my trembling hands as I bend down to retrieve the letter. It isn’t an overly big letter, a

standard white envelope with a gold insignia stamped on the cover.

The little letter means...*fuck!*

Looks like I'm becoming a paperboy.

I had to remain positive. After all, I'd worked hard. I deserve this.

My mother nudges me gently, ushering me towards the sealed letter. "Well, go on then, Lyndon. Open it."

I swallow hard.

I begin to peel open the envelope and pull out a neatly folded letter. I've never felt so vulnerable and exposed in all my life, this letter decides whether I stay cooped up in this small town or whether...

Dear Mr Lyndon Hargroves,

Congratulations!

Your application for study at the Sword & Arrow Academy has been successful. We are delighted to give you an Offer of Admission with an exclusive scholarship.

Please read our attached offer and follow the instructions to advise us of your decision.

We welcome you to the Sword & Arrow community and look forward to you joining us to undertake your studies.

Yours Sincerely,

Sword & Arrow Academy

I swallow a lump that had grown in the back of my throat and quickly turn to my mum. Her hands are clasped together; so tightly they'd turned an unnatural white in colour.

I give her a grim smile, unsure if I should burst into tears or jump up and down in excitement. Then, without any warning, I melt into the floor, clutching the letter tightly to my chest as I begin to sob.

"Oh sweetheart, there is always..."

"T-these are h-happy tears-s." I splutter. "I g-got in."

“YOU GOT IN!” My mother squeals, her hands flying up into the air as she dances around the entryway.

I pull my knees tightly into my chest, my shoulders heaving rhythmically with each silent tear that slides down my cheek.

“Get up,” my mother orders with a gentle nudge extending her hand down to me.

I take my mother’s hand and allow her to pull me to my feet. “I’m so proud Lyndon,” she brushes my cheek with her thumb before winding her arms around my shoulders.

“Thanks, mum,” I reply, squeezing her tighter.

GOOD MORNING, COFFEE

Summer licks against my caramel skin, the constant breath of warm air wrapping around me as I embrace the morning sun. The faint smell of roses drifts eagerly to my nostrils, filling me instantly with a false sense of contentment.

I glance out at the perfectly manicured rose bushes outlining the edge of the backyard. An explosion of soft pinks, peaches, and scarlet roses speckle the emerald hedges, a glimpse of the brilliant white picket fence peeking through the picturesque screen.

I have lived the perfect suburban lifestyle. I shouldn't have a single worry.

I take a second to remember this moment, inhaling a calming breath; God only knows I needed it. After receiving my acceptance letter, I'd become an anxious ball of nerves. My usually uncomplicated life had quickly taken a turn, and all these worries and concerns I'd never given mind to suddenly bombarded my every waking thought.

I'd been blessed to have such an easy and uncomplicated life. The thought of uprooting myself from a place I'd always called home and planting those roots in a city I'd never even seen is daunting.

I drink in my morning coffee, the thin tendrils of steam rising to fill my nostrils. I close my eyes and take a large gulp. *Mmm...coffee!*

I'm not sure whether it's purely from all this talk of the academy over the past few days or whether the coffee has finally kicked into gear, but an overwhelming sense of anxiety washes over me. It leaves my hands trembling so badly that I'm forced to set my mug down on the table beside me.

I'd worked my ass off for this scholarship. Indeed, I'd taken a second to consider what it'd mean if I were accepted.

What is it that I'm really anxious about...why is it so hard for me to say goodbye to this small town?

And then the answer glides through the sliding glass door, wrapped in a silk dressing gown that matches the rosy hue of her cheeks. My mother crosses the back patio to join me on the cast iron garden chairs, setting down her coffee mug on the matching white table that sits between us before sinking into her chair with a sigh.

“Good morning, my gorgeous boy. How'd you sleep?” Her smile is contagious, and I can't help but relax with her beside me.

I shrug. “Surprisingly, I slept soundly. You?”

She takes a moment to contemplate her answer and finally says. “Good actually. Thought you may have been too worked up to sleep?” The way she says it sounds more like a question.

“Somehow, I managed to switch off.” I smile sheepishly, hoping it came across as semi-believable and unbothered.

My anxiety has a lot to do with the fact that I would be leaving the only home I'd ever known. And leaving my mother alone.

My father had died when I was very young, and I'd never known her to date. She'd never attempted to make friends romantically or otherwise. And I hated the idea of leaving her alone. After everything she had given me, it didn't seem fair that I was allowed to leave.

I brush aside the thought and take another gulp of coffee, the mug still warm in my hands.

My mother hasn't noticed that I'd been lost in thought as she continues on her own external babble. “So, it looks like the family from across the street have finally sold. I just spotted the real estate agent hammering in the sold sign.”

I nod incomprehensibly. “Finally, it's been on the market for years now.”

“Probably some *outta’ towners.*” My mother is generally very eloquent with her speech, but every now and then, her country brawl escapes. That uncanny hint of country bumpkin always has a way of making me smile.

“You’re probably right.”

I glance over at my mother. She is naturally beautiful with a very petite frame. Complete with large doe-like eyes always adorned with thick-rimmed glasses and full lips painted a brilliant ruby red.

We’re alike in so many ways — *aside from the red lipstick* — and for that, I’m thankful. We always relished in the smaller moments like this. My mother reclines back in her chair, thin shoulders arched back as she breathes in the warm morning air. The sun kisses her golden skin, and a mix of roses and coffee swirls around us. With her eyes still closed, she takes a sip of coffee, and I know without a doubt that there is enough sugar in that mug to kill a bear.

“Mum,” I breath out slowly, waiting for her almost inaudible reply. “I know this probably sounds ridiculous...but will you be okay when I leave?”

“Oh, baby boy, you don’t need to worry about your Mumma Bear.” She didn’t even hesitate before she spoke. It’s as if she had already prepared for what I’d been about to ask.

She straightens her back and sets down her mug. She turns in her chair enough to look me directly in the eyes.

“Lyndon, listen carefully. I’m not going to lie. It’s going to take some adjusting to get used to you not being around. Hell, not being able to see that thousand-volt smile every day will probably kill me. But the fact that you’re brave enough to pursue your dreams and travel halfway across the country to achieve them gives me strength that I will be able to accept the changes around me too.” Her words are so sincere and comforting that I can’t help but smile in appreciation. Instantly, I no longer feel the overwhelming weight pressing down on my shoulders.

I open my mouth, words unspoken fall away to nothing at the back of my throat as my mother ushers me into silence.

“Lyndon, I’m happy and so very proud. I promise.” She lets out a shaky breath, her smile bittersweet. She understands the finality of her words, and it is in this moment I realise she will be okay. Not right now, or even a week from now, but given time and space, she will be okay.

I purse my lips together and nod hesitantly. Allowing myself to speak would only leave us in blubbering tears, and neither of us want that.

We sit in silence for a while instead, quietly sipping at our steaming mugs of coffee. My mother eventually breaks the silence. “Is that all you’ve been concerned about because you’ve been awfully quiet these past few days? Have you got something else on your mind?”

“I guess I’m nervous,” I admit hesitantly. “Not just about leaving you, but leaving this house, this town, and starting brand new in a city I’ve never even visited.” I breathe out slowly before turning my head to take in my mothers’ uneasy expression.

“You’ve always been one to worry, Lyndon. But the truth of the matter is, you need this change more than anyone. For yourself, your career.” She pauses long enough to catch her breath before she continues. “This town has offered you everything it has to offer. You need to take on a new project, a new city and discover new aspects of who you are.” She reaches beneath the table and squeezes my thigh; eyes locked on mine. “But for now, Lyndon, you need to worry less about the academy and more about enjoying your summer. You’re only seventeen once. Go spend time with Jess, relax, and put all those worries behind you, at least for the time being.”

My mother releases my thigh and wraps her hands around her mug.

“You’re completely right.” My eyes glisten in the early morning light as I attempt to hold back my tears. I hadn’t even considered spending time with Jess. I had been more concerned with how I would say goodbye.

“What are you thinking of doing to celebrate getting into the academy?”

“Honestly, I think Jess and I need a *Real Housewives* marathon and pizza.” I can’t help but chuckle as I relish in what my ideal notion of celebration looks like.

My mother giggles.

“What?” I exclaim.

“Nothing. I love how *you*; you are. You aren’t out to be anyone you’re not. You are unconditionally Lyndon Hargroves.”

I smile and my cheeks blush a soft pink.

“Don’t ever change.” She shakes a finger in my direction. With the heavy conversation behind us, my mother stands and readjusts her dressing gown around her waist and snatches her empty mug from the tabletop.

“Love you, Mum.”

As she strides towards the sliding doors, her dressing gown swishing around her ankles, she looks back over her shoulder and whispers, “always.”

THE BOY NEXT DOOR

The world thrashes around me in a cacophony of green and grey as I hurtle through the secluded forest.

The dampness clings to the forest like a second skin, oddly comforting as it wraps its sodden arms around me.

Cold, empty, *mine*.

I've always loved the uncertainty of the forest's terrain. It allows me the ability to escape the mundane and reset.

Running is the only way I know how to drown out the angst and worry, and with every stride, I feel my concerns start to slip further away.

Every stride needs to be calculated, each leap and bound thought out. I remind myself of this as I approach a fallen tree. It has been this way for years now; the bark so weathered it would've just crumbled to the ground at a single touch. If I used the tree to propel myself forward, the bark would give way beneath me, and I would have fallen within seconds.

I need to clear the entire log to keep up the momentum. I pump my hands beside my body and pull my knees up against my chest. I clear the tree effortlessly, then I land on the other side with a hard thump, the balls of my feet screaming for me to slow down.

I concentrate on the obstacles before me as my focus shifts to the here and now.

My fists pump at my sides, tearing out ahead to pull aside low hanging branches and vines as I navigate my way through the forest. My lungs burn with each ragged breath that forces itself from my chapped lips.

I run so hard my lungs yearn for me to stop and catch my breath. Still, I keep running, pushing aside the dryness that has begun to take over, the faint taste of metal lingering at the back of my throat.

Shallow, controlled. I breathe slowly to keep from growing dizzy.

Judging by the slow burn in my calves and thighs, I'd been running for close to an hour. That's the weird thing about this forest, time seems to move differently. Like everything is on pause and fast-forward at the same time.

I give into the ache in my throat, that unquenchable burn I can't quite contain with each exhausted swallow.

I come to a sudden halt, shy of the grassy embankment that divides the dense forest from the serene oasis before me.

The forest's centre is secluded; not a breath of air perturbs the beauty surrounding me. An almost perfect circle of trees encompasses a large expanse of water, so still and glasslike it is as if you could walk across its very surface.

The grassy meadow that stretches out before me is speckled with a brilliant array of white, yellow, and purple wildflowers. Their colourful little heads peeping out from the ankle-high strands of grass.

The faint smell of honey lingers in the air, and that sweet smell of freshwater wafts from the lake to my nostrils.

I close my eyes and lean forward, hands falling to grasp my shins as I inhale deeply. My lungs quake at the sudden intake of air, and then slowly, I exhale.

I notice the burn at the back of my throat begin to ease. However, the metallic taste still lingers, made easier to swallow by the taste of honey clinging to my tastebuds.

My thoughts have finally fallen away into oblivion, all conscious efforts focused on my breath and the untouched surroundings.

I release my shins and straighten my back. My head spins slightly as I stand, my vision swaying unconventionally. The lake, trees and sky meld into one chaotic whirlwind.

I close my eyes, and as I open them, I watch everything return to its rightful place.

A subtle breeze suddenly surges from the lake. An almost complexing draw summons me to dive into its unknown depths, breaking the smooth surface and disappear.

Instead, I smile stupidly to no one and nothing and turn back the way I'd come.

Not many people know about this part of the forest. It's a place I can come when I'm stressed or angry and know I'll be alone.

Feeling ready to take on the day, I head towards the edge of the clearing where the wispy grass and wildflowers meld into shrubs and towering pines.

I welcome the dense underbrush and ready myself to tackle the obstacles before me again.

I leap forward without a second to consider, instantly sidestepping to avoid an uneven hollow on the forest floor before bringing my knees to my chest and jumping over a fallen tree.

Regardless of how calculated and prepared I am for each step, there will always be an unexpected obstacle. The ground gives way beneath me, a soft spot in the leaven debris crunches beneath my runners. My ankle rolls, and the rest of my body follows. I stumble, push myself off the trunk of a pine tree and propel myself forward with enough force to keep from face planting.

And in what feels like seconds, the dense forest gives way to daylight and an empty stretch of asphalt.

I relax as the forest opens around me and I step onto an empty stretch of road that runs through town.

I release a heavy breath and allow the sun to envelop me. It's only ten in the morning and the sun has an edge to it that is almost unbearable.

I embrace the heat and allow the warmth of the sun to bite down on my caramel skin as I make my way back towards town. The pine trees offer a moment of solace from the sun. As I approach the bend in the road, houses start to appear through the trees. Parked in the driveway across the road from

my house is a truck. I watch two muscly men in matching black polos lift a lounge from the rear. Leaving boxes and ropes to lay neglected on the pavement.

They toss the lounge suite over their shoulders and begin their march inside.

Waiting patiently at the rear of the truck is a rather tall, lightly tanned guy wearing a plain black shirt and ripped black jeans; a devastatingly bad choice considering the weather.

Before I have a chance to pull my eyes away from the handsome stranger, he turns around, a box bound in his muscly arms.

His eyes bore into mine. The hint of a smile plays at the edges of his plump lips. I almost have to shake myself to break the spell he's put me under.

Crap!

I hadn't meant for him to catch me staring, or is gawking a better word?

And then the smile turns into a full-fledged grin. I nearly stop dead in my tracks, tripping over my tongue as it falls out of my mouth.

If my cheeks hadn't already been splotchy and red from my run, they certainly would have been now.

Damn this incredibly handsome guy!

To save myself from further embarrassment, I begin to approach him with the intention of introducing myself. After all, we are going to be neighbours.

He looks familiar, but I can't pinpoint where I had seen him before.

And then as if a switch had been flicked on somewhere in my head, I realise where I remember him from. My nerves double.

Stupid, stupid, *stupid*.

He takes a step closer and looks directly into my eyes. That radiant smile beams, and those shockingly electric green

eyes focus on me and me alone.

He looks different in the daylight, more radiant if that is even possible. His jawline is more defined, and his eyes sparkle like a thousand twinkling stars.

He has that cute sun-kissed country boy kinda' style, though he's every bit a city boy.

I begin to speak. My voice caught in the back of my throat. "Hi, *Cole*."

"Hi," he mimics the same soft tone. "I saw you take off on your run this morning," he confesses. "When I saw you, I couldn't believe that it was you. What are the odds? *Lyndon*, right?"

I nod. "Yep." He remembers my name. "I didn't think you'd remember me." My heartbeat increases, as does the size of my smile.

"How could I forget —" he shifts his gaze, and I know in that sudden movement there's been something left unsaid.

I can't tell if he's blushing or whether wearing such outrageously long clothes on a day like today is finally taking its toll. His cheeks blossom a fiery red, spotted with the odd freckle that kissed his cheeks.

"Isn't it a small world," he says instead.

"I guess I just wanted to stop and introduce myself. I live across the road," I wave my hand over my shoulder to the white two-story house across the street.

"Well, it was nice re-meeting you, *Lyndon*," he mocks sweetly, "looks like we are going to be neighbours."

He shifts the box he is holding. It must be heavy. Instinctively I reach out to help, ensuring the box doesn't fall.

"Thanks, *Lyndon*."

His voice sends my mind into overdrive. I don't want this interaction to end and, in an attempt to continue the conversation, I ask, "do you need a hand with those?" I gesture to the truckload of boxes.

Cole chuckles, surprised at my offer. “That would be nice. Here take this box. I’ll grab another.” He places the box into my arms and drags another from the back of the truck.

My muscles groan at the weight, and I do my best to mask the pain. “Ugh,” the effort is futile, but it’s the attempt that counts, right?

Cole jumps down from the truck’s rear with a thump against the cement driveway. “I bet you’re regretting your friendly decision to lend me a hand,” he mocks.

“Not at all,” I lie.

I follow him up the driveway to the front porch steps and into the grand entryway, which is empty, bar the odd box that had been tossed aside. It’s beautiful, with high ceilings and a wraparound staircase. To think all the years I’ve lived across the road, I’ve never known what the inside of this house looked like and I certainly didn’t realise it was so picturesque.

The house is two stories, white Hampton’s style. It is big, bold and beautiful with natural light flooding in from every direction through the tall pan-glass windows that stretch floor to ceiling.

I wonder what Cole’s parents do for a living to afford something so lavish.

Everything has been freshly painted. I could tell by the way the metallic aroma plays on my senses, igniting a gentle burn at the tip of my nose.

Cole walks ahead, taking the stairs two at a time. I watch as his body moves with such agility.

His ripped jeans hug his figure perfectly, each bubble and curve sculpted expertly, leaving nothing to the imagination.

Cole makes it to the landing on the second floor and takes a moment to look back at me. A questioning look plays at the edges of his mouth and his eyes furrow in silent curiosity.

I dart my eyes away from him, concentrating on each footfall as I force myself up the stairs. Surely, I hadn’t made it that obvious that I’m staring directly at his butt.

He smiles and says, “just down the end of the hall.” He waits for me to sidestep around him and leads the way down the hall.

I want to turn back and see why he’d chosen to walk behind me. Is it for the same reasons that had played on my mind only moments earlier?

I push the thought aside and observe the upstairs quarters. They are just as bright and beautiful as downstairs.

The room at the end of the hall is huge, with windows overlooking the main road and the forest to the left. Light streams through, unperturbed by any trees. I know by midday this room would be a sauna. The room already felt steamy.

“Just put them down wherever,” Cole speaks softly, his voice rolling off his tongue like honey, sweet, rich and tempting.

This man — this voice — could control me in a way I couldn’t let myself be controlled.

“Mmm.” I take a few more steps forward and place the box in the centre of the room. I don’t bend with my knees because my legs have been so abused during my run. They were running on luck. The fact that I’m still standing is a miracle.

Like I knew I would, my body stumbles forward, my legs quaking beneath the weight of lowering the box to the floor. The box lands with a thud, and my body follows.

How embarrassing, I scold myself internally. Like I hadn’t already embarrassed myself enough today, I go ahead and fall head over heels. I shouldn’t have offered to...

Out of the corner of my eye, I watch Cole react instantly. His whole body darts towards me, arms outstretched.

His large biceps wrap around my shoulders, and he swings me around to face him, pulling my chest close to his, to protect me.

And at that moment, my breathing completely stops, in shock, embarrassed and love-struck. For a moment I think I

might be sick, but I hold it back.

I'm not sure if he meant to hold me so closely or whether he notices at all. Our bodies press together, his chest warm against mine, I notice his breath linger between us.

His eyes lock on mine filled with concern, and empathy clouds his expression. His eyes envelop me, instantly lost in a delirium I can't escape.

My heart stops, my lungs collapse, and all sense of my surroundings falls away around me.

I wonder if he feels the same way.

"Lyndon," Cole's perpetually deep voice breaks through my thoughts, and I have to blink to break whatever curse I'd been put under. "Lyndon, are you okay? That was quite a fall."

I nod, taking a step backwards. "Just embarrassed. It would be my luck to fall on my face." I breathe out heavily. "Sorry," I stammer, heart still thumping so loudly I have to swallow to keep it down.

"Don't ever be sorry. I'm just glad I was there to catch you." His smile slowly fades, though his grip remains firmly placed on my forearms, his biceps flexing as he kneads the soft skin on my arms in what I assume is an act to comfort me.

And then whatever fireworks had erupted between us fizzles all in the space of a single heartbeat.

A voice booms from down the hall, a husky version of Cole's voice. His dad, maybe? "Hey, Son," he calls before he reaches the end of the hall.

Cole's hands immediately drop to his side from where he had been holding me, pretending amicably to dust his hands off on his shirt.

Unexpected bewilderment floods through me, and I know I hadn't contained my expression, but I didn't care.

Cole and I stand a considerable distance apart before a tall man rounds the corner and stops in the doorway, running his hands through his silvery hair.

He is dressed in a pair of shorts and a loose shirt.

I stand there uncomfortably; hands clasped together with an awkward smile plastered across my face.

“Hey, Dad, this is Lyndon. He was helping me bring up some boxes. He lives across the street.” Cole’s smile is strained. “Hi Lyndon, it’s a pleasure. I’m Al.” He extends his hand, and I mirror the response, shaking sternly. The movement is rigid, a quick up and down motion followed by a polite bob of his head. “My wife and I really appreciate the thought.”

His smile is brisk, annoyed, maybe. I can tell I’m interrupting something I shouldn’t have been. It’s my time to leave.

“Ugh, Cole, we’ve got quite a bit to get through...” And there is my exit interview signed and delivered.

Cole nods. “Sure, dad, I’ll be down in a minute.”

“Nice to meet you, Lyndon,” Al offers me a final smile before turning to leave.

When his dad is far enough away, Cole exhales a shaky breath that I don’t think even he realised he was holding back.

“Sorry about that,” his smile does nothing to mask how uncomfortable he had become. And I’m not sure whether it is one hundred percent because of me or a combination of everything that had just unravelled between us.

“No, don’t be sorry. I should be off anyway. Leave you and your family to unpack and settle in.” I turn towards the door, only managing to take two or three steps before Cole stops me, his fingers wrapping around my forearm.

“Will I see you again?” The way he asks sounds final. An unfamiliar sorrow laces his words.

I turn to face the handsome, green-eyed stranger and offer a soft smile. “We’re neighbours now.”

Cole nods once and lets his hand fall away from my arm.

I leave without another word.

ONE SIDED

Fuck my life!

Cole is a blur behind me as I march out of his house. I'd never moved so quickly as I did in the moments that followed my sudden eviction. I take the stairs two at a time, doubling out of there as soon as I can.

I accidentally barge into one of the guys helping with the move and mutter an incoherent apology before tearing across the pavement towards my house.

What the hell had just happened? I can't even begin to understand the sudden dynamic shift between us.

One minute it's so unexpectedly hot and steamy, and then next — nothing but empty space and unspoken truths.

What more could I have expected though, seriously, Lyndon? You've only known each other for a heartbeat. And there is the possibility that he isn't even gay — hence the sudden knee-jerk reaction when his father walked in.

But that still didn't explain Cole's lingering touch. He hadn't needed to comfort me so intimately after I'd fallen. He had a choice to catch me, prop me up and call it a day.

But instead, he caught me and tended to my invisible wounds, like the prince charming I'd imagined in my head.

Huh, I sigh internally.

I reach my driveway and stop beneath the shade of the oak tree that looms over the pavement.

I take an unbelievably shaky breath, embarrassed I'd let my emotions over a boy I barely knew change my mood so dramatically.

Without thinking, I look towards the house across the street and concentrate my eyes on the upstairs window.

The glass shimmers in the sunshine, the house blindingly white in the morning sun. I'm not sure what I'd hoped to see — maybe Cole staring back at me. *Stupid!*

Though this isn't my reality — the window is empty except for the reflection of the whispering oaks that line the street. I chuckle unconsciously, feeling foolish for considering any other possible outcome that could have come from this.

Whatever unexplained emotions had blossomed between us had been entirely one-sided.

I mentally shake myself and walk inside.

SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

Once I'm inside I'm welcomed by the overbearing aroma of freshly cut roses.

My mother is busy at the kitchen counter, trimming leaves and thorns for her display and in seconds, all my worries begin to fade.

"How was your run?"

"Very warm," I kick my runners off into the standby the front door. "I'm just going to jump in the shower."

She makes a small noise in understanding and doesn't turn around to meet my gaze.

I race upstairs and head straight to the bathroom. I can't bear to face my mother's scrutiny. She has a way of knowing when something is bothering me. And I had a feeling I'm not doing a good job at hiding my feelings today.

I need time to think everything through and make sense of what happened before I tell anyone.

I slam the door behind me and begin peeling off my putrid clothes. They are damp with sweat and dust, and I don't think twice about dumping them into the hamper.

I yank the shower door open and twist the hot water nozzle all the way around, completely ignoring the cold tap.

Everything I'd set out to achieve today had been in vain. I'd gone for a run to eliminate my problems. Now my mind is no longer clouded with thoughts of leaving town. They've now been replaced by the stupidly handsome boy next door!

And it seems there is nothing I can do to change my mind. I close my eyes as I feel my control start to slip away. My emotions are boiling inside me.

I can't believe I'm allowing a stranger to ruin my mood! I roll my eyes into the back of my skull and blow out a

frustrated breath.

I submerge my body under the boiling jets of water and then my face in the hopes of drowning out my subconscious thoughts. I turn my body slightly, letting the water cascade down my back, enjoying the blissful hiss of the water as it expels from the shower head.

I hate losing control, but more than anything, I hate losing control of my emotions. It happens so suddenly and unexpectedly. I'd never been made to feel this way before. Was it love or hatred?

I can't be sure.

I brush my fingers through my hair and let out a disgruntled sigh. My heart is racing, a constant thump thud I can't shake.

Not only had the run left me hot, but the conversation — or lack thereof — between us had left me truly bothered.

Cole could deny what happened between us until he's blue in the face, but I know as well as he did that there had been something between us, and he had just thrown it aside.

But regardless of whether he's into me or not, I can't give it any airtime. I can't afford to get locked into a relationship before I leave for Stone and Arrow Academy. It is definitely not part of my plan.

I wash vigorously, shedding the anger and disappointment from my body as I wade through the mix of emotions that ransack my mind.

I turn off the water nozzle and lean out the shower door to retrieve my towel. I briskly dry myself and wrap the towel around my waist. I shuffle to the mirror, swiping a firm hand across the fogged glass to take a look at my reflection.

My cheeks blossom a soft pink, highlighting my high cheekbones and deliciously sharp jawline. My eyes are a devastatingly attractive pale blue, almost glasslike in the sun. My shock of blond hair flicks out at odd angles, and no matter how much hairspray I use, it will always be that way.

I run my hands through my hair and smile at myself in the mirror. I am definitely attractive but not in the sort of textbook way Hollywood stars turn heads. Still, I wouldn't consider myself unpleasant by any means.

I run my fingers through my hair one last time and leave the bathroom in exchange for my bedroom. I close my door behind me and as I shuffle through my drawers, I take a second to check my phone. I have an unread text from Jess.

JESS: Hey Lyndon...

JESS: Are you dead?

I can't help but chuckle at Jess's text. I haven't spoken to her in two days, so the likelihood of me being dead is accurate, considering we are attached at the hip 24/7.

The idea of leaving her upsets me greatly. We've been so close for so long, and I don't want the relationship we have to ever change.

The fact that we only have a limited time left together before our lives begin to change around us scares me. And I guess that had something to do with not talking to Jess these last couple of days.

I tap at my phone screen before responding, pushing aside my inner worries for another time.

ME: S.O.S, BOY TROUBLES!

JESS: WTF

JESS: Say no more...

JESS: I'll be there in 10 minutes!

And as if she had been waiting by her phone for her invitation, she is pulling into my driveway in her banged-up Sedan, music blasting, precisely ten minutes later.

Jess comes tearing through the house, slamming the front door so hard, the house quakes and startles my mother downstairs.

"Jesus, Jess!" I hear my mother cry out.

“Sorry, Anna, I didn’t mean to frighten you,” Jess cackles, landing a loud kiss on my mum’s cheek. “*Mwah.*”

The ten minutes it had taken Jess to arrive had given me enough time to change into a pair of olive shorts and a grey t-shirt and style my hair in my usual messy high-top.

I hear Jess and mum exchange small talk before she makes her way up stairs.

“Lyndon, baby!” She coos loudly, racing into my bedroom. She wraps her long arms around my shoulders and squeezes me tightly. She pulls away from our embrace and sighs dramatically. “I’ve literally had the worst two days of my life.” She explains, exasperated.

“Oh my gosh, why?” I gasp, genuinely concerned.

“Babe,” she pauses, fanning herself with long, manicured fingers before continuing. “You being MIA made me realise that this is what my life will be like without you here.” She purses her lips and mopes. “It’s devastating, but I will forgive you.”

She always talks as if it would be her last opportunity. She is loud, obnoxious at times and way over the top, but that is Jess.

“So, boy trouble?”

“*Boy trouble,*” I repeat.

“First things first, who the hell is he?” She grabs me by the shoulders and squeezes, her eyes wide with anticipation.

I blush. Pulling away from our embrace and shuffling across the room to sit down on the edge of the bed. “It’s going to sound ridiculous and cliché.” I pause and look towards my bedroom window with a playful smile.

“No...” Jess gasps, hand poised over her mouth.

I nod. “He’s the boy next door.”

Jess squeals.

“I told you it was cliché.” I gush.

“No way!” She squeals. “Do you know what this means?” Jess taps her hands excitedly on my thighs, her green flecked eyes widening with anticipation.

I shake my head, genuinely confused.

“It means midnight booty calls and scandalous late-night adventures.” Her eyes light up, and her lips widen into an incorrigible smile.

“I doubt that very much.”

“Ooo, why?”

I don’t really want to get into the details of my loveless existence. It just doesn’t make sense to waste time on something that is never going to happen.

“Lyndon,” she urges.

We shuffle back onto the bed, reclining into the million and one pillows. I know there’s no getting out of telling Jess every last detail, so instead of brushing it aside and lying, I tell her.

I start with New Year’s Eve, the fiery night I met Cole Chamberlin in the field. Watching the night erupt into a flickering display of colour and then the unexpected interaction today that had left me completely confused.

She absorbs every juicy detail, quietly contemplating her reply.

When she speaks, she does so softly. “It sounds like he may still be closeted.” Even after she’d spoken, she seems to mull this over, as if she doesn’t really believe it herself. “But that’s no problem. We can work with that.” She quips.

“There is nothing to work with. He totally isn’t interested.”

“Baby, Lyndon.” Jess grabs me by the cheeks and shakes my head in her hands, a little too roughly. “He’s totally into you,” she assures me.

I sigh and shake my head, realising I will never win this battle. Better to accept defeat now.

“Okay, so hear me out.” Jess steadies herself on the mountain of pillows that cascade around us before speaking. “So, on a scale from one to ten...one being adorable and dorky, the type of guy you’d take home to your parents, no questions asked, and ten being a total badass fuck boy who you wish you could take home but know it would never work? Both are kinda’ hot.”

I gasp, almost choking on my tongue. I swat at Jess with both hands, one of those girly slaps that are more annoying than painful. “You. Are. Unbelievable.”

“Mmm-hmm,” she cackles wickedly.

Jess suddenly jumps up from the bed and crosses the room, the summery thigh-high white dress she’s wearing drapes around her waist perfectly. She grasps the edge of the window and props herself comfortably on the edge of my desk to peer out my bedroom window.

She watches intently until she spots what — or who she is looking for. “Ooo, Lyndon, the brunette with the delicious sun-kissed skin.” She turns to me with wild, hungry eyes.

I nod sheepishly.

“Far out! He is such a snack. So...” her mouth is hanging open. If she isn’t careful, she would begin to drool over my clean window.

“So, what?” I exclaim.

“So, tell me more about this stranger.” Jess glides across the room and lands softly on the bed. An avalanche of pillows towers down around us. She grabs a cotton-candy pink pillow with bright pink tassels and hugs it to her chest as she waits for my reply.

“There honestly isn’t anything else to tell,” I admit, wanting more than anything for this conversation to be over.

Jess always tends to jump from topic to topic, and she always has a way of turning it around to get the answers she wants to hear. Her talents in this small town are wasted. “Are you guys going to see each other again?”

“Well, yeah.” I shrug, suddenly feeling uncomfortable with all the questions. “I mean, we are neighbours now.”

Jess’s face lights up with excitement and deflates just as quickly. “You know what I mean, Lyndon.”

I lift my head and look Jess straight in her green flecked eyes. She stares back at me with little to no remorse. “I’m going to the academy in a little over a month. It doesn’t seem sensible.” I sigh desolately, automatically hating how much my life revolves around rules. Rules that I put in place to protect myself.

“Lyndon, you’re seventeen. You don’t need to be sensible. You have your whole life to follow the rules.”

“Jess, I’m like the poster boy for sensible. I have such a structured routine. It’s how I landed myself in one of the most prestigious academies in the country.” I throw my hands up in the air, annoyance clouding my voice. “I don’t have room to slip up.” I exhale loudly in defeat.

I know before I’d even lift my head and locked eyes with Jess that she’s not angry. Just annoyed.

Jess stands and lifts her chin till she is able to look down her nose at me and follows through with a snooty pout before beginning to march on the spot with her hands poised on her hips.

“I’m Lyndon Hargroves, and I never do anything exciting or adventurous because I’m too sensible. Ooo, look at me...” She mocks.

“Okay, okay, *okay*.” I chuckle. “I understand what you’re saying, it’s just...”

“Well, then.” Jess continues over the top of me without even blinking. “What are you going to do?” She demands.

“Jess, just because I get your point doesn’t mean —”

“Lyndon, listen to me.” She looks at me from beneath her furrowed eyebrows. “When a fine piece of ass like this walks into your life, and he literally throws himself at you, you better throw yourself back at him.” She points her finger out the

window with an unexpected urgency while at the same time licking her lips.

I cringe at her crude choice of words, though, deep down, I know she is right. I am holding back.

“You know I’m right,” she winks smugly.

I nod in agreement, though I can’t actually bring myself to admit it out loud.

But why is it so hard for me to accept that I could ever have a chance with Cole Chamberlin, the devilishly handsome boy next door — what’s holding me back?

LOVE THY NEIGHBOUR

Jess is unpredictable and borderline psychotic. But that, coupled with the fact that she is possibly the most honest person in the world, is the very reason we had become friends.

She is a troublemaker with a cause and always devises the most ridiculous plans. Today is no different — except today, our stupid plan involves none other than Cole Chamberlin and how we will lure him into my life.

We spend the entire afternoon doubled over in laughter as we scheme and plot our way into his unsuspecting heart. At times we laugh so hard we end up in tears.

I hate being the centre of attention. It always has a way of making me feel as though I'm being poked and prodded beneath a microscope.

But at this moment, I didn't mind. I remember why Jess and I had become so close, and it's for this reason. She always has a way of pushing me out of my comfort zone without pressuring me and challenging me in new and exciting ways.

Eventually, we fall asleep, whispering obscenities in each other's ears. I don't even remember falling asleep, though I know it had been late. I guess the run and emotional trauma had really taken its toll on me.

Clang, bang, *crash*...

My eyes suddenly snap open. My heartbeat bounces chaotically against my ribcage as I sit upright in my bed. I look around warily. It is still dark outside, with the faint glimmer of the streetlamps shining through my window. It didn't take me long to find the cause of the racket.

“What the hell are you doing!” I demand. “It sounds like you're fighting off an intruder.”

Jess is standing behind my closed bedroom door, applying her makeup in the thin mirror. She is hurriedly rummaging through her makeup bag, tossing tiny tubes and pencils aside to find what she needs.

“I might as well be,” she exclaims, obviously frustrated, dabbing at her lips with a tissue. “My stupid lipstick smudged, and I’m trying to remove it.”

I growl, annoyed and smack my head back down on my pillow. “You definitely aren’t the queen of subtly.”

“And I never will be,” she clarifies with a smug smile.

Jess continues to rummage around the room, oblivious to the noise that follows her as she fixes her hair and makeup. It is barely five-thirty in the morning as she pulls her hair into a messy bun and throws on yesterday’s clothes.

She showers in a half bottle of candy scented perfume and calls it a day, snatches her keys from the dresser and prances over to smack a wet kiss on my cheek.

“Do you still love me,” she flutters her eyelashes as she turns to leave.

“Always, *mwah*.”

She stomps out the door. In an attempt to be quiet, she closes the door, so slowly the hinges groan. Her car roars to life in the driveway moments later and then she’s gone, the silence almost deafening as it winds its calming arms around me.

I pull the blankets around my chest and snuggle beneath their warmth. *I’m not going to allow yesterday’s troubles to overflow into today*, I tell myself.

I exhale deeply and throw the blankets across the bed and swing my legs onto the ground. Regardless of the heat, I fumble around for my slippers and sink my feet into their comfy blue soles.

Dressed in nothing more than an oversized shirt, cotton shorts and slippers, I march downstairs, making a beeline for the coffee machine. It has already been warmed up, and the

beans already ground. Which means my mother is already awake — probably due to the unnecessarily noisy Jess.

The alluring aroma of coffee carries me away to that irresistible happy place coffee addicts lived in.

The morning is warm. The breeze that lulls through the kitchen window is unpleasantly hot, which doesn't give me much hope for how the day would turn out.

The heat always has a way of leaving me feeling drained and unproductive, and I hate the idea of wasting time.

I squint my eyes to see out the kitchen window. As expected, my mother is perched in her usual seat. Basking in the early rays of sunlight that danced through the cracks in the fence.

She must have heard me tinkering around with the coffee machine, trying to balance my mug beneath the coffee spout.

“Is that you Lyndon,” and before I can respond, my mother ushers me outside. “Come here. I've got a quick question to ask you.”

I fumble to pour my coffee, the mug weighing down my tired arms. Once the mug is brimming with coffee, I head outside.

I watch the sun begin to rise over the fence as I walk out the sliding door. The entire backyard is illuminated in a radiant glow of golden yellow light.

“Aren't we lucky?” My mum chirps before turning to face me with a warm smile.

“Mmm.” I smile, coming to a halt beside her. “So what was it you wanted to ask me?”

“I'm thinking of baking a little something for the neighbours that just moved in.” She pauses, waits for my reaction and when I don't say anything, she adds, “what do you think?”

“It's positively old school, mother.”

“Nonsense, Lyndon,” She swats at me with a feeble flick of her wrist. “Go switch the oven on for me. I’ll whip up some raspberry brownies.” She nods, content with her decision.

I oblige, leaving my mother to enjoy the sunrise.

I head back into the kitchen. With my coffee still poised in my hands, I lean down to flick the oven on high, the lights flicker on inside, and the fan started to whir loudly.

I march upstairs to my bedroom and close the door behind me with a heavy thud.

No matter what I do, my eyes remain blurry. I hate how badly lack of sleep affects me.

I am definitely not your modern-day teenager. I am that rare breed that needs a solid eight to ten hours of beauty sleep to even remotely function.

I’d never been one of those people to sleep in — especially when you have a best friend that is oblivious to sound — my idea of a sleep-in is anything past 6 AM.

I’m currently running on about a thirty-two per cent battery and a couple per cent luck.

I cross my room and settle in at my desk. It’s laid out with a white bendy lamp and my laptop, a notepad and a single pen. The desk overlooks the front yard and has a clear view of the Chamberlin house across the street.

It is slightly obscured by the old oak that twists in front of my window. The brilliant white house sits quietly in the early morning light, undisturbed by the newcomers.

I take a seat, shuffling my slippers beneath the chair and set my mug beside my laptop.

I open my laptop, the screen illuminating instantly.

I haven’t written anything in months; instead, I do the same dance every morning. I open my laptop and begin contemplating what to write. And eventually, I give up, throw my hands behind my head and slam the laptop closed.

The submission for Stone and Arrow Academy had completely and utterly chewed me up and spat me out and left nothing but brittle bones. I know I can write. I am an incredibly talented writer.

I guess I'm scared that what I write next won't be anything worth reading, forgettable. That scares me more than anything in my world.

It is daunting starting something completely new. No structure, no outline. Just a blank document.

I brush the thought aside and open a brand-new document. The brilliant white page glows before me. The single stroke repeatedly blinks, taunting me to write.

But as much as I try to write, it seems to grow more and more difficult with each passing second.

The only thought playing on a constant loop in the back of my head is Cole, the mysterious and handsome boy next door, with those damned green eyes ruining any chance of concentration.

I slam my laptop closed and shove it aside. Annoyed. I screw my face into my hands and sigh.

Focus, Lyndon. What's holding you back...

I turn and look out the window, my eyes focusing on the Chamberlin house across the street, with their perfectly manicured rose bushes.

Fuck the boy next door, I thought. I really can't allow myself distractions this close to —

And then Jess's mocking voice booms in my head, 'you never do anything exciting...'

So maybe that is precisely what I need — a distraction. A handsome green-eyed distraction.

I rub at my eyes, trying desperately to push aside any conflicting and unnecessary thoughts that involve Cole.

Unfortunately, it's easier said than done.

CONFLICTION

I try desperately to push aside all thoughts of Cole Chamberlin.

I can't begin to explain the allure that surrounds him. I'd become so wildly obsessed by him, that suddenly every waking moment had become about the irresistible boy next door.

An unexpected pressure weighs down on my chest, so unforgiving and painful I force myself to take a breath to numb the pain. A wave of emotions floods through me, despair, desire, shame. What did they all mean...

I didn't think it would hurt so much to fall for someone.

But what if that's exactly what falling in love with someone is like — do I really want to feel this way?

My mind is a whirlwind of conflicting emotions that ricochet against the cacophony of unanswered questions that stir impatiently inside my skull.

I can't quite put my finger on exactly what it is drawing me to Cole Chamberlin, but the pull is strong and unrelenting.

Does it matter what it is? All that matters is the here and now. And right now, in this moment, I need questions answered to make up my mind.

Number 1: Why had his mood changed so dramatically when his father walked in?

If I ask, will he answer? By no means does Cole owe me an explanation for the strange way he'd acted, nor does he owe me an apology. But any sort of peace of mind or rejection would be better than the unknowing that lingers between us.

Number 2: Is it anything to do with me — had I somehow become the problem, or is it something else entirely?

Or is that exactly it? Do I actually have nothing to do with this at all. Is the picture so much bigger than me and him lost in a single moment in time? Have I become that completely and utterly self-absorbed that I can't see that it isn't about me.

I roll my eyes and let my head fall into my hands, my elbows burying painfully into the edge of the desk. What is holding him back, what had made him pull away from me so suddenly, so unexpectedly and what caused that incomprehensible shift between us.

Number 3: Is Cole even gay?

I can't explain why I'm so fixated on Cole, obsession, curiosity, both. Whatever it is, it isn't healthy for me to keep obsessing over a boy who probably doesn't feel the same way.

My entire life has revolved around a carefully structured routine. What if I allow myself to fall for the boy next door and ultimately throw away everything, I'd worked so hard to achieve. It has the potential to turn my entire life upside down, forever.

I hate that I can't control the emotions that rival through me, untamed, wild, unpredictable.

And I know there is only one way to find out whether there is anything between us. Or whether it is all in my head

INVITATION

The pastel pink hues of early morning soon fade into oblivion and replaced by a clear blue sky.

After what felt like hours, I opt for a pen and paper. And without a moment's delay, my pen begins to sweep across the page as if nothing is standing in its way. Ink spills from the nib as I press it to the untouched paper and begin to write.

My mind's a whirlwind of emotions as I embrace the impulsive obsession that's overtaken my mind. Without realising it, my thoughts venture to Cole Chamberlin, and the words on the page soon reflect these uncharted feelings.

I glance up from my page momentarily to allow my eyes a second to rest. I relax my wrist and flex it back and forwards to release the tension in my muscles.

The sky is a beautiful pastel blue. Wisps of white cloud sift through the blue expanse. There is something about summer that makes me feel relaxed.

My hands ache from hours of writing; the edge of my hand smudged black with ink that will need scrubbing to remove.

"LYNDON!" I jump at the unexpected boom of my mother's voice calling from downstairs. I know exactly what she wants. I can smell the richness that fills the house, dark chocolate, and raspberry brownies.

I race downstairs and into the kitchen. My mother is hunched over the bench, a red and white striped apron pulled taut around her waist.

Without even noticing, my mouth begins to water at the aroma that fills the kitchen. My mother giggles at my reaction as I prepare to snatch a brownie from the platter she's carefully constructed.

“Lyndon, honey, these aren’t for you.” Quick as a flash, she swats my hand away, leaving me to scowl in mock offence. “Do you mind running these over while they’re still warm.”

“No problem, but you better have saved some for me.”

Waves of honey-coloured hair fall over my mother’s face, and before she speaks, she tosses her head gently to remove them. “Of course,” she winks. Gesturing to a tower of brownies on a separate cooling rack beneath the window.

She hands me the large rectangle platter bound in a thin linen cloth. A rose has been laid across for decoration, and I can tell she is very proud of her creation.

I slide the platter into my arms.

With the homemade brownies in hand, I head across the street.

I’m nervous, especially after how Cole and I had left things yesterday. I’m over-worrying about what yesterday had meant. It didn’t have to mean anything.

Firstly, we barely know each other. Secondly, I’m awkward almost 99% of the time, so that couldn’t have helped.

I’m hoping this will give me a chance to interrogate Cole — well, interrogates a strong word — maybe, at the very least, I’d talk to him.

The Chamberlin house is quiet. Lawn upturned from the moving trucks aggressively large tires the day before, thick track marks tarnishing the manicured facade. I follow the expertly stoned driveway, edged with a cascade of blossoming white roses and up the wide set of stairs that led to the front door.

I hope his parents’ answer. That way, it would be a brief encounter, and I can leave. Suddenly growing nervous about the inevitable conversation with Cole, I don’t want to be that person always making drama out of nothing. When he wants to talk, if he wants to talk. He will come to me.

I raise my hand to knock. I feel a little strange, maybe due to the conversation I'd had with Jess last night. It made everything I'd felt yesterday seem a little more real in comparison — then again, it could have meant nothing at all.

I shake my head and mentally brace myself. Here goes —

Just as I raise my hand to tap on the door, a soft voice echoes from beside me, and everything I had been feeling a moment ago vanishes.

I jump, startled.

A woman relaxes back into a painted white hardwood bench chair. She is naturally beautiful, with straight, long chocolate hair pulled back into a neat ponytail. She has painted her lips a soft peach that compliments her glassy green eyes that are just as immersive as her sons.

“You must be Lyndon,” she summons me towards her, her voice soft and melodious. “I didn't mean to frighten you.” She smiles sweetly to reinforce her statement.

“Sorry,” I breathe heavily. “I was completely lost in thought.” I step back and turn towards the beautiful woman. “You must be Cole's mum?”

She nods slowly. “Yes, I'm Kristin. But you can call me Kris.” She pulls herself up from the chair and wraps a delicate arm around my shoulder in welcome. She smells of expensive perfume.

“Nice to meet you,” I offer a thin-lipped smile, appreciating the welcoming hug. “I, uh, my mum wanted me to bring across some baked goods for you and the family as a welcoming gift. She's very old-fashioned in that way.”

Kristin laughs politely at my boyish grin and extends her hands out to take the platter from my grasp. “Aww, that is so wonderful. She didn't have to do that.” Kristin unravels the linen cloth from over the brownies and takes a deep breath. “Oh my, these smell decadent,” her eyes light up, and I can tell she means every word she says. “Tell her thank you, I'll come over and introduce myself one of these days.” She makes her way towards her front door covering the brownies back up.

“No rush,” I explain. “I’ll leave you to your day. Enjoy.”

“Thank you, Lyndon.”

I double down the stairs to the paved pathway that leads back out to the street. A sudden weight has been lifted off my shoulders, and I am kind of relieved Cole hadn’t been the one to answer the door.

I take a breath and continue along the pathway.

“Hey Lyndon,” the familiar voice calls my name, so jarringly alarming that my heart seizes in my chest, and my quick feet freeze beneath me. “Wait up.”

My body hasn’t given me the option to run. It has completely given in to the intoxicating pull that draws me ever closer to Cole Chamberlin.

Fuck me, I guess this is happening now whether I like it or not...

I whip around so quickly to make up for my sudden pause that I’d almost given myself whiplash. “Cole, what’s up?” I take a second to steady my breathing. But no matter what, I can’t keep the surprise out of my voice.

I take a closer look at Cole. My eyes are instantly drawn to his piercing gaze. That’s when I notice the deep bruise that wraps around his left eye and down his cheek. A cloudy mix of purple and blue travels from his left eye all the way down to his cheekbone, where it hesitantly begins to meld with his sun kissed skin.

A sinking feeling wells in the pit of my stomach, and I instantly feel the need to tend to his wounds. Before I know what I am doing, I lift a hand to caress the bruise, my fingers gently sweeping across his cheek, his skin warm beneath my touch. Cole doesn’t flinch as my hands trace the contour of his cheek. “Oh my gosh! Are you okay?”

Cole laughs indifferently, flinching at the unexpected pain. “Yeah, I’m fine, I foolishly dropped a box on my face, don’t ask.” He rolls his eyes into the back of his head and chuckles. “Once you get to know me more, you’ll understand I’m quite the klutz.”

I drop my hands by my side. “You probably should have led with that,” I declare, suddenly overwhelmed with how quickly I overreacted. Though aside from the accidental overreaction, this is nice, casual, relaxed and extremely unexpected. “What can I help you with anyway?”

Cole looks at me with his hands delved deep into his pockets, a coy smile playing at the corners of his mouth. A slight boyish edge to his normally confident charisma. “So next weekend my parents will be out of town for this work thing, so I thought I’d get together a group of my friends from where I used to live for a little get together at my place. It’d be nice for you to meet some of my friends. Would you want to come?”

My tongue gets caught in my throat, and whatever I’d been about to reply vanishes.

Cole chuckles under his breath. “No pressure Lyndon, it’s nothing serious.” Cole must have noticed the surprised expression plastered over my face. “It’s just going to be a handful of friends. You’re welcome to bring a plus one if that makes it any easier, but I’d really like you there.”

“That would be really nice.” I stutter and if Cole notices it, he doesn’t mention it. He only smiles.

He pauses, words left unspoken, and then a silent breath escapes his lips, and the hint of a smile tugs at the corners of his mouth. “And I mean, it’ll give me an excuse to get to know you a little better.” He confesses.

I smile so completely that my cheeks sting. “Let me think about it?”

“Okay,” he says. “Anyway, I’ve got to get back; otherwise, I’m never going to finish unpacking.” Cole reaches out and squeezes my arm. The smile that spreads across his face somehow makes his entire face illuminate regardless of the bruise that marred one side. He turns a moment later to heads back inside. “See you.”

I take half a step before Cole’s deep voice breaks through the whisper of wind that wraps around us.

“Hey Lyndon,” his voice is soft, questioning.

I turn around to face Cole, curiosity clouding my expression.

“I don’t want to sound too forward, but what is your phone number?” The question catches me off guard, and then to make it even worse, he smiles that irresistible lopsided grin that sends my heart racing into overdrive.

“Give me your phone,” I say instead, forcing my voice to sound even.

He hands me his phone, his fingers brushing against my palm, warm and gentle. He uses his fingerprint to unlock the screen and lets it fall into my palm. I notice his background is a picture of a cityscape, maybe his previous life, the one he’d left behind to move here.

I find his contacts and punch in my number and type LYNDON into the field that says name.

“There you go.” I usher, allowing an uncontrollable smile to light up my face. I hand his phone back.

“Thanks. Well, I should be getting back to the madhouse now.” He cocks his head towards the white house behind him. “And hey, let me know what you decide about next weekend.”

With a devilish grin, he turns and jogs up the stairs. Waving a final time before he slips back inside the heavy wooden door.

And just like that, he is gone again, and I am left paralysed on the sidewalk, trying to remember how to walk. I remind myself to lift one foot in front of the other until I’ve crossed the street and safely concealed within my home.

I pull the door closed behind me and wait for the latch to click in the door before I let my guard down. I let out an awful noise — cross between a squeal and a cry — my excitement unparalleled.

And suddenly Stone & Arrow Academy is the least of my worries. A boy had asked for my number — and I had given it to him!

SOUND CHECK

Coming out is not a fucking option right now!

My head is filled with a storm of unanswered questions that ricochets uncontrollably from one side of my mind to the other.

I can't understand what is holding me back from coming out...deep down in the depths of my stomach I'm ashamed of myself.

I know without a doubt that isn't the reason. I want nothing more than to be out and proud. I want so badly to tell my mother that the very thought of not telling her makes me want to explode.

I have a feeling my mother suspects, but she has never said anything. She is open and kind and loving, and I know wholeheartedly she will never stop loving me. Though it has never been part of my plan to tell her before I leave for the academy. I intend to tell her once we have distance between us.

But why can't I just tell her — I can do it now — I just need to open my mouth and let it out. As I part my lips to speak, my throat closes, and the words I'd gone to speak fade into silence.

With a single sentence, I could be rid of the endless chaos that floods my mind. More than wanting to tell the people I love that I'm gay. I want to come out for myself. So, I don't have to pretend to be someone I'm not. I've always thought it's this backwards town holding me back, but it isn't that at all —

My own naivety is to blame. I'd made up all these selfish notions to hide the real reason I hadn't allowed myself to come out. In reality, it's because I'm scared of the unknown.

The most alarming aspect holding me back is how much everything will change around me when it is all out in the open. And that scares the absolute shit out of me.

People change all the time, from their hair to their clothes, but this isn't just me deciding to style my hair differently. This will change the way people see me forever. I will no longer be the quiet achiever with straight A's and a successful future. I'll be the awkward gay boy — the know it all. And I'm not sure I'm ready for that to happen.

I don't want anything to change. Will it be such a bad thing if everything I'd ever known changes right before my eyes?

The answer is *yes*.

Jess already knows that I'm gay — we've talked openly about our love interests and *sex-capades* or lack thereof on my part — I know she will never force me to come out before I'm ready.

But time is running out, and I'm watching my life unfold before me. All these wonderful opportunities have already presented themselves because I have worked so hard for them. I deserve whatever happiness there is waiting for me. How can I sit back and watch as another amazing opportunity slip between the cracks?

“Lyndon...”

And then, of course, there's Cole Chamberlin.

UGH!

His devilish gaze and intoxicating smile sends jolts of electricity through my body. What would happen if I didn't at least try to unravel his mysterious charm — would I be left questioning whether I'd made a mistake for the rest of my life?

It goes against every bone in my body to sit back and do nothing at all. For crying out loud, I'd already given the boy my number. There isn't a doubt in my mind that I want to see where this takes us.

I close my eyes and allow myself to take in a deep breath, trying desperately to calm the unprecedented chaos that clouds my mind.

With an elated breath, I open my eyes, my anxiety doubling as my surroundings hurtle into focus around me. I brace my hands on the passenger side seat, subconsciously reaching down to adjust my seatbelt, ensuring I am safely secured.

I force myself to focus. Today has been one big unpredictable blur. So much so that I am beginning to grow annoyed with myself for not being able to string a single cohesive thought together and actually allowing my mind to wander.

I glance over at my mother, whose hands steadily grip the steering wheel, her eyes locked on the narrow road ahead.

Fuck Lyndon, focus!

Without even thinking, I lift my phone from my pocket and wait for the home screen to illuminate. Without a second glance, I tuck my phone away and look out the passenger window at the flurry of green pines that speed past. There has been no missed calls or unread messages waiting for me, just an empty home screen and a picture of Jess with her arms around my neck, giving me the worlds warmest bear hug. Nothing held us back. Not boys. Not feelings. Not anxiety. We were free to be who we wanted to be. Free to be unconditionally us.

I wonder how much easier life would be if I didn't care so much about being someone or something people wanted me to be. If I just allowed myself to let go and be in the moment. The thought frightens me. It's absurd, right? Structure is necessary. It leads to success and —

There are very few facts I'd become absolutely certain with as of late and moving to Stone and Arrow Academy is one of them. The other — that I'm gay.

I officially have a month left before I head to Stone and Arrow Academy. And this is where a lot of my anxiety stems

from. The uncertainty of what next month holds, but also what is possible this month. I want to make sure that when I leave, I don't leave with regrets. I'm about to embark on a whole new uncharted chapter of my life. I don't want to continue on with the lie I've allowed myself to live. I want people to know who I am and where I've been and who I've chosen to love. And I want those around me to know that too.

One month.

730 Hours.

43,800 Minutes.

2,628,002 Seconds.

I remind myself on repeat that this is more than enough time to tell my mum who I really am and who I've always been. I can't let anything get in my way. I owe her that much.

Having Cole come into my life and try to flip it the fuck around had never been part of the plan though...hell coming out had not been part of the plan either...

What I'm *quickly* coming to terms with is the fact that so much can happen in a month. Already my world had changed within just a few days.

Give me another month of airtime in this town, and I'm sure to run headfirst into another catastrophe. There is no telling what can happen.

What else does this town have left in store for me? Had my mother been wrong when she said this town has offered me everything it possibly could...was there still one last hurrah before my final farewell?

I unravel my hands and quickly clamp them back together. I crack my fingers once and then wind my fingers back together in my lap in an effort to relax my mind. Instead, it makes me even more anxious.

'One month. 730 Hours. 43,800 Minutes. 2,628, 002 Seconds.' I repeat several times to remind myself that I'm not working against the clock. I have time before I leave, time to

make mistakes and grow and be ready to pack my bags and uproot myself and then —

The car comes to a sudden halt, and I jolt forward in my seatbelt. I narrow my focus on the road ahead and realise that we haven't crashed. We've just pulled up to an intersection.

“Lyndon!” My mother snaps suddenly, staring at me sharply from behind the steering wheel, looking at me over her thick-framed glasses.

“What?!” I choke out, eyes wide with panic.

“What's gotten into you!” She interjects forcefully. “Y-you keep checking your phone, tapping your fingers...w-what are you waiting for — you seem completely and utterly distracted.” She sounds exasperated. The way she spoke startles me. There is a frightened edge to her voice. An unshakable uncertainty laces her words towards my uncharacteristic behaviour.

I force a smile to ignite my features, but I know my mother can see straight through the lie.

“Lyndon.” She spits out in a ‘*don't fuck with me*’ tone. “Really, tell me, what's the matter?” The car idles on the empty intersection. I didn't — couldn't — meet my mother's gaze; instead, I look straight forward at the glistening blue sky wanting more than anything to not have to answer her question.

I pull at my seatbelt as I begin to talk, wondering whether I should tell her the truth or...*I'm gay*. I want to say the words so badly my chest begins to hurt. “It's officially a month till I move,” I decide to forgo the truth with a little white lie. Well, it is more stretching the truth. *What if I'm not ready to come out*, I want to say. Instead, I say, “what if I'm not ready for this huge change?”

I drop my head, realising it isn't far from the truth I'm hiding from at all.

My mother drops one hand from the steering wheel and squeezes my fake smile straight off my face, shaking my jaw in her palm. She offers a saddened grimace and sighs before

speaking. “I can only imagine how you must be feeling. When your dad passed, there was this huge empty hole in our lives. It was hard at times to think through all the negative changes that had happened. And find the good at the end of the tunnel. It sounds cliché, but it gets better, Lyn. You just have to learn to live with this feeling, knowing that you are only going to grow from it and become the best possible version of yourself that you can be.” She turns back to the road, and the car lurches to a start as we round the corner, the gears grind into place as we pick up speed. She always looks pained when she speaks of my father. I’d been young when he passed, maybe two or three. And I’d never really understood what happened. “It’s a little different, but you get my point?” She assures herself more than me.

“I think I do...” I smile appreciatively. “Sorry for being dramatic. I just feel that there is going to be so much change this month, and I don’t want anything to catch me off guard.”

“The best things happen when you let your guard down and least expect it. Don’t be afraid of change Lyndon, embrace it.” The corners of her mouth pinch into one little dimple beneath her cheek.

I chuckle and shrug, loving the way her thick country brawl makes everything sound so easy breezy lemon squeeze-y. And in that moment, I know everything will be okay — even if it isn’t.

BITTERSWEET

We drive the remainder of the trip in silence.

The undisturbed country landscape whisks past the car window in a fleeting heartbeat. Wild daisies pepper the roadside all the way into town, offering an unspoken solace.

After a while, the silence grows too much. I'm hardly the type of person that needs noise to fill the void — I'm a writer, silence is currency where I'm from — but today isn't a typical day. I need something to drown out the voices in my head.

“So, the Chamberlin's that just moved in next door...” I let the statement hang in the air for a second. “Their son Cole invited me to a get together with some of his friends next weekend.”

My mother turns to me, shocked at first and then bemused. “Ooo, how lovely,” she quips, keeping her eyes on the road as she speaks. “When have you had time to make new friends?”

“We bumped into each other the other day when I came home from my run,” I confess hurriedly as if I need to suddenly defend myself. I wonder whether I should elaborate but instead decide against it for obvious reasons. “And the get together will be very casual,” I continue. “Just a few of his close friends, that's all.”

It's going to be really nice to mix with a group of new people and understand whether there's more to Cole Chamberlin than meets the eye.

We pull up to the curb next to the only cafe in town and park the car. The engine idles before completely churning to a stop.

The cafe beside us is bustling with early morning coffee addicts, with men and women all dressed in tight activewear.

I spot Jess behind the counter, her wild red hair pulled up into a high ponytail and a bright smile stretching across her face. When she notices us pull up, she starts waving like a maniac for me to come inside.

I nod towards Jess and hold up a hand as if to say, *give me a minute*. I can almost hear her sigh impatiently as she turns back to the coffee machine she's hunched over.

"Hey mum, I'm just going to say hello to Jess really quickly. Did you want another coffee?" I'd been dying to tell Jess that I'd given Cole my number.

Mum looks at me as if I'd asked her a stupid question.

"I'll take that as a yes," I raise my eyebrows sceptically.

She winks at me and busies herself in the rear-view mirror as she reapplies her signature red lipstick.

I step out onto the sidewalk and manoeuvre my way through a cluster of tables brimming with mum's in activewear sipping on chai lattes and rush inside to Jess.

The little cafe is made up of exposed brick and is adorned with an adorable black awning that is hung over the entrance.

Jess steps out from behind the counter in her all-black uniform with an apron pulled tight around her waist and wraps her arms around me as if we hadn't seen each other hours earlier. She squeals in my ear and air-kisses my cheeks, one and then the other.

"Lyndon, honestly, I needed last night more than you know." If anyone's listening to our conversation, their minds would be allowed to wander, but Jess didn't care who heard and how they heard it. She's unapologetically loud. "Coffee?" She asks, and I nod in response.

"Two, please. And totally, last night was very much needed. Plus, we only have so long left together before I'm gone." Jess knows our order off the back of her hand and instantly starts preparing two paper cups.

"Blah blah snore, don't remind me." She lets out a heavy breath before continuing. "So, what have you been up to

today?” She probes indifferently.

I turn and double-check my mum is still fussing over her makeup in the compact mirror in the car. When I turn back to face Jess, she has raised her brow at me in questioning. “*I stopped by Cole’s house this morning,*” I uttered in an almost incomprehensible whisper.

“Oh. My. God.” She stops making the coffees and slams the cups down on the bench. “Tell. Me. More.” She punctuates each word with emphasis. She is anything, if not dramatic. I guess we had that in common, among a thousand other things!

“And he asked for my number —” I continue.

Jess lifts her hand to cover her face as if she may faint at the very notion. “And *please,*” she almost begs, hand screwed up in front of her mouth. “Please tell me you gave it to him.” She speaks through her hands.

“Obviously,” I smile nervously with an exaggerated roll of my eyes.

At this point, I don’t think Jess can take any more surprises. She is thirty-seconds away from bursting into happy tears. Her eyes are so wide with bewilderment I think they might fall out of her head.

“He also invited me to his house next weekend. For a get together with some of his friends from out of town.”

Jess screams. She actually screams. And everyone in the cafe turns to look at us as she reaches over the counter, grabs me by the shoulders and starts shaking me back and forth with excitement. “I’m so freaking happy for you, Lyndon.”

“He said that he wanted to invite me because it’ll give him an excuse to get to know me a little better.”

“I’m sure that’s the only reason.” She winks, her shock of red hair falling across her face as she composes herself once again and concentrates on the task at hand.

“Jess!” I scold, my cheeks suddenly flaming with the heat of a thousand suns. “I need you there to run interference if it

doesn't go so smoothly," I interject before she can add anything more vulgar into the conversation.

"Oh babe, mmm hmm, no way. I'm not getting jumbled up in any of this modern-day love affair...this is all for you to figure out." She eyes me a matter of fact as she secures the lids on the coffee cups.

I roll my eyes and sigh. "You are absolutely no help."

"I'm more qualified than you know, Lyndon, baby." She winks and slides the coffee cups across the counter. The mint green coffee sleeves adding a picturesque touch.

"But seriously, Jess, please? I promise you can leave if things get weird or uncomfortable. And he's inviting a few of his friends from out of town. And I don't want to be the only person there that doesn't know anyone."

"You know Cole," she quips. I look her dead in the eye and frown. "Fine." She lulls her head back with a contentious sigh. "You better go find something cute to wear, Mr Lyndon Hargroves."

I pay for the coffees and spin around to leave.

"Love you," I call back over my shoulder as I head for the entrance and back into the beautiful morning light.

"Love you more, you little minx!"

I make my way outside, where my mother is leaning against the side of her car, one hand poised on her hip and the other fanning her face to fend off the stubborn heat.

When she sees me coming, she pushes herself from the side of the car. She closes the space between us, instantly grabbing the steaming cup of coffee from my hands and bringing the cup to her lips before taking a long gulp.

The heat welcomes me instantly, and I regret my decision for a second coffee, definitely not the weather.

"You look beautiful today, Mum," I say.

My mum beams sweetly, wrapping an arm around my shoulders as we walk. Her linen dress billowing around her

with each step. “In all honesty, I don’t know how you and Jess have anything left to talk about.” She shrugs her shoulders and unwinds her arm from around me.

“We always seem to find something to talk about.” I chuckle, thinking back to our conversation and instantly blush. I grasp my coffee with both hands and bring the cup to my lips to hide my suddenly rosy cheeks.

A warm breath of air caresses my skin as we make our way down Main Street. Everything around me feels familiar, *safe*, and in that moment, it feels like the perfect time to tell my mum everything. About me being gay...about whatever is unfolding between me and the handsome boy next door.

No, no, *no*. Now isn’t the time! I remind myself frustratedly. But when will be the right time, and what the *fuck* is holding me back!

Above all else, coming out seems like a pointless conversation to have just now, especially when I can’t even make heads or tails of the situation between Cole and me.

But surely that isn’t the reason holding me back, because it isn’t like anything’s happening between us anyway. Besides the fact that we’ve had several horrifyingly awkward *encounters* — yep, encounters seems like the right word. From the stolen glances on New Year’s Eve to literally falling head over heels into his deliciously masculine arms.

“Anyway, back to the task at hand.” My mum holds her coffee cup out in front of her and directs us forward, breaking me away from my inner babble. “Now it’s going to be much colder in the city. So, you’ll need jumpers, coats, boots...” she declares very matter of fact as she begins listing off items on her perfectly manicured fingers.

I chuckle more to myself than anyone, brushing aside the conflicting string of thoughts that have been left to wander elusively in my mind. “I love your optimism, Mum, but it’s the middle of summer. I doubt we’re going to find anything on your list.” Especially given the fact that we have all of three boutiques to make our selection.

She gasps in mock offence and rolls her eyes before she continues walking in the direction she'd intended, not willing to admit defeat just yet.

When my mother had an agenda, there is no convincing her otherwise, so we spend the next hour wandering through various stores, coffee poised in hand as we search for jumpers and coats in the middle of the hottest summer we've had in years.

As we wander from store to store, I can't help but come to the realisation that everything around me has changed so quickly. And the question that remains isn't how much has changed and why — but whether I will be quick enough to keep up...

UNKNOWN

“I don’t want to say I told you so, *but* I told you so.”

The atmosphere between us shifts so suddenly on the walk back to the car, and without my mother having to say anything, I could see the defeat in her eyes.

We hadn’t driven close to an hour just for me to tell Jess that I’d given Cole my number, that was just an added bonus. We’d driven all this way in an effort for my mother to run those last-minute errands ahead of my move. It’s unnecessary and sweet all in the same breath. But it’s something she had wanted to do to eliminate some of the stress from my move.

“We’ve got plenty of time to shop once I’m settled. Besides, it’ll be a lot cooler in a few months anyway.” I explain with an exaggerated shrug of my shoulders in an effort to reassure my mother.

“You’re probably onto something there, Lyndon,” she offers her best attempt at a smile, but it isn’t hard to see through the cracks and glimpse at what she’s really feeling.

There is a heavy sadness that rests in the air between us, almost unbearable. I extend my hand out and squeeze my mum’s palm in my own. And it is enough for her to turn and offer me a fleeting smile.

“In retrospect, I won’t have to pack as much,” I justify.

My mother chuckles under her breath but doesn’t say anything. Instead, she gives my hand a final squeeze before pulling away to unlock the car.

As we slide into the leather upholstery, my phone chimes in my pocket. I know undoubtedly it is Jess sending me a sad face for not saying goodbye. Except to my surprise when I look into the cafe, she is nowhere to be seen.

A little confused, I shuffle forward in my seat to retrieve my phone from my pants pocket. When I glance down at my

phone, an unknown number flitters across the screen. With a single swipe of my thumb, I unlock my phone to read the message displayed.

UNKNOWN: Hi, it's me. Thought I would check-in and see how your day was? Hope it's going well!

My heart lurches in my chest, becoming an uneven thump thud thump thud I'm unable to control. I know exactly who the text is from, and it isn't Jess.

Jess certainly doesn't begin conversations like this, and besides, I already have her number saved in my contacts. On the contrary, her texts start quite aggressively, either with a '*what's up bitch*' or something slightly more colourful and dramatic.

It's *Cole*.

I take in a sharp breath and switch my phone off, quickly stuffing it back into my pocket in fear my mother is glancing over my shoulder.

But she is already focused on the road, her hands steadily grip the steering wheel; her eyes tuned in on the roadside as she pulls the car onto Main Street in the direction of home. She doesn't question my sudden knee jerk reaction or even the chime of my phone.

I recline in my seat ever so slightly and close my eyes, enjoying the heat of the sun on the side of my face as we head back the way we'd come.

As soon as I figure out who Cole is to me. I will tell my mum everything. But until then, he is just the boy next door, nothing more. And I'm still me, Lyndon Hargroves.

The sun glimmers warmly behind us now as the landscape melds from storefronts to the countryside. We speed along the abandoned highway with the wind in our hair and our worries soon to be behind us. "I'm going to miss you when you leave, my little Lyndon." And suddenly, the lingering tension that had wrapped around us like an unrelenting cloud dissipates with a single heart-breaking sentence.

I watch my mother look away and press her lips together to keep her emotions in check. When she parts them again, she forces out a controlled breath. Then, and only then, did she turn and look at me. The sadness is still evident in her eyes, but it's replaced by something else — acceptance. It is a bittersweet feeling to watch unfold, an unspoken desperation that foretold the end of an era.

“I'm going to miss you too, Mum.” And I meant it; I'd barely spent a week apart from my mother in my entire life, and the only reason I got through that is because I had Jess with me. I have no idea how I will cope without either of them by my side.

She reaches out a soft hand and ruffles my hair, leaving her hand to fall and brush against my cheek.

We wind the windows all the way down and drive the rest of the way in blissful silence. I'm going to miss days like this, the scents of summer surrounding us, hair billowing in the wind.

The tension between us had vanished, and a serene acceptance has replaced it. We both know we will be okay without the other.

I know everything will be okay.

INSTANT REPLAY

Everything is not okay!

It has quickly become an even playing field that both teams want to play on. And I'm desperately waiting to begin the game.

Metaphorically speaking, that is...*huh*.

I haven't been able to think of anything aside from Cole's text all afternoon. *Hi, it's me!*

I know undoubtedly that the text belongs to Cole. I'm not exactly a blossoming socialite in this backwards town.

To calm my nerves, I pace the length of my bedroom — long abrupt strides back and forth and back again — as I contemplate what to reply.

I run my hands nervously through my hair before taking a seat on the edge of my bed. I let out a heavy sigh, and without another thought, I begin to type out my reply. As soon as the message is complete and my thumb idles over the send button, I consider deleting everything and starting again. I've already left Cole waiting all afternoon, any longer, and he'll think I've been ignoring him on purpose —

For fuck sake, Lyndon, just press send already!

It isn't until I press send and the animated *whoosh* sound fills the silence that I realise I've been holding my breath. I exhale loudly, taking in a shaky breath of air and the unexpected burn that had filled my chest vanishes.

I realise with sudden trepidation that there is no turning back now.

ME: Who is this?

I'm in way over my head, and that isn't a secret.

Why the fuck did I have to play the dumb card and pretend that I didn't know who the text had been from. I

probably sound like a complete fucking asshole.

Fuck!

I swallow a growing lump in my throat as I wait anxiously for Cole to reply. I curl up on the edge of my bed, legs crossed beneath me, my hands clamped together so tight that my knuckles crack under the pressure. The audible *crack* fills the emptiness.

Five minutes pass and then ten and still no reply.

I inhale a ragged breath and uncurl my legs from beneath me, leaving them to hang off the edge of my bed and tap against the floor. Without thinking, I stand abruptly and cross the room to the window seat overlooking the side garden. The sun has begun to fall beneath the suburban skyline. The final rays of warmth rest delicately on my skin, and I allow it to wrap its comforting arms around me.

Which, on an average day, would have been all I needed to compose myself. But today is different. And no matter what I do to shake this horrible all-consuming feeling — it won't budge.

The window seat is just wide enough for me to pull my legs up to my chest and twist my body sideways to stare into the distance.

I rest my head on my knees and close my eyes, forcing myself to take a deep breath. He is never going to message back. He's just taking pity on me.

And then, out of nowhere, my phone chimes with a new message. It had felt like an eternity had passed, when in reality it had been closer to fifteen minutes.

My head snaps towards my phone across the room where its screen illuminates my bed. I instantly feel my body lose control, and my anxiety levels double. My cheeks explode with a sudden warmth, and my heart beats erratically.

I jump to my feet and scurry across the room. In seconds I snatch my phone from the covers and unlock the screen.

COLE: It's Cole, the boy next door ;) What other guys have you given your number to?

Oh my gosh! The horrible twisty feeling in the pit of my stomach begins to dissolve.

My heart stops racing as wildly, replaced by a heavier thump, thump, *thump!* I throw myself onto my bed, a flurry of throw pillows cascade around me as I type back my reply.

ME: You must have had one too many boxes fall on your head if you think I've got men lined up behind me.

COLE: Ouch.

ME: Whoops! How's your head?

COLE: No complaints ;)

I bury my face into the covers and scream, completely embarrassed. I feel the warmth rise in my cheeks and know without a doubt they would have been a fiery red to the point where they are almost glowing.

Aside from the unbelievable embarrassment, does that mean Cole Chamberlin — the handsome stranger next door — is batting for the same team?

I don't have long to dwell on the comment before my phone chimes again. I lift my head to look at the unread message flashing on the screen.

COLE: Seriously though, it's all healing nicely. Just a little bruising, but the swelling has all gone down. Crazy how much damage a single box can cause.

This is nice, casual, *easy*. Now that I have Cole in the palm of my hand, I need to bring up what happened between us the other day. I can't just leave it alone and brush it aside like it never happened. Because it fucking happened, and it changes something inside me that I'll never completely understand.

What's the worst that could happen? I tell myself, and before I can take a moment to consider the repercussions, the message is gone.

ME: Can we talk about what happened between us the other day?

I didn't want to bring attention to something that may have been one-sided – that's complete idiocy. But after the '*no complaints*' quip I can't help but wonder whether there is something left unspoken between us.

If what had happened between us is completely and utterly one-sided, he will laugh it off and tell me everyone makes a fool of themselves every once in a while. If this isn't a one-way street, then this would be a whole other conversation I'm not entirely sure I'm ready to commit to —

COLE: You noticed, huh?

What is that supposed to mean, *you noticed*?

ME: It's a little hard not to notice.

I remember back to the stolen moment together in his empty bedroom, boxes scattered across the floor, sunlight streaming through his open windows. I close my eyes and recall the way his large biceps had wrapped around my shoulders as he pulled me close to his chest. Our bodies pressed together, his chest firm, his breath warm against my cheek. And when he pulled away, his eyes had locked on me.

Without even realising it, I'd been gnawing on my bottom lip. I shake my head to break away from the daydream and open my eyes. It isn't until then that I realise Cole has replied.

COLE: There is a lot you don't know about me.

Clearly, I roll my eyes and sigh heavily. There is so much left unspoken in that single jarring sentence. That my heart does backflips as I read the message over and over again. Trying to decode what Cole could have meant.

ME: I'm all ears. Tell me what I need to know.

I let my response hang in the stratosphere. The infamous *dot dot dot* follows as I wait for him to reply.

COLE: It's not that simple.

Just tell me, goddammit!

Why is he playing so hardball? He hardly seems like the type of guy that likes to make things more complicated than they need to be.

ME: Why can't it be?

At least tell me that what I felt the other day wasn't completely one-sided! That I'm not going crazy thinking there could ever be something between us.

As Cole and I whack the ball back and forth, I have to hold myself back from complete self-destruction. If I push it too far, I could ruin any chance at all with Cole Chamberlin. So, like the responsible adult that I want to be, I delete every last syllable and wait. Leaving the ball in his court.

COLE: Lyndon, can we talk about this in person?

Shocked, I sit bolt upright. The abrupt undertone of Cole's message sends shockwaves down my spine. It isn't a question so much as it is a statement, cold, hard and final.

Everything had been so casual and flirty up until this point. And now, the conversation has taken a detour straight off the side of a cliff.

I wonder vaguely what sort of dirty laundry he has bundled up inside. Why can't he admit what's happened between us?

ME: Sure, to be continued...

COLE: You are very bossy!

COLE: But I kinda' like that.

COLE: Have you decided if you're coming to mine next weekend?

ME: I'll be there with a plus one.

COLE: And this plus one is...

ME: She's my best and only friend so you'll need to be on your best behaviour.

COLE: What's that supposed to mean?

ME: I know what city folk can be like...

COLE: Whoa, don't hold back!

After that, we don't touch on any serious topics and keep everything incredibly mundane. But I don't mind. It's nice to have someone other than Jess or my mum to talk to. I'm just happy that he hasn't run away screaming and is still talking with me.

When I look up from my phone, my room is pitch black. Shadows shift lazily from the oak outside my window with each gust of wind. I cuddle beneath the covers and allow myself to fall asleep.

With the covers pulled up tight to my chin, I wonder what it would be like to fall asleep with Cole's arms wound around me.

Game. Set. Match. Or something like that...

CAT GOT YOUR TONGUE

I have so many questions. And Cole better come prepared to answer them. After all, today is the day. He's all but promised me when he cut me off the other night — not that he owes me an explanation — but he definitely *owes* me something. I am finally going to get the answers I've been longing for over this past week. I'm as ready as I'll ever be and praying Jess keeps her word and comes to run interference. I'm not sure I can do this without her by my side.

We haven't spoken much this week, partly my fault, so I'm really looking forward to catching up. After all, I only have a few weeks left before I move halfway across the country.

On another note, the sun is hotter than the six shades of hell, and regardless of how little clothing I'm wearing, it still clings to my body like a second skin.

I decide to wear a dressed-down look, quite casual as it is so uncomfortably warm. A simple olive beach short and a white top paired with my favourite converse sneakers.

Cole and I have text back and forth all week, and we have become friends, maybe even close friends. And now, standing by his front door, I suddenly feel incredibly nervous as if I'm meeting him for the very first time. And in a way, I kind of am, I'm meeting the actual Cole I'd come to know, the Cole who jokes and mocks and isn't focused on hiding who he is. What if we don't have that same sharp-tongued chemistry in person.

I knock once, twice, and on the third knock Cole swings open the door and beams out at me with that devilish grin. He relaxes against the doorframe, his arms folded against his chest.

I'm glad to see Cole has exchanged his long jeans for a pair of shorts and a top that hugs his body in all the right places leaving nothing to the imagination, lucky me. Still dressed in his signature black that really pops against his tanned complexion.

"Lyndon," his smile widens as if he were genuinely excited to see me, his glistening green eyes swallowed by his smile. "How are you?"

"Hi stranger, I'm actually really good." Panic mood automatically sets in, and my mind is completely wiped. My words become tacky and dry in the back of my throat, and whatever I'd been about to say vanishes. And in a split second, I'm lost for words.

Thankfully Cole hasn't noticed, and if he does, he ignores my reaction. Instead, he unfolds his arms, places his hand on the small of my back and silently ushers me inside. He leads the way to the living area just off to the side of the entrance.

It's furnished just as elaborately as the entryway, a high-end Hampton's style complete with a clear glass coffee table adorned with a fresh bouquet of white roses and an assortment of drinking glasses. The whitest of lounges compliments the room. It is beautiful, elegant and expensive.

"My mum decorated the entire place. She's very —"

"Stylish," I add politely.

"Not the word I would have used," he scoffs, and when I realise he isn't going to elaborate, I change the subject.

"So, no one else has arrived?" I ask dubiously, trying my hardest to seem like I walk into lounge rooms that look like this every day.

"Just you," Cole clarifies sweetly, his elusive smile hinting at something unspoken. "Which is actually perfect because I want to apologise for completely cutting you off the other night," he confesses. He takes in a sharp breath of air before casting his gaze to the floor. When he starts talking again, he lifts his gaze to meet mine, looking at me from beneath furrowed brows, hands delved deep into his pockets.

“I didn’t mean to sound so rude, but I just thought it would be better coming from me in person than over the phone.”

I’m genuinely shocked at his abruptness. I hadn’t expected him to address the situation so willingly after he had totally shut down the conversation the other night. I hadn’t considered him to be so forthcoming, and everything I had prepared myself for this afternoon completely flies out the window. Is finding out the truth about Cole Chamberlin really going to be this simple?

I blink several times, shocked.

“No, I didn’t think it was rude at all.” I lie. “I knew you would tell me when you were ready.” I offer a polite smile, uncertain what’s coming next.

“I know we haven’t known each other for all that long, but it feels like — it feels like I’ve known you most of my life.” His tone is warm, sincere and holds a certain confidence I hadn’t known him to possess. “And I’m ready for you to know me...the real me, and I want to tell you *now*.”

“Oh.” I didn’t mean to sound so surprised or do anything other than nod, for that matter.

“Come with me.” Cole leads me deeper through his house from the living area all the way through the kitchen before entering an extensive sunroom. Its elaborately decorated with beautiful white lounges and freshly cut roses in crystal vases, similar to the front living area. A built-in fireplace fills an entire wall, a cavernous white cave tall enough for me to walk straight into, accompanied by perfectly manicured cuts of timber-lined along the edge in an ornate white stand. Everything about the house screams expensive.

The entire house has been completely set up. No remnants of boxes remain like they’d been living here for years, not just one week. The house is almost too polished; it’s unsettling.

We get comfy on the white chaise lounge sitting all but five inches from each other. “So, what is it you were going to tell me?”

Cole clenches his hands in his lap, I can tell how nervous he is, and I don't want to push him any more than I already have.

"If you don't want to tell me, I'll understand." But in all honesty, I don't think I can live without knowing the truth. I'm thankful when Cole finally parts his lips to speak.

Cole sighs wearily. "The other day —" He pauses, gulps. "I didn't mean to —" I can tell he doesn't quite know how to word what he is about to say. I watch his eyes fill with anxiety, and his words disappear from his lips. His train of thought lost from his brain to his mouth, and instead, he just sighs in annoyance. He looks at me with sad puppy eyes. I can feel how badly he wants to tell me, how strongly he is trying to spit it out, but the words just never come.

I reach out and clasp my hand over his; before I know it, his shoulders slump, and he seems more relaxed. "It's okay," I reassure him, his hands warm between mine.

He nods. "The reason why I'm so —" and before Cole can finish what he is about to say, there is a loud knock at the front door.

"Knock, knock." Someone yells.

And in the blink of an eye, whatever Cole had been going to open up about vanishes.

THEY, THEM, YOU.

I'd never seen anybody move so quickly, *whoosh*.

Cole jumps to his feet like a firecracker has been set off underneath him and is halfway out of the room before he even acknowledges me.

"Aren't you coming?" Cole urges casually as if he hadn't just been about to tell me something so major that I'd been waiting all week to know. "My friends are super excited to meet you."

Wow, way to give a guy whip-*fucking*-lash!

I force a smile to appear, though it definitely feels more like a frown. Cole's sudden reaction has caught me completely off guard. How the hell am I supposed to react when he has totally ignored what just happened.

With the awkward tension still bubbling between us, I follow closely behind Cole as we weave our way back through the kitchen and living area, all the way to the main entrance. He swings open the front doors so quickly I'm surprised when it doesn't fly off its hinges. It's like he can't stand to be alone with me for a second longer than he has to. What the actual fuck has just happened?

Cole's composure completely relaxes as he welcomes his friends, like a mask has been pulled down over his face.

"Cole!" Three extravagantly dressed young adults waltz in, all screaming Cole's name in unison. One by one, they all lean in close and kiss his cheeks and then wrap their arms around him.

I suddenly feel underdressed, and my confidence level deflates like a sharp pin to the side of a balloon.

"Callum, Liam, Grace, it's so good to see you all." Cole beams at them warmly and welcomes them inside. Cole turns and closes the door before gesturing to me. "Guys, this is

Lyndon, the boy from across the street I was telling you about.”

Instinctively I blush and give a half-hearted smile that definitely doesn't hide how uncomfortable I've become. I hate the idea that they know more about me than I know of them. It feels like I've already lost control, and I *hate* not being in control.

They all turn to me and smile politely, the action's so controlled, so forced that it makes me want to back into the closest room and disappear. But somehow, I manage a feeble smile in return. “Hello.”

The guy Cole refers to as Callum is tall, likely 6 feet, with wavy brown hair and deep brown eyes to match. He has that delectable golden skin that compliments his simple black shirt and suit pants. He seems to hold himself with an unshakeable confidence that is slightly intimidating.

Grace, on the other hand, is much shorter, complete with a slender waist and pretty face, amber eyes and dead straight blond hair. She's dressed in a delicate dress the same colour as her eyes and Christian Louboutin heels that are taller than life.

Liam is hunched and has a matching grey tracksuit combo that looks more high end than most with midnight hair and green eyes. He seems quieter and more reclusive. He has a black backpack slung over his shoulder that clanks with each step he takes into the house.

“Hello!” Grace leaps forwards and wraps her arms around me, giving me the longest hug. “Mmm, you smell delicious!” She confesses, opening her eyes extremely wide to emphasise her statement.

“Thank you,” I beam.

Callum and Liam follow suit, their embraces quick, strained. The type of uncomfortable hug you get from a relative you haven't seen in years.

I am well and truly out of my comfort zone.

Cole leads the way into the adjacent living area, where his friends quickly make themselves at home as if they had

been here a hundred times before.

Liam doesn't hold back as he begins to remove the contents of his bag onto the glass coffee table. It consists of several bottles of alcohol and a small baggie of white powder.

"Liam." Cole warns.

"Okay, okay." He holds his hands up in mock defence. "Honestly, I preferred the old Cole Chamberlin, the wild and unruly —"

"What happened to you?" Cole spits out viciously, not even giving Liam a chance to finish what he's about to say.

"I could say the same about you." Liam raises a lazy eyebrow, his smirk speaking volumes. "Fine, I'll put it away, old man." He tucks the little baggie back into the folds of his backpack and holds his hands up in surrender.

"Well, that isn't fucking awkward," Callum interjects offhandedly. As he familiarises himself with the room.

Cole reclines back into the seat beside me just as my phone buzzes. I quickly pry my phone from my pocket to check the message.

JESS: I'm so sorry babe, I won't be able to make it. You've got this!

I roll my eyes, not today!

"Everything all good?" Cole asks uneasily.

"Yep!" I assure. "Jess won't be able to make it, that's all." As he reclines into the chair beside me, he reaches out and squeezes my thigh in an attempt to comfort me, and my body instinctively swoons at his touch.

"Don't worry, I'll look after you." His voice melts through the air between us. He isn't making it easy for me to keep my composure. Especially when my skin reacts to his touch so aggressively, goosebumps dancing across my skin.

Without warning, Cole jumps to his feet, startling me into awareness. His hand trails tentatively along my thigh and off the edge of my knee. It sends a sudden rush through my body.

Once standing, he says in a much louder voice that's directed towards everyone. "Now, who's ready to drink!"

Shouts fill the large living area, and the chorus of glass against glass fills the room within minutes as Cole prepares several drinks.

Fuck it. I know the only way I will get through tonight is with the help of a little liquid courage.

I don't drink much — or at all, for that matter) — as a rule. The idea of losing control scares the shit out of me, and I'm not about to embarrass myself in front of a room full of strangers. But I need to be able to match the energy in the room and quickly.

Callum takes his chance and plonks down beside me and wraps his arm around my shoulder. "Lyndon, what's your poison." He points towards the various bottles of liquor on the table.

"I don't really drink, maybe tequila?" I conclude, feeling insecure without Cole beside me.

"Okay." He purses his lips together and smiles as if that is all the answer he needs.

He offers my shoulder a firm squeeze before leaning forward to pour five shots of tequila. He hands me one of the glasses, keeping one for himself. The others instinctively raise the remaining glasses and take their seats. It's very clear this isn't their first rodeo.

"Here's to new friends," Callum's voice rumbles softly from his lips, the sort of voice that unintentionally commands a room. Callum winks at me playfully, lifting his glass to mine with a soft *clink*.

We take our shots together. The liquor burning as it washes down my throat. Without meaning to I choke and splutter.

Grace giggles sweetly at my reaction. She tells me, "it gets easier," as she flicks her golden main of hair over her shoulders.

“I doubt that very much,” I say, hand pressed over my mouth to save whatever reputation remains intact.

I feel the heat rise to my cheeks almost instantly and know deep down that I’ll be dead in a heartbeat if I have another drink too soon.

Liam staggers over to the Bluetooth speaker and connects his phone, music starts to play. If you can even call it that, it is more noise than it is lyrics. But it fills the space and eliminates any awkward breaks in the conversation.

“Lyndon,” Callum muses, his arm remains firmly around my shoulders. “What’s your story...”

“There’s not much to tell,” I explain simply. Because what do you say when someone asks you your story, especially when your story hasn’t even begun. “I’ve only recently graduated high school. I love writing, reading, which —”

“Aww, Lyndon, baby, you’re a little nerd. Just like our Cole.” Callum ruffles my hair just to patronise me. I brush his arm from my shoulders and fold my arms across my chest completely over his arrogance.

I nod briskly.

I don’t have to turn and face Cole to see the annoyance that clouds his eyes.

“You know Grace graduated with a full college scholarship that she threw away because she couldn’t keep her hands off her professor...” Callum continues obliviously.

“I dare you to finish that sentence,” Grace warns, her voice holding a slightly more sinister tone. She looks beautifully frightening with her long legs crossed over one another, her body slightly angled. I wonder if she posed herself this way on purpose or if she is naturally this refined.

“I surrender. Anyway, Grace graduated a Grade A Badass.” I watch him wink at her from the corner of my eye.

“Touché.” She giggles sweetly. Seeming pleased with the outcome, she allows her defence to drop, relaxing her posture.

I'm already piecing together everyone's personality. Liam is the quiet loner type with self-destructive tendencies. Callum is the life of the party, outrageous and loud and not afraid to say what he is thinking. And Grace is a fierce socialite who can secretly kick-ass if there ever came a time.

And then there's Cole — the mysterious boy next door. Will I ever uncover the truth, or will I always be left wondering? Only time will tell.

I can tell instantly that Cole doesn't belong, that he is different from all of them.

"Why this town Cole, it's hot as fuck, man." Callum protests, peeling his shirt from his chest.

"I needed an escape," Cole lifts his whisky glass to his lips and flicks his head back as he drinks.

"Mysterious," Liam mocks with an exaggerated roll of his eyes, unbothered by the statement.

"No, seriously, Cole, you move so suddenly we barely got to say goodbye," Grace interjects sadly. Morphing her pink lips in an exaggerated pout.

"You know that's never really been my scene, and with everything that happened last year what was keeping me there, I was miserable..." I expect him to continue, but instead, he leaves his sentence hanging in mid-air.

What the fuck happened last year!

Callum rolls his eyes, and I wonder how they all became friends. They are all so obviously different from one another.

"Well, let's get drunk and have some fun, fuck semantics." Callum bellows loudly before he downs his drink. He slaps his glass against the coffee table with such force I think the table will shatter under the pressure.

Grace jumps into some story about her wild sex life in what I assume is an effort to alleviate the tension that's started to build. Liam adds little digs at her every now and again but otherwise remains quietly in the background.

Callum pours me another shot that quickly leaves me weightless. My mind grows lighter and my limbs heavier until the point I have to lean against his shoulder to keep upright. I should feel ashamed for letting myself get to this point or, at the very least embarrassed. But I don't feel anything at all. It isn't until this moment that I realise why people like drinking so much. I feel so unconditionally relaxed.

Callum keeps his eyes locked on me, his look fills with something I've never seen before. Something powerful, hungry and consumed by desire. I wonder if anyone else notices the glances he is firing at me.

Cole and Grace lean into one another on the lounge opposite, deep in conversation, so I don't expect either of them to notice me.

As if on cue, Grace glides across the room and wraps her arms around Callum's neck from behind the lounge and squeezes him close. "How about we make this a little more interesting," she giggles sweetly.

I inhale deeply, thankful for the interruption.

I watch Cole lean forward where he sits, hands propped against his knees his curls falling over his eyes.

"What are you suggesting?" Callum scoffs loudly.

Completely disinterested, Liam pipes up from the edge of the living room, where he quietly sips his drink and chuckles.

Grace releases Callum from the bear hug and begins rubbing her hands together greedily as she makes her way across the room to accompany Cole on the lounge opposite us. "Let's play a good old fashion game of truth and dare."

Liam rolls his eyes and pours himself another drink.

"Let the games begin," she winks.

BAD BOYS DO IT BETTER

“Truth or dare.” Grace turns towards Liam and beams wickedly. She has one of those faces that can get whatever she wants whenever she wants it and now is no exception. With a dainty flick of her wrist, she tosses her golden hair back over her shoulder.

If I had known that this is how tonight would play out, I would have cancelled. Starting with Cole completely putting me on the back burner with his answers, to Jess ditching me last minute. It isn’t surprising that I’m not in the mood to play a game of truth or dare with a room full of strangers.

“Dare.” Liam chucks his drink back without hesitation.

Grace doesn’t hold back. She already has something planned. “I dare you to kiss Cole,” she giggles, wriggling her eyebrows cheekily.

“You’re enjoying this a little too much.” Cole’s eyes widen as he turns to look at Grace, giving her a lopsided smile.

She nods, her eyes holding an unattainable warmth as she watches her dare unfold.

Liam leans over Cole lazily and wraps his hand firmly around Cole’s jaw. Their lips meld against each other’s effortlessly. I don’t want to watch, but I hate it so much that I can’t look away.

My heart pounds so erratically that I think I’m going to be sick.

I hope my disappointment doesn’t show on my face.

“Not bad, Mr Chamberlin, not bad at all...” Liam licks his lips as he pulls away from Cole. Falling back into the corner of the lounge where he’d been sitting unperturbed.

Cole’s cheeks blossom a soft shade of pink, but he seems otherwise indifferent by the kiss. As though it means nothing

at all.

“Liam, you’re up,” Cole commands, reeling back against the lounge with his arms folded over his chest.

“Callum, Callum, *Callum*.” Liam sneers, chomping his teeth together.

“Do you worst heart breaker.” Callum encourages.

Without any hesitation at all, Liam fires out his question. “Do you like it rough or slow...” he leaves the question hanging in the air between them, and I can sense there is something between them that had been left unspoken, *unfinished*.

Grace chocks on her whisky, bringing her hand delicately to her mouth to hide the mess she’d made down her chin.

“Liam, baby, you should know better than anyone.” Callum quips, his voice dripping with confidence.

“O-k-ay, my turn,” Callum announces eagerly.

He had his eyes on me most of the afternoon, so I know he’s waiting to drag me headfirst into the game, and I know it’s only a matter of time before he says my name.

“Lyndon.” His voice commands. His eyes take on a teasing glint that comes so naturally to him. I can tell he has a wicked dare playing over in his mind, one that I wasn’t going to give him the benefit of asking.

“Truth!” I snap back before he has the chance to ask me truth or dare. I’m not about to find out what twisted fantasy he wants to play out with me.

“Boring,” Callum boos, barging my shoulder playfully.

“Guys, what do we want to know about Lyndon?” Callum asks. Swiftly raising an eyebrow and locking eyes with me while he considers his response. “Are. You. A. Virgin.”

The statement is so unexpected that it smacks into me so hard it knocks the breath straight out of my lungs. I blush and nod apprehensively. My guard is down. Walls, shields, everything obliterated.

“Mm-hmm.” I choke out uncomfortably, my lips locked in place, unable to speak.

Callum bobs his head contently as if he isn't expecting anything else. What had he hoped to gain from that? Is he just out to humiliate me.

“What a waste of a question. You could have asked something we didn't already know.” Grace huffs.

I look at Grace questionably. Firstly, wondering if it's that obvious. Secondly, did it even matter. Thirdly, is it any of their fucking business. As if she'd heard exactly what I was thinking, she turns to me and sighs.

“Oh baby, you didn't think you were fooling anyone, did you?” She cackles as she batters her fake eyelashes.

I drop my head nervously. I feel like I had just walked into the room naked with nothing more than the wind between them and me. I want nothing more than to run away and never come back. All eyes are directed at me, and I feel completely and utterly humiliated. But there is nothing I can do about it.

Callum wraps his arms around me and squeezes me tight. “Aww, it's okay, Lyndon. We can always —”

“Just shut up, Callum,” Cole speaks each word with a noticeable annoyance. “Lyndon, your turn,” he offers me an encouraging smile that I can't help but return.

There is something in his dazzling green eyes that makes me feel invincible. That makes me feel strong.

Callum doesn't respond well to being told to shut up. He huffs quietly beside me, frustration evident in his eyes. It puts so much into perspective just how little the four of them have in common. And yet, here we all are having an absolute blast, *not*.

It's my turn and I've lost all interest in the game, feeling attacked and honestly a little uncomfortable.

If the afternoon had gone any other way, this would have been the perfect chance to force Cole to answer some of my burning questions. However, the questions I have in store for

him are very personal and now doesn't feel like the time for a personal attack. I know if it were me, I'd want to wait until we were alone. "Okay, Liam, truth or dare." I force myself to say.

"Dare, and don't be shy, baby boy." He leans forward on his elbows, chin resting in his hands. His black hair falling over his eyes.

"I dare you to change this awful music." I jab, hoping it'll alleviate some of the tension that suffocates the room.

His eyes grow wide, filled with surprise. This catches everyone off guard. Callum elbows me in the side and doubles over in laughter. Grace swipes tears from her eye, and so does Cole.

"Fuck you!" Liam stomps across the room and starts poking me in the chest playfully. "Smart-ass."

"Sorry," I say through fits of laughter.

We talk for a while longer. After that, the whole afternoon becomes a lot more enjoyable, the tension has eased as much as it can, but I can sense there is still something left unresolved between Cole and Callum that I can't quite put my finger on. I make a mental note to add it to the list of a thousand and one questions I already have lined up for Cole.

Liam has thankfully changed the music to something less techno and more — well, less techno.

"Whose turn?" Callum calls.

"M-mine!" Liam chocks out through a mouthful of whisky. "You're about to have your ass handed to you, Lyndon." He grins at me mischievously.

"Truth or dare, Callum." You can see in Liam's eyes that he's already anticipating Callum's reply. And I'm not sure I'm ready for what's about to happen.

"Dare." Callum pulls his lip between his teeth in anticipation.

Liam rubs his hands together, his eyes laser-focused on me. "I dare you to take Lyndon upstairs for ten minutes and make out with him."

And just like that, everything comes crashing down around me. I want so badly to go back to last week when Cole invited me to come and instead tell him no. What the hell have I done to end up here!

“Fine by me, Lyndon?” Callum stands eagerly, holding his hands out to help me up from the lounge.

I must look like a lost puppy, eyes wide and worried as I look around for an escape. *Fuck!*

“Come on, guys, this isn’t cool anymore,” Cole argues.

“A dare is a dare. Go play!” Liam beams.

I smile wanly, realising that I really don’t have much of a choice in the matter. This is happening whether I like it or not!

Callum whisks me up from the lounge in a single movement securing his arm around my waist as he leads me from the room.

“Be kind.” That is all Cole says as he screws his hands up in front of his mouth and blows out a heavy breath before letting his head fall into his hands in a *‘what the fuck have I done’* gesture.

“Always.” Callum winks.

Aside from his acquired personality, Callum is classically handsome, with his lush brown hair, chocolate eyes and deep cocoa skin. I would be lying if I said he isn’t attractive. But that doesn’t mean that I want to make out with him.

Liam, Grace and Cole whisper among themselves as Callum drags me upstairs. They are too busy with their own conversation to notice us. I realise in that moment I’m on my own.

The upstairs hallway is cold and empty. Callum pulls me into the master bedroom and slams the door closed behind us. Shadows dance lazily across the room as the late afternoon sun drops beneath the horizon, the last glimmers of murky reds and oranges giving way to darkness. Even through the darkness, I’m able to make out just how massive the room is.

Complete with a king-size bed and walk-in wardrobe, there is still plenty of space remaining.

Callum cocks his head toward me intently, his eyes lock on mine. And like a switch has been flicked on, the energy that ignites between us is unparalleled. Before I have a chance to say anything at all, Callum has me backed up against the wall, my body slamming viciously into the drywall. Instinctively I allow his body to lead the way.

“You don’t do this often, do you?” Callum asks with bated breath. His firm hands following the contours of my body all the way from my waist to the centre of my back.

“What?”

I can’t keep myself from meeting his gaze, his eyes a deep obsidian abyss. When he speaks, his breath is like melted honey, sweet and warm. He smiles arrogantly, that all-encompassing smile that I have quickly grown to hate.

His hands are strong as they wander around my body, an unexpected roughness that I can’t help but enjoy. His chest heaves against mine with each jagged breath.

“Drink, party...*socialise*.” His breath is heavy as he burrows deep into my neck, his hands hastily inching our bodies closer and closer until there is no more space between us.

“N-never.” I shudder involuntarily.

“Figured.” He chuckles into my shoulder.

“Is it that obvious?” I exhale loudly, my eyes fluttering closed.

He nods.

Within a heartbeat, he has my hands suspended motionless above my head with the strength of a single hand.

“I’m sorry,” I apologise. “I hadn’t meant to dampen everyone’s buzz.” My breath catches somewhere between my throat and my lungs.

“What makes you say that?” He shakes his head curiously. His hands grip the skin beneath my shirt aggressively. His lips begin to work a line of kisses from the nape of my neck all the way along the edge of my jaw.

“It’s pretty obvious I’m not really the type of person who you would generally hang out with,” I explain tentatively.

Callum releases my hands from above my head and lets them fall by my side. With his hands now firmly placed around the small of my back, he yanks me impatiently into his large arms. And without even meaning to I push off the floor and wrap my legs firmly around his waist. I move quickly to secure my arms around his shoulders before he strides across the room and throws me onto the bed.

My heart thumps chaotically, and nothing I do to get it under control works. I hate how much power Callum has over me and how little I care at this point in time. But if anything more happens between us, I would care very much, and I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself for allowing it to get so out of hand. What the hell has gotten into me, I mentally shake myself, but it is no use. I have no idea how I am going to get myself out of this.

Within seconds Callum has peeled off his top, his muscles contracting as he crawls on top of me. He fastens his grip on the bed on either side of my shoulders and leans in close, his body presses firmly against mine.

“Obvious, *huh*. On the contrary, Lyndon, you’re exactly the type of *guy* I’d hang out with. Why do you think I’ve paid you so much attention this afternoon? You’re fucking delicious.” Even through the darkness, I watch him cock his eyebrow, and I know exactly what he means by that statement. If I wasn’t already so lost in his charm, that would have sent me over the edge.

He leans down swiftly. An unfamiliar feverish adrenaline consumes me as his smooth lips run a line of kisses down my throat. His breath is warm as he trails along my jawline.

As easy as it would be to pull him close and kiss him. It is much harder to pull away. Which is precisely what I have to

do.

My heartbeat is out of control as I force my hands against Callum's chest to wage space between our bodies. Callum tilts his head and looks at me, confused.

He pushes himself onto his forearms, so he is looking down at me, his body crushing against mine.

“What’s the problem? I won’t tell if you don’t.” He grabs my waist and pulls me closer until our bodies are riding against each other. I feel him firm against me, our bodies so close they are almost one.

Fuck, fuck, *fuck!*

I need to focus. To bring my attention to the here and now and stop what is inevitably going to happen between the two of us. I’m not the type of person to just throw myself at anyone — let alone a stranger.

“It’s not that I don’t find you attractive, because well, you are...” I babble. I’m surprised that I don’t trip over my tongue. “It’s just I’ve never kissed anyone before.” A sense of foreboding washes over me, and I’m suddenly overwhelmed with emotion. A rouge tear slides down my cheek, and Callum sweetly swipes it away with his thumb.

“When you said you’ve *never* done this before, you meant, never?” Callum asks.

I nod my head once, twice. “And I guess I didn’t want my first kiss to be with a complete stranger.” I add, giving him a look to say, *‘It’s not you, it’s me’*.

“Aww baby,” he brushes my hair out of my face and smiles. An unexpected soft edge fills his expression. “You’re too cute, honestly; who the hell are you saving your little cherry blossom for anyway? I can’t imagine you’ve got a huge community in this butt-fucked town.” And then, just like that, he is back to his usual self.

My expression must say it all because Callum almost chokes on his tongue when he comes to the realisation.

“No, no, no! Cole?” Callum chuckles mechanically. And when he realises I’m serious, his face turns to stone.

My cheeks flush red, and all words vanish.

“Just be careful. That’s all I’m going to say.”

“Why would I need to be careful...” I begin to panic internally, wanting more than anything to know what he knows.

Noticing my blatant discomfort, Callum shifts the weight of his body until he is lying on his side. He folds his hands beneath his chest and turns to face me.

“He doesn’t really date. Not after what happened...” Callum leans in, in an attempt to lure me in deeper. However, it doesn’t work; the spell has broken.

What is that supposed to mean? What has happened? Is this the same thing Cole had hinted at earlier this afternoon...

“Let’s just say you’re better off as friends. He comes with a-hell-of-a-lotta baggage.” Callum pulls away, realising that nothing more is happening between us. He quickly jumps to his feet, adjusting himself in the process.

“And why couldn’t it be different with me?” I ask, pulling myself up onto my elbows and looking him straight in his dark smouldering eyes.

He chuckles ignorantly, quickly leaning down to retrieve his shirt before pulling it over his head. He closes the space between us, grabbing my head with both hands and shakes me gently. “You’re so sweet Lyndon, don’t ever lose that.”

“I’m not...”

He closes his eyes and shakes his head, encouraging me to shush.

He reaches out and claws his fingers through my hair unexpectedly.

“What are you doing!”

“Making Cole jealous, show the son of a bitch what he’s missing. Might as well give you a fighting chance.” He ruffles

my hair some more to make it look even messier. He takes a step back and inspects his masterpiece. “There, now you look all hot and bothered.” He offers another mischievous wink and I have a sneaking suspicion this is more for him than it is for me.

My notion of him hasn’t changed much. He is still a jerk. But he isn’t all bad.

He pulls himself up until he’s standing and offers his hand to help me up. I take it and allow him to pull me to my feet.

“One last thing...” we pause where we now stand in the middle of the room, my heart still hammering uncontrollably.

“Yes, handsome?” He chews his lip as he looks at me, our bodies inches from one another.

I shudder involuntarily, hating the way my body reacts to his charm. “What’s the deal with you and Cole, have you guys ever...”

“Fucked.” He speaks firmly, not so much a question but a statement. The word so unexpectedly harsh coming from his lips.

I suck in a sharp intake of air, my eyes growing wide with shock. “Ugh, I guess I just sense some tension between the two of you, that’s all.”

“Cole isn’t really my type. You on the other hand, are the perfect little nerdy twink cocktail.”

He steps closer, and I have to force my hand between us to stop him from advancing any further. All the while wondering why he has completely diverted my question.

“I get it you’re into Cole. I know my place.” He holds his hands up in surrender. “I hope it works out for you both,” he shrugs. “Lord knows he deserves it after Issac.”

My heart sinks so deep in my chest it feels like my entire body has grown empty. “Issac?” I repeat, confused.

“Yeah, his last *boyfriend*, Cole never told you?” A look of surprise twists his features into an uncomfortable smile.

“We haven’t known each other for all that long. I guess Cole doesn’t owe me any explanations.” But boy, is my list just growing longer and longer.

“Anyway,” he shrugs indifferently as if it doesn’t mean anything. He either doesn’t care or is just an excellent liar. There is a long pause where neither of us say anything — where neither of us is quite sure what to say before Callum eventually breaks the silence. “We should get back to the party.”

I nod. My mind can’t comprehend all this new information at once, complete sensory overload.

I can’t believe what had just happen...

Callum and I reunite with the others downstairs. They all cheer as we descend the staircase. I follow Callum tentatively, trying to hide the fact that my cheeks are a fiery red. Cole joins in the cheers, but I can tell he hasn’t enjoyed the escapade as much as the rest of his friends.

Callum ruffles his hands through my hair and plants a warm kiss on my forehead. I can’t help but catch Cole’s cold gaze as he locks eyes with Callum, who doesn’t seem fazed at all.

How can I explain what hadn’t happened to Cole, or did the not knowing only fuel the fire? I know I need to be honest with him.

“Thanks for your less than formidable hospitality Cole, but we’ve stayed our welcome long enough,” Callum summons Liam and Grace with a flick of his wrist. “We have a motel in town; we better head back before we’re too intoxicated to drive.”

“You’re all welcome to stay. I mean, there’s plenty of room.” Cole states though he seems relieved by Callum’s invitation to leave.

Callum glares at Grace and Liam to hurry them up. “I’m beat. I just want to fall asleep.” I can’t help but wonder whether this is partly because I rejected him. Surely his ego isn’t that easily bruised.

“Weak,” Liam mocks.

“Grandpa Callum,” Grace teases. She quickly jumps to her feet, snatching her purse from the lounge cushion and secures it in her palm. Her dress cascades around her thighs as she makes her way across the room to where Cole is standing. Heels tick tacking across the wooden floor.

Grace jumps headfirst into Cole’s arms, showering him with a sea of kisses. Landing little pecks on his forehead and cheeks. “Don’t be a stranger. You know where we live.” Grace states in her typical matter of fact voice. She then turns to me and smiles. “So nice to meet you, Lyndon. Look after our Cole for us.” She air kisses both my cheeks and heads out the door without another word. Her blond hair whipping behind her as she makes her exit.

Callum steps forward unexpectedly and pulls me into his arms. His embrace is so much warmer than it had been when we first met only hours earlier, and I wonder how I’d been able to crack his hard exterior. “Pleasure to meet you, Lyndon. Good luck. And remember what we spoke about.” He whispers, running his thumb gently along the edge of my cheek before smacking my cheek once and then twice.

“Look after that boy Cole,” Callum demands, gesturing towards me.

Cole doesn’t respond to Callum’s demand; instead, he nods tersely. He lifts his hand and gives a final wave goodbye.

Liam waves lazily and mutters a quick goodbye, and then is gone.

We make our way to the front door, where Cole gazes out at his friends as they climb into their sleek black car and slam their doors closed behind them.

“They were...” I blow out a breath as I try to find a word to describe his unruly friends.

“Cruel.” Cole snaps tensely.

“I was going to say wild,” I add.

Cole leans silently against the doorframe with his arms folded across his chest. We watch as the black BMW lurches out of the driveway and speeds off down the road. Within seconds they are gone.

He nods sheepishly. “They can get a little out of hand sometimes, sorry if they took it a little too far with truth and dare.”

I think it’s sweet that he feels the need to apologise for his friends, and I can tell he genuinely means every word.

“Honestly, it’s fine,” I assure him, “all part of the game.”

The night breeze is unexpectedly cool against my skin. I wrap my arms around myself to keep from shivering.

My head is groggy with sleep, and I want nothing more than to curl beneath my covers and wake up from this nightmare. Tonight has been something else, and I need to wrap my head around everything that I’ve learnt. Because that, mixed with a combination of tequila, it’s no wonder I’m exhausted. But that isn’t going to be the case.

“I better head out too,” I press my lips together in a thin-lipped smile.

“Come on,” Cole whines. “Why don’t you stay the night? We’ve barely had a chance to talk without the other lunatics ruining every last ounce of your innocence.” He mocks playfully.

“I mean, they weren’t all bad.” I lie. “And you’re sure you aren’t bored of me?” I question dubiously.

“You could never bore me, Lyndon.” He shakes his head and smiles sweetly. Even through the ebony darkness, I can make out that innocent gleam in his eyes.

I believe him.

CONFESSIONS OF A CONTROL FREAK

Cole's cheeks deflate and his eyes morph with an unfamiliar emotion. And suddenly everything he's feeling on the inside is on full display on the outside.

I can see the turmoil percolating behind Cole's eyes, and I know it is only a matter of time before he brings up what happened during the game of truth and dare. I know deep down Cole hated every moment I was with Callum. Whether the feeling is purely platonic or whether he feels guilty for his wicked friend's behaviour. I figured probably the latter, considering how little interest he'd shown me all afternoon.

Cole walks ahead of me to switch the bedside lamps on. He bows his head as he walks, defeat evident in his pace.

I wonder whether he's brave enough to say anything to me or whether he'll remain in silence.

As I cross the archway into Cole's room, the bedside lamps illuminate the once gloomy room, covering it in a soft golden glow.

I hadn't seen his room since it was nothing more than an empty square with boxes scattered across the floor. It had also been the day he'd caught me in his arms, and I'd become obsessed with him.

I didn't even have a chance to look around before Cole steps in front of me, completely blocking my view. His eyes lock intently on me, a pained look hidden behind his eyes. Unsure what to do with his hands, he folds them across his chest with an agitated sigh.

I look at him confused but remain silent. Wondering if he is going to tell me how he feels or if he is just going to let his feelings exacerbate until he explodes.

"I don't want to sound like I'm prying...and by no means do you have to tell me, but what happened between you and

Callum during truth and dare?” And like a grenade, the question of the hour slams straight into me. His voice shakes as he speaks, a rocky edge he can’t shake. I know he’s been nervous to ask me.

“He tried to kiss me.” I declare honestly, thrown back by Cole’s unexpected abruptness.

“Oh.” Cole takes in a sharp breath, and I can see the frustration and annoyance bubble behind his eyes.

“But I didn’t let him,” I fold my arms over my chest and unravel them just as quickly, feeling suddenly overwhelmed.

“What stopped you?” Cole lets out a sigh of relief, all the while playing with the hem of his shirt nervously.

I clear my throat. Wanting more than anything to tell Cole the real reason. The fact that I liked him. This is the real reason that had held me back from kissing Callum. But instead, I shrug and say, “I’ve never kissed anyone before. I didn’t want to throw it away to a guy over truth and dare.” I smile wanly.

Cole beams excitedly, though I can tell he hadn’t meant to show his emotions and desperately tries to hide his smile.

“Well, that explains why Callum cleared out so quickly. He’s so used to getting what he wants. Guess he couldn’t handle his ego being a little bruised and battered by a simple rejection.”

Remembering back to Callum’s body pressed against mine, he’d definitely given it his best shot to get what he wanted. But I’m not about to tell Cole that.

“Just call me the original heartbreaker,” I flick imaginary hair over my shoulder and giggle.

He closes the door behind us, the weight of the afternoon gone.

We are alone together, like alone, *alone*. We have the whole house to ourselves.

And now that the cat had been let out of the bag, Cole is taking a second to relax. It gives me a moment to study his

room.

His room is very boyish, complete with a king-size bed and navy-blue sheets. A pair of matching white lamps glow on either side of his bed and cast the room in a warm glow.

Along the entire righthand wall is a sleek white bookshelf filled with books arranged by colour, lightest to darkest. “You never told me you were a nerd.” I gawk, rushing over to run my hands over his books.

He shrugs, folding his arms across his chest and joining me by the bookshelf. “It’s one of my many secrets,” he winks.

Our bodies are close. Cole’s shoulder brushing against mine as he sways restlessly. It is nice to finally have a quiet moment to ourselves.

“You said earlier you love to read.” He asks, breaking the silence.

“I didn’t think anyone heard me.”

“Like I said, you could never bore me.” He runs a steady hand through his curly brown hair, a coy smile perking up the edges of his mouth.

I can’t help myself but smile because for the first time all night, I feel happy.

“Whose, your favourite author,” Cole asks casually, leaning against his bookshelf as he waits for me to reply. He has a glint in his eye that I can’t quite place. A certain fervent happiness that mimics my own.

“Just one?”

He nods, shrugging his shoulders indifferently.

“Well, it’s probably going to sound super clique,” I warn, holding my hands up in front of me, already feeling stupidly predictable with what I’m about to say, “but Emily Bronte would have to be my all-time favourite author.”

“You, Lyndon Hargroves, are such a dork. But I love it.” He holds up a hand as if urging me to wait as he leans down to retrieve a book from his shelf. He scours the collection of

darker coloured books along the bottom shelf. When he finds the one he's looking for, he snatches it carefully from the stack and stands up, straightening his back.

The book is worn and battered and has several coloured tabs hanging from the pages. Cole turns to a page with a bright purple tab and flicks the book wide open.

"Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same," he reveres passionately, his lips perk into a smile, and I swear my heart melts a little as he recites one of my all-time favourite quotes.

I choke, my mouth opens and closes helplessly as I try to find the right words. "You've read *Wuthering Heights*?" I look at him perplexed, wondering where the hell this complete stranger has been hiding my entire life. "It's literally one of my favourite novels of all time." I gush, my cheeks flaming red.

"I'm more than just a pretty face, Hargroves." His eyes gleam with an unfamiliar warmth that I can't help but fall captive to.

"I'm beginning to realise that." I can't help but smile. I'm impressed, not what I had expected.

He arches an eyebrow, a tentative smirk playing at the corners of his mouth as he chuckles under his breath. He places the book back on the shelf and looks at me, his eyes pulling me in deeper.

"Ditto, Hargroves, *ditto*." He clicks his tongue as he contemplates his reply. "Anyway, let's get ready for bed. Those guys really know how to suck the life out of you."

You're telling me, I tell myself thinking back to his *friends* and their complete lack of humanity.

"What's your deal with them anyway. Grace, Liam and Callum are like the complete opposite of you?" Rude, obnoxious, arrogant, just to name a few.

"Victims of circumstance, but that's a story for another time." He blows out an uncomfortable breath, and I know now isn't the time to push it.

It had been the most information he'd given me all week, and I love that he's finally comfortable enough to start opening up. Maybe he isn't expressing his undying love for me, but at least he's taking baby steps.

"Did you want something comfier to sleep in or..."

I look down at the clothes I'd been in all afternoon and nod. "Sure."

Cole crosses the room and begins rummaging around in his dresser. "Now, all I can offer you is a shirt because I have a feeling my shorts are going to be way too big for you." He looks down at my slender waist and grins.

"A shirt will be fine," I confess, giving him a conscious glare.

Cole pulls out a grey shirt and tosses it from across the room, and I catch it in one hand. It's big and baggy and smells like him. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it." He pauses. "I hope it's not weird that I asked you to stay over?" Cole screws up his eyebrows, his face contorting with uncertainty as he closes the drawers and turns to face me.

"No, of course not." I toy with his shirt in my hands, nervously considering what to say next. "I'm glad you did."

"You are?" His reaction is instantaneous, and I realise that he's been waiting for me to respond, almost desperate for my answer.

"I just feel like I know you already," I confess and wonder whether he feels the same way. When he doesn't say anything, I realise how stupidly naive and desperate I must sound. I shake my head in annoyance, wanting more than anything to rewind.

"Same." He nods contently, and suddenly the pressure that weighs on my chest disappears.

Without another word, he turns away from me and quickly peels off his shirt. The muscles in his back flex as he pulls his shirt over his head and tosses it to the floor beside

him. I know I shouldn't watch, but I can't bring myself to turn away.

I'm going to hell for this, but I don't care. Goddammit he is...

He reaches down and shucks his pants lower on his waist. I turn away just as he removes his pants, leaving him in nothing more than his boxers.

He turns and notices me still standing awkwardly in the same place. "You aren't going to change?" He questions as he crosses the room in two long strides and slides beneath the covers. He pulls the navy sheets around him and watches me from across the room. "Will it make you feel better if I look away?" He asks, and all I can do is nod.

I round the bed and turn away to remove my clothes', hoping Cole has stuck to his word to look away.

I'm not as confident in my body as Cole. I certainly don't have that perfect designer body like him. I look more like a wet strand of spaghetti in comparison.

I pull my shirt over my head in a much less attractive fashion and toss my clothes aside. I pull Cole's oversized shirt over my head and let it billow around my body. It comes down mid-thigh, way too big to be considered a shirt on me, but I don't care because it smells like Cole.

"Suits you," Cole admits, and I realise at that moment he'd watched every second of me change.

I spin around so suddenly that I stumble over my feet. My cheeks instantly ignite with unexpected heat. As I lift my head, I meet Cole's fiery gaze with a nervous smile.

He grins charmingly, and I can't help but notice that he is blushing too.

"Come on, you weirdo, get into bed." He reaches over and pulls back the covers, patting the bed beside him.

My heart stops in my chest as I crawl beneath the covers beside Cole, unable to keep myself from breathing in that intoxicating mix of vanilla and honeysuckle that belongs to

him. I've never felt so tense in my entire life. A combination of fear and excitement bundle up inside me.

"Are you okay?" Cole asks hesitantly. "You seem..."

"I'm fine, *honestly*." I force myself to take a breath as I ruffle the covers around my chest.

"Okay." He nudges the covers down around his waist and props himself up on his pillow. "You are an absolutely mysterious Lyndon Hargroves," he confesses, hands folded behind his head.

"Yeah," I sigh. "Honestly, I was starting to think the exact same thing about you."

He shifts onto his side, the shadows from the lamps on either side of the bed painting his smooth skin in a golden glow, and I want nothing more than to run my hands over his body. "Oh really, how so?"

Where do I even begin, I want to say. "You keep so much locked up inside. And it's like the only way you know how to express how you feel is with your face. Every emotion you've ever felt. Every question you hold back is plastered on your face for the world to see. It's one of the most interesting parts of you and at the same time it's one of the parts of you I find most frustrating."

"Ouch." He pulls his hands to his chest as if he'd been wounded and falls backwards against his pillows.

"And me?" I fluff the pillows under my elbow and scurry beneath the covers.

His eyes lock on mine with a quiet intensity as he contemplates his reply. "Well, Lyndon, you are the complete opposite. You are very calculated, meticulous. You're the complete opposite of me. Your guard is always up and your defence in place. Why's that?"

I don't know how to answer that. It isn't for any particular reason other than — *structure, control, success*. I need to be calculated and meticulous; otherwise, I'll lose control.

“Lyndon, where’d you go?” Cole waves his hands in front of my face, snapping his fingers when that doesn’t garner my attention.

When my eyes snap back into focus, I realise Cole has moved directly in front of me; one of his hands now grasps onto my arm, gently shaking me.

“See,” he huffs. “You have to physically stop and consider your words before you speak.”

“I hate losing control,” I snap before I have a chance to stop myself. “I have to maintain structure. Control. Everything in my life depends on it. My entire life, I’ve wanted to be somebody. When I die, I don’t want to be another number on this earth. I want to be somebody someone remembers. For this, I have to think about everything I say and do to be successful.” I let out a ragged breath and look at Cole. His eyes hold an unshakeable sadness, and I can’t help but think that I’ve put it there.

“It sounds lonely...” he speaks in a whisper that only I can hear, his voice barely able to keep from shaking.

“It can be, but it has to be this way.” I bow my head, a silent sigh escaping my lips. “Anyway, how did this become an interrogation about me?” I raise my eyebrows suspiciously.

“Fine, your turn. What deep dark secret do you want to know about me?”

Finally!

PILLOW TALK

I had one too many shots and my head is giddy. Not in an outlandishly drunk sort of way, just light, content, filter-less. Because it makes what I'm about to say next so much easier.

"You said you moved to get away from everything that happened? But why did you move to this town, I've tried my whole life to escape this dreary little bubble, how bad could it have been."

"Wouldn't you get tired of the constant hustle of the city..." he states, expertly ignoring my question.

Cole's response is calculated, as if he knew exactly what I'd been about to say.

"I'm sure I'd miss the peace and quiet, but I'd eventually come back. It's not like I'd be going away forever. Same question, why the move to the country? It's probably too slow pace compared to what you're used to."

"I haven't been here long enough to decide." He replies quickly. I'm not sure how many more of these non-answer, answers I can take. After all, he is the one who wanted me to know his deepest darkest secret.

"You're not going to elaborate?"

The silence stretches between us like a long empty highway as I wait for him to say something, anything. But as the silence lengthens between us, I realise I've pushed him to his limit.

Cole's eyes are filled with an indescribable pain. A hollow, empty, suffocating pain. I can see he wants to say something, but his nerves have rendered his body motionless.

"It's okay," I feel terrible, I hate that he feels this way because of me. "Honestly, we can wait until you're ready. I shouldn't have said anything. It's honestly none of my

business.” I clear my throat, a shocking half smile spreads across my face to ease the tension.

Cole runs his hands anxiously through his hair before shifting his weight to lean on his side. He pulls the blanket firmly around his waist and hugs his torso securely. He glances up into my eyes, shadows dancing on his cheeks. “Long story short, I had something really fucking bad happen to me.” He swallows loudly, chocking back his nerves. “My family decided we needed a slower lifestyle, and then we ended up here.” His voice cracks, he blows out a heavy breath and closes his eyes on blind panic.

“Thank you.”

He nods.

“Is that what you’d been trying to tell me earlier?” I ask, my curiosity getting the better of me. I know there is more to the story, but ever so slowly it’ll unravel. If I push too hard too quickly, I might never know the real truth.

He nods again. “I’ve never actually told anyone the real reason before, just you. So can we please keep this between us, I don’t need everyone in town knowing how fucked up I am. It’s bad enough I’m the new kid on the block. I don’t need to be the broken kid too.” There is so much pain behind his words that my heart physically quivers in agony.

“Never, I promise. You’ve got my word. And Cole?” I pause, reach out and grab his hand and squeeze it tight. “You aren’t fucked up. And you’re far from broken. You’re just hurting. And it may take some time before you aren’t hurting so much. Just give yourself time to heal.”

Sadness clouds Cole’s expression as shadows dance across his face. A combination of defeat and acceptance renders him speechless.

As much as he doesn’t want to admit that I’m right he knows deep down that he will be okay one day and I hope that I’ll be there to help along the way if he needs me.

I can tell there is more he wants to say, though he remains silent. I know he will tell me when the time is right. And now

isn't that time.

I wonder whether Issac has anything to do with his move. But now certainly isn't the time to keep poking the bear.

"It's late," Cole releases my hand with a final squeeze and rolls over to check his phone. As he's checking the time a tired yawn escapes. "We should probably catch a few hours of sleep."

With a tired sigh of my own I reach over and flick my bedside lamp off and snuggle further beneath the covers.

I bury my head into the pillow beside Cole. The pillow is soft beneath my head and the covers smell exactly like him. The intoxicating perfume of honeysuckle and vanilla is almost suffocating as I pull the covers up over my shoulders.

I turn and face Cole just as he switches off his lamp. The room is consumed by shadows in an instant and all that remains is the sound of our breath in the darkness.

It doesn't take long for my eyes to adjust to the darkness and Cole's silhouette emerges. He rolls onto his side, and I can tell he is facing me because his breath is warm against my face.

"Thank you." He mutters, and I swear through the gloom I can see a smile stretch across his face.

"What for?" I whisper, dazed.

"For being there for me — for actually giving a damn. You hardly know me, but it's nice to know I have a friend."

"Always." My heart drops painfully in my chest and I do my best to keep my voice from cracking.

Friends.

Just friends. I'm not quite sure how much longer I can ride this rollercoaster for before it takes me on any more loops.

We've known each other a little over a week, and in that short time we've had a number of full circle moments from the day we met to our amorous texts, it has never once felt like we were making a beeline straight to friends. But this has

completely thrown any sort of perception I'd begun to piece together out the window.

Friends.

NOW DEPARTING, TEMPTATION STATION

I wake suddenly. The sun warm against my face. I bury my head deeper into the pillow, my head is still fuzzy with sleep. I'm still too tired to open my eyes.

The comforting scent of honeysuckle and vanilla wrap around me and I breathe it in deeply. I let out a content sigh and smile. And that is when it hits me, like a tidal wave crashing down over me. I remember all the events of the night before and the smile quickly morphs into a blind panic.

My eyes snap open, the harsh sun almost blinding me in the process. My pulse quickens as I look around the brightly lit room, surprised to find myself in Cole's bed and even more surprised to find his arm fastened firmly around my waist.

I didn't think *friends* cuddled.

My breath catches in the back of my throat, my body rendered motionless. I can't bring myself to move a muscle, scared that I will wake Cole in the process.

Cole stirs restlessly.

Before I have time to contemplate my next move Cole inhales deeply, his muscles tensing as he pulls me softly into his chest. His skin feels like sunshine against my body, warm and soft.

And like a hummingbird's wings, his heart flutters softly against my back. Thrum, thrum, *thrum*.

My heart thunders in response. And just like that I'm wide awake.

The faint murmur of his breath against the back of my neck makes me smile. I take a deep breath in and relax into his embrace.

I can't help but question whether the embrace is intentional, especially after the whole '*it's nice to know I have*

a friend' pillow talk we'd had last night. Or whether this is just a senseless reaction to having someone in his bed.

Cole pulls me closer, his heartbeat quickening. Every muscle moves as he melds his body into mine until there is no more space between us — until the ridges of his muscles press firmly into the arch of my back — never once loosening his hold on me.

My heart skips a beat — or three. *Thunk. Whack. Thud.*

I gulp. Unsure whether I'm excited, nervous or scared or all of the above. And then Cole presses his waist into my back, and my heart stops altogether.

I can't hold back the involuntary gasp that escapes my lips...no...do I push back...I really want this...yes...I should know where I stand before we...

I know whatever there is between us that it isn't just physical. It's more, it has to be more, even if I don't know what that means just yet. I know there is more to our story.

As much as every bone in my body — and Cole's — tells me to give into his touch, I need a more definite answer before I can allow anything to happen.

I unravel the covers from around me, lift Cole's arm from my waist and leave it to fall beneath the covers.

I sit up with my feet hanging off the bed and allow myself to quickly glance over my shoulder at him.

He sleeps soundlessly, his eyelids fluttering softly as I move to stand. He looks sweet lying there with the sun on his face. His hair swept low across his forehead in complete disarray.

I quickly collect my clothes from the floor and exchange the bedroom for the ensuite. I close the bathroom door behind me with a soft click.

I don't think I will ever get used to this house; even the bathroom is beautiful. The bathroom is all white with matching fixtures and a clear glass shower.

I undress quickly. Stepping into the shower, I wait for the warm water to flow before stepping under the stream.

The sound of water is deafening as it cascades against my shoulders, the empty room amplifying the water pressure.

I feel oddly relaxed. After everything that happened last night, I'm surprised I don't feel more overwhelmed.

Aside from the fact that all of Cole's emotional barricades are on high alert, he'd opened up and allowed me to see so much of his past — and still somehow leave so much under lock and key.

I wash my body quickly, hoping by the time I finish showering that Cole will be awake and we can take the time to talk stuff over.

I rinse the bubbles from my body and turn off the water. I carefully tiptoe to the basin and pull a navy towel from the cupboard.

A desperate scream slashes through the silence.

I jump at the sudden outburst — the hairs on the back of my arms standing on end.

Angry voices howl back and forth. A harrowing sound that grows more malicious with each second. The voices are so consumed by fury and hatred that it frightens me to the core.

I can't hear words, just sounds. It almost sounds like Cole's parents — but they aren't supposed to be home until tomorrow afternoon.

And then silence.

Steps pound down the hallway, and my body freezes in place. Whack, thump, whack, thump. Gaining closer and —

A door slams so hard that the walls around me shudder. My head darts towards the bathroom door, the sound startling me into awareness.

I hadn't realised until now that I'm completely still, my towel bunched up against my chest and my body dripping wet.

With my body still slick with water, I toss my towel aside and yank my clothes on.

The only thought racing through my mind is whether Cole's okay. And some wicked, cruel and twisted part of my subconscious tells me he isn't.

What the hell had happened —

WATER WORKS

My heart races – my mind considers the worst. I don't know what to expect when I open the bathroom door and find Cole slumped over the edge of his bed.

To my relief, he seems fine. He'd managed to pull on a pair of pants but remained shirtless. He slumps forward, head buried in his hands to cover his face. His shoulders shake gently, and I can tell he is crying. I don't need to see his face to know that.

And suddenly, everything I wanted to talk to him about that had once felt so paramount no longer seems important.

“Good morning, Cole,” I chirp and instantly regret the cheerful note to my tone. Because whatever Cole is going through, it's the complete fucking opposite of joyful.

Cole doesn't move. He remains with his head bowed in his hands and his lips locked together.

I move quietly, making sure to give him enough space as I take a seat beside him. Unsure what to do with my hands, I lock my fingers together and place them in my lap.

“What happened?” I ask uneasily.

All he can manage to do is shake his head.

“Cole...” I want to reach out, wrap my arms around him, and tell him it will be okay. But it doesn't feel right, and I know he isn't in the mood to be showered in well wishes.

“Can you please just leave?” He asks, not rudely. Just empty, broken.

I completely understand why he doesn't want me here, telling him everything will be okay because maybe everything isn't going to be okay.

No matter what I want to say, I can't make words come out of my mouth — sitting here like a rotating clown at a

Carnival. My mouth wide open, a surprised look plastered to my face.

With delicate hands, he reaches out and takes my own in his to assure me that he isn't upset with me. He squeezes them gently.

“Lyndon, please.” He begs, closing his eyes on tears.

Cole lifts his chin and cast his eyes at me. They are rimmed red, filled with something shocking and unfamiliar. *Fear?* He presses his lips together and only parts them to take a shaky breath. I can see the pain so evident in his expression and how badly he is fighting the urge to cry.

What's he scared of —

“Please.” He repeats, defeat evident in his tone.

I look straight into Cole's bloodshot eyes and gasp.

His eyes aren't just rimmed red with tears. The vessels around his pupils have burst, leaving his glistening green eyes swimming in a milky cosmos of red and white.

I pull my hands across my mouth to cover the scream that's already escaped.

A tear stings Cole's red-specked cheek, and I follow its path as it cascades down his face and along the edge of his jaw, where it quickly dissolves. And that's when I notice the marks on his neck. The real reason for his fear. The real reason he doesn't want me to see him like this.

A galaxy of red and purple dance under the skin. A twisted pool of burst capillaries that leave tiny red tracks from Cole's collarbone all the way up to his throat, where they vanish beneath the skin.

Without thinking, I reach out to touch his throat, frightened, scared, and angry at the thought of who had done this to him.

He catches my hand in mid-air and holds it there for a moment. Our eyes meet, and his look says everything I need to know. He drops my hand, leaving it to fall back into my lap.

“Lyndon,” he all but snaps at me, and it’s only now that I notice the sudden raspiness of his voice. The way he says my name sends chills running down my spine. Not because I feared him, but because of how scared and defenceless he sounds.

I jump to my feet and offer his arm one final squeeze, somehow feeling like all of this is my fault. “I’m sorry,” the words come out hushed, barely comprehensible.

I whirl around one last time to look at Cole, adrenaline pumping through me as I make a break for the door. I need to get out of here and fast. I race downstairs without another thought, my heart racing wildly. A thousand questions run through my head. Before I can stop and think, my feet are doubling down the front porch steps, and I have made my way across the Chamberlin’s front lawn.

It isn’t until I’m safely locked behind my own bedroom door that I allow myself to take a long, heaving breath, panic constricting my lungs.

I close my eyes on tears that were yet to fall, unable to make any sense of what’s just happened.

3 + 1 = AWKWARD

Are you ready, Lyndon? I ask myself unenthusiastically. *Ready as I'll ever be.* I answer back, knowing tonight is going to be awkward as hell.

I receive a message from Cole not long after I'd run from his house this morning asking if I'd want to come over for dinner.

My initial thought had been to say no. Nothing good had yet to come from stepping foot in that house. I'm beginning to think maybe it's cursed.

But ever since I'd locked myself behind my bedroom door to be left alone with my thoughts, I hadn't stopped worrying about Cole. I needed to make sure he's okay.

I assume his parents put him up to the invite because whatever happened this morning hadn't painted them in a picture-perfect light. It's obvious they're scrambling for redemption.

After all, it's a small town, and small-town people loved to talk.

I pull on a crisp white shirt, tan jeans and my faithful all-white converse before stepping into the bathroom to fix my face and hair. My skin glows nicely and looks less oily than usual, which is surprising considering the heat. I quickly run my fingers through my hair, leaving my blond waves to fall back naturally.

My nerves are stretched thin, and I feel like they might snap at any given moment. Would Cole's parents offer an explanation for what happened this morning, or would they try and cover up what they did to Cole and pretend like it didn't happen?

Every time I blink, I see the ratcheted marks on his neck, and I have to keep myself from bursting into tears, or, worse,

screaming. I had no right to be upset, but I definitely had a right to be angry. And I'm furious.

I can't bring myself to think about it anymore. My head pounds with a fresh headache, and I need to pour all my energy into making sure tonight goes smoothly. That, and I desperately need to know Cole is okay.

It isn't long before I make the trek across the small stretch of road to the Chamberlin house and pound loudly on the front door, once and twice.

I look over my shoulder, wondering whether it's too late to bail just as Cole's parents slither from behind the door.

They are perfectly presented in matching beige ensembles. Kristin's in a tight-fitting blouse with a loose collar and jeans. She looks effortlessly stunning. Al wears slacks and a fitted polo that compliments his milky skin.

"Aww, Lyndon. It's so good to see you again," Kristin pulls me in for a quick hug, her perfume wrapping around me like a second pair of arms.

When she pulls away, Al takes his chance to shake my hand swiftly. "Come on inside," Al places his hand on my shoulder blade and leads me inside the entryway. "Cole. Lyndon's here." Al calls, his voice echoing up the empty staircase.

"We're sorry we missed you this morning," Kristin intones politely. Stepping out from behind her husband, she wraps her hands around his arm, resting her temple delicately on his shoulder. "You ran out of here so quickly we barely got a glimpse of you." She chirps sweetly.

"Sorry Mr and Mrs Chamberlin, I hope I didn't offend you." I try my best to sound apologetic. "I was running late for an appointment, that's all." I lie, knowing full well they know it's a lie.

Kristin nods in understanding. "Lyndon, there's no need for such formalities. Al and Kris will be fine. Anyway, Cole shouldn't be too much longer. We'll leave the two of you to catch up."

Kristin and Al leave me standing in the entryway by the staircase. Al gave me a final side-eyed glance before departing, leaving chills down my spine.

Cole charges down the stairs two at a time, moments later. And before he even plants his feet on the ground he wraps his arms around my shoulders and buries his head into my neck.

“Thank you,” he whispers in my ear. The hug is so immediate and unexpected that when he pulls away, I can’t help but frown, confused.

I look deep into his bloodshot eyes, past the pain and emotion, and for a second, I can almost feel his sadness dripping off him.

He is dressed in his signature black jeans and a matching button-up top. He’s ruffled the collar to hide the surmountable bruising that wraps around his throat. When he notices me looking, he adjusts his collar even more.

I hadn’t been able to piece together what had happened completely, and I want more than anything to ask him about it. But more than that, I need to know that he’s okay.

When we are finally alone, I look at Cole, the desperation behind his eyes clear as day. “Are you okay?” I whisper, not wanting anyone to overhear my concern.

“I’m okay.” He promises, his eyes sad. “Thank you for agreeing to come tonight. I can’t imagine it was an easy decision —”

“Knock, knock.” Al appears seconds later, rapping his knuckles on the archway that separates the living area from the entryway. Al’s smile is wide, perfect — *too perfect*. “Dinner is ready, boys. Cole, did you want to help me bring everything into the dining room.” The tone implies it’s more a statement than a question.

When Cole doesn’t say anything, I know I need to step in and reply. “Would love to help, lead the way!” I didn’t want Al to get suspicious. Of course, they know I knew about

everything — or at the very least assumed — but having Cole fall apart won't help anyone.

Cole zeroed out, staring blankly into the distance.

Al nods and marches back the way he came. When he is out of earshot, I turn to Cole, his cocoa-coloured hair hanging over his eyes. I take both his shoulders in my hands and gently shake him.

He looks at me, dazed, confused.

“I can't blame you for being distracted,” I tilt my head to the side to peer at him from beneath his hair. “But you need to pull it together.”

He nods.

We catch up to Al and let him lead the way into the all-white ornate kitchen. I take in the long window that stretches along the entire back wall allowing a clear view of the backyard.

The afternoon light drifts from dusk into darkness. The pine trees that line the clearing cover the backyard in tall shadows.

“Grab those plates, will you, Lyndon, and help Kristin set the table,” Al gestures to the room just off the kitchen with a flick of his hand, his tone sharp.

I have to keep myself from flinching at his bluntness.

“Sure.” I can't keep myself from rolling my eyes as I walk across the room to collect the stack of plates and napkins from the island bench and make my way out of the kitchen.

I give Cole a final look before I leave the room, but he's too preoccupied with his dad to notice me.

As I turn to leave, I watch Al reach out and grab Cole by the forearm, jerking him closer to him. He looks at Cole through furrowed brows.

Cole recoils from his touch, struggling to yank his forearm free.

Al's fingers wrap tightly around Cole's arm, his fingernails burying deep into his skin. "What have you told him?" His tone is harsh, devoid of all compassion.

"Nothing, I promise." Cole's voice trembles.

I can't believe my eyes.

Without a doubt in my mind, I know who had hurt Cole. It's clear to me now that Al Chamberlin had abused his son. And there is no forgiving him for that. The damage is already done.

I make a break for the dining room before I hear something I'm not supposed to. I'm beginning to think it's already too late —

I enter the dining room and find that Kristin has already set down cutlery and is busying herself with the arrangement of meat and vegetables in the centre of the table.

A large white marble table rests in the middle of the room, with complimenting high-backed chairs, the sort you'd only ever see in movies.

"Lyndon, give me those." Kristin looks surprised to see me. "You're our guest; you shouldn't be doing chores." She waves her hands at me submissively, gesturing for me to pass her the plates.

"Honestly, it's okay. I don't mind helping." I offer her a genuine smile and lay the plates and napkins beside the cutlery.

"Is everyone in this town always so nice, or is it just you?" Kristin reaches out lovingly and pinches my cheeks.

"Always," I admit. "It's a curse."

She gives me an appreciative smile before she sashays back into the kitchen, her heels clicking on the tiles as she walks.

I move slowly, making sure to take my time.

Kristin's voice suddenly cuts through the quiet. "Al, you're being ridiculous. Leave him alone." Kristin scolds

loudly.

I look over my shoulder in the direction of the kitchen. A harsh empty silence now fills the house.

Cole rushes out of the kitchen seconds later with his head hanging low, shoulders slumped, and hands in his pockets. I offer him a weak smile that he doesn't return.

He lifts his head and looks me dead in the eyes before I have a chance to gather my thoughts. He gives me a look that tells me everything I need to know. *Leave it alone*, it says.

And I oblige without question.

Kristin waltzes into the room, unfazed by what's unravelled in the other room. She balances a tray of sparkling water in her right hand, cubes of ice clinking coolly against the edge of the glasses. Al follows closely behind her, taking his seat at the head of the table.

"Don't just stand there, boys." Kristin clicks her tongue. "Take a seat. You're making the room look messy," she makes her way quickly to the table and sets the glasses down.

Kristin hands us a glass as we take our seats before rounding the table to take a seat next to her husband.

The energy in the room shifts, and I can't help but notice Al's wayward stare as he takes in his son. I can't tell if it's anger, resentment or revulsion. Whatever it is, he isn't doing an excellent job at hiding his feelings.

I feel like a clueless bystander wandering through a minefield, one wrong word, and the tension in the room would explode.

Kristin breaks the uncomfortable silence immediately, motioning for everyone to serve themselves.

She tucks her hair behind her ears and leans forward to look me directly in the eyes before she speaks. "Lyndon, thank you so much for joining us tonight. Cole has already told us so much about you, and we're excited to get to know you too."

I must look shocked, or maybe caught off guard is a better choice of words.

“Don’t worry, nothing bad, of course.” Kristin jokes though I can hear the unsteadiness in her voice.

But that isn’t the reason I’m so taken back.

They’ve completely ignored the real reason they invited me to dinner, which wasn’t to get to know me. It’s to keep their twisted family masquerade intact — their perfect illusion.

“Thank you for having me.” I try to keep the warmth in my tone, but it’s hard to keep up this sanguine charade.

I fill my plate with roast chicken and vegetables, and Cole and his family do the same. There is something about uncomfortable dinner conversation that seems to make everything taste better.

The chicken seems to taste less dry while Al speaks about his day. The vegetables less bland when Kristin begins rattling off a list of errands she needs to run before they are officially settled into their new house. Never once mentioning what happened this morning. And at this point, I don’t think they will.

Cole remains quiet, picking at his plate every so often and mindlessly moving his peas from one side of his plate to the other.

“So, what keeps you busy?” Al pivots in his chair, his eyes meeting mine with warmth and curiosity.

I lift my head and lock eyes with him from across the table. “Well, I graduated high school a few months ago and I’m currently preparing to move.” I take another bite of chicken and wash it down with sparkling water before speaking. “I’ve just been accepted into Stone and Arrow Academy with a full scholarship.”

Al and Kristin both light up, eyes boggling in their skull. “Congratulations Lyndon,” they both say in unison.

“Your parents must be very proud.” Kristin commends earnestly, and I can see in her pretty green eyes that she means every word.

“Just my mum, and yeah, she’s super proud.” I smile sweetly.

“And what will you be studying?”

“Literature,” I confess.

“So, you want to become a journalist, author...” Al questions, waving his fork around as he speaks.

I nod politely. “An author.”

“When do you leave,” Al asks abruptly, the questions have become quite pointed, and I can’t help but come to the realisation that this dinner isn’t an apology — but an interrogation.

I shake off the abruptness with a feigned smile. “I’ll be leaving in less than a month,” I say.

“So soon, that’s wonderful.” I can’t make out whether he’s excited for me or excited for me to leave.

“And are you working while you’re still here to keep yourself busy?”

“I just finished up working at the bookstore in town a few weeks ago. I wanted to take some time to relax before I leave. I’ve saved some money and living on campus should help me cut back the cost a little too.”

He presses his lips together and nods his head in that typical fatherly manner that shows he’s impressed. “You’ve got your head screwed on right, Lyndon,” Al confesses.

He seems like an average dad, complete with greying hair and the all-approving dad nod, not to mention the ugly polo. He seems normal.

As much as I try to come up with a rational answer that explains what happened this morning, I come up blank. It just doesn’t make any sense why Al had chosen to hurt his son so badly.

The rest of the dinner goes smoothly. I down my plate quickly, wanting more than anything to spend time alone with

Cole. Because while he's told me he's okay, he's clearly in pain.

Cole keeps his head down most of the night, looking up every now and again when spoken to, offering a quick remark and a cheerless smile before going back to flicking his food across his plate. I can tell something's playing over in his mind.

After everything that's happened today, I know faking a smile and having dinner with his family would be the last thing he'd want to be doing right now.

"Well, I better be home before it's too late," I dust off the edges of my mouth with the napkin and set it down on the table beside me. "I appreciate you having me over. You really didn't have to go to all this trouble."

"It was our pleasure," Al reclines back in his chair, hands folded over his chest. "Any *friend* of Cole's is a friend of ours," Al emphasises friend, making sure I heard every syllable. He extends a hand across the table, and I shake it sternly. His eyes hold an unspoken malevolence.

"Cole, could you show Lyndon to the door." Kristin offers me a parting smile and a delicate wave goodbye.

I plaster on my best fake smile before turning to give Cole's parents one last look. I follow Cole out of the room. We don't say anything as we walk. It isn't until we are standing on the front porch, the cool night air settling around us, that Cole finally speaks.

"So, you're moving, huh." He says very matter of fact, running his hands through his thick curls to keep them from falling in his eyes. He is obviously nervous about something.

"I'll be leaving in less than a month," I state flatly.

"A month," he repeats sadly, "that's too bad."

"Why would it be bad?" I laugh, tilting my head to the side, curiosity getting the better of me. I've held it together all night without asking any questions. I definitely deserve to ask one.

“Just when I was really starting to get to know you.” He wrinkles his nose up charmingly and gives me a look that is both adorable and disappointed.

“There are these magical devices called phones.” I mock sarcastically, trying my best to hide my shaky voice. Was this his way of telling me that he liked me? “If someone actually cared to answer their texts.” I wriggle my brows playfully.

Cole chuckles for the first time all evening, and that alone makes me smile.

“Well, thanks again for tonight.” I lean forwards and wrap my arms around him, without even thinking. I close my eyes on the smell of vanilla and honeysuckle and bury my face into his chest. “I really do hope you’re okay.”

He pulls away slowly, keeping hold of my shoulders.

I stare up at him softly, relishing in our closeness, as much as it makes my heart race nervously.

He reaches out deftly and lifts my chin, bringing my eyes to meet his. He looks deep into my eyes and smiles wanly.

“Goodnight, Lyndon.” He squeezes my shoulders one last time before turning to head back inside.

I can’t help but be consumed by his gaze, those piercing green eyes catching fire in the darkness.

“Goodnight, Cole,” I whisper, the sudden gyrating of my heart sending shockwaves through my body.

And just like that, he turns and heads back inside, slowly closing the door behind him.

FREAK SHOW

With the sheets wound around me like a cocoon, I toss and turn all night, trying to wrap my head around what happened at dinner. It was one huge fuck-tastic freak show that I walked away from even more confused than when I'd entered.

I had no expectations of how the night would play out. I certainly hadn't expected them to unleash all their family secrets at once. But seriously — anything would have been better than whatever stunt they'd pulled. They honestly deserve an Oscar for their performance.

I drag myself out of bed around 4AM, unable to make the madness that wreaks havoc in my mind stop. I decide to take my frustration and anger out the only way I know how. And that's on pen and paper. After wrapping my blanket snugly around my shoulders and switching my bed for my hard desk chair, an endless loop of chaos and mayhem leaves me so restless and unable to concentrate. My anger and frustration quickly turn to tears.

I drop my elbows to the desk and let my head fall into my hands. My heart breaks piece by piece with every moment I don't know the truth. And I know it wouldn't be long before my heart shatters entirely.

I want to help Cole so badly — I need to help him — before something even worse happens. A sudden, alarming rush charges through my body as I consider calling the police and putting a stop to this madness once and for all. And then I consider the repercussions that will cause, the unavoidable damage it will cause for his already divided family.

As soon as this secret's out in the open, their lives in Whispering Pines will never be the same.

And that isn't my decision to make.

JESS AND LYNDON SITTING IN A TREE

I end up at Jess's house around ten that same morning, desperately needing to talk to someone who wasn't my subconscious. We hadn't seen each other in days, and to finally be able to wrap my arms around her is everything I didn't know I needed.

The sun is deliciously warm against my deep skin as I shake out the picnic blanket beneath the shade of a pine tree. A slight breeze licks gently against my bare arms and leaves the pine needles whistling high above me.

Jess's house is a two-story country-style lodge, all exposed timber with an open backyard surrounded by a forest of emerald pines. Her parents were out of town for the weekend, so we had the whole place to ourselves.

"Oh my gosh, babe!" She laid down on her side with her elbow propped under her head. "I'm so sorry for bailing on you the other night. I hope you aren't too mad."

"Never."

"Do you still love me?" She grimaces, looking out at me from above her cartoonishly oversized sunglasses. She's dressed in a lavender bikini and matching bottoms that make her orange hair catch fire in the sunlight.

"Always." I smack my lips together in one exaggerated air kiss.

I recline back on my hands, dressed in a pair of shorts. I roll my head back, enjoying the warmth of the sun against my face. Tiny streams of broken light speckle down gently through the wispy pine needles.

A long-wet kiss breaks me out of my state as Jess's chunky Labrador, Jimmy Chew, bounds over and licks the side of my face. I pull back quickly and wipe my face with my

forearm before wrapping my arms around his short neck and showering him in scratches.

“Jimmy Chew,” she snaps. With a single click of her fingers, Jimmy Chew unravels himself from my arms and marches across the picnic rug to lie between us. The grass crunches beneath his weight as he settles down beside her. He bows his head and closes his eyes, and within minutes he’s asleep.

“Anyway, you need to tell me everything that happened the other night. From start to finish and spare no details.” She wriggles her eyebrows wickedly as she runs her hands mindlessly through Jimmy Chew’s thick fur.

“I mean, it was an eye-opening night,” I admit, exhaling heavily. “You know how I confronted Cole about what happened between us when he first moved in. When I awkwardly collapsed into his arms —”

Jess nods eagerly.

“— Well, he went to tell me his side of the story. And then, before he could tell me, his friends arrived, and he completely avoided the conversation. It wasn’t until after his friends left that he went on to give me some superficial answer about his complicated past.” I oppress a sigh and slap my hands against my thighs in frustration.

“What did he say exactly?”

“Well, he told me that something fucked up happened to him and his family, and they thought it would be best to take a break from the city.”

Jess looks at me absently, the wrinkles between her eyes bunching together in bewilderment. “What the fuck kinda’ answer is that?”

“Anyway, I don’t think that chapters going anywhere,” I exhale loudly, annoyed that it had taken me this long to realise that he just isn’t that into me.

“How so?” She eyes me dubiously.

“After we had this heart-to-heart, he thanked me for being a friend.” I snicker. Just saying the statement out loud hit me hard, and my heart thuds with disappointment.

“Ouch,” Jess grimaces, “that really sucks.”

“And that’s not even the worst thing that happened. During a game of truth and dare, his friend Callum was dared to hook up with me. Anyway, in the end, he took the game way too far...” Before I can finish, Jess holds up her hand to interrupt, and I let her.

“Wait, did you —” Jess throws her hands across her mouth to hold back her excitement.

“Oh my gosh, nothing happened!” I spit out before she gets the wrong idea. “He tried to kiss me, but I stopped him before anything more could happen.”

“Why?” Jess exclaims, almost choking on her tongue in the process.

“You know that I’ve never kissed anyone,” I explain. “I didn’t want to just throw it away.” Throwing my hand above my head.

“Oh sweet, Lyndon.” She shakes her head in dismay.

“It did seem to make Cole jealous that I agreed to go through with the dare.” I consider the possibility that Cole isn’t being completely honest with his feelings. And perhaps some small part of him liked me too.

“Okay...” Jess looks at me confused. “Then what’s holding him back then.”

“I found out he had a boyfriend back home,” I speak softly, uncertainty lacing my words. “And I think it ended badly between them.”

“Well, at least that explains the weird one-sidedness,” Jess slaps her hands together triumphantly before rolling onto her stomach. She folds her elbows beneath her chest and allows her shock of fiery red hair to fall around her shoulders.

“That’s not helpful,” I spit out, unable to keep myself from rolling my eyes in obvious annoyance.

Jess pulls herself into a sitting position and turns to look at me. She flutters her eyelashes sweetly. I realise that whatever she is about to say next will hit a chord I'm not ready to be struck.

“Look, Lyndon. On the bright side, at least you're both batting for the same team. So, there is at least fifty per cent of your problem already solved.” Her lily-white skin, complete with orange freckles, glistens in the sun as she spoke. I focus on these details instead of the passive tone of her annoyingly right speech. “Now, the other fifty per cent is you telling him how you feel and hoping he feels the same way about you.” She pauses and lifts her hands to my cheeks. She holds them tightly in her warm palms. “You do like him, don't you?”

I choke on my words, unable to string a single sentence together in my head, let alone speak the words out loud. I knew what I wanted to say. And I know Jess already knew my answer.

“I'm leaving in less than a month.” My words are filled with an unspoken sadness, which is closely accompanied by my own weakness. “Now is definitely not the time.”

“But you do like him, right?” His eyes lock on mine, and for a heartbeat, I can't take my eyes off the irreverent emerald of her pupils.

“Yes.” The words slip from my lips so easily that it's almost painful to hold them back.

I can't bring myself to look at Jess as my expression quickly morphs from certainty to doubt in a heartbeat. What the fuck is wrong with me that I can't face the fact that I liked someone. That I wanted Cole-Fucking-Chamberlin. The annoyingly handsome boy next door with his gorgeously tanned skin and stupid cliché bad boy wardrobe. What's keeping me from accepting that I want more between us, more than friends, more than a stranger I will leave behind and never see again. I want more than stolen glances and forgotten memories. The fact that I hadn't stopped thinking about him since we met should have told me everything I needed to

know. But why am I fighting so hard to convince myself it isn't meant to be?

“What’s not to like about him, he’s tall, handsome, literally a dream guy, and he’s a complete nerd like me. Of course, I like him.” I almost yell the words at Jess, and I have to force myself to swallow the growing lump in my throat before I continue. My emotions quickly bubble out of control. “And what if I’ve just made this whole narrative up in my head? I’d look like a complete fool if he didn’t feel the same way about me.”

“Lyndon, you can’t live in fear of rejection or heartbreak. Take that fear, run wild with it, do things you wouldn’t normally do, and make bold, daring choices. And if he doesn’t feel the same way about you, he’s a fucking idiot. Sorry, but it’s true. If he can’t see how amazing and loving you are, he doesn’t deserve you.” Her tone is sharp and demanding, and I know she is right. She gives me a contentious smirk that only boosts her own confidence.

“Jess, it’s not as easy as you think.” I take in a steady breath to keep from bursting into tears as I turn to face Jess. My heart lurches, and my head swirls with too many thoughts that I quickly become overwhelmed.

I didn’t want to tell her anything. Not until I had all the facts for myself. But I need advice because this is more complex than wanting Cole to be my boyfriend — because this would have all been for nothing if he’s dead.

“What’s the matter, Lyn? You know I only ever want what’s best for you. I didn’t mean to upset you.” She looks physically hurt by my sudden reaction.

“It’s not that at all. I appreciate how much you care for me. That’s why I need your advice on something very important.” Tears sting my eyes, and I can’t help the emotions that bubble over. “I haven’t told anyone yet, and honestly, I’m scared to tell you.” I blink repeatedly, and the tears quickly fade away.

“Oh, babes, what’s the matter.” Jess wraps her arms around me so quickly that her hair whips me across the face.

She pulls away, tossing her sunglasses aside and looks at me just as suddenly, and it takes all my strength to keep my composure as much as I want to curl up in a ball and cry.

“I think Cole’s in trouble.” I stare at her despondently, unsure how I’ve forced the words out of my mouth.

Her face goes blank, and her effervescent smile vanishes.

“I think Cole’s in trouble,” I repeat.

“Lyn, honey, you’re scaring me.” She looks at me, her eyebrows furrow in dismay. When I don’t say anything, she grabs my hands, holds them so tight my fingers ache. “Are you —”

“I’m okay.”

“And you’d tell me if you weren’t.” She eyes me questioningly, and I don’t think she believes me when I nod.

“Without a doubt,” I relax my shoulders and sigh.

“Then what are you so worked up about?” Jess’s eyes are a cocktail of fear and concern.

“I think Cole’s dad hurts him.” I’d never spoken the words out loud, and I’m not sure I completely believe them until now.

Jess gasps. “Oh Lyndon, baby, that’s a serious accusation.”

I look deep into her eyes and nod.

“He told you this?” She looks at me through wisps of wavy red hair, her eyes filled with uncertainty.

I shake my head. “Not in so many words.”

“Have you tried talking to him about it? There’s a big difference between discipline and abuse, honey.” Blind panic fills her expression, and I know she feels way out of her depth.

“I totally understand that, Jess. I really do. And I wouldn’t have said anything to you unless I didn’t think it was serious.” Without any warning, tears uncontrollably spring from my eyes, leaving trails down my cheeks. I press my

palms into my eyes and wipe them away. “Cole has these huge red marks around his throat, and his eyes are so red and bloodshot.” I gulp. “Like he’s been strangled —” I choke out, tearing my hands along my throat to emphasise the image imprinted in my memory. “And then his parents invited me over to dinner last night,” I had to pause and get my emotions in check before I continue. “It just felt like they were trying to cover up what happened by acting like the perfect family.”

I drop my head and stare at the ground because I know I’d cry even harder if I look at Jess and see her concerned face. And I don’t want to fall apart more than I already have.

“I haven’t heard from him since that night. I’ve sent texts and voicemails, and he hasn’t answered them. I have no idea if he is hurt or worse —” My throat is so tight I can barely force myself to say another word.

“Lyndon, that’s fucked up on so many levels.” Her shoulders sag, and she just sits there like a balloon that’s been popped. It’s rare that she’s ever at a loss for words, and the fact that she doesn’t have a witty quip lined up just makes the situation even more serious.

“And the worst part is I don’t even think Cole understands how much danger he’s in. He just shrugs it off like it’s nothing. Like it’s something that happens so often that he’s just used to it.” I dab my tears away with the palm of my hand.

Jess looks away, blinking repeatedly. I can tell she is holding back tears, she’s always been the stronger one between us, but I can see her slowly starting to break.

“Maybe he’s holding back because he’s scared of what will happen if you’re together.” And without her even having to say the words, I know exactly what she’s implying.

“This is all happening because of me.” I stare at Jess in complete disbelief. My mouth hanging wide open, my breath caught in the back of my throat, too shocked to even cry.

Cole isn’t scared of what would happen if we were together. I realise that now. He’s scared of what his dad will do

if he knew...

I hate the idea that he's hurting because of me.

"Lyndon, that's not what I meant at all, and you know damned well that's not true." She hadn't let go of my hands the entire time, she rubs at the back of my palm with her thumb, but it did little to comfort me.

I press my lips together and nod. It's all I could do to keep the tears from cascading down my face.

"Talk to him," Jess speaks softly. I've never seen this gentle side of her before, and I know how difficult this conversation must be for her. "Get the truth."

NO REPLY

The Chamberlin house sat in complete silence.

Cole's blinds remain closed for two days, the navy fabric taunting me. The expensive front lawn, lined with its perfectly manicured rose bushes, are void of all life, deathly quiet. Even the shadows that fall across the house turn the brilliant white colour an ashy grey.

ME: How are you?

Nothing.

ME: I hope you are okay.

Nada.

ME: Are you okay?

Please, please, *please* reply!

ME: Just let me know you're safe.

With each day that passes, my heart shatters a little more. It's crazy to think how someone you barely know can quickly mean so much to you. It isn't until two days later that I receive a text back from Cole.

COLE: Sorry I've been M.I.A., Lyndon.

COLE: My parents decided to take my phone hostage.

COLE: But I'm more than fine! I just needed a few days to be alone, hope you can understand.

COLE: How are you?

Who the fuck cares about me? An endless stream of horrible thoughts have been racing through my head for days. I've been worried sick, that's how I am! This isn't just some stupid rumour you can brush under the carpet and hope it goes away.

I want to scream through the phone at him. *This is serious. This is life or death!*

ME: Let's meet up for lunch tomorrow!

I text Cole back instantly. My fingers are already punching away a reply before his tyrant of texts finishes pinging through.

COLE: Yes, I would love to!

COLE: Meet at mine around 11AM?

ME: Perfect, see you then!

Locked away in my room, I wait quietly by the front window, staring ardently at the Chamberlin house.

My mind returns to the welts that had wrapped around Cole's throat. Inflamed, red, angry. And then his bloody eyes, so empty and cold.

I rest my head helplessly against the window and cry.

DAMAGED GOODS

I really like Cole, like *really* like him.

The idea of telling him how I feel has my whole body working on overdrive. My mind buzzes, my palms are damp with sweat, and nothing I do to keep my mind off him works. He's all I've been able to think about for weeks now. He's there when I write. He pops up in conversation with Jess and even when I'm snuggled beneath my covers at night. If I don't tell him how I feel, I will probably explode.

Before I can even tell him how I feel, I need to get to the bottom of whatever's holding him back — because right now, he isn't just a closed book. He's a closed book with all his pages superglued shut and then padlocked.

Standing in the foggy bathroom mirror, I pull my hair back with a layer of hairspray, leaving my blond locks to fall back in an unruly mess of whips and curls. I've never had much luck taming my hair and today's no exception. I try to ignore the unruly mess on top of my head as I pull on a pair of black jeans and converse.

As I make my way from the bathroom to my bedroom wardrobe, I run my hands through my hair one last time. I pull on the first wrinkle-free shirt I can find. It happens to be a pale blue shirt that contends with the colour of my eyes.

I take a second to give myself a quick once over in the full-length mirror hanging from the back of my bedroom door. Happy with how I look, I shove my phone in my back pocket and charge down the stairs two at a time.

“Good heavens, Lyndon, slow down!” My mum's curled up on the lounge, her thick-rimmed glasses slipping from the end of her nose as she casts her gaze in my direction.

I come to a sudden halt and whirl around on the spot to face my mum. Her eyes are wide, and she looks annoyed.

“Oh, hey.” I can’t help the guilty smile that crosses my face as she looks me up and down. It feels like I’ve been caught doing something I shouldn’t have been doing, and my cheeks burn with embarrassment.

“Why are you so dressed up —” she sets her magazine beside her and gestures to my clothes and quaffed hair. She eyes me suspiciously, and I can’t help but wonder if she suspects anything out of the ordinary — if she does, she doesn’t say anything.

“I’m hanging out with Cole this afternoon,” I reply with a smile.

“Okay.” Her eyes grow wide with curiosity, and I watch her expression change from surprise to suspicion in seconds, but she doesn’t say anything more.

I haven’t come out to my mum yet, but I really want to. But now isn’t the time.

“What time will you be home?” She asks.

“Not too late,” I state vaguely. “See you later.”

She rolls her eyes at me, annoyed I don’t give her a definite answer.

I collect the wicker picnic basket from the entryway and hock it over my elbow. I step outside, the sun blindingly bright in my eyes. The shadows from the overhanging oak offer some solace from the harsh sun.

I lift a hand to shield the sun from my eyes as I cross the road to the Chamberlin’s driveway.

Cole is already waiting across the road with his back pressed against the side of a baby blue Chevy. He’s dressed in his shockingly handsome signature all-black attire, his hair a dishevelled mess that he somehow manages to make sexy.

I can’t help but notice the marks on his neck aren’t as obvious today. The swelling has dissipated, and all that remains is a faint smear of yellow and purple beneath his jaw. I quickly divert my gaze before he notices me staring. And

when I look into his eyes, I realise they are back to their normal iridescent green too.

“You look terrific.” Cole chews on his bottom lip as he looks me up and down. A playful smirk spread across his face that causes his cheeks to burn a muddy red.

My heart jumps and thuds uncontrollably at his unexpected actions. “Thanks, you look nice too.” I take in a deep breath and smile. I have to force myself to gather my composure while reminding myself to keep my tone even.

He smiles devilishly, knowing the effect he has on me.

I work double-time to hide my burning cheeks and change the conversation. “Nice car, by the way.” I quickly turn our attention to the baby blue Chevy that sticks out like a sore thumb.

“It’s my dad’s, I figured he kinda’ owed me.” Cole raises his eyebrows, and I don’t need him to say anything more to understand what he means. “Anyway, where are you taking me?” He looks suspiciously between me and the picnic basket bundled in my arms.

“You’ll just have to wait and see.” I tilt my head and smile.

“I’m scared.” He grimaces. His green eyes lock on me as he gives me a look in-between excitement and concern.

“Oh, you totally should be.” My smile is so wide that it splits my face in two. “The picnic basket is actually filled with all sorts of torture devices and poisons.” I wriggle my eyebrows in an attempt to look crazy.

Cole laughs so hard his shoulders jump with each chuckle, and his cheeks swallow his eyes.

“Well, in that case, it’s probably best I take that off you.” He unfolds his arms from over his chest and leans in close. “It’s not that I don’t trust you. I just don’t want to leave anything to chance.”

He gestures for me to hand him the basket bundled in my arms, and I pass it to him without question. He moves quickly

to set it down on the backseat of the Chevy.

“Are you ready to head out?” His tone is light and cheerful. It’s a flip side from the Cole Chamberlin I’d come to know over the last two weeks. It would take me a moment to get used to this new easy-going attitude. I can’t help but wonder what had changed between then and now or is he just getting used to being around me.

“Sure,” I reply easily.

He steps out of the way and yanks the passenger door wide open and leans languidly against the door frame. “Jump in Hargroves.” He motions with his head for me to take a seat.

Cole has already rounded the car and slid into the driver’s seat by the time I’ve eased myself into the comfy leather upholstery and pulled the door closed behind me.

He turns the key in the ignition and waits for the car to purr before he adjusts the rear-view mirror and secures his seatbelt around his waist. “Which way are we going, Hargroves? Left, or right?” He gestures to the stretch of road on either side of us.

“Go right,” I direct.

His muscles clench as he reaches between us and jerks the gears into place. He reverses smoothly, the car veering out onto the road before quickly taking off down the empty street.

We drive most of the way in silence. It allows me time to take in everything around me as we make our way down the narrow country road and through an endless sea of pine trees and sunburnt fields.

The air is warm and filled with the overbearing scent of vanilla and honeysuckle. I glance at Cole, oblivious to the perfume that clings to him like a second skin. His eyes are locked on the road ahead, his eyes glimmering in the harsh light.

After twenty minutes of silence, I beckon for Cole to slow down and point to a beaten track to the left of the road. Barely visible to anyone that doesn’t know the town.

Cole clenches his teeth and grimaces but follows my directions without question.

The car quivers and quakes as we drive. Cole drives cautiously. Bracing himself for each bump and divot the track throws his way. The road is no wider than the car's width, with a thick outcrop of pines on either side. The trees quickly close in around us, making it almost impossible for the car to drive until eventually, the pines make way for smaller ferns and blossoms.

“And you're sure I shouldn't be worried. You know this is how every horror movie starts.” The playful smirk that lights up his face dissolves whatever nerves I've been feeling.

“I promise I won't kill you. That would be too predictable.”

The narrow road opens up to an empty parking lot, and the terror on his face suddenly turns to relief. Cole pulls the car to a stop beside a tall pine, the needles crunching beneath the tyres as he kills the engine. I push the heavy door open and jump out before I collect the picnic basket from the backseat and slam the door closed behind me.

Cole steps out of the car moments later and slams his door closed. He stands beside the car with his hands buried deep in his pockets, silently staring at the trees above him. He listens intently to the deafening cacophony of leaves rustling wildly in the wind.

“Come on.” I summon, waving my hand at him to follow me.

Cole runs to catch up to me, his sneakers crunching loudly against the gravel. There is something mechanical and stiff about the way he runs. But I don't pay it any mind as I lead the way down an uneven track filled with fallen branches and overgrown ferns.

“So, what's so special about this place?” Cole asks impatiently, hands delving deep into his pockets, completely ignoring the branches that brush against his arms.

“Just wait. It’s not too much further.” I call back over my shoulder. The trees start to clear, and the dappled light suddenly turns bright and airy. I have to shield my eyes to keep from squinting, and Cole does the same.

Cole eagerly pushes his way around me and walks into the grassy clearing, his eyes wandering alertly.

“Told you it was worth the wait.” I leave the picnic basket to fall at my feet and close the small space between Cole and me.

He only nods as his eyes lock on the horizon. Beyond the grassy clearing, the side of the mountain falls away to boulders and rock. Beyond the clearing an endless patchwork of rolling fields and emerald pine forests stretch out across the horizon, and Cole can’t peel his eyes away.

“See those blobs between the pines?” I point towards a cluster of grey and white dots in the distance, and he nods slightly. “They’re our houses.”

“No way!” He looks between me and the tiny houses in the distance and smiles.

“I bet you didn’t have much like this in the city?” I ask.

“Nothing even close.” He answers immediately.

Cole follows me when I turn around to retrieve the discarded picnic basket. I unravel the tan and white striped throw, lay it down over the grass, and quickly unpack the contents.

Cole drops to the ground with ease, kicks his legs out in front of himself, and leans back on his elbow.

Kneeling on the ground, I reach for a sandwich wedge. Cole snatches it from my hand and downs it instantly. “Thanks, I’m starving.” He moans.

“Hey!” I whack his shoulder playfully, and he falls onto his back, laughing hysterically.

“You’re a little shit,” I say.

“Guilty.” He smirks, the lopsided grin never leaving his lips as he pulls himself back onto his elbow.

“So, will you tell me what happened the other day?” I ask gently, hoping I don’t come across as pushy.

He chuckles softly as he begins to speak. “I had a feeling you weren’t going to give up easily.”

“Never. I’ve been known to come across as a little —”

“Annoying,” he teases, and I can’t stop myself from punching him in the arm again. “I’ve kinda been waiting for you to say something.” He confesses. “You’ve probably figured out by now that I’m not the most open book out there. And that’s probably never going to change.”

“I guess that makes us both a little annoying.” I arch my eyebrow cunningly

“Touché.” His smile is so honest and warm it causes my heart to flutter. And it almost makes me forget that I’m supposed to be mad at him for continuously dodging my questions.

“So, what really happened?” I ask, determined to get to the bottom of this nightmare.

“Honestly, I don’t even know what to make of the whole situation.”

“You scared the hell out of me,” I say.

“It really scared the shit out of me too.” He pulls himself up into a sitting position and hugs his knees. He looks away and shakes his head as if shaking away bad thoughts, his brown hair blowing in the wind.

I don’t say anything as he rushes to find the right words to say.

“It’s never been that bad before,” he gulps, his words so cold and final it sends a shiver down my spine.

“How long has this been happening?” My voice cracks, and my words fall silent as I try to comprehend what Cole had just told me. This hasn’t just happened once or twice. This has

happened multiple times, and now he's just adding strokes to the tally.

"It's happened for years..." He raises his shoulders lazily and then leaves them to slump back down.

"Cole, you've got to realise just how fucked up that sounds," I exhale angrily, alarmed he can't see what I saw. "Just promise me it won't happen again."

"I can't promise that, Lyndon." He stares at me with devoid eyes.

"Promise," I beg.

"Promise." He doesn't meet my gaze when he answers. He stares vacantly at the ground and picks at the torn hem of his jeans.

"At least let me know if it happens again?" I ask, really not sure how else to get through to him at this point.

"Why?" He snaps. The vein in his temple pulses when he clenches his jaw.

I stare at him blankly. Hurt. Offended. "Why!" I demand. "Because I care about you, Cole, and I couldn't live with myself if something happened to you. That's why!" I howl.

"You don't have to worry about me."

"Why do you do that?" I murmur. "Why do you act like this isn't a big deal. Your father beats you senseless and leaves you all battered and bruised, and you shake it off like nothing ever happened and get on with your life."

"Don't you think I know how serious this is?" Cole talks feverishly through gritted teeth. His eyes lock on me, and his shoulders are so tense that his muscles begin to pulse beneath his blacktop. "I know that one day my father will take it too far and probably fucking kill me."

I can tell I'd struck a chord; it's only a matter of time before he closes me out completely.

I jump to my feet and throw my hands above my head. I'm annoyed, angry. I can't bear to look at Cole a moment

longer. The very sight of him makes me furious. I didn't want to get angry — that had never been part of the plan — because I knew if I did, it would only end in tears.

Cole stands hastily, the grass whooshing around his legs as he stomps towards me. “Look at me, Lyndon. Look at me, goddammit.” He yanks me by the shoulder and swings me around forcefully.

“Why are you acting like such an idiot!” I cry. I'm more annoyed because he can't see that I'm only trying to help him. “I'm trying to help keep you alive, and you keep pushing me away like I'm the enemy. I'm not trying to hurt you —”

“UGH, LYNDON, I'M NOT WORRIED ABOUT YOU HURTING ME!” Cole yells, frustrated, his hands wrap firmly around my biceps.

“Then tell me what you're worried about!” I can't hold back anymore. My whole body convulses with fury.

Cole closes the space between us until we are standing toe to toe, and he reaches out and lifts my chin.

When our eyes finally lock, the intensity of his stare frightens me and sends cold chills down my spine.

“Lyndon, everyone that has ever gotten close to me ends up hurt, and you mean too much for me to let that happen.” His tone is much softer now, and I watch as his eyelids flutter closed on tears. He quickly drops my chin and turns away.

“Cole, you could never —”

“It's not me I'm worried about.” He speaks softly. “You have to understand this is the way it has to be. Pushing you away is the only way I know how to keep you safe and deal with the bullshit that suffocates my life. I'm damaged goods.”

I blink, shocked.

“You can try and push me away as hard as you want, but I'm not going anywhere.”

A tear slides down his cheek, and he brushes it away with the side of his hand.

“Have you told anyone what your father does to you?” I feel stupid for even asking the question when I already know the answer.

“Never!” He shakes his head fearfully. “And you have to promise me you won’t repeat this to anyone. Because if anyone found out, it would destroy my family’s reputation.”

I reach out and squeeze his hands in mine. “I’d never tell anyone. But you must be honest with yourself and your family because you can’t live like this anymore.”

“I believe you. And I know...”

“Just don’t push me away anymore.” I look up at him pleadingly.

“I won’t. I promise.” And I believed him.

ARE YOU SCARED OF THE BOOGIEMAN?

The afternoon slips by quickly.

“We should probably head back soon.” I glance at the horizon as the sun fades lower in the sky. Shades of pink and purple mask the sky.

“I don’t want to go back.” Cole’s tone is unintentionally reserved. And I can tell his apprehensiveness stems back to his family. “Being here with you today was the first time in forever that I’ve felt happy. Like I didn’t have to pretend to be someone else,” he confesses breathlessly.

“You never had to pretend to be someone else around me.” And as soon as I say the words out loud, I feel like an absolute hypocrite. I realise in this moment I can’t keep lying to myself anymore. “Whatever brought us together did it for a reason.”

We bundle the throw and picnic basket into our arms and start back towards the narrow track. I look at the cotton candy skies before I begin to manoeuvre my way back through the thicket of brambles and ferns.

Cole follows closely behind me. The path serves to be much trickier in the later afternoon light, the thick canopy overhead obscuring most of the light. *Clunk, snap, crunch.* Cole groans loudly as he yanks the throw free from a low-hanging branch.

We make it back to the Chevy in one piece. We quickly unload the throw and picnic basket into the backseat before sliding into the front of the car and clipping myself in place.

Cole turns the key in the ignition, and two beams of light instantly illuminate the empty lot. He waits for the engine to kick over before winding the steering wheel all the way around and heading back the way we’d come.

“What are you doing tomorrow?” I ask anxiously once Cole has turned onto the main road.

“Tomorrow?” Cole chuckles. “Nothing. Why?”

“Let’s escape somewhere where you can completely clear your mind,” I say.

“What do you have in mind?” He looks at me suspiciously.

“What do you think about camping?”

“I didn’t peg you for the outdoorsy kinda’ guy.” He keeps his eyes fixated on the road as he speaks, but I can feel the warmth that radiates from his voice. “And just to be clear, it’s camping, as in, tents and wilderness and campfires?” He asks dubiously, his lopsided smirk playing at the corner of his mouth.

“Yep, that pretty much sums up camping city boy.” I mock.

“Well, I’ve never camped before,” he confesses. He takes a second to mull the idea over in his head before offering me a steady nod. “Let’s do it!”

“So that’s a yes?” I ask, astonished that he actually agrees. “Are you sure you aren’t scared of bugs and the boogiemán?” I reply sarcastically.

“Are you kidding me? They’ve got nothing on me.” He sweeps a hand across his shoulder and removes imaginary dust with the flick of his wrist while keeping a satisfied grin plastered on his face.

“Would you be up for a hike, city boy?”

“I think I’d be able to handle that, but I really wish you’d cool it on the city boy.”

“Noted. Now it will mean you’ll have to trade your black jeans for activewear,” I tease playfully.

“Ouch, hit me where it hurts. But I think I’ll be able to manage that as well, country boy.” He turns briefly and screws up his face in a ridiculous grin.

Cole seems more relaxed than ever now that he's released the weight of his secret from his staunch shoulders. The conversation seemed to flow effortlessly, and in no time at all, he comes to a halt in his driveway and kills the engine. The headlights instantly shut off, and the compartment lights above us blink on, illuminating our features in a harsh white glow.

"You have no idea how thankful I am to have met you and how much I appreciate what you've done for me today. Thanks." He smiles wanly.

"You don't need to thank me," I say.

"No one, and I mean no one, has done anything like this for me. I guess I'm just not used to it, that's all. And even though I've been such a dick to you lately, you still found it in you to care. Can you forgive me?" He tilts his head and looks at me with a half-smile.

"Always, you're forgiven. And thank you for not shutting me out today." I return the half-smile.

He lowers his eyes and smiles sweetly.

He keeps quiet as he unlatches his door and steps onto the driveway. He rounds the car and holds open the door for me, and I step out and close it behind me.

In typical Cole fashion, he leans against the side of the car with his arms folded stoically over his chest. He holds an unsuspecting glint in his eye, and I want more than anything in the world to know what he is thinking. I realise doubtfully that I will probably never know. To my surprise, when Cole parts his lips to speak, the glint remains behind his eyes, and I realise for the first time that he's about to tell me the truth.

"You know most people would have run for the hills knowing what you know," Cole states blankly, and I can sense the apprehension creeping back into his tone.

"I'm not most people. You'll do good to remember that." I eye him intently and poke him in the ribs.

He nods smugly, jolting me awake with his thousand-volt smile.

“I like when you smile.” I blurt out without any hesitation.

“Oh yeah?” He chuckles.

“Yeah,” I say.

“Well, I like when you smile, Hargroves.” He looks away, and when he turns to face me again, his eyes sparkle in the afternoon light. “You get these cute little dimples on either side of your mouth,” he reaches out and touches the corners of my mouth. His touch is so delicate that I barely comprehend his hands on my face.

I impulsively lean into his touch and allow his fingers to caress my cheek.

He secures my chin firmly in his hand and leans in close. The movement is sudden and unexpected as his warm lips brush my cheek. “You’re special, Lyndon. Never forget that.” He whispers in my ear, and the velocity of his voice causes my body to shake.

Cole pulls away within the blink of an eye, his demeanour completely changing. And just like that, the moment is over.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, Lyndon.” He quickly turns to leave without even waving goodbye.

“See you tomorrow,” I mumble nervously.

I can’t bring myself to turn my head as he walks away. I lift my hand to my cheek and touch the place Cole’s lips had brushed. The warmth of his breath still lingers on my skin. And I wish I’d been brave enough to pull him closer and —

Instead, I bow my head and walk down his driveway towards my house.

LOVE, ALWAYS

The last thing I expect to walk in on is Jess and my mum curled up together beneath a fluffy pink blanket, watching trashy reality TV together. Complete with a bowl of popcorn and a steaming cup of tea.

“Lyndon,” Jess leaps from the lounge and wraps her arms around me. Her red hair bouncing in my face. “You are looking all kinds of delicious as per usual.” She runs her hands down my sunburnt arms, encouraging an army of goosebumps to bubble over my skin.

Now it’s my mum’s turn to look at me. She pulls herself forward on the lounge and shakes her head. “Where’d you go to lunch, Mar’s?” She asks, annoyance obvious in her tone.

“More like Uranus.” Jess quips so unexpectedly that my mum almost chokes on her tea.

If my mum doesn’t already suspect that I’m gay, she certainly does now.

I look at Jess, who expertly ignores my side eyed glare.

“A text would have been appreciated, Lyndon. You know better than that.” My mum collapses into the lounge and pulls the fluffy pink blanket over her shoulders.

“Sorry, we got carried away talking.” I apologise.

“Just text me next time. That’s all I ask.” She nods swiftly.

“Always.” I smile gingerly.

“Now leave; go enjoy yourselves.” She waves us away with a feeble flick of her wrist and ardently turns back to the trashy reality show she’d been watching.

I pull myself away from Jess’s embrace long enough to set the picnic basket on the kitchen bench. When I walk back into the living room, I motion for Jess to follow me. “I think

it's time to go," I grab her by the shoulders and start pushing her up the stairs one at a time.

Once we are upstairs with my bedroom door closed behind us, I turn to Jess with wide eyes. "What the hell was that!"

"Yeah, yeah. Sorry, low-hanging fruit." She snickers. "Anna pretty much handed me gold, and you've got to admit the joke was kinda' amazing."

I lull my head back and sigh. "It was pretty good. I'm not going to deny it."

"Thank you," she rolls her hand in front of her chest and bows. "And sorry," she grimaces apologetically. "On a separate note, I can't believe you still haven't come out to your mum."

I roll my eyes, something I'm getting all too good at lately. "I guess it's just another stress I don't have time to deal with right now." I slap my hands down on my thighs and sink onto the edge of my bed. "Anyway, what would I tell her exactly?" I look desperately into Jess's eyes, willing her to give me the answers I needed. But she only stares at me and giggles, and I know the answer she's holding back won't be helpful.

"Tell her you like fucking boys," she says, a cheeky smirk stretching from ear to ear.

"Jess!" I scrunch my eyes closed and shake my head in dismay.

She shrugs indifferently and crosses the room to stand in front of me. She extends her hands and beckons for me to hold them, and when I do, she grips them firmly. A strange apathetic expression crosses her face as she begins to speak. "I have no idea what you are so worried about. You know Anna is going to be fine with it." She says, and I know she is right. But I will never admit that to her. Why am I making a bigger deal over this than I need to?

"Your mother couldn't care less if you were a fire-breathing alien. She'd still love you for you." Jess concludes

carelessly.

I drop my head and stare down at our interlocked hands and take in a deep breath.

“Lyndon, babes,” Jess commands, and instinctively I lift my gaze to meet hers. An alarming sadness lingers behind her eyes. “If you don’t accept who you are now, you’ll end up being no one.”

“Ouch.” My shoulders slump, and my heart sinks.

“You can’t keep living in the shadows when you were born to set the world on fire. You’ll never be happy otherwise.” The painful conviction in her voice is so guttural and jarring that my heart sinks deeper into my chest. And with each word that slips from her lips, the unrelenting reality of her words sink in.

“Just give me a chance to see if there is anything between Cole and me. I’m taking him camping tomorrow, and he won’t have a choice but to answer me. I just need some time.” I look up into her eyes pleadingly, and she nods.

“Okay.” She bobs her head and releases her stronghold on my hands. Without any warning, she lunges forward and wraps her arms around me and pushes me back onto the bed. She attacks me with strawberry-scented kisses. When she pulls away, a youthful luminescence fills her green-flecked eyes.

“Eww, eww!” I cry out helplessly through fits own laughter.

She releases me from her unrelenting embrace and lays on her back beside me. We both lay there for several moments, staring silently at the ceiling.

“I’m proud of you,” Jess barges my shoulder lightly, and even though I can’t see her face, I know she’s smiling.

I look up at the ceiling and smile too.

“Okay, now real talk.” Jess rolls over, yanks the throw out from underneath me and wraps it around her head and shoulders, strands of her wild red hair sticking out at odd

angles. “Tell me about your date with Cole.” She eyes me with wide, hungry eyes.

“It was not a date,” I clarify as I scramble to sit up and cross my legs beneath me, leaving my hands to fall on my lap.

“No one believes you but continue.” She rolls her eyes and pulls the throw tighter around her face until she looks like a fluffy white marshmallow.

“It was really nice.” I furrow my eyebrows together in thought, unable to keep the memory of Cole’s lips brushing against my cheeks out of my head.

“Did you kiss?” She asks expectantly. And when I don’t say anything, she looks me dead in the eye, and her mouth falls open in shock. “Did you fuck?”

“No!” I cry.

“Well, you better start your research, Lyndon, because I can promise you that with a body like that, Cole has done more than just French. And if he likes you, this camping trip will involve more than kissing.” She gives me an exaggerated wink that causes half her face to collapse.

“Let’s just say hypothetically; he is into me.” I start hesitantly. “It honestly feels way too soon to be thinking about sex. Besides the fact that I’m a virgin, it’s no surprise I have no idea what I’m doing.”

“Just back up into it and let him do all the work,” She unravels the throw from her shoulders and tosses it back onto the bed before jumping to her feet. She turns and starts shaking her butt in my face. “Just back it up, back, back, back it up.” She jumps from one side of the bed to the other, shaking and jiving, throwing her hands above her head and moving her whole body to her own rhythm.

“Stop, oh my god!” I laugh, falling back onto the bed and swatting her butt away from my face.

She collapses beside me, giggling so hard her eyes are screwed up tight, and tears start to fall down her cheeks. “What,” she folds her hair beneath her head as she holds back laughter. “You know your girl is right because she’s always

right.” She eyes me righteously before cuddling closer and resting her head on my shoulder.

I know Jess is right. I can’t keep lying to myself any longer. And whether it is love or lust, it feels right in the moment. I remind myself that this is all that matters. I have to be honest with Cole, even if it ruins everything between us.

Not only do I have Cole’s complex mind to wrap my head around. But coming out is now on the agenda, and I’m not sure whether I’m excited or terrified — or both.

LIONS, TIGERS, AND BEARS, OH MY!

An endless chorus of birds echo around us as we unload the back of Cole's baby blue Chevy. The sun is unconditionally warm. Even beneath the shade of the tall oak we park under, it's still hotter than the six shades of hell.

"Is it normally this warm in Whispering Pines?" Cole complains, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand.

"You're such a drama queen, but it's totally normal for this time of year."

The limbs of the old oak groan in the warm breeze, its tired wistful arms scratching together as we unpack the car onto the side of the road.

"What?" Cole looks at me, consciously frowning, when he notices me staring.

I shake my head and try to hide my embarrassment with a fake smile. "Nothing."

"Whatever," he says.

Cole reaches into the trunk and tosses me a backpack. It hits me square in the chest and knocks the wind straight from my lungs. "Good catch, Hargroves," he mocks.

"You could've killed me," I wheeze.

"Here's hoping," he winks.

He heaves his own bag onto his back and loops his arms through the holes.

"All set?" He asks.

"Yep. Are you ready to hike?"

He nods. "Ready."

I can't help but note the trepidation in Cole's tone, the shaky breathless edge to his voice that tells me that maybe he

isn't as prepared for this hike as he makes out to be.

Cole's muscles protest as he slams the trunk closed and hooks his hands through his backpack straps like a school kid. The unexpected action leaves my cheeks burning hot. Hotter than they already were.

"Lead the way, Hargroves." He ruffles my hair with a firm hand and motions for me to walk ahead.

Cole carries himself with a relaxed confidence that is infectious. He marches with purpose and poise as if he owns the ground he walks on. It's a very sexy combination.

It isn't just how he carries himself; the mouth-watering scent of vanilla and honeysuckle makes me weak at the knees. Plus, the way his activewear hugs his body in all the right places, I can't help but glimpse. I'm only human. And he is handsome. It's only fair.

I can't hold myself together. Cole is commanding all my attention. And I can't help but stare.

I force myself to turn my head and scoop my tongue back into my mouth to keep from drooling. And continuously remind myself to put one foot in front of the other and walk.

We cross the threshold into the forest, and the warmth in the air quickly becomes sticky and damp.

"Where's the track?" Cole asks, alarmed.

"There isn't one," I reply absently.

"Okay. So how do you know where we are going?"

"I don't." I shrug carelessly.

"You aren't doing a great job of reassuring me that this is a good idea."

"Wasn't trying to." I tell him.

"I don't know if you're joking or serious," I swear I hear him gulp in fear. But when I turn around to ensure he is still following me and hasn't sprinted back the way we'd come, his face is completely blank.

“Guess you’ll just have to trust me.” I offer a mischievous smile.

“The fact that you’ve led me into the wilderness and have no idea where you’re taking me completely contradicts everything I know about you.” His tone is painfully low and very matter of fact and I can’t help but wonder whether he thinks he knows me better than I know myself.

“You’re such a drama queen.” I stop walking and turn to face him. “We’ve barely walked ten yards. We can still see the road,” I gesture behind us, and surely enough, I can still see the car parked beneath the old oak from here. “Anyway, how does this contradict *everything* you know about me?” It isn’t so much a question as it is a statement. How could he already know so much about me?

“Well, I think you’re very calculated. However, this goes against that.” He expels a heavy breath and seems to relax.

“Someone once told me that I was too calculated. Kinda’ wanted to prove them wrong.” I quip righteously and turn on my heels and start walking again.

Cole chuckles as he runs to catch up. “Well, whoever they are, they sound like an absolute A-hole.”

“You’re telling me.” I turn and give Cole an all-knowing smile that he quickly returns. I’ve never had this type of banter with anyone, and it’s low-key amazing. Considering we’ve only known each other for a few weeks, it’s hard to believe how far we’ve come as friends.

Sunlight filters through the canopy of trees overhead, a soft welcome light that guides us deeper into the forest. Beneath us, the sounds of twigs and pine needles snap with each footstep. The sounds carry us through the forest, following our every footfall and movement.

The backpack is heavy on my back and makes each step harder, heavier, and hotter.

A bird swoops past my eye line, and I jump back. With each step deeper into the forest, my nerves become a little

more unstable. I can't believe everything that's happened over the past two weeks and how quickly everything has unfolded.

Everything in my world changed on New Year's Eve, and the boy who'd stolen my attention in the dead of night is here with me now. I have the perfect opportunity to tell him I like him. But regardless of how much I want to tell Cole that I don't just want to be friends, I have no idea how to tell him.

I like you. I want to scream at the top of my lungs.

Instead, I roll my eyes, frustrated at myself for being such an idiot. I brace my hands against the fallen tree. My fingertips dig into the rotten bark and sticky moss and attempt to pull myself over.

"Need a hand? Here let me help." Cole offers after my second failed attempt, all the while laughing at my failure. He dashes forward, his arms outstretched and grabs me by the waist, and effortlessly hikes me up onto the moss-slicked edge.

The intoxicating scent of cedar and pine needles fill my nostrils as I slide off the other side of the tree and land with a thud.

"Thanks!" I call back just as Cole propels himself over the tree like it is nothing.

The muscles in his biceps tense as he catapults himself over the tree. He tucks his legs to his chest and uses his arm to pivot. He lands beside me breathlessly, a smug smirk twitching at the sides of his mouth.

I look at him with wide perplexed eyes.

"What's that look for, Hargroves?" He steps close to me and wraps an arm around my shoulders. We walk again, taking a few smaller steps to clear the uneven terrain before he drops his arm back by his side.

"You're ridiculously strong," I tell him. I've never been much into athletics until now.

"Thanks," he casts his eyes down bashfully. "Back when I lived in the city, I used to work out a lot to keep from reminding myself just how shitty my life was. It turns out it's a

good way to take out anger because I ended up with a killer body.” He lifts his shirt and pats his stomach three times before leaving his shirt to fall back into place over his abs.

“Impressive.” I didn’t notice that I’m biting down on my lip until it’s too late. My cheeks flush red instantly. “Ah, it looks like we’re almost there.” I take a deep breath and break the tense silence.

“How can you possibly tell.” Cole just shakes his head incredulously.

I don’t want to tell him how I knew. I didn’t want to ruin the surprise. This is one of the few places I can come and completely forget about the world. I want to share that with Cole because if anyone needs to escape their life right now, it’s him. For a multitude of reasons.

“I honestly would never have expected to be camping right now,” he confesses.

“And is that a good or bad thing?” I adjust my backpack straps as we walk.

“It’s a good thing.” He clarifies. “Everything with you is always good.”

He rarely shows this sweet unfiltered side, and I can’t help but smile at his words.

“Lyndon, be careful; that looks slippery —” Cole’s voice rips through the silence that stretches between us and startles me into awareness.

It’s too late.

My balance skews, and I start to fall towards the moss-covered ground beneath me. My ankle slips through a bed of twigs and moss and fallen branches. And as I fall, I can’t contain the scream that escapes my lips.

Fuck my life!

How many people fall face-first in front of their crush not once but twice.

I glance at Cole; he moves like lightning out of the corner of my eye as he whirls around and lashes his arms out in front of him. His fingers latch onto my top and wrench me into his arms before I collide with the ground.

He pulls me close to his chest, firmly, protectively. The erratic beating of his heart is all I can focus on, the constant throb against my cheek as he holds me tight.

I can't move my arms or legs. My whole body is rendered motionless with shock. I have no idea what to think as my heart hammers and my ankle throbs painfully.

"Are you okay?" Cole asks breathlessly. With soft fingers, he reaches out and deftly sweeps the hair from my eyes. His touch lingers as he brushes the strand behind my ear, his fingers trailing down the length of my jaw.

"You have a habit of needing to be rescued." Cole smiles shyly.

My heart hammers like the thrum of a thousand hummingbirds. Light. Powerful. Every impulse in my body tells me to kiss him. Maybe it's the adrenaline talking or perhaps it's just how close our bodies are to one another. But leave it to me to fall face first and think about kissing Cole, typical. If nothing else gets his attention, this would surely get the point across that I like him — a lot.

His eyes glaze over pale green, and just as quickly as he'd caught me, he pulls away entirely. He drops his hand from my cheek and leaves it to fall by his side. And then, just like that, he turns and starts walking away as if I hadn't just plummeted to my death.

I have to mentally shake myself to prepare for the complete Cole Chamberlin whiplash experience. I watch him walk away as if the spark that had just blossomed between us hadn't been there at all.

It's no wonder I'm starting to think I've made this all up in my head. The constant back and forth between us has become heartbreakingly unbearable, and I can't deal with it

any longer. I'm tired of constantly hoping for something that will never happen.

I feel stupid, like I've been played like a violin, my cords belt and bent because some guy who can't comprehend his own emotions sideswipes me.

"I'm tired." I stand there shaking, a combination of anger and confusion roiling through me.

Cole stops dead in his tracks. "I thought you said we were almost there?"

I can't stop myself from what comes next. My lips move, and my tongue clicks as I blather out of control. "No. I'm tired of this thing between us."

"What are you talking about, Lyndon?" Cole whips around so quickly my eyes struggle to follow him.

"I'm talking about you and me." I slap my hands over my face and drag them down slowly. When I pull them away, Cole steps even closer. "I feel like an absolute idiot, pining over a boy who doesn't see me or want me." I spit out angrily, no longer caring what Cole thinks of me...or how ridiculously childish I'm acting. I just need to let it all out.

Cole doesn't say anything. But his silence is all the answer I need.

"Do you think I'm an idiot, Cole? Do you?" My voice is strained, dripping with emotion I can't control.

"No." He takes another step closer and then another. His eyes take on an unshakeable sadness, something I've never seen in him before.

"Then why are you treating me like there's nothing happening between us?"

I let the silence wrap around us, growing more and more unbearable as the minutes pass, certain he isn't going to say anything.

"I know you can see what I'm talking about. I have eyes. I have a beating heart. I hear every word you don't speak. Every breath you hold back. We could never just be friends.

Not when we're meant to be so much more." As I speak, my voice grows more profound, more intense. The spark inside me burns out of control, a wild unattainable flame that consumes my heart and soul. I want more than anything for Cole to feel that fire too.

I close the space between us — the world a blur around me.

Cole doesn't move or say anything. He just stands there staring at me, completely dumbstruck. His eyes gleam a beautiful shade of green as tears blossom and threaten to fall. His mouth falls agape, and his lips quivers.

I hold my breath as he takes another step closer to me, but at this point, his proximity means nothing. The moment he feels anything towards me, he will pull away like always. He taunts me with his closeness — waives it over me like blackmail and then boom — nothing.

"I can't give in to you, Lyndon." He gulps. "It's too dangerous for us to be together."

"I'm willing to make that sacrifice," my voice catches in the back of my throat, and I have to take a deep breath before I say, "are you?"

He looks away, and I feel my heartbreak. My entire body goes rigid, and a helpless gasp escapes my lips. He doesn't want me. That much is painfully clear to me. I can't keep the tears from cascading down my cheeks.

"Lyndon, I don't think you understand what you would be giving up to be with me," he sighs. "I would never be able to give you what you want —"

Cole reaches out to comfort me, and I abruptly deny his touch. I shake my head, and when I lift my head to meet his gaze, we both have tears running down our faces. This unexpected vulnerability from him only breaks my heart more. How can I hate him when he looks like this.

"Lyndon, look I —"

"Is it because of Issac?" My words are like a dagger to Cole's heart. I watch him instantly freeze, his whole body

going completely motionless. “Is he the reason you won’t let me in?” I pause and expel a shaky breath before continuing. “Have I just been acting a complete fool thinking there could have ever been anything between us?” I don’t know whether I’m being stupid or brave — or both. But there’s no turning back now — especially not when the words have already left my mouth.

“Who told you about Issac?” He demands, and the tears in his eyes instantly dry up, held captive by anger and outrage. He strides towards me, quick, assertive steps, and suddenly he is standing right in front of me, looking down at me.

“Callum was right when he told me to be careful of you.” I gasp, shocked. I can’t believe the horrible words that come from my mouth, filled with so much hatred and spitefulness. I regret the words before they’ve even left my lips.

“So, Callum told you.” He’s shocked and surprised in the same breath, but he doesn’t seem fazed by my outlandish outburst. “What did he tell you?” There is an undeniable pain in the way he speaks, but I’ve had enough of answering his questions. I don’t care anymore. I’m hurt and heartbroken, and still, he hasn’t given me an explanation.

My sneakers slosh through the moss and leaves as I turn to leave.

“Lyndon, wait!”

I don’t listen. Instead, I turn and begin walking back in the direction we’d come.

Tears blur my vision, and I realise in this moment that I was stupid to think that anything could have amounted between us. I should have never strayed from my plan. Never. After all, structure equals success. Recklessness abandonment equals failure.

Never, never, *never!*

“Seriously, Lyndon, stop.” He howls.

I stop, but I don’t turn. I keep looking away until I gather my composure enough to face Cole. When I turn around, Cole is standing right behind me. Through the tears and suffering, I

didn't even hear his footsteps or the crunching of twigs beneath his sneakers.

He reaches out gently, his fingers raking through my loose curls to hold my head in place so my eyes lock on him. And as much as I try to control the temptation, my head swoons to his touch, hard and warm. Mine.

I can barely make out his expression until I wipe the tears from my eyes.

He looks me dead in the eyes. When he speaks, his tone is dry. "What I've been trying to tell you but have sucked at so badly. And to be honest, it just never felt right..." he mutters chaotically.

I'm tired of his half-answers and broken truths. And Cole can tell he's losing me.

"Issac was my boyfriend, and I loved him very much."

This isn't news to my ears. His tone takes on a softer edge, and there's something in the way he looks at me. His soft luminous gaze is filled with anguish and heartbreak, and I feel sorry for him. "But there isn't anything unfinished between us."

"Nothing?" I repeat with question in my tone.

He shakes his head and lets out an unsteady breath, paralysed by emotion. "N-nothing."

He turns his head just as tears start to fall down his cheeks. He quickly brushes them away with his shoulder, and when he meets my gaze, his eyes are glassy and red.

I hate that I've made him feel this way.

"Lyndon, Issac died." Cole takes a deep breath before he continues. "And it kills me to know that someone you've loved so deeply can leave just like that," he snaps his fingers together. "Gone."

Blink, blink, *blink*. I stand there speechless.

"And it happened because of me."

What happened to Issac?

“Issac’s dead because of me,” his voice breaks away into gasps.

I grapple helplessly at his body, pulling him closer to me. I wrap my arms around his shoulders and hold him. His hands tighten around my back, allowing his emotions to run wild. I hold him tighter as his tears turn to sobs and then to sniffles. And when he’s ready to pull away, he does.

“All I know is I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if something happened to you too.”

“Whatever happened to Issac wasn’t your fault —”

“It might not have been my fault, but I still blame myself every single day for what happened to him. He would still be alive today if it wasn’t for me and my family.”

A horrible sinking feeling churns in the pit of my stomach, and I hate myself for making him relive those horrible memories. I shouldn’t have pushed. I shouldn’t have said anything —

He smiles solemnly.

There is something about his vulnerability that makes him seem more human than ever before, from his tear-stained cheeks to the soft effervescence in his stare. All I can think about in this moment is how beautiful he looks standing there with the forest wrapped around him.

“I’m sorry it’s taken me until now to be honest with you.” His eyes seem lost and lonely. Like he’s searching for the words to say, but they never come.

“Lyndon, I want you to know that, of course, I like you. I mean, look at you,” he gestures towards me, waving his hands up and down to take in all of me. “You’re cute. You’re funny. And you’ve got those dreamy blue eyes and an adorable smile to match. I can’t get enough of you. You’re intoxicating in the best possible way. But my life is shitty and complicated. And I can’t go through that bullshit just to have my heart wrenched out of my chest all over again.”

I’m suddenly lost for words. I have no idea what to say. I have no idea how to act. I’m frozen on the spot, and my mouth

turns dry.

Cole *likes* me.

And I can't even hate him for not wanting to be with me.

But knowing that he likes me but can't be with me doesn't make it any easier.

At least I know I didn't make it all up.

"Thank you," I sigh. "I really appreciate you trusting me with this." My heart pounds in my chest, an uncontrollable thud that makes me feel sick. "I hate that I've caused you so much heartache today. But I also can't keep pretending like I'm not hurting too." I lower my gaze and look down at my sneakers. "I have to leave, I can't —"

I feel sick to the stomach. I don't want to be that person that hears how fucked up someone's life is and runs away selfishly. But that isn't what I'm doing, and I know Cole knows that too. I just need space to run and scream or cry and —

"Lyndon, please don't go!" The words slice through me like a knife, and if I hadn't already been in pain, he'd have just added salt to the wound. "Fuck it!"

Without warning, Cole laces his fingers through my hair and pulls me forcefully to his chest, knocking the air straight from my lungs. An unrelenting warmth fills my cheeks as his lips meld against mine like molten flames. Warm, fiery, powerful.

My eyelids flutter to a slight close, and I allow him to take control. And in that moment, as the sunlight flitters across Cole's cheeks and the shadows dance within his eyes, he becomes everything I ever wanted, needed, craved. And it's mine.

For a second, my heart completely stops as his lips melt into mine. Hollow, empty, void. And then thump, thump, *thump*. A sweet mix of tears and passion fuel our kiss, and within seconds his tongue lashes out and finds mine.

A rush of adrenaline pumps through my body as my hands wrap around his back and pull him closer until our hearts beat as one. Cole laces his hands through my hair and kisses me deeply, with such a wild hunger that my breath is snatched from my lungs.

We pull away from each other with bated breath. Desperate to catch my breath, I tilt my head back and inhale deeply.

I blink several times to remind myself that this is real. That Cole Chamberlin kissed me. The handsome stranger I've been obsessed with since New Year's Eve. The boy next door I've literally fallen head over heels for has actually kissed me.

I'm totally swept away in the moment that I lose track of all sense of time and place. And when I gather my thoughts and look around, everything suddenly hurtles back to me. I remember that we're standing in the middle of the forest. Locked securely in each other's warm embrace as the trees whisper around us and a distant bird whistles its melodious tune. With dazed eyes, I stare up at Cole and smile.

Cole stares back with beady green eyes and pink cheeks. When he opens his mouth to speak, his words are soft and his smile wistful. "I've wanted to do that for a while now."

"What was holding you back?"

He clears his throat before continuing, his voice suddenly thick with emotion. "After what happened to Issac, I felt like I didn't deserve happiness. In some way I thought closing myself off to the possibility of love might keep anyone else from being hurt because of me. They say you never truly get over your first love, and for me that's true, but for all the wrong reasons.

"I know it sounds totally insane, but it felt like allowing myself to fall for someone else meant letting go a piece of him I wasn't ready to say goodbye to, you know. I fell hard. And fast. And when I fell, I gave him all of me. And when he died, he took that part of me with him. In truth loving Issac has taken everything from me. When something this horrible happens to you it's difficult to comprehend that it's the end

and he's never coming back. It's unbearable to think that one moment I could feel him by my side, the whisper of his breath on my lips. And then the next he's gone. He didn't deserve what happened to him. No one does."

What happened!

"So, when you walked into my life on New Year's Eve, I instantly knew there was something I liked about you. Even though you were a complete stranger. And even though I wasn't ready to let anyone in. I wanted to let you in. As I watched you watching the fireworks that night, I was reminded of all the things I'd be leaving behind if I didn't allow myself to discover what we could be, that's why I came over to you. From the moment I laid eyes on you something inside me was ignited. I felt my guard slip. My heart skipped a beat. I hadn't felt that way since —"

Issac. Cole doesn't have to say his name for me to understand what he wanted to say.

"I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to lead you on and make you feel like it was one sided. It wasn't fair to you. I tried to push you away and pretend that spark had never been there between us. After a while I couldn't deny it anymore. I couldn't deny you."

His words hit me like a freight train and my mind is completely blown. All this time he's liked me. And all this time he's denied that part of him. Denied his very happiness. All for what?

"It burned inside me. Hot. Electric. Mine. And I couldn't get you out of my head. Day. Or. Night. And every waking hour in between. All I could think about was you."

He takes a moment to catch his breath. He doesn't stop to breathe the entire time he speaks.

Every word that separates his lips is endearing and heartfelt and honest. Heartbreakingly. Painfully. Brutally. *Honest.*

"It's weird because the stronger the flame became, the more scared I grew thinking I was making a bad decision. Like

the part of me that's so badly damaged couldn't even allow myself a moments happiness. Allowing myself to even acknowledge the spark inside me made me feel guilty. Like somehow my silence and misery were the price I had to pay to live with what happened to Issac. I was reminded of all the terrible, twisted shit that haunts my past and without even meaning to I disappeared back into myself. Because shutting down is the only way I know how to survive.

“I never thought I'd be ready to let anyone in until you — you've made it impossible for me. I don't think you realise what you do to me.”

Cole Chamberlin's twisted mind quickly unravels before me. And all the questions I'd been waiting to hear are answered all at once.

“I would never have been able to tell anyone — I would never have been brave — It's because of you.” His words come out cracked and broken, but the message is clear. “So, thank you for pushing me when no one else would. Not even me.”

He speaks like he's stuck on fast forward and rewind all at the same time. His words are short and clipped as he pours his heart out to me.

I want to see his face. I need to look into his eyes. I pull back so I can see him, but he doesn't release his hold on me. It's strong, secure, protective. “I didn't mean to push you. I know how awful it must be to relive those memories you've kept hidden. It makes sense why you've worked so hard to build your guard up.” I let out a heavy breath and shake my head. I don't know what else to say to make everything better.

His voice is stern, unapologetic. “No one has ever pushed me the way you do, and I don't know whether that excites me or scares the absolute shit out of me. But I can't wait to find out.”

He leans down and gently presses his lips to mine one last time. I close my eyes and let him guide the way, his lips soft, his tongue firm, his touch dangerous.

“Plus,” he continues in a softer tone, “the memories with Issac weren’t all bad. Maybe one day I’ll tell you about him.”

“I’d like that,” I reply.

His tone is sombre, assuring and somehow has a way of making me feel safe all at the same time. “Anyway, everything happens for a reason.”

And for whatever reason. I’m glad it did.

And suddenly, everything that I’ve been worrying about vanishes.

Gone.

Callum’s ludicrous claims on Cole’s worth disappear.

Gone.

And any and all doubts of how Cole felt about me go away too.

Gone.

And for the first time in weeks, that churning ball of nerves in the pit of my stomach dissolves.

Gone.

And for a split second, I forget about how fucked up Cole’s life is and how scared I am to tell my mum I’m gay. Everything that I thought mattered is just gone.

I think back to the steamy day in his bedroom when he saved me from falling face-first into the floor and unintentionally smile. When Cole was nothing more than a handsome stranger, and I was just the boy next door. How everything had changed so quickly.

ADVANCED CHEMISTRY

I can't believe that just happened.

I want to shout to the world that Cole fucking Chamberlin kissed me and confessed to me his deepest, darkest feelings, and it was breath-taking. Or did that all sound way too cliché. Either way, I didn't care. I just had my first ever kiss, and it was beyond perfect.

It had just been the two of us, and nothing else in the world seemed to matter.

I expertly dodge weeping vines and weave spiky branches as I make my way through the forest. The scent of wildflowers and blossoms waft through the air around me as I near the edge of the woodlands. Fern's tangle around my ankles as I step through the cover of trees and into the meadow. The grass is soft beneath my sneakers as I step out from the shelter of tall pines.

I breathe in the sweet scent of honey that cloys in the breeze. The wildflower blossoms that speckle the meadow add to the unbearably sweet aroma that wraps around my body and assaults my lungs with each deep breath I inhale as I try to catch my breath.

As we stand there, side by side in complete silence, a black and blue specked swallow dives into the lake, sending ripples across the water before disappearing soundlessly into the faraway trees.

The lake is everything I remember it to be, with the stark blue sky reflecting on its sparkling blue surface. The trees that line the meadow are as vibrant as ever and the deepest shade of emerald. It is my secret little oasis, untouched, pure beauty.

Cole is completely bewildered by the unparalleled beauty of the oasis that stretches before him. His eyes dart from the encompassing pines that wrap around the lake and meadow to the crystal blue lake that glimmers and glistens in the early

afternoon sun. His eyes skim over the meadow's lush grass and delicate blossoms before turning his attention back to me.

I can't help but smile. But it isn't just a typical smile. It's unapologetically wide. The kind of unprecedented smile you only hear about in Taylor Swift songs.

"How'd you find this place?" Cole comes to a complete stop beside me, folding his arms over his chest and sighing into the empty meadow.

"I stumbled on it by accident. I don't think anyone knows about it." I admitted. "It's somewhere I come whenever I'm upset or anxious and just need to clear my head."

Without any hesitation Cole looks at me and offers a supportive smile before dropping his backpack from his shoulders. He leaves it to fall to the ground by our feet with a heavy thud. I follow suit and drop my bag in a heap beside his.

"I could be lost out here forever." He whispers.

I nod in response.

He takes a few strides forward and bends down on one knee. He carefully plucks a wild daisy from the grass. He stands and instantly turns to face me, the daisy extended between us. He bows his head and pushes the flower closer to me.

"It definitely doesn't make up for the emotional rollercoaster I've put you through these past few weeks, but I hope you can forgive me." His voice is soft, a boyish edge to his tone that makes him seem younger than he is as he inches the flower closer and closer, willing me to accept it. The gesture is unexpected yet so sweet that it sends my heart racing dangerously out of control. I really like the way it makes me feel.

I yank the flower from his fingertips and bring it to my nose. The pollen is rich and vaguely smells of peaches. When I pull it away, my nose begins to tickle, and I had to wrinkle it side to side to keep from sneezing.

“Thank you,” I say, and I mean it. “I wish I had handled the situation better too. I’m so used to having control over everything in my life that the moment I don’t it feels like the entire weight of the world comes crashing down on me. I’ve never liked anyone how I like you. And that scares me too.”

Cole clenches his teeth together thoughtfully as he considers what to say next but instead chooses to remain silent.

“I wanted to believe that it was as easy as telling myself I didn’t want you. However, the more I told myself that I didn’t want you. The more I became obsessed with needing you. When Callum mentioned Issac, it only made you that much more attainable. You’re handsome, charming and mysterious. And most importantly you were *gay*. It sounds ridiculous but up until a few moments ago it felt like my head would explode if I didn’t tell you how I felt about you.”

Silence.

“It was never a part of my plan to —” *fall for you*, I want to tell him. Instead, I gesture between us and blow out a frustrated breath and expertly refrain from rolling my eyes. I’m not exactly sure what we would call what we are, he isn’t my boyfriend, and we aren’t together. “It was never a part of my plan to date.” As soon as the words escape my lips I regret them, but Cole doesn’t seem to mind me deciding what we are and so I continue while I’m still brave enough to speak. “Anyway, we both know how that’s turned out,” I sigh, annoyed with myself for making it all about me. “I guess what I’m trying to say is — I’m sorry too. I wanted this trip to be an escape from your fucked up reality. And instead, I just backed up and dumped all the emotional baggage straight on top of you like a complete idiot.”

“It’s okay,” he chuckles. “You know we’re really not that different you and me. We’re both to blame. We were too busy hiding in the shadows. So, let’s make a pact that we will be honest with each other from now on. *Okay*.” He extends a hand and forces me to shake it. He doesn’t say anything more, he doesn’t need to. He’s said everything and more in the words he doesn’t say. It’s the look he gives me with his condemning

green eyes that assures me that for whatever reason he is glad we're so alike.

He moves closer, his hands grip my biceps and his eyes lock on me with a wicked intensity. When he speaks next, his words shock me into silence. "I'm really happy to have found you Lyndon Hargroves." He winks.

My mouth falls agape, and I stand there soundlessly.

My mind has been completely wiped clean, and I choke on my words.

Cole reaches forward and lifts my jaw back in place. My lips snap shut, and my teeth instantly smack together. "Better close it before you give me any ideas." He winks mischievously completely resetting the tension that had bubbled between us.

He kisses me gently.

And it's not until his lips brush against mine that I'm startled back into awareness. The sudden warmth of his mouth against mine sends my mind spiralling out of control.

I can't believe someone so strong could have such a gentle side. But for whatever reason, I'm glad he did. His hands rack through my hair and pull me nearer. Enveloping me in his strong, powerful arms.

His hands brace my back securely and quickly squeeze me closer. I can't deny his touch as his hands begin to wander my body. His arms wrap stealthily around my waist, his big hands and muscly arms embracing me in their warmth.

I drape my arms over his shoulders and lean in close, our breath lingering between us tormentingly before our lips eventually lock together. When our lips finally meld together, there is a wild, uncontrollable fire that ignites. So heated and irresistible that the sheer intensity burns through my entire body. All the way from my head to the tips of my toes.

Cole's next movements are so sudden they startle me. He shifts his hands lower on my back and quickly guides me to the ground. Wildflowers press against my spine as he lowers his body hungrily into mine.

His body rocks against me as our kiss deepens, his thrusts long and slow as his length hardens against my thigh. I shudder uncontrollably. Flattered. Freaked. I can't decide. A shallow growl escapes his lips as he bites my bottom lip between his teeth. His hands grip my back harder, his fingertips digging relentlessly into my skin.

I can't believe how quickly we'd gone from friends to fifty shades of steamy — I didn't want to stop kissing him, but I can see where this is going, and I'm not about to lose my 'V-Card' in the woods. Everything happens so quickly. So unexpectedly fast, my breath is snatched from my lungs, and I can barely work up the courage to stop kissing him.

My nerves take over, and my breathing becomes strained as I hold a hand up to Cole's chest to wage space between us. My heartbeat thunders in my ears, and I can't help but wonder if I'm making the right decision. But before I even have a chance to change my mind Cole's aware of my hand on his chest and is already making a conscious effort to pull away.

Cole instantly notices my apprehension and quickly crawls backward until his chest hovers over me. His hands are braced either side of my waist, and his knees dig into the ground between my legs. He doesn't look concerned, maybe worried. But when he speaks, his tone says otherwise. "Sorry." He mutters quietly, an overly cheeky grin tugging at the corners of his mouth.

I can tell he isn't sorry, but I'm not mad. I'm just happy that he stops to give me a second to breathe.

"I didn't mean to get so carried away. I just couldn't help myself," he confesses. "You taste amazing, like raspberries and cotton candy." He tilts his head up and licks his lips.

He pulls himself to his feet and extends a hand to help me up. I push myself up onto my elbows and lift my hand into his and allow him to bring me to my feet. He doesn't release his hold on my hand even after he helps me from the ground.

He looks into my eyes and smiles, his cheeks burning a brilliant cherry red as he begins to speak. "Forgive me?" His eyes hold a shaky warmth as he begs for forgiveness.

“Always.” I lean forward on my tiptoes to kiss him quickly, his lips smooth against my own. “We should probably set up camp now before it gets too late.”

“Probably,” he says while simultaneously raising his eyebrows, “Or we could keep kissing.” He smiles mischievously.

“We’ll have plenty of time for that later,” I confirm, and his eyes light up excitedly. I would have been lying if I said I didn’t want him to keep kissing me.

“Promise?” He cocks his head to the side and grins ridiculously.

“Promise.”

REALITY CHECK

Cole paces towards me, his arms stacked high with kindling. He drops the branches from his bare arms and leaves them to topple to the ground beside me. Beads of sweat threaten to trickle down his forehead and into his eyes, before he wipes them away with the back of his arm.

Cole drops down to his knees beside me and scrunches his eyebrows together when he realises I've made no progress with the tent. "It looks like you're struggling." He motions to the instructions that I begrudgingly tossed aside an hour ago.

I retrieve the screwed-up piece of paper from the grass beside me and reluctantly hand it to Cole. He left me in charge of assembling the tent. As he studies the instructions, I continue to smack bendy bars through crunchy material with absolutely zero success.

"You're making this look more difficult than it actually needs to be." He chuckles softly and tosses the instructions aside. "Here, let me help, grab that pole." He gives me a playful look as he gestures towards the bendy bars beside me. I reach over quickly and hand them to him.

In seconds Cole is feeding the bar into place, through the material and out the other side. He hooks the base together, and in a flash, the tent bounces to life.

"Not too bad for a city boy, huh." He gives me his best attempt at a conceited smile before nodding his head contently.

"Bravo," I clap unenthusiastically. "Bravo." The tent is nothing elaborate. It's a tiny black dome that looks more like a shade tent people use for kids on sunny beach days. I look between all six feet of Cole and the tent and frown. "I don't think you're going to fit."

"Surprisingly enough, not the first time I've heard that." Cole quips and quickly catches me flapping my mouth open and closed as I desperately try to redeem myself, but the words

are lost by the time they reach my lips. Without even a moment's hesitation, Cole leans across and kisses my cheek triumphantly. "Stop while you're ahead, Lyndon." He beams smugly.

"It's totally going to take me a second to get used to this version of Cole Chamberlin." I sigh and roll my eyes dramatically. I'm not sure what happened between his confession and now but allowing Cole to bare all had unlocked a side of him I didn't know existed. He had gone from dark and mysterious to something slightly more human. And I'm so thankful I'd been able to carve beneath his hard exterior and discover the real Cole Chamberlin within.

I would probably never get used to his wicked sense of humour and unbelievably quick wit that I'm only just discovering he has. It's a welcomed surprise from the dark and desolate Cole Chamberlin I'd come to know. I'm not entirely sure I'm ready for it. Because when it comes to humour, I'm definitely more on the serious side, and rarely – and I mean extremely rarely – did I ever get jokes. Maybe I'm just extremely blond.

"Want to help me start the fire?" Cole quickly changes the topic and looks between me and the pile of sticks he'd dumped beside me, waiting expectedly for me to say something.

"Sure."

I move quickly to retrieve the sticks while Cole starts aligning a collection of muddy rocks in a skewed circle far enough away from the campsite that we wouldn't send it up in flames. We kneel by the circle of stones and start placing dry leaves at the base and larger branches and twigs to fill in the gaps until we've created a lopsided tepee.

Cole leans back and apprentices his handiwork as I slid open the matchbox and snap the match along the edge of the box. It sparks instantly, and before the flame crawls up the thin matchstick, I drop it onto the dry leaves. They catch within seconds and begin to sizzle and pop as flames take hold of twigs and branches.

The flames crackle, and thick plumes of grey smoke billow through the warm air as Cole reclines backwards into the grass. He kicks his legs out in front of him and reaches for my hands. Within seconds he swings me around and pulls me down so that I'm sitting between his legs staring into the fire. He wraps his arms around my shoulders and hugs me from behind, his muscly arms like a human shield, locking in all the warmth. He rests his chin softly on my head and squeezes me tighter. I tilt my head back and smile up at him. A splash of orange and red dance within his eyes as he leans forward to kiss my forehead. His lips are soft and sweet as they brush the skin just above my eyebrow. I close my eyes and smile.

I can't believe how the day has unfolded. Cole has fallen effortlessly into '*boyfriend*' mode, and I can't help but wonder whether the confidence comes from being lost in nature and away from prying judgmental eyes, or whether this is how it would always be from now on. And yet I can't shake the feeling that everything will quickly change once we check back into reality.

I don't want to think of that right now. It isn't helpful. And I definitely don't want to ruin the spark that's ignited between us. At this exact moment, I want to be lost with Cole forever. With the sun fading in the sky and the electric pinks and oranges of sunset enveloping the meadow, the familiar scent of vanilla and honeysuckle combined with the powerful smell of smoke and wildflowers that filled the air as the fire crackles silently in the background. My mind buzzes, and my heart beats happily.

"I'm going to come out to my mum tomorrow," I tell him quietly. My ear pressed to his chest; I can hear the faint pitter-patter of his heart.

An empty silence stretches between us. I don't expect Cole to say anything. Especially when he doesn't even make an effort to breathe as he sits there staring silently into the blazing fire. After some time, he finally speaks. His voice is a grave combination of hesitation and despair.

"I'm sure your mum will be proud." He gives me a remorseful smile that I can only assume has something to do

with his own strained relationship with his parents.

“Did your parents know about Issac?”

He nods silently. When he eventually opens his mouth to speak, there is an undeniable pain that eats away at his words. “It doesn’t mean they approved.”

I know the question’s stupid and idiotic even before it leaves my lips, but I can’t bear the idea of not hearing it for myself. “Will you tell them about us?”

I already know his answer. And I can’t be mad at him for what he’s about to say. Because I know if it was up to him, he wouldn’t have chosen this empty reality where he wasn’t loved unconditionally by his family. Where he didn’t have to worry or be afraid for choosing who to —

“Believe me. I want to tell them.” He pauses and swallows a thick lump in his throat before turning to look at me, his eyes consumed with fear. “Do you remember earlier when I said that I wouldn’t be able to give you what you wanted —”

I nod mechanically. I understand what he’s trying so desperately to say, and it doesn’t make it hurt any less.

“Well, this is one of those things. Us. You and me,” he motions to the empty space between us. “I want to be with you Lyndon. And more than that I don’t want to be the one to hurt you. But —”

You could never hurt me. I need to tell him, but the words are trapped at the back of my throat never to be heard.

“After what happened —”

Tell me! It’s the heavy silence that stretches between us that makes my heart ache.

“After what happened with Issac, I know what I have to do to protect you and make sure what happened to him doesn’t happen again.”

What happened to Issac?

I'm beginning to think he's never actually going to tell me what happened, and I'm okay with that because I know deep down, I didn't want to know the truth behind what really happened. Cole has managed to store the memory far away in a secure hideaway in his mind, fastened by lock and key. A place somewhere he never ventured, somewhere he didn't dare to go for fear of reliving a moment in time that continues to torture him. It will always be something that happened and never discussed under any circumstances. And I'm okay with that. Because knowing the truth scares me.

I can't keep my mind from running wild with horrible, twisted possibilities that could have resulted in Issac's death. I know the truth wouldn't have been as terrible as what's running through my mind which makes it that much easier to accept that I don't need to know. I don't want to. It's Cole's secret. And he will tell me when he's ready.

"If I haven't already ruined my chance with you, I'd like to see what we could be."

"You haven't ruined your chance," I nuzzle my forehead against his chest before taking a moment to stare into his eyes. "I promise."

"Okay, good." He breathes me in with his eyes and takes an apprehensive step towards me and wraps his hands around mine. "I just have two conditions."

"*Oh.*"

"Would that be okay with you?"

"Sure." It's a lie. And I have to quickly brush aside the dazed look that forces my lips into a frown and turns my eyes sad and confused. "And what would they be?" I tilt my chin to meet his gaze and note the unexpected hesitation behind his stare.

"Okay. Rule number one, my parents can never know about us. It's too dangerous for you if they knew."

It's not me I'm worried about, it's you! I want to scream at him, but it would have been no use. He's so oblivious to the

imminent danger that surrounds him every second of every day.

“And rule number two, never ask me questions you don’t want the answers too.” His words dissolve into silence, and just as quickly as his mouth opens, he smacks his lips closed on words unspoken.

I reply with a silent nod.

I don’t want to admit it, but I knew rule number two has everything to do with what happened to Issac. And as suddenly as I allow my mind to wander to those dark places, I force myself to push it aside just as quickly.

Cole’s lips quivers as he works up the courage to speak. His eyes like liquid fire in the ever-changing light of the campfire.

“Does that upset you?” He asks resolutely.

I hold my breath before expelling a heavy sigh. “I understand why you can’t tell *them*.” But saying the words aloud doesn’t ease the situation or make it any more bearable.

I can tell he can sense the frustration in my tone because he pulls me into his chest and holds me close. I lean into his muscly embrace and allow his broad arms to wrap around me warmly and hold me tight. He doesn’t meet my gaze and instead stares out into the electric sunset.

“I don’t want something to happen to you because of me.” I attempt to make my words sound believable but they’re weak, frightened and unsure.

He smiles sadly into the distance and eventually drops his eyes to meet mine. When he does, I realise he needs a second to process my words before he answers.

“Can you please just accept that this is all I can give you right now?” When I look into his eyes, his features are hard, locked in place. Like he’s made entirely out of stone and seeing him like this makes me realise just how serious he is. We’d quickly crossed over into unknown territory and he isn’t leaving a stone unturned.

I reach out and lace my fingers through his hand, his skin warm against my palm. “If that’s the small price I have to pay to be with you, I’m okay with that.” I tell him with a shaky voice. He doesn’t move or even blink in response when I speak, and I wonder if he’s heard anything I’ve said.

I can tell there is something he isn’t telling me just from the way his mouth quickly opens and closes. He doesn’t need to speak for me to understand what he’s trying to tell me. I can tell from the apathetic smile that animates his face that he really appreciates my words.

“Thank you.” His voice is void of all emotion. But deep down, I can see how much he cares.

It’s in those two simple words — *thank you* — that I realise just how much my words mean to him. And suddenly, the idea that he’d closed out all hope for love for the sake of his family’s twisted happiness becomes very real. Because it isn’t just a compromise on our relationship we were vowing. It’s a compromise on our lives, which is a very daunting realisation.

“Well, that’s enough about my fucked-up life.” He chuckles deeply. And just like that, the conversation is over.

But it isn’t just his fucked-up life anymore — it’s ours.

And that scares me.

THIRSTY

Golden sparks gleam across the lake as the sun fades lower in the sky.

I can't believe I've never been here at sunset. The meadow shimmers with shades of sunburnt orange, lavender, cotton candy and hints of crimson. The electric hues set fire to the entire meadow, leaving the lake drenched in colour. The deeper the sun sinks beneath the horizon, the darker the shadows become within the twisted pines.

Cole charges towards the lake's edge without a care in the world, coming to a halt on the grassy embankment. Seeing him like this feels like there are no longer any limits. He's completely untroubled by all the crazy crap that's happened with him and his dad. I know if I was in his shoes, I don't think I'd have the same willingness to act like nothing had ever happened.

The golden afternoon light wraps around his body, leaving him as nothing more than a blurry silhouette against the electric horizon. His features are swallowed up by dark shadows.

Cole slips off his sneakers and socks and absently throws them aside. He pulls at his top to expose his smooth tan skin; his shoulder blades extend as he pulls his shirt over his head and leaves it to disappear within the grass.

He looks back at me with a playful grin and waves for me to join him.

I nod my head and slowly start walking towards him. The sweet aroma of wildflowers waft around me as I make my way across the meadow. The harsh glow from the water's surface reflects directly into my eyes, making it almost impossible to see.

Cole stands there shirtless with the sun warm against his skin. The luminous shimmer of light leaves his already tanned

body an even deeper, even more delectable shade of melted caramel. And I want more than anything to run my hands over his body.

With each step closer to Cole, the less blurry his features became. And suddenly, the undeniable definition in his shoulders stand out from his blurry silhouette and the way the muscles in his biceps roll beneath his skin like mountains become more defined. He arches his back, and his shoulder blades push together. His body looks like it could have been etched from marble, like one of those ancient Greek sculptures.

And suddenly, I can't seem to take my eyes off him —

And that's when I notice the marks on his back, and my whole body stops dead in its tracks. For a second, I can't move or even breathe as I take in the purple and blue smears that mark his skin.

I take a step closer and then another.

Deeper, darker, even more painful marks appear on his back. A splash of dark red runs all the way from his shoulder blade and down the curve of his spine. Uneven darker wounds blotch chaotically across his back, relentless marks from being kicked or punched repeatedly.

My lungs tighten, and my pulse thuds loudly in my head.

The outrage that pulses through my body is purely visceral and feral. I want to scream as anger, frustration and annoyance bubble over inside me. But there is nothing I can do out here in the middle of the wilderness that will make anything better. I should have done something when I had the chance. I should have called the police before letting something worse happen to him. It's too late now, I realise.

What had Cole done to deserve this wicked excuse for a life?

Cole looks back over his shoulder at me and smiles. "Are you coming or not, Hargroves?"

"I'm coming," I call back just as he hooks his fingers into the band of his shorts and slips them off without a second

thought.

I gulp. And in the space of half a second, my mind is completely wiped blank. Cole is standing barely five feet away in nothing more than a pair of ultra-tight black underwear that hugs every bump and leaves very little to the imagination. I'm left standing there with my mouth wide open like a goldfish gulping bubbles wondering whether I should look away or —

I want nothing more than to wrap my arms around his shoulders and kiss him until we are out of air and breathless. But how can I do that when I can't get the image of his dad beating him within an inch of his life out of my head.

Cole turns, the sunlight catching in his eyes. The look he gives me over his shoulder is mischievous, and his piercing gaze is enough to pull me away from my inner babble and back to reality.

Cole prepares to dive. He braces his feet firmly beneath him and arches his hands above his head. He leaps from the grassy embankment into the shimmering water, and his body is instantly submerged in the glowing depths of the lake.

Water ripples around his head and shoulders as he resurfaces. He quickly flicks his head side to side to keep his hair from his eyes, leaving it in a chaotic twist of blond waves on top of his head.

He meets my gaze with a cheeky boyish grin, and as he wades in the shallows waiting for me to join him. I can't think of anything worse than taking my clothes off with him staring at me. It makes me nervous and uncomfortable. Not because I don't want him to see my body or because I'm ashamed of my appearance. But compared to Cole, I didn't live up to the same standard of beauty he did. Where his body had muscles, mine have bones, and it certainly doesn't scream sexy.

His eyes don't stray from me as I kick my shoes off and stuff my socks inside them.

"Could you please turn around?" I call out hesitantly, hoping he doesn't take it the wrong way.

He furrows his eyebrows together and gives me a curious look that he quickly brushes aside. He swishes his hands through the water and turns around without delay.

“Thank you.” I gulp down a deep breath and just as quickly blow it out.

I peel off my shirt, exposing my deep caramel skin, lean torso and barely defined muscles. I toss my shirt aside and hike down my shorts until I’m left standing there in my underwear.

Cole tilts his head slightly and peeks at me from the corner of his eye.

“Hey!” I scald, and he quickly snaps his head back around to stare into the distance. I notice the wicked smile that perks up his cheeks before he can turn away.

I dive into the lake, wanting more than anything to have my body covered again. My hands break through the water’s surface, and the whoosh of bubbles ripple around me as I propel myself into the lake’s velvet depths. I pull myself even deeper until the water grows cloudy and cool against my skin. I continuously wave my hands back and forth to keep myself suspended above the surface.

I can’t hold back my smile as I stare up at the sky, bubbles escape my lips and burst as they make their ascent to the surface. I watch the water sparkle like a million city lights, and suddenly everything that has happened today makes sense.

Cole told me everything. He told me about Issac. He told me he likes me. And now it’s like there’s never been any tension between us. Like he wanted this all along and just didn’t know how to make us make sense.

It felt like we’d been submerged beneath ice water, unable to breathe or shine. And then, finally, the frozen tide melted away. And the wall between us disappeared like it was never really there.

My head grows light and airy, and my lungs begin to burn. I spin around and quickly start to pull myself to the

surface. As soon as the water breaks over my head, I gulp desperately for air.

Cole races to my side, eyes wide with panic, water splashing wildly around him. He instantly wraps his arms around my waist and holds me close. "I didn't think you were ever coming back up." His tone is shaky as he brushes my hair from my face.

"Sorry," I breathe deeply, running my hand along with the faint red marks on his shoulder without him realising as I gather my thoughts. "My mind was elsewhere," I confess absently, wondering how long I was down there. I'd been so lost in thought, staring mindlessly back up at the sparkling lights, I hadn't even considered what Cole would think.

He gives me a look that is in between shock and relief. "You should have given me some warning." His tone is dark, deep and grave as the words fall from his lips like poison. The good kind of poison. The addictive kind that you could never have enough to satisfy you.

"I didn't mean to scare you," I say, unsure of what else to say.

"It's okay," he shakes his head as if his over-exaggeration had been just that, an exaggeration. But the anguish behind his eyes tells me it hadn't been nothing. He'd genuinely been scared.

He holds me with unshakeable desperation as water splashes around us with our every moment. His hands are firmly fixed on my waist; his eyes locked on mine as if I'd turn to ash if he looked away.

He notices my reaction and smiles widely, his eyes lighting up instantly.

"I love the effect I have on you," he drags his fingers through my hair and forces me to look into his eyes. "Like you can't control yourself when you're around me." His tone is sharp, edgy, and dangerous.

With his hands delved deep into my hair and the sun warm on our faces, Cole kisses me deeply. Fireworks explode

inside me, tiny explosions of light and sound that bind us together as his lips meld against mine. There is something different about the way he kisses me this time. It's softer, more familiar. Like it had been a rhythm, we'd danced a thousand times.

When he pulls away, I'm left breathless with our legs tangled together, whacking against each other as we kick to stay above water.

"They don't tell you how hard it is to make out in the water without drowning," he intones playfully as we work to quickly untangle our legs.

"Agreed." I suck in a sharp breath.

I swipe my hand across the lake's surface, sending a wall of water blasting into Cole's face. He braces himself with his hands over his face.

"You are so dead." He yells, water cascading down his bare shoulders.

He drags his hand through the water to retaliate, but I'm already too far away, so he stops mid-swipe. My body glides effortlessly through the water like silk against smooth skin.

It's going to be one steamy summer...

TWO TRUTHS AND A LIE

The water melts from our skin like liquid fire as our bodies intertwine. Our bare chests are exposed and pressed together, heaving with every jagged breath as our kisses deepen.

“You’re really beautiful.” He whispers, his lips moving softly against my own.

“You’re just saying that.” I tease, my teeth catching on his upper lip.

“No, I mean it, Lyndon. Your body is...” he stops to press his lips to mine and growls resolutely. The noise sends shivers ricocheting through my body. “You never need to hide it from me. Okay?”

I roll my head back against the screwed-up blankets and gasp as his hand glides along the side of my body until he finds my thigh. His hand grasps it firmly as he pushes his body closer to mine. I don’t stop him.

I take a deep breath, the suffocating warmth inside the tent making it hard to breathe.

His skin’s smooth beneath my fingertips as I reach down between us, my hand grazing every square inch of his chest and the hard contours of his abs as I work my way lower down his body. My fingertips lightly touch the elastic band of his underwear, and my heart starts to race as I contemplate reaching further than I’ve ever imagined.

Before I can think to move another inch, Cole reaches between us and snatches my hand away, suspending it helplessly above my head.

“We don’t have to rush anything.” His voice takes on a serious note that is so deep and commanding that it completely paralyses me. “I want to do this right with you.”

I can’t help but nod my head, hanging onto his every word.

“We should probably get dressed so we don’t tempt fate any more than we already have.” He smiles wickedly, wrinkles swallowing up his eyes, and I can tell he wants nothing more than to keep kissing me.

“Okay,” I reply anyway.

He releases my arms from above my head, and before he has a chance to object, I wrap my hands around his head and pull his face to mine. His lips are warm and determined as they meld against mine. Our teeth smack together, and I can tell Cole’s smiling through the kiss; it’s over before it even begins.

We both pull away with enormous smiles on our faces.

“I couldn’t help myself.” I tilt my head to the side and shrug my shoulders.

“Totally understandable. I’m irresistible.” He winks.

“More like irritable.” I joke, jabbing him in the ribs with my elbow.

He shakes his head and chuckles under his breath in the typical Cole Chamberlin way.

I turn away from Cole to search through my backpack and quickly retrieve a crinkled white shirt and my favourite pair of black shorts, which hug my body in all the right places.

I need every advantage I can get to stand a chance next to Cole. He doesn’t exactly make it easy for anyone else when he looks so damn gorgeous all the time.

I have no way of knowing how my face or hair look, so without overthinking it, I brush my hair back with my fingers, hoping my pants pull through and the focus is on them and away from my face.

I jump to my feet and slide on my faithful converse before making my way from the tent. Everything is drenched in ebony shadows as I step out into the meadow and leave the tent flaps to fall closed behind me.

All that’s left of the fire are glowing red ambers. I kneel by the burning coals and disrupt them with a broken stick.

Tiny flames erupt as I load more kindling on top of the coals, and slowly the fire begins to crackle back to life.

A circle of warm orange light works to illuminate the meadow as the fire takes form. The endless sounds of the crackling fireworks fill the empty darkness, its stark warmth cloying eagerly to my skin.

Cole steps out of the tent and stretches loudly. An aggressive groan escapes his lips as he arches his shoulders back and cracks his neck. He tussles his fingers roughly through his hair and flicks it to the side, leaving the strands of wayward curls sticking from the side of his head.

He slips his phone from his pocket and studies the screen for several seconds, his face contorting in annoyance. He grips the phone so tight his knuckles turn white as he starts furiously typing.

His thumb slams down on the screen, and the message disappears.

I close the space between us as he shoves the phone away. I place my hands firmly on his chest, and when I look up to meet his gaze, an unspoken pain and anger swirls behind his eyes.

“Are you okay?” I ask softly.

“Yep,” he replies desolately, his eyes not once meeting mine.

“You know you can tell me anything.” I scrunch his shirt up beneath my hands and urge him to tell me, a silent pleading within my gaze. I watch his empty expression dance in the shifting light of the fire, his eyes nothing more than two beady black orbs. Cold. Empty. I try to read his expression, but he doesn’t give anything away.

He had to know he can trust me that he doesn’t have to hide anything from me anymore.

“It’s just my dad being a total jerk.” He grabs my wrists and unfurls the shirt from my grip, forcing my hands back by my side.

“You two really don’t get along.” I frown empathetically, playing anxiously with my hands.

“Not really,” he sighs, annoyance creeping into his tone.

“Does he know that you’re out here with me?” I swallow a heavy lump in my throat, my tone seething with urgency.

He nods silently.

“I’m taking it he isn’t very pleased about that?” I press my lips together and wait patiently for a reply that never comes.

Cole only shakes his head and offers a meek half-smile.

He drops to the ground and kicks his feet out beneath him. Leaning forward, he rests his arms on his knees and stares absently into the fire to distract himself from whatever’s troubling him.

I join him, curling my legs beneath me and resting all my weight on my left hand. I don’t say anything as I gaze into the flames, scared Cole will detonate.

I can’t help but think I’ve done something wrong. My heart hammers with uncertainty as I stare past the fire into the bleak night sky. And suddenly, I feel guilty. Worse, I feel responsible for whatever Cole is going through. Maybe it’s never supposed to work out between us. Maybe it’s all just wishful thinking to believe we could ever be together.

I swallow back the idea that we had a time limit on our relationship, and there’s already a clock counting down the seconds.

Tick, tock, tick, tock...

It doesn’t make sense how something temporary could feel so infinite.

The silence between us stretches so thin it’s beginning to smother me, and I can’t take it anymore. The words have already formed, and my lips are moving before I have a chance to stop myself.

“Tell me about the bruises on your back,” I demand. “Are they because you chose to come on this trip with me?”

Cole’s jaw clenches together, and the vein in his forehead pulses. I know it’s probably the last conversation he wants to have, but I can’t pretend like I hadn’t noticed.

And just like I knew it would, the words cut through Cole like a knife, sharp and lethal. Cole whips his head around to face me. His eyes lock on mine with a fiery intensity I can’t shake. And that’s when I notice the fear in his eyes. It consumes him, controls him. Like a deer caught in headlights, he just sits there shocked, blinking.

And still, he doesn’t say anything.

“You said you’d tell me if anything happened to you.” I blink, shocked. “And I believed you.”

“I didn’t want you to worry.” He closes his eyes and drops his head between his knees. “It happens so often lately that I’m getting beaten up more than I’m not. It’s hard to keep track.” He tilts his head back, and I look up at him sadly.

“Is it because of me?” The words leave my mouth before I have time to process them, but it’s too late.

He doesn’t say anything at all — he barely reacts.

“Cole,” I plead desperately.

“I hate how much you worry about me,” he snaps.

“You didn’t answer my question,” I tell him bluntly. “I want you to tell me the truth.” I’m quickly growing tired of all his games, pretending everything is okay when it isn’t. It’s becoming very exhausting.

His frown deepens along with the lines on his forehead. “Okay. Yeah,” he throws his hands above his head in defeat, “lately, he’s punished me for spending time with you. It’s one reason he can’t know about us.” He admits.

“And you just take it?” I ask blatantly.

“Yep,” he nods, shaking his messy hair over his face so I can’t see the tears in his eyes.

“And you don’t want to fight back; you don’t want to tell the police?” I brush his hair aside and watch the thin stream of silver slide down his cheek and off the chiselled edge of his jaw.

I turn my whole body to face him, only for him to turn away from me again.

I reach out and grab hold of his jaw. He tries to pull away from my grasp, but I hold it there with unwavering strength. I wrench his face towards me so that he looks me directly in the eyes. The movements are harsh and forceful, but it’s all I can think to do to get his attention.

He folds his arms protectively over his chest, locking them in place. His biceps tense as he meets my gaze. I can see in his eyes that he’s displeased.

He scrunches his eyebrows together and groans. “Every time he lays a hand on me, I want to run to the police and tell them all the horrible, wicked, evil shit he does to me.”

He jerks his head to the side and looks away into the darkness. My hand instantly falls from his chin and into my lap.

“Then why don’t you!” I yell, spittle flying from between my teeth. I’d never been one to get angry and regret my decision instantly. Still, it’s already too late because the words have left my lips.

“He’s my dad, Lyndon!” He snaps. His voice breaks through the silence, overflowing with so much heartache and desperation that it is unbearable. And still, he doesn’t meet my gaze when he speaks. “He wasn’t always a bad man.” He jumps to his feet. His movements are sure and swift as he stomps no more than five feet away before turning back to face me. His eyes are dark and dangerous, and his voice is like a whip as he speaks, just as harsh as it is quick. “He used to be the kindest, most caring person in the world. And over the years, we suddenly grew apart. And it wasn’t until I started dating guys that he got really bad. And then, like that,” he snaps his fingers together and just as quickly throws his arms wide open. “He became angry and mean. He started yelling

more and more until that didn't cut it anymore. And that's when he turned to violence." His voice doesn't waver as he speaks. His tone is sharp, cold, and final. And then he closes his eyes and releases a shaky breath. It's only then that I notice tears sparkling down his face. "I wake up every day expecting him to change and simply go back to being the loving, caring dad he'd always been."

"He hates you because you're gay?" I gulp, feeling stupid that it had taken me this long to piece together all the signs.

He nods and slaps his hands down on his knees. "It was already hard enough coming to terms with the fact that I was gay, and now I was being punished for something I couldn't change. I could handle what he put me through day after day. It had always been my father's intention to destroy me. And the only way he knew how to tear me down was to eliminate the person who mattered most to me. *Issac*." He blinks away tears. He swallows a thick lump in his throat, making it hard to speak. When he works up the courage, his words are filled with an emptiness I could never attempt to understand. "One second is all it takes. It was already too late to save Issac when I realised what had happened. My father had pushed and pushed until eventually, Issac had reached his breaking point —"

What happened to Issac?

My heart thumps wildly.

After all the terrible things Al had done to Cole, I know what he's capable of, and that scares me. Could it be possible that Al had more to do with Issac's death than Cole is leading me to believe? Had he pushed so badly —

Had Issac killed himself to escape?

I didn't know what to say. Cole's words unexpectedly force me into silence. So instead of saying anything at all, I decide to sit there silently and listen.

"After what happened to Issac, we decided to move. I don't think my dad could bear to be surrounded by his guilty conscience. It was never a choice to move here, it was an

excuse to start new in a town where no one knew us and no one cared who we were. A place no one would ask questions.”

Until me.

He takes a deep breath and shoves his hands in his pockets before looking up at the sky. “It was supposed to be like nothing had ever fucking happened. Like Issac hadn’t died. Like, somehow, everything would be different here. And maybe, just maybe, I wouldn’t be gay anymore.” He stops to take a breath and looks at me. “And honestly, the worst part about all of this bullshit is that I’m so unbelievably damaged that I want to believe that it can be different. Maybe my mum won’t be so blindsided by her love for my father and that everything will change.”

“And do you believe anything will change?” I knew the truth. I knew it was too late for anything to change.

He expels a heavy breath and laughs hoarsely. “Wanting and believing are two different things.”

When his eyes meet mine, there is an unexpected directness behind them that scares me. And suddenly, his chiselled jaw seems less defined, and his cheekbones seem sunken and hollow in the murky shadows. His chagrined stare turns into more of a twisted smile, and I can’t tell whether he’s happy or sad or a combination of all the above.

“I’m done. I don’t want to answer any more questions.”

I gulp. Not even my booty shorts had been able to save me from this blazing truck fire.

HOME RUN

I've always been a light sleeper. And being out in the wildernesses is no exception. Only it's worse because I slept with one eye open in fear of being mauled by wolves.

Though it hadn't been all bad because Cole's currently curled up beside me. I don't have to overthink whether I should kiss him or hug him or whether he wants me to push back into him. I knew it would be okay because we're —

Boyfriends? It hadn't totally sunk in that Cole, and I were together. And the feeling is everything I'd expected it to be. Warm, fuzzy. But it isn't all sunshine and daisies, we still have so much to figure out, and we both knew this ride would never be easy; he'd laid it out clearly last night that we had rules to follow to be together.

I always follow the rules, but this time, it feels different because falling for someone isn't supposed to have rules.

“Good morning, *babe*,” Cole's voice breaks me away from my inner babble. He languidly pulls me closer, his voice groggy with sleep as he throws his arm over my waist and tugs me into the grove of his body.

Babe? I like how it sounds breaking free from the constraints of his full lips—sweet, seductive, *mine*.

I relax into his embrace, pushing back into his chest, his skin warm against mine.

“Good morning,” I reply with a smile so wide it makes my cheeks ache. I know the moment isn't much, but it's nice, normal and mine.

Cole's arm tightens around my side as he pulls himself up to kiss the hollow of my neck. The second his lips press my skin; goosebumps erupt over my body. A muted moan escapes his lips when he realises what he'd done.

“I love how sensitive you are to my touch,” he whispers in my ear, though it isn’t the only thing I’m sensitive to. His voice is deep, intense. And every syllable unintentionally lures me in deeper.

“You don’t give me much of a choice.” I tilt my head back towards the sound of his voice and let my head fall back into his arms.

“I could get used to this,” he leans down, and his lips meld against mine, the stubble from his chin gently scrapping my lips as he pulls away.

I want desperately to believe it could be this easy. But after everything that we’ve been through and everything we talked about last night, I know it will never be easy.

He has more demons in his cupboard than socks, and on top of that, his dad will undoubtedly make things harder between us. And then came Cole’s crippling inability to open up to me.

I roll over to face him, desperate to glimpse into his irresistible green eyes.

The sun shimmers faintly through the tent, casting a warm glow over Cole’s skin. I can make out the smile that tugs at the corners of his mouth and the intricate network of freckles that kiss the bridge of his nose. His brown hair sweeps low over his forehead framing his square face and instantly drawing me into his captivating gaze. In the dim light, his eyes glimmer a startling silver so soft and beautiful I can’t help but smile.

“Me too,” I whisper so quietly that the words are almost lost to my ears.

I bury my head into his chest and listen to the rise and fall of his heart. He draws a line along my shoulder with his index finger, soft, slow motions that cause me to shiver.

“Lyndon,” Cole murmurs, and the playful edge in his voice is gone, replaced by something more desolate.

“Mmhmm,” I mumble into his chest, not bothering to lift my head as I speak, enjoying the closeness too much to let go.

His voice is shaky as he starts to speak. “I j-just want to say that I’m s-sorry for how I acted last night. I was unbelievably rude to you.” He says with a sigh.

“It’s okay,” I assure him, lifting my head to look into his eyes.

He casts his eyes downward. And as he runs his hand down my side, his fingers glide over every bump and divot, I can’t help but notice he’s about to cry. “It’s really not,” he breathes out deeply, frustration evident in his tone.

His eyebrows bunch together, and I can see the devastating look of concentration on his face as he searches helplessly for the right words to say.

I watch him swallow back the lump in the back of his throat before he continues. “I’m not used to people caring so much about me.” He says bluntly.

My heart breaks a little, and I don’t know how to put into words how that makes me feel. “Well, you better get used to it because I’m not going anywhere,” I tell Cole abruptly. Attitude laces my words to help mask my own insecurities.

Cole chuckles. And the sound is so unexpected that it makes me jump slightly.

When I meet his gaze, his smile is so wide that wrinkles swallow up his eyes.

“Why are you smiling like crazy?” I screw up my face suspiciously.

“I just know today’s going to be a good day.” He smirks sweetly.

“How could you possibly know that?”

“Because I’m here with you,” he says. “And you always know how to make me feel better.”

“But I didn’t do anything...” I eye him sceptically.

“That’s exactly my point,” he tilts his head to the side and smiles his charming lopsided grin. “You don’t need to do

anything to make me feel better. You just do. I don't think you realise just how important you are to me."

I had no idea he felt that way, and the sudden display of emotion leaves me scrambling for words. His intense green stare fixes on me, rendering me completely powerless. He caresses my cheek in his hand, running his thumb gently along the edge of my jaw, his eyes never leaving mine.

I weave my fingers through his tangle of brown curls and nuzzle my cheek into his grasp, closing my eyes on the warm feeling deep inside me.

And then Cole's phone rings, causing us both to jump. He snatches his hand from my face and darts towards the sound of his phone, quick as lightning. He spends several seconds digging around beside the mattress before he plucks his phone from beneath the covers. He quickly inspects the screen before letting out an exasperated groan.

"It's my dad," he gulps.

I make an O with my mouth and grimace.

The whole atmosphere in our tiny little tent comes crumbling down around us as Cole presses the phone to his ear, and his dad's strong voice booms over the speaker. I don't need to know what he was saying to understand that he's angry.

"Hey, dad — okay, y-yeah — I'll be home soon, okay..." Cole's eyes are wide with panic as he hangs up. He throws his phone aside aggressively, leaving it to catapult off the side of the tent. He flops backwards onto the blow-up mattress, sending me hurtling with him. "We've got to go. He's completely lost his shit." He runs his hands over his face and expels a long sigh before he rolls over to face me. "Sorry," he whispers under his breath.

"Well, let's pack up and get you home."

"I hate that I've ruined our trip." He presses his lips into a thin line and frowns.

I lean into him and shake my head. "I'm sure you'll find a way to make it up to me." I wink, trying my best to keep the

mood light because I can only imagine what Cole must be feeling right now. And I don't want to be the one to make it worse.

Intrigued, he raises his eyebrows.

“How about lunch with Jess and me this week? I know she's dying to meet you.” I say.

“She already knows about me?” He gives me a look across between surprised and amused.

“I've kind of been obsessed with you since New Year's,” I grit my teeth together and smile guiltily.

“I don't know whether that's cute or creepy.” He eyes me suspiciously, but I can tell he's joking by the impossibly wide smile that lights up his face.

“Cute, I promise,” I say. I hope I'm doing an okay job convincing Cole that I'm not a modern-day stalker and instead a lovestruck teenager.

“Then it's a date,” he says just as he pulls me into a massive bear hug. He yanks me onto his lap with a gentle force, and my legs instinctively fall on either side of him.

I can't stop myself from giggling as he wraps his arms around me and shakes me wildly. He buries his head into my neck and playfully kisses every inch of my skin. And then he pulls away to kiss my cheeks which are now a rosy pink, and then finally, my lips.

My smile is still so wide I can barely pull my lips together to kiss him back, completely defenceless against his touch.

I can't remember the last time I was this happy.

TOTALLY NORMAL

Sunlight glistens through the windows of the baby blue Chevy, casting a deep shadow along Cole's already defined jaw, giving it the illusion that it's even more chiselled than it is.

Cole has an effortless way of always looking handsome, from the shake-and-go brown waves to his seamless all-black attire that hugs his body like a second skin. His style is sleek and sexy and complimented his hard stone exterior. But deep down, he's sweet and sensitive and funny. And they were the parts of him I couldn't wait to unravel more.

Even as we pack the campsite into our backpacks and trek back through the forest, he holds himself with unshakable ease. I hate him for making everything he does look so unbelievably, ridiculously sexy.

I keep quiet as Cole punches the steering wheel with his palm, spins it all the way around, and launches off down the road at a startling speed towards home. My eyes are fixated on the gentle movements his hands make as he veers around corners and swiftly shifts gears.

I stare at him from the corner of my eye. The sun beams through the windows and settle against his tan skin, leaving him dripping in sunlight. My cheeks flush with an unexpected warmth as I watch him drive. Maybe it's because of the day's relentless heat, or perhaps his intoxicating good looks that make my head spin. Either way, I can't get enough of him.

How had he gone from a stranger to someone I can't stop thinking about...

"Hey, Cole?" I reach out hesitantly and rest my hand on his thigh. He shifts his leg towards me, and my hand instinctively squeezes his thigh. He doesn't turn to look at me, but I can see the hint of a smile break through his hard exterior.

"Mmhmm," he mutters distractedly.

I swallow the growing lump in my throat and sigh. My palms grow sweaty with nerves, and I pull my hand from Cole's thigh and bury them in my lap. "I'm moving in nine days, and that is a very real reality of mine." I pause and take a deep breath before I continue. "I need to know we will find a way to make us work while I'm gone."

"We'll make it work," he says. And the conviction in his voice tells me that he means every word.

"Okay," because what else was I supposed to say? I need more, then *we'll make it work*; I need to know that no matter what, we'll be there waiting for each other if the other needed them. "What about you?"

"What about me?" He chuckles.

I have to keep myself from rolling my eyes into the back of my head. After everything he's told me I have a right to be concerned. It's a wonder he hadn't resorted to rocking back and forth in a corner with endless tears streaming down his face. "I mean, will you be okay. *Here*. By yourself."

He gives me a look that tells me I've crossed a line. I don't care.

He keeps his eyes on the road and adjusts his grip on the steering wheel. I can tell he's nervous from the way his eyes dart across the horizon.

"Cole," I turn to look at him.

A heavy silence sucks all the air out of the car, and it only worsens when he doesn't say anything. He won't look me in the eyes, which hurts more than his silence.

Lyndon, you're an absolute idiot! So unbelievably stupid; why did you have to say anything at all?

"Cole, you're scaring me." My words are rushed, panicked even. "Say something. Anything. *Please*."

"Yes." A lie.

I tilt my head to look at him.

“Okay.” He slams his hands down on the steering wheel, and the car jerks sideways suddenly. He quickly steers the vehicle back onto the road before he speaks. “I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t a little scared.” I know how much he hates to admit that he’s not okay. And even more than that, I know how much he hates admitting it to me. “After what’s been happening at the house recently, the thought of being alone with either of them scares the shit out of me.”

I’m scared. I’m shaking. I’m scared and I’m shaking. I didn’t think he would actually admit this to me. *Ever!*

“Is that what you wanted to hear?”

No, yes. Maybe? Why is he putting this all back on me. I’m not stupid. I know it has everything to do with how much he loves his parents.

It isn’t hard to believe that he’s started to question his parent’s honour, his father’s abusive, and his mother’s a complacent fool who would do anything to keep their family’s twisted secret buried.

“Come with me then.” The words are out of my mouth before I have time to reconsider them.

Fuck!

Even though it’s too soon to be having this conversation; it’s too late to backtrack. My mouth has already done the damage. I just have to run interference and hope it doesn’t blow up in my face.

He looks at me blankly, and I can’t tell whether he’s happy or scared senseless. Maybe he’s a mangled cocktail of all the above.

Would it be too dramatic to feign some type of medical episode or would that have been entirely on-brand for me at this point. My emotional instability borders on a mental breakdown with each second Cole doesn’t say anything.

“Lyndon, you don’t get it!” He snaps, his eyes locking on me with a dangerous intensity that makes me gulp.

“Then make me understand!” I know it’s insensitive and borderline rude, but playing by the rules didn’t seem to get him to listen to me. He has let me in so little and I’ve been able to glimpse into his past for a second, but as much as he gives me, he keeps just as much hidden.

“They’re my family. They’re all I’ve ever known.” He stares vaguely into the distance. Something in his tone tells me that maybe he’s too scared to even consider the alternative. “I can’t just leave them.”

If he’s so scared of them, why would he stay. “You wouldn’t be leaving them. You’d be escaping them.”

He looks away.

“I know we haven’t known each other all that long, but the thought of leaving you behind is unbearable, especially knowing who I’m leaving you with and what they’re capable of.”

The words clung to the air between us, thick and heavy, and I know they sink into Cole’s head because I watch his annoyance dissolve and a sad, empty look take its place.

“I’ll be okay.”

Will you? I want to shake him until he realises what a catastrophic idiot he’s being. He stopped being their son the moment his father laid a hand on him and the moment his mother complacently accepted his fate. He’s their captive. Held against his will to keep their twisted secret under lock and key.

His eyes are laser-focused on the winding road ahead, and I can tell he’s extremely annoyed with me. His jaw is so tightly clenched that the vein in his temple pulses continuously. He grips the steering wheel with such force that I’m sure the metal will bend under pressure. He adjusts his steel grip and rolls his wrists forward and then back again.

At this point, I have no idea what he wants me to say to make everything go away. But I need to defuse the situation quickly before he physically explodes.

“Sorry,” I breathe out heavily. “I didn’t mean to make you upset. I should have kept quiet —”

“No,” he says. “Don’t apologise for standing up for me. It’s just not something I’m used to.”

“I just want the best for you. I know some part of you not too far down wants more from your life than they can give you.”

“You’re adorable.” He chuckles sweetly, and the tension that had once consumed me disappears.

I don’t push the conversation further and instead stare out the window as the world rushes by the car and allow the empty silence to comfort me. I can vaguely make out the outline of houses through the trees. I don’t want the trip to end. We only had a few turns left before our miserable reality comes crashing down around us.

Couldn’t we live in this moment a while longer.

Before I can brace myself, Cole jerks the car off the road. The loose gravel spins out beneath the tires as he drives his foot against the break. Without any warning, the car lurches to an immediate stop on the side of the road.

I turn to Cole manically, staring at him with wide, frightened eyes. “What the fuck was that!” My heart beats rapidly, and my hands shake just as violently.

The only sound to fill the silence is the deafening purr of the engine as we idle along the side of the road. Cole crooks a finger down the empty road towards our houses. “Once we round that corner, I can’t do what I want to do so badly.” The look he gives me is a combination of mischievousness and sadness. And until this moment, I’d never seen the two emotions go hand in hand.

“And what is it that you want to do so badly?” I play along even though I have a pretty good idea of what he’s about to say. Because I know as well as he does that as soon as we round that corner, we’ll just be Cole and Lyndon, *friends*.

I came into this knowing that I’d have to make sacrifices to survive. And the reality of that sucks. I didn’t just have to

contend with typical teenage drama. I had to navigate my way through an endless minefield of secrets and contention. Not to mention the constant tug-of-war between his family and me. You'd think knowing all of this would have made everything that much easier to accept when in reality, it only makes it that much harder.

"I won't be able to kiss you," he chews his lip as he speaks. And when he reaches out and winds his fingers through my hair, I'm prepared for his kiss. His movements are quick and agile, and when his lips finally meet mine, they fill me with a warmth so intense my whole body feels it. His lips are soft, his hands gentle as they grip the back of my head, his fingers loosely intertwined in my blond waves.

He pulls away and rests his forehead against mine. "I want you to know I hate this as much as you do." He speaks softly, his breath warm against my face.

I pull away breathlessly and adjust my seatbelt, where it digs into my shoulder. "It sucks, but we'll make it work." I can't hide the unconvincing tone that rattles my voice. What else was I supposed to say? Yeah, *actually, this isn't going to work, rain check.*

"Thank you." He whispers. He reaches out and squeezes my thigh, and without him even meaning to, he sends an electric chill racing through my veins.

He doesn't say anything as he veers back onto the road and starts driving again.

It isn't long before we pull into the driveway. The massive white house looms over the front yard, casting a dreary shadow over the perfectly manicured rose bushes lining the driveway.

I can see the wheels turning over in Cole's head as he stops the car. He doesn't need to speak for me to know that he's nervous. It's written all over his face. From his clenched jaw to the beads of sweat that trickled down his forehead. I can tell how much he wishes he was anywhere else.

He turns and looks at me, his luminous green eyes melting into me. His lip's part, and his tongue presses against the back of his teeth as he works up the courage to speak. I watch him blink, furrow his eyebrows together in concentration, and then quickly snap his lips together.

He presses his lips together until they are nothing more than two thin white lines. The words he'd gone to speak dissolving on his bloodless lips. Without wasting any time, he shoves the door wide open and rushes out of the car, leaving the door to slam closed behind him.

I jump, startled. The sudden rifts Cole drives between us sends my head spinning and my heart hurtling into overdrive. It always leaves me feeling exhausted. I take a second to close my eyes and catch my breath.

I'm not entirely sure I'm cut out for secret love affairs. After all, this is all becoming very overwhelming, very quickly. I just want to be loved. And I want it to be easy. But there isn't anything about this that's easy.

When I open my eyes, Cole's rounded the car and has my door wedged open against his hip. He holds my backpack and waits patiently for me to step out of the car. I unbuckle my seatbelt, jump to my feet instantly, and quickly grab the backpack from his hands and swing it over my shoulders.

"Thanks," I say.

"You're welcome," he says softly, the hint of a smile pulling at the corners of his mouth. "And thanks for everything you've done for me lately."

"Don't mention it," I tell him.

"I mean it, and the trip was pretty amazing." His voice is brimming with laughter, and suddenly the awkward tension that had filled the car fades.

I blush and quickly run my hands through my hair to cover my face. "Anyway, I better head home and let my mum know I'm alive."

"I'm sure she'll be happy to know the boogiemán didn't get you." He adds quickly, his voice verging on playfulness,

that slight child-like edge to his otherwise hard exterior that makes me feel warm and gooey inside.

“Don’t forget the bugs.” I wriggle my eyebrows teasingly, and I can’t help but think I look like a complete crazy person.

“Also, let me know when you want to catch up for lunch. I’m looking forward to meeting Jess,” he reaches out and squeezes my shoulder, his hands warm against my skin.

He doesn’t realise his effect on me until he pulls his hands away. He watches the goosebumps rise beneath my skin and leave my hair standing on end. A wicked smile perks up the side of his mouth, and I can tell he’s enjoying this way more than he should be.

“I’ll text you,” I reply breathlessly.

I hate goodbyes. Especially when they involve Cole. And judging by the look that wrinkles up his face, he hates them as much as me. He bows his head sombrely, and the combination of his oddly arched brows and glower that pulls strangely at his lips makes my heartache.

It would have been naive of me to think it’s purely because of our goodbye. I know the look has plenty to do with the fact that he is about to walk headfirst into the snakes’ den, and there is nothing I could have said to make that fear go away.

And without even saying goodbye, he turns and starts walking away.

“Cole,” I call after him, and he instantly stops walking. He doesn’t attempt to turn all the way around. He just looks back at me over his shoulder. A confused look scrunching up his face. And in a much lower tone, I continue, “I want you to know that I was serious about you coming with me to the academy.”

“Okay.” He says. By the awkward way he arches his eyebrows, I can tell he doesn’t quite know how to respond.

I suck in a sharp breath before I continue. My voice is only loud enough for him to hear me. “You don’t have to make up your mind now, tomorrow or even two years from now. But

just promise me you'll consider it. I think it's time you step out from your family's shadow and live your own life.”

He turns away *again* and walks towards the cold white house without another word. He doesn't attempt to kiss me or even hug me goodbye. He just turns and walks away. He brushes past the rose bushes on his way up the front porch steps and quickly disappears behind the heavy wooden doors to his house.

I don't know how much more of this I can take.

It's a weird feeling. Not exactly a bad one, but definitely weird. We were exclusive, obviously, or whatever you wanted to call it. Didn't that at least warrant me a kiss on the cheek or, at the very least, a hug goodbye?

As I turn to leave, the afternoon a wash of lilac and cotton candy around me, I have to wonder whether this is the baggage that Callum warned me about during truth and dare. It felt like secrets were buried within secrets, and finding out the truth would likely destroy me.

I'd been warned to stay away — and I'd been too stubborn to listen.

KISS AND TELL

Besides the awkward car trip, not even the crushing realisation that my relationship with Cole was likely doomed could change how excited I am to finally come out to my mum.

I'm exhausted by the time I get home and want nothing more than to drown my feelings in a warm shower and snacks. Though I know as soon as I walk inside, this wouldn't be my reality.

When I walk in, my mother is standing in the kitchen, pulling her hair into a bun. She's dressed in an adorable white knee-length sundress that's a stark contrast against her caramel skin. I kick my shoes off in the hallway. Instead of ignoring my mum and running upstairs to shower, I smile at her ruefully and start walking towards the kitchen.

"How was the camping trip?" She asks casually, taking in my uncharacteristically dishevelled hair and tired eyes.

I can't focus on her words as I work to control the constant jackhammering thump, thud, thump, thud of my heart as I make my way into the kitchen.

"Are you okay?" She asks, concerned. She tilts her head to the side and looks at me with a lopsided frown.

I nod distractedly, instantly feeling bad for lying. Instead of telling her everything is all right, I look into her sparkling blue eyes and offer her a shaky smile. And then, without hesitation, I tell her what I've wanted to say to her for years.

"Mum, I'm gay." I hadn't spoken the words out loud, and suddenly all those devastating fears I'd conjured up come crashing down around me. Hateful scenes play through my mind as I stare into my mum's eyes, preparing for the worst-case scenario.

Though she doesn't say anything — she doesn't need to — she closes the small space between us, holds me by the cheeks, and smiles into my eyes.

One of those sweet mum smiles that makes you feel like everything is going to be okay — even if the world's slipping out from beneath you.

And suddenly, all those horrible unnecessary fears of abandonment and embarrassment vanish. And that heavyweight that's held me back for years suddenly lifts from my shoulders. And everything scary I'd been worried about disappears.

I'd built this moment up to be something so unbelievably monumental and perpetually bad that it's held me back for years.

“Lyndon, I know.” She says, blinking back tears as she stares into my eyes.

“You knew?” I choke, confused.

“I'm your mum,” she whispers sweetly, “it's my job to know these things.” She laughs and drops her hand from my face, leaving her hands to fall to her hips. “Plus, I'm not going to pretend like I haven't seen your search history,” she adds, arching an eyebrow suspiciously. “Whose Tom Holland,” she eyes me questionably, “and why do you want to see his naked so badly?”

“MUM!” I cry, and I have to gulp back my embarrassment. I didn't realise my cheeks could blush so deeply. They took on a violent crimson colour that reflects vividly in my mother's glasses.

“Okay, okay. I'm sorry,” she gushes. Holding her hand over her mouth to keep from laughing. “I won't even tell you how many times you searched for Chris Hemsworth's abs.”

And then we laugh, actually laugh. The kind of laughter that has you doubled over with your arms braced at your sides wheezing breathlessly.

My cheeks burn as I catch my breath. I told my mum that I'm gay, and she found a way to humiliate me and make me

laugh at the same time. Nothing has changed between us.

“So, you’re not disappointed?” I ask nervously.

“Disappointed?” She chuckles, staring at me over the thick frames of her glasses. “You haven’t given me any reason to be disappointed in you. You’re seventeen for crying out loud, and you’ve already accomplished what most hope to archive in a lifetime—your heart’s pure and overflowing with so much love and passion. Not everyone is brave enough to show the world who they truly are, but you are, Lyndon, and you should be so proud of that. I know I am. I’m just happy you are comfortable enough to accept who you are too.” She brushes her cheeks with her hands to wipe away the rogue tears that slip down her face. “Does the timing of all of this have anything to do with the handsome boy that just moved in next door?” She pulls her lips together so that none of her signature red lipstick is visible.

“It has everything to do with the boy next door.” I nod guiltily.

“So, are you together or?” She grins wildly.

I nod sheepishly. “Yeah, he asked me out yesterday.” I know the smile that collides on my face stretches unapologetically from ear to ear.

“And when can I meet him?” She folds her arms over her chest and wraps her fingers impatiently against her arms.

“Soon, I promise,” I say vaguely.

Cole’s a flight risk, and I knew adding too much relationship pressure onto him too soon could give him all the motivation he needs to run away and never return. And I’m not about to leave anything to chance when there is about to be half a country between us.

“I love you, Lyndon.” My mum grabs me by the shoulders and pulls me gently into her arms. The smell of roses smacks into me as she squeezes me tightly. The familiar smell brings tears to my eyes. I bury my head into her shoulder and slowly rock side to side.

“Always,” I reply.

THE BOY IN BLACK

The last week has been one exhausting whirlwind. And there's always one thing after another, and suddenly everything came hurtling towards me at once. I just wish for once I can catch a break and have a week go by where my life isn't falling apart around me.

From packing problems to the colossal Cole Chamberlin catastrophe, my weeks shaped up to be a Grade A train wreck.

Cole and I left things on a pretty uncomfortable note, not intentionally, just with the whole friends by day, boyfriends from night dilemma. Though, it didn't remain uncomfortable for too long.

Cole had been the one to break the ice and had text me to see how I'm doing. I couldn't help but gush at the unexpected cuteness of it all because my very handsome boyfriend wasn't hiding behind a guise or pretending to be someone he wasn't any longer. He's being his sweet, thoughtful self. And I can't keep myself from smiling.

I'd never had anyone check in on me and make sure I'm okay, aside from my mum and Jess, but that's completely different.

COLE: I miss you.

In those three words, I can somehow forgive him for the fact that we're forced to live this double life.

I know he'd never be able to tell his parents for obvious, dangerous reasons.

But I know he's trying very hard to make up for that with everything else, including his sweet little texts.

I know that once I move, everything will be different. We won't have to hide a part of ourselves. We can walk down the street and be seen with each other. We can be so much more than we are now.

I know it had to be this way.

And while it's taken me a few days to wrap my head around the fact that Cole isn't doing this to hurt me, I'm constantly reminding myself that I can't be mad at Cole for trying to walk that fine line between happiness and mortality. After all, he's putting himself on the line to be with me. Because the cost of us being together is very dangerous, and it hadn't been something he decided lightly.

I know that now. And feel selfish for the way I'd acted. Still, just like Cole, this is all new territory for me, and I quickly realise that when my heart's involved, things get complicated quickly.

In light of everything that's happened with his dad recently, we decide to keep apart for the entire week to keep him from raising any suspicion. It's so difficult knowing he lives across the street, and I can see his silhouette walk past his window. And not being able to see him or touch him is a whole new hurt I'm quickly growing accustomed to.

ME: I miss you more!

COLE: Impossible x

And somehow, that simple text makes everything better.

Every message, and every call leaves me reeling harder, falling faster. And the longer we spend apart, the more I feel this insatiable burn deep in my chest that I can't control, that yearns desperately for his touch. I want his arms around me. I need the warmth of his body close to mine. I need to feel his lips against mine; more than anything, I want to squeeze him tight and never let go.

It's weird how a complete stranger can become the very person you can't get out of your head. The same person that if anything happened to them, your heart would break so powerfully that it would never mend.

I wonder if he feels the same way. And I know the answer, *yes*.

Cole hasn't been the only person I haven't seen in days. I realise regrettably that I've completely neglected Jess.

When I message her asking if she wants to catch up for lunch, she jumps at the invitation without hesitation.

JESS: Thought you'd never ask, babes. See you soon x

I meet Jess outside her work, the quaint little cafe with the black and white checked awning and exposed red brick. It isn't as busy today, with the weather so unbearably warm that it is honestly too uncomfortable to be out in public.

Jess wears her fiery red hair down over her shoulders with a lily-white sundress that pulls at her waistline and flows loosely to just above her knees. She pairs it with matching white sneakers.

She beams wildly when she sees me walking towards her and quickly rushes towards me and wraps her sun-kissed arms around my neck, shaking me vigorously from side to side. Her embrace is surprisingly strong, and if she hadn't pulled away when she did, I was seriously considering how I would pry her off me.

When she pulls away, she smacks a kiss on either cheek that I quickly brush off with my shoulder.

"Rude," she sneers.

"Your kisses could honestly contend with Niagara Falls; they are that damp."

She waves her hands beside her as she doubles over in laughter until the point she has to press her palm into her ribs.

"You're an asshole, but I love you." She speaks through breathless laughter.

"Ditto," I wink.

I catch a glimpse of myself in the cafe window. I'm wearing a concord beige look with my shirt tucked into my shorts and white converse. The whole ensemble really sets fire to my caramel skin. And as usual, my hair is its typical unruly self and no matter how much time or hairspray, the blond waves dance to their own beat.

Jess hooks her arm through mine and leads me to an all-paved courtyard nestled along the side of the cafe with a tall

oak falling over a collection of ornate iron tables set out with menus and salt and pepper shakers. The shade of the oak offers some relief from the vilifying heat that sweeps through Whispering Pines. As we take our seats beneath the shade of the oak, thin streams of light dapple through its tired limbs and fall across our skin. It's a beautiful day — aside from the hard to handle heat — the blue sky is alive with wispy white clouds, and the sun beams brightly over the little oasis.

Before we even pull our chairs up to the table, Jess is already firing away questions in typical Jess fashion. There is certainly no rest for the wicked or the polite and unjust. Honestly, I'm unlikely to catch a break with Jess around.

"How did the camping trip go? Did you get all the answers you were looking for?" She rests her elbows on the table and drops her head into her hands as she speaks.

I realise I haven't spoken to Jess about anything related to Cole since she gave me her almighty pep talk about me needing to set fire to the world.

She'd pretty much told me not to be a wimp and take control of my life, which is easier said than done.

But it's precisely what I did. I hate that Jess is always right, *grr*.

"It. Was. Amazing." I pronounce each word as I try to wrap my head around everything that happened while we were lost in the woods.

"You sure about that, babes?" Jess looks at me, tilting her head to the side suspiciously.

"Yeah, I'm sure." I plaster on my best fake smile. Hoping she wouldn't see through the charade, and before she can interrogate me further, I add, "We kissed. A lot." It's definitely a last-ditch effort to turn the attention away from my obvious uncertainty, and to something not even Jess could deny her attention.

"What!" She squeals loudly, and I have to scrunch my face up to handle the shrill sound that breaks through her lips. She drops her hands to the table, shock rendering her body

impassive. “So you guys are together?” She audibly gasps, like one of those fake movie gasps, but for real, as she gathers her thoughts into one cohesive sentence. “Like together, together?”

“It’s complicated.” I beam so widely that it’s actually painful. My cheeks stretch up to my ears, and the smile lines swallow my eyes, and all I can see is Jess’s ridiculous grin back at me. “Also, warning, he’s coming to lunch.”

“Oh my gosh!” She raps her hands excitedly on the table and squeals again. “I can’t wait to meet him.”

“You’ll love him,” I exclaim.

“Hmm, I’ll be the judge of that.” She huffs mockingly.

Jess reaches across the table and squeezes my hands in hers. They’re warm and clammy, but I don’t care because I can see in her eyes just how happy she is for me.

“So, have you told your Mumma bear that you’re gay, or are you still waiting for hell to freeze over?”

“Actually, I came out to her when I got back from the camping trip,” I tell her very matter of fact.

“And you didn’t tell me,” she tsks. “Congratulations, officially! How did she take it?”

At this moment, Jess is staring me right in the eyes. I wish I had something more dramatic to tell her; instead, I say, “she already knew.”

I deliberately neglect to mention the part about my vibrant search history, having given it away years ago.

Jess only laughs, her eyes glinting in the daylight. “Well, babes,” she tilts her head as she speaks. “It was pretty obvious.”

Sighing heavily, I say, “I realise that now.” I shrug in a ‘*guess there’s nothing you can do about it now,*’ sort of way, which only makes Jess laughter harder.

“Aww, it’s actually so cute you thought it was a secret.” She pouts, her cheeks perking up into a smile. “Anyway, I

can't believe you're leaving in nine freaking days! I'm literally going to die without you. You better promise to call me every day." She sticks out her pinkie finger and shakes it in front of me till I link my own finger through hers and shake, once and then twice.

"Promise," I roll my eyes dramatically.

"You probably won't have any time for me now that you have a boyfriend." She pulls her hands from mine, folds her arms over her chest, and sucks in her top lip to look like a spoilt kid who hasn't gotten their way.

I will miss these stupid, fun, ridiculous moments the most. There is only one Jess, who just happened to be my best friend.

"I'll always have time for you," I confess, pressing my palm over my heart. "We're ride or die, *babes*," I say in a cockney Jess tone that leaves us both hunched forward and giggling.

In a quick jarring movement, she leans across the table and plants an extremely loud and horribly wet kiss on my cheek.

"Good, just making sure," she winks exaggeratedly. "Any who, what does Cole think about you moving away now that you're together? I'm sure he's not over the moon about you moving halfway across the country."

The question catches me off guard, but I shouldn't have expected anything less from Jess. I don't exactly know how to answer that after I dropped the '*why don't you just move with me*' bombshell.

"I may have accidentally invited him to live with me," I wince, and I can tell by the look on Jess's face that she's gobsmacked.

"Hold up, Lyndon!" She snaps but doesn't say anything more. She just sits there frozen with her hand held up in front of her as if signalling me to stop. But I need to defend my case before she has a chance to say anything.

“You don’t have to lecture me. I know it’s way too soon. Like *way* too soon. But the idea of leaving him behind is unbearable.” I can’t meet Jess’s gaze, and I play with the folded edge of my menu just to keep my hands from shaking. When I eventually look up, Jess watches me intently, and her beady green flecked eyes latch onto my every move. “If something awful happens to him while I’m away, I’d never forgive myself.”

“So, the marks around his neck weren’t an accident?” She says, quickly joining the imaginary dots. I can see it in her eyes that everything suddenly clicks.

I shake my head.

“That explains the caginess and abrupt change.” Jess is just speaking out loud at this point. Without any hesitation, her mouth flaps wide open, and words are spilling out before she has time to even consider what she is about to say. “You need to call the police and end this nonsense once and for all.” Without even saying what we were talking about, we collectively know we’re talking about Cole’s dad.

“I promised him I wouldn’t tell anyone. It would destroy his family.”

“Promises mean nothing to a dead man,” Jess says, and it feels like she’s punched me in the chest. All the air in my lungs whooshes out of my body, and I’m left sitting there on the hard iron chair breathless and cold. Jess only goggles at me. “What do his parents have over him that he needs to be so scared about?”

I realise in that moment I haven’t told Jess about Issac and the horrible things Cole’s dad did to tear them apart. The very thing that’s damaged Cole so immeasurably that he’ll probably never completely heal. And keep him from opening up to me. I’ve told Jess too much already. She doesn’t need to know about Issac. I owe Cole that much.

“I don’t know the full extent of it, and honestly, I’m too afraid to ask. There was a boy before me, and Cole loved him more than anything in the world. He died. He blames himself, but I don’t think he had anything to do with it. And I think he

pushed me away so much because he was scared maybe I'll uncover the truth about what really happened, and that scares the shit out of him. I have no idea how long they dated or even how he died. I don't know whether he killed himself or —" I didn't want to believe Cole's father could have had anything to do with Issac's death, but all lines pointed to him. "Cole said his parents drove Issac to his breaking point, whatever that means."

"What the actual fuck!"

"Yep."

"And what about the marks on Cole's neck?"

"They were because of me."

"Lyndon..."

"His parents were supposed to be out of town the night I stayed at his house, and they arrived home early and found that I'd slept over, not that anything happened. I think just the idea that I slept in Cole's bed triggered something in his dad that made him snap, and he took it out on Cole."

"Oh, Lyndon. Don't you dare blame yourself for that horrible man's actions?" The look in her eyes is full of questioning and wonder, *'what have you gotten yourself into'* the look says. "You yell and scream when you're angry. You don't hurt someone."

I didn't realise I was crying until the tears are already falling down my cheeks, and when I start to speak, my voice is thick with emotion. "So, inviting Cole to live with me sounds crazy, ridiculous, and way too soon but I needed to know that he was safe from all this madness."

Jess is in complete shock. I've never seen her so quiet in my entire life. She sits there silently, unblinking.

"The sad thing is he doesn't even see that what's happening is bad. He's so used to it happening all the time that he's just become numb to it. Completely blinded by his love for his family." I swallow the growing lump in my throat and swipe away the tears with the back of my hand. "There are

times when sacrifices need to be made, and this is one of them. Because I'm scared what will happen if we don't at least try."

"Me too." She gulps.

"So, to answer your question, I honestly have no idea what he thinks about me moving away. I hope he considers coming with me," I reply sadly.

Jess laughs at the irony of where we ended up. "Well, I'm glad you took my advice." She shrugs indignantly. "I'm just doing my duty as your best friend. Now, slip some hot city guys my number if you want to return the favour." She's a master of defusing uncomfortable situations and completely flips the conversation around.

My face drops, and my jaw follows while Jess assaults me with her relentless verbal rampage that goes from topic to topic so quickly my head begins to spin. It's a full-time job being friends with Jess in the best possible way. You always have to be alert because she's always at one hundred and ten and has no chance of running on empty. "I'm serious," she says sardonically, stomping her feet beneath the table like a toddler.

"Speaking of moving, I'm actually so excited. I think I'm ready for the change. I'm not as nervous as I thought I would be now that there are only nine days till I leave."

"It's very close," she admits sadly.

"It feels like I've been working towards this moment for years, and the idea that it's just around the corner seems a little surreal."

"It'll all come to a crushing reality a few days before you leave."

"Probably," I say. "But there is still some part of me that is completely petrified of the unknown." It feels like once I start talking, I can't stop myself and all my worst fears and greatest goals flood past my vision.

"You need to do this, babes. As much as I hate to admit it for a selfish reason, mainly because you'll be leaving me, but you're way too big for this town. You've got your whole

career in the palm of your hands, and your future is yours to take.”

I reach out and grab my friend’s hands and squeeze them gently. She always seems to know the right words to say to talk me off the ledge. Like Jess, who stayed at one hundred and ten, my ability to overthink stayed there too.

Considering how worked up I’ve become just talking about moving, maybe I’m a little more nervous than I let her believe. I know she can see right through my bullshit.

“I don’t want to talk about you moving anymore. I’m depressed enough already. Tell me more about this lover boy of yours. Does he know that I know, about everything that happened?”

“No,” I explain. “And it’s going to stay that way.”

“I won’t say a word,” she says.

“Thanks,” I smile a thin-lipped smile.

I have no idea where to start telling Jess about the handsome stranger that slithered his way into my heart. There’s so much to Cole that he honestly needs to come with his own personalised instruction manual just to open him up.

I start telling her about everything that happened leading up to our camping trip. From the picnic at the overlook where Cole had confirmed my suspicions about his dad. To the trek through the forest where he had grudgingly admitted to liking me and had irrevocably changed my perception of him forever. Where his cold hard exterior had softened, becoming more malleable and sweeter.

I don’t go into detail about what his dad had done to him. I only mention the bruises she already knew about. I finish on our double life.

When I stop talking, Jess is left staring at me, blinking repeatedly.

“Holy crap, Lyndon!” She blinks. “Why didn’t you tell me any of this sooner? It’s been over a week!” Her tone is stern and annoyed.

I grit my teeth and shrug. “I didn’t want to burden you with any of my drama. It’s been a very confusing couple of weeks....”

“Number one,” Jess cuts me off before I can finish, “I live for drama. And number two, I’m literally your one-stop-shop for everything, drama, advice and everything in between.” She exclaims breathlessly.

“I know, I know,” I roll my head back and sigh. I didn’t want to offend her. “I needed some time to process everything before I told anyone. Everything seemed to change at once, and everything around me went from bad to worse very quickly.”

“Okay. I just hate that you went through all that alone.” She pushes out her bottom lip. “So, where does that leave you two now?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out.”

Apart from being forced to live this double life, everything else is perfect.

“And you’re okay with this double feature?”

“Strangely, yes.”

“So, tell me, what happens next?”

A car pulls up beside us. Cole’s baby blue Chevy groans to a halt out front of the cafe.

“You look nervous,” Jess whispers.

“I haven’t seen Cole since we came back from our camping trip, and I told him he could move with me.”

Jess looks between the baby blue Chevy that has just pulled to a stop and me. “But you’ve spoken?”

“Yeah, of course, we’ve spoken.”

“You know what I mean.”

“If you’re asking whether we’ve spoken about him moving with me, no. I’ve been too busy packing to pay it any mind.”

Jess laughs. “Lyndon, I’ve known you my whole life. Overthinking is a sport to you.”

I hate how well she knows me. “It’s one of my many faults.”

“Assets,” she corrects me. “Lyndon, you’ve always jumped into things so carefully. And now you’ve leapt headfirst into the unknown. I can’t even imagine how daunting this must be for you. But I don’t think you have anything to worry about, and the fact that he understands why you asked him is a bonus too.”

Jess is right, I’d been left on the real-life equivalent of un-read, and it sucks.

“What if everything between us has changed. What if I’ve ruined the only good thing to happen to me?”

“From what you’ve told me about Cole, I think it’s going to take a little more than teenage angst to scare him away.”

Cole strides towards us dressed in all-black with a noticeable wariness. Like he’s being preyed on, his eyes constantly darting from side to side, aware of its predator stalking close behind him. But Cole has nothing to worry about, and the idea that he could be this nervous about being seen in public with me is startling. But I don’t say anything as he walks up behind me and rests a hesitant hand on my shoulder. I can feel the strain in his touch, can feel him holding back.

And before Jess can ask me anymore hard to answer questions, I’m saved by the boy in black...

DOUBLE FEATURE

I reach out and rest my hand over Cole's where it grips my shoulder gently and give it a little squeeze.

"Hey, Cole." I gulp back my nerves and turn to look up at him with a jovial smile. He beams back at me, and I can almost hear the sound of his laughter around me. The charming tilt to his smile forces me to relax instantly.

I can't help but be happy around him, no matter the concerns that ransack my thoughts.

"Cole, this is Jess." I signal to the crazy redhead sitting across from me, who beams back wildly.

Cole returns the smile, his thousand-volt smile that's equal amounts cheeky as it is charming. "I've heard lots about you."

"All bad?" Jess questions wickedly.

"Without question," he winks.

She jumps to her feet without a second thought and walks around the table to wrap her arms around Cole's neck and gives him a warm hug.

Cole drops his hand reluctantly from my shoulder and hugs Jess back. The fact that he doesn't want to let go makes me smile.

Cole wraps his large arms around Jess and shakes her gently, lifting her feet from the pavement. She giggles sweetly.

His muscles swell beneath his shirt as he sets her back on her feet.

"You don't understand how happy I am to finally meet you. You're all Lyndon talks about."

Cole gives me a look as if to say, *'is that right'* before turning back to Jess. "Judging by that lacklustre hug you just

gave me, you're not very excited at all." He arches his eyebrows teasingly.

She punches him in the arm, causing him to pull back and wince playfully.

"Oh, he's a comedy queen." Jess balks.

"Only when I'm nervous," he interjects, his cheeks burning a bright red.

"Well," Jess looks suspiciously between us, and I give her an incredulous look. "I'll leave you to catch up. I just need to use the ladies." Without another word Jess casts us one last glance and turns and waltzes away, her sneakers scratching across the pavement as she makes her way to the bathroom.

Cole drops down into the chair beside me and lays his hand on my thigh, his touch sends a warm rush of adrenaline through my body.

"I hated every moment we were apart." His voice rolls from his lips like thunder, so deep, so seductive it sends shivers down my spine in the best possible way.

"Me too." I'm so lost in the intensity of his eyes. In the daylight, they catch fire, and their normal sedated green colour became electric.

He glances around the empty courtyard before he leans in close to me. He slides his hand from my thigh, up the front of my chest and along the curve of my shoulder before locking his grip into place around my jaw.

His touch is electrifying, magnetic, like his hands have no choice but to touch me.

He presses his forehead against mine, his breath heavy and warm between us.

Just kiss me. I want to scream at him.

And then he leans in and kisses me. His lips snatch the air from my lungs and leave me breathless. I moan into his mouth as I catch my breath.

He snakes a hand around the small of my back and nudges me ever so slightly closer to him. He pulls his lips away long enough to whisper in my ear. “I can’t wait to kiss you deeper.”

And this time, I’m truly left breathless. I look up at Cole sweetly and allow myself to be completely swept away by him. Long enough to forget everything we’d left unspoken.

Nothing can tear us apart when we’re wrapped up in each other’s embrace. But the minute we have to face reality; all those lingering tensions came crashing down around us. I know there’s only so long we can pretend like everything is okay.

I’d let a huge cat out of the bag, and he hadn’t said anything.

“Can we talk?” I breathe into his shoulder.

Cole pulls away unexpectedly fast, his fight or flight mood kicking into overdrive. “Lyndon...”

“We left everything on a bizarre note after the camping trip. I don’t want you to feel pressured into anything or think I’m taking pity on you. Because that really wasn’t the case. And I hate that I could have jeopardised what we have, I was really only trying to help, and I totally crossed a line.” Once I start, I can’t stop myself.

Just shut the fuck up! Shut up! Shut up! Shut the fuck up!

He grabs me by either side of the head and shakes me gently. My hair falls in front of my eyes.

“Lyndon, it’s okay. We’re okay.” His tone is light, endearing, understanding even. “While I love watching this train wreck unravel before me, I just really need you to know that we’re okay.”

I nod.

He must notice my apprehensive look because he adds. “And one day, I will move in with you.” He says. “But not like this, not because my life is chaos. But because we’re ready and we want to. Okay.”

“Okay,” I let out a heavy breath, relieved.

“Plus,” he adds. “I don’t want you to feel like you have to save me all the time.”

I open my mouth to speak, but Cole interrupts me with a gentle kiss.

“You don’t need to worry about me.” He presses his nose to mine and scrunches up his face sweetly, and I can’t help but think how much of a dork he is. “I’ll be fine. I always am.”

“Okay.”

All my worries vanish. I don’t know how it’s different from all the other times he’s told me he’ll be okay. But I believe that this time he will be. I don’t have another alternative. I have to believe him.

“I want to take control of my life, and that starts with telling my parents were together.”

“Cole, you don’t have to do that for me,” I’m instantly overcome with panic. Cole’s bruised and battered body flashes before my eyes and I have to work hard to keep back tears.

“I know I don’t have to, Lyndon. But I want to. And more than that, I need to. Like you said, I need to step out of my parents’ shadow and live my own life. I think it’s time.” He says.

And without him even meaning too he does the one thing he can do to prove to me, above everything else, that he likes me. So much so that he’s willing to put everything on the line to be with me.

I want to tell him that I’m happy for him. I want to assure him that it’ll be easy, and they’ll accept us. But it’s not true. The truth is more sinister than I care to admit. And the truth is that I’m scared of how they’ll react. Will they harm him? Will they hurt me?

“I’m proud of you.” I know he can see right through it, but I force a smile to stretch across my face. He can see the fear that eats away inside me.

“Me too.” He says. In those two words he says so much more than he can know. He understands the severity of the situation. He’s always known. It’s what he’s tried tirelessly to keep me away from.

“How do you think they’ll take it?” My voice is nothing more than a shallow, empty breath as it escapes my lips.

Jess appears suddenly and takes her seat across from us, putting an abrupt end to the conversation. Cole exhales sharply and quickly composes himself. He expertly forces a smile across his face as if to say everything is completely fine. A performance I can tell he’s sadly become all too comfortable with.

I look up at Jess, her eyes fill with a warmth and happiness that is so pure and undiluted that it forces me to smile too.

She sighs as she starts to speak, “I want what you guys have.” She looks at us completely lovestruck, a sparkle in her eyes.

“Is there anyone in this town you’d date?” Cole asks, and I think it’s sweet that he’s playing along with Jess’s charade.

“Yeah,” she says. “But they are both gay,” she winks, throwing her whole body into the action. “Anyway, how do you feel about Lyndon leaving?” The question catches me off guard, and Jess throws me a side eyed glance, but Cole doesn’t seem fazed by it at all.

Cole slaps his hands down on his thighs and looks at me sideways, head tilted all the way on its side and shrugs. “What we have is something else,” he says, “and distance isn’t going to change that.”

He leans forward and kisses my forehead reassuringly. The gesture is so sweet it fills me with that familiar warm and fuzzy feeling that swells in my stomach.

Hearing him talk about us like this, dissolves all the nerves circling my thoughts like a raven to roadkill.

Jess turns to me. “Don’t let this one go.” She doesn’t make an effort to whisper.

I glance over at Cole and catch his beautiful green eyes; they’re swirling with curiosity and something even sweeter than I can’t quite place.

I turn and beam at Cole. “I don’t plan on it.”

BEAUTIFUL CHAOS

I need a distraction desperately!

I haven't heard from Cole since our lunch with Jess, and my mind has been left to its own devices and allowed to wander. Ironically, I want Cole to be that distraction. I want to spend the afternoon wrapped in his embrace. I know the likelihood of that happening is very low.

Cole and I are in a really good place. Especially after our very open, and very real discussion about coming with me to the academy. I feel somewhat relieved that we aren't rushing into anything stupid. It's hard to make sense of something when you're thinking with your heart and not your head. And the whole situation with Cole has me thinking with both, which only doubles my confusion.

You don't need to worry about me. I'll be fine. He'd said. But I can't help but hear that little shred of doubt in the back of my mind that tells me everything isn't going to be fine.

Cole once told me that I was a very calculated person, and he wasn't entirely wrong. I jump from zero to a thousand in 0.5 seconds. I instantly think the worst of an already bad situation, which leads to me seriously overthinking everything.

It's like my mind is playing a constant chess tournament, it knows all my moves, but it also knows everyone else's. Which only makes it that much harder to think normally — *rationally*. So, when Cole told me not to worry about him, that he'd be fine, of course, that only makes me worry more. I push aside all the wicked thoughts that ambush my mind and believe him.

Cole has completely changed the way I think. He's somehow managed to weasel his way into my heart and alter that part of me forever. The part of my brain that tells me to overthink every second of my existence.

Sure, there will always be a part of me that overthinks everything. That's just who I am and always will be. But he's made me realise that it's okay to take a step back and let go of the things you can't control.

And now everything that I've ever been worried about is laid out on the table for everyone to see. It's exhilarating and dangerous. And regardless of how scary everything has been lately, at the same time, it's filled me with such an unpredictable fire that is raging out of control. And I don't want it to stop.

I sit on the floor with my back against the wall, I pull my notebook back onto my lap again, and begin scratching away at the page. It's been weeks since I've picked up a pen and paper and written anything. And as soon as the pen hits the page, words flow so effortlessly, like they've been held back behind a barricade and finally able to walk free. But something that usually brings me so much ease only seems to make me anxious the more I write.

I stop writing and press the back of my head into the wall with a heavy sigh. I will be leaving Whispering Pines in a week. 7 days, 168 hours, 10,080 minutes, 604,800 seconds. And I'll be leaving behind everyone I love.

I blink several times as the sun gleams through the window, filtered by the twisted branches of the old oak that hangs in front of my window. Everything in my room is covered in a luminous golden glow that only highlights my sad reality.

I look up at the stacks of brown cardboard boxes that line the far wall. My entire life is packed in them, along with a collection of worn duffel bags that are stuffed with clothes. All that remains is my bed, adorned with its thousand pillows and throws. It is overwhelming seeing everything I own packed away. It is equally overwhelming knowing that this room will be empty save for a lonely bed frame in one week.

It doesn't feel like enough time to say goodbye. The month has flown by so quickly that I haven't prepared myself for the crushing anxiety that comes with leaving.

I'm so lost in my thoughts when my phone chimes, breaking the eerie silence, my heart leaps out of my chest.

COLE: I need to see you, Lyndon. I'll be there in five!

I hadn't expected to hear from him. It's been days.

Within seconds I jump to my feet, relieved I don't have to be alone with my thoughts any longer. I toss my notebook onto the end of my bed and cross the room to give myself a once over in the full-length mirror that still hangs on the back of my bedroom door. I wear a tight pair of grey running shorts and a white top. It doesn't exactly scream thirst trap, but it's all I can manage with all of my clothes tucked away in duffle bags.

I give myself an approving nod in the mirror and quickly take up pacing the length of my room. It's a futile attempt to pass the time and keep myself from overthinking everything that I've been dreading —

"Hey, babe!" Cole calls out to me as he walks through the doorway, dressed in his usual all-black jeans and top. His complexion looks particularly sun-kissed in the warm glow of the afternoon sun. Instantly the light sets fire to his green eyes. "Do you normally pace back and forth like a complete madman?"

I didn't hear Cole enter the house or even the groan of the stairs as he bound up them to my bedroom. I'm too lost in my internal babble to pay attention to the outside world.

"Cole," I breathe out breathlessly, whirling around to face him, "you scared the hell out of me."

Without him even realising, his very presence causes me to smile. I stop pacing immediately and stare back at him, completely caught off guard by his sudden entrance.

"I'd like to think you'd run if there were an intruder in your house." He narrows his eyes into slits and looks at me from where he stands across the room with one brow arched. A noticeable mocking cadence to his tone that's always evident when he jokes.

"I'd totally be one of those dumb blonds who stumbles and trips in every horror movie," I tell him jokingly.

“Agreed.” He winks.

He closes the space between us.

“What’s on your mind, babe?” He looks at me cautiously, his head tilting to the side.

“Everything,” I attempt to smile, but it doesn’t feel right, so I frown instead.

“That doesn’t really narrow it down for me.” Cole returns my desolate frown with his own sympathetic grimace.

“I know I’ve worked myself up over nothing. It’s just really weird seeing my whole life packed up…” I gesture to the mountains of boxes that are lined up along the wall, instantly feeling stupid that I’m complaining about a few packed boxes.

As he moves towards me, he eyes me with that same cautious scrutiny he always does when considering what to say. “Overwhelming,” he says, turning slightly to take in the boxes I know he’s already seen. “Maybe even a little confronting, definitely odd,” he adds.

I look up at him sweetly, my cheeks warm. “Yeah,” I sigh, “all the above.”

He secures his hands on my waist and locks his hips into mine. The closeness is electrifying — and I can tell he feels it too — the way his touch unintentionally makes me lose my mind and forces every cell in my body into overdrive simultaneously.

He leans into me, his breath warm on my neck as his lips trace the gentle incline from my shoulder to the sharp edge of my jaw. The sweetness that winds tight inside me only intensifies with the intoxicating elixir that courses through the air and the seductive scent of vanilla that leaves me light-headed and woozy.

Within seconds his full lips are on mine, kissing me softly, and just as quickly, it’s over. Cole pulls away slowly with his signature lopsided grin plastered to his face, that unexpected boyish charm that only adds to his ever-changing mystery.

“Does that help?”

I don't know how to answer. I can't think clearly anymore. “A little,” I tell him as I bury my head into his chest, and suddenly everything I've been worried about disappears.

Cole wraps his arms around me; his voice rumbles warmly against the side of my face as he begins to speak, his tone low and deep. “I've never told anyone this before, but when I moved here, it was so sudden and unexpected I didn't even have time to wrap my head around what was happening. And then, before I knew it, we'd arrived in a dreary country town. It didn't stay that way for long because some extremely cute guy made it that much easier to deal with everything.”

“You're telling me I need to find a cute boy, *easy*.” I chirp sweetly, lifting my head to meet his gaze.

He stares back at me with unshakable envy in his green eyes. “You've already found him,” he squeezes me tighter while gently shaking me side to side. “Every time you miss home, you've always got me to think about. You've got your mum and Jess just a phone call away too. We'll never be far away from you. Anyway, no matter where you end up in the world, this will always be your home.”

I hate how easily he's able to talk me off the ledge. Instantly, my nerves dissolve, and my heartbeat returns to normal, as normal as it could be wrapped in his warm embrace.

“Anyway, that's enough about me,” I hate having the spotlight on me. “How did you manage to sneak away from your parents? Where do they think you are right now?” I'm genuinely curious.

“They're away on a business trip, so they don't exactly know that I've left the house.”

“What do your parents do exactly? It honestly feels like they're gone more than they're not, plus your house is amazing. It's something straight from the movies.”

He chuckles and rolls his eyes, his cheeks burning a shameful red. “They own their own company, Chamberlin

Lawyers,” he pauses. “It’s one of the largest law firms in the country. They’re both practising criminal justice lawyers, but these days they spend most of their time going back and forth between all the firms.”

“In other words, they defend bad people,” I ask, hardly able to keep the judgement from dominating my tone.

“I wouldn’t put it like that, but yeah.” He exhales loudly, and I watch as his shoulder deflates where he stands. It’s in the way his breath escapes his lips that I can almost hear his eyes roll into the back of his head with annoyance.

“Anyway, where’s Anna?” Cole interjects, obviously desperate to change the subject to anything that isn’t how morally corrupt his parents are.

“Actually, she joined a book club. I think it’s her attempt to prove that she’s okay with me leaving. Plus, they’re reading some classic about unlikely lovers, sounds totally swoon-worthy.”

“Sounds oddly familiar,” he wriggles his eyebrows. “That means we have the house to ourselves?”

“Yes,” I tell him eagerly, my eyes lighting up...

“And you know what that means...” he arches an eyebrow suggestively. Before I can say anything, he tackles me onto the bed.

I land on my back with my notebook folded under me. Cole instantly notices my discomfort and reaches around to pull the notebook out from underneath me.

“What’s this?” He doesn’t wait for me to reply and instead begins to quickly flick through the notebook, his smile widens the more he reads. “Who is this the tall, handsome stranger you keep referring to?”

“Obviously you,” I confess sheepishly, realising there is absolutely no point in denying it now.

I snatch the notebook from his hands before he has a chance to read anything more and thoughtlessly toss it aside, leaving it to scatter across the hardwood floors.

“What don’t you want me to see?” He teases happily, his hands wrapping around my back, and in one fell swoop, he flips me over, so he’s lying with his back on the bed. I’m mounted on top of him, straddling his waist between my thighs.

“No one has ever read my work...” I bow my head apprehensively.

“Are you kidding me?” His eyebrows bunch together in confusion, and he seems genuinely shocked.

“I’m scared I’m not good enough —”

He grips my hips as he speaks. “I don’t believe you. You have to know you’re an amazing writer. You’ve been accepted into one of the most prestigious academies in the country.”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve done my research,” he says, and his words take me by surprise. I know the look on my face must have affirmed that because he quickly adds, “I needed to know how far away you’d be from me.” He says bashfully, his cheeks turning a deep red that’s only intensified by the late afternoon sun streaming through my bedroom window.

“I’m just a boy with a notebook,” I tell him.

“Well, somebody, somewhere, saw potential in you.” He says nonchalantly. “Anyway, what do you write about me.”

I cover my face with my hands to hide my rosy cheeks. Embarrassment doesn’t even begin to explain the dread I’m feeling. He’s read parts of my most private thoughts, damn straight my cheeks are on fire.

Cole reaches out swiftly, his movements firm as he pulls my hands away from my face. He looks me square in the face, his eyes holding a sweetness I’m coming all too used to as he pulls me towards him. My hands land on his chest, and the firm contours of his muscles brace beneath his clothes as I lean further into him. It’s as if everything inside my head goes blank, and I can’t even force myself to move, let alone speak. I’m so caught up in him I can’t even defend myself against what I’d written about him, not that any of its particularly bad.

But there's definitely been some unexpected truth bombs I didn't want him to see.

"Wow," he chuckles devilishly, "that nasty." With his eyebrow still arched, he presses his lips together in careful contemplation. I can tell he's considering whether he's taken it too far — although in all honesty, I'm just thankful for the distraction.

I kiss him to let him know that he isn't in trouble.

And then something between us changes, and suddenly Cole's pulling impatiently at my clothes and that sweet boyish look in his eyes is replaced by wild desire.

He pulls me close to him. His movements are firm, possessive, mine.

Everything happens so suddenly.

Cole wraps his fingers through my hair, and I can't help but lean into his touch. He pulls me into him, his breath warm as he brushes his lips along my jaw. Every cell in my body catches fire as his feather-soft lips travel further down the smooth contours of my neck. My body writhing involuntarily as his lips graze my skin.

An impulsive gasp escapes me, and my whole body jolts in awareness as his mouth wraps around my throat. His teeth catch on my skin, and I have to hold onto him harder, my hands gripping the back of his head helplessly.

I desperately want him to kiss me. I need the warmth of his full lips on mine. Then suddenly, his lips find mine and an overpowering warmth erupts inside me. My heart echoes like thunder, deepening with the breathless pulse of our kiss.

He slides his hands beneath my top, his palms warm against my skin. His touch is surprisingly gentle as he traces the curves of my back with his fingertips. He pulls on my shirt, and it glides effortlessly over my head, and he quickly tosses it aside.

His arms are like steel vices around my waist, holding me in place, his grip relentless, powerful, intense, and I never want him to let go.

“*Lyndon,*” he bites down hard on his lip till the skin around his teeth turns white. He unlocks his steel grip from around my waist long enough to run his hands from my shoulders all the way down my sides.

He doesn’t say anything while his hands are around my hips. He squeezes my backside, silently devouring me with his eyes in the process.

I bundle the sides of his shirt into my hands, and he hurriedly pulls himself up to help me remove his top. He wrenches me onto his lap impatiently— his arms like steel around my waist as he jerks me closer.

My hands fall instinctively to his chest, and before I can stop myself — not that I would ever want to — I run my hands down his body, over every rise and fall. His body is aflame with the afternoon heat, his muscle like granite beneath his skin, hard, unwavering stone. Aside from the gentle throb of his heart, his body is like human armour, untouchable.

A warm breeze sweeps around us as the afternoon sun melts into our already sun-kissed skin. I tear my eyes away from Cole’s perfectly sculpted body long enough to gaze into his intense green eyes. They are equally as captivating as they are electric. They hold an unspoken mystery behind them that contends with the sun and stars themselves.

A wild temptation burns deep inside me, made even more unbearable by the space between us. I reach down and wrap my hands around Cole’s belt buckle to eliminate the clothes that separate us. My heart hammers wildly as I fumble with the cold metal clasp. When it finally releases, I release a heavy breath. Cole lifts his hips, and I quickly slide the belt from around his waist, it glides out effortlessly, and I leave it to clank loudly to the floor with our shirts.

He places a hand on the small of my back and pulls me toward him aggressively. My breath catches in the back of my throat, and every bone in my body is screaming for him to take me.

I fumble to undo his zip, and his breathless impatience only evokes the wild desire that rages deep inside me even

more. I want to feel him inside me, all of him. The zip finally releases, and he shucks off his jeans and leaves them to fall off the end of the bed.

I take in a steady breath to keep my hand from shaking as I reach down between us and press my palm to his length. He immediately takes hold of my wrist and holds it between us breathlessly.

“Are you sure?” his eyebrows furrow together thoughtfully.

I force my hand from his grasp and run my hand over him. His length pulses excitedly under the pressure, and I love that I have this control over him. “Yes,” I answer so quietly my voice is nothing more than a whisper.

“Okay,” he replies.

And at that moment, something changes between us, and the fury that once controlled us turns to something sweeter. He grabs me by either side of my face and kisses me deeply. It’s innocent and pure unlike anything in this world.

He wraps an arm around my waist, his muscles flexing as he flips me onto my back. I embrace how the closeness allows him to take control.

He kneels between my legs, his hands working quickly to remove my pants and underwear collectively. He tears them from my body in seconds, throwing them across the room.

His body moves agilely, his muscles rolling beneath his skin as he removes his own underwear and crawls on top of me. I suck in a sharp intake of air as his length grazes my thigh, and my legs intuitively tighten around him, pulling him closer.

He braces his muscly arms on either side of my head and quickly leans down to kiss my lips. He runs a hand down the side of my body, my skin dances beneath his touch and prickles with goosebumps.

I shake off the nerves that threaten to destroy the moment and reach a steady hand between us and grab hold of Cole’s length. He shudders as my fingers wrap around him, my

cheeks flush unexpectedly. I love how susceptible he is to my touch, just like I am to his. I bite down on my lip as I guide him towards me.

A soft growl escapes Cole's lips as he delves inside me.

I gasp loudly. All my senses are ablaze. My thighs tighten powerlessly around Cole, unintentionally forcing him closer. Until our bodies become one.

“Fuck —” he groans impulsively.

My heart hammers wildly as a combination of pain and pleasure roil through my body. It leaves me breathlessly clutching at Cole's biceps with all my strength. I rake my fingernails down his arms, leaving painful red marks down his skin.

Cole's body moves effortlessly, every movement controlled, thought out. He rocks his hips back and forth, quickly finding his rhythm. He adjusts his tireless grip on my side and quickly picks up pace. My entire body writhes in response.

I let out a breath I didn't realise I've been holding back and relax into him.

My eyes flutter closed, and when they open, again I catch a glimpse of Cole's muscly body. Each muscle made even more defined by the flares of light illuminating his silhouette.

We always knew our love would be impossible. And it's moments like this when our bodies are entwined that everything else in the world slips away and all the chaos seems worthwhile. A chaos so beautiful it completely consumes me.

Cole's body crashes into mine like a powerful tide, and mine responds readily, every muscle in his body pulsing arduously beneath his tanned skin. I push back into him, and instantly his grip becomes even more relentless. His fingers brace my sides with an unyielding strength as his body collides with mine harder and more intense than ever. I can't hold back the breathless scream that escapes my lips.

I tilt my head, arch my back, and embrace the fire that consumes me. My whole body ignites with a powerful flame

that burns deep inside me.

I push back into him and give into his touch completely.

THANK YOU, NEXT

Cole is gone by the time I wake up. And suddenly, the room feels empty without him.

I roll onto my side, retrieve my phone from my bedside table and punch in my passcode with tired, weary eyes. I get it wrong twice before my lock screen snaps open, showing me that I have a text from Cole and two from Jess. I open the text from Cole first and instantly smile.

COLE: Morning babe, sorry I had to leave so early busy day. I'll call you later.

Weird, he hadn't mentioned anything yesterday about having plans...

ME: That's okay. I hope everything is okay. Can't wait to hear your voice.

I watch the speech bubble pop up on my screen seconds later and realise Cole is already typing back his reply.

COLE: I miss you.

ME: I miss you more.

COLE: Impossible.

I exhale a deep breath and let my head fall back onto the pillow. I can't contain the smile that stretches across my face, I'm unbelievably happy, and nothing or nobody can take that away from me.

I hold the phone to my chest and hug it tightly. It's crazy to think something as simple as a text can make me smile so wildly. It hadn't just been the text that has me smiling from ear to ear. It's everything that's happened in the past twenty-four hours that has left this ridiculous smile on my face.

I peer out the window at the thin grey clouds that mar the blue sky. The weather warrants a few extra minutes curled up

beneath the warmth of my covers. I quickly pull them up around my chest and open Jess's messages.

JESS: Cole is handsome AF.

JESS: Like Chris Hemsworth handsome. If Chris Hemsworth had a kick-ass evil twin.

I chuckle softly to myself, unable to hold back from laughing at Jess's utterly inane sense of humour. I debate whether I will tell her that Cole and I had taken our relationship to the next level and then I decide I'll wait to tell her in person. And instead, enjoy the quiet, intimate moment a while longer.

ME: He's totally more mysterious than evil.

JESS: Still kiss-ass through!

ME: Totally kiss-ass!

Emphasis on the *ass* — because it is everything as beautiful as the rest of him. All tanned and bouncy. However, I'm not about to tell Jess that Cole had a nice ass. That mental image is tucked away for my eyes only.

There are three things I knew for certain about Cole Chamberlin.

Number one, he's a mystery. But he's my mystery.

Two, there's secrets buried deep inside him that are so dark and twisted it scares me to think what truths he's kept hidden from me. And how far he'd go to keep them that way.

And three, I am head over heels in love with him.

STRANGERS

Empty, calm, soundless.

The late afternoon sun shines through the clouds illuminating the meadow in a dreary grey glow. A storm has been building all day, and the wind that had swept through the meadow seconds earlier suddenly stops dead in its tracks.

The pines that had blown so wildly stop. The chorus of birds that had flown overhead disappear into the cover of trees, and their joyful whistle go with them.

Ripples echo across the lake, and then the water turns to stone, an empty chasm so still and unwavering I could have walked out onto it, and it wouldn't have moved.

An unbearable warmth wraps thickly over my skin. I've never noticed just how quiet everything becomes just before a storm. The air is heavy, making it harder to breathe. It has an unsettling eeriness to it that sends a shiver hurtling down my spine.

I look out at the lake as the sun slips behind the clouds, and a sudden cool breeze sweeps over me. I shiver involuntarily. I know it won't be long before it starts to rain.

Cole, where the hell are you... I look around alertly, but there is no one there.

An ominous sinking feeling twists in the pit of my stomach, and I can't shake the thought that something bad has happened. Cole had messaged me in a frantic rush of jumbled words asking me to meet him by the lake.

As seconds turn to minutes, I grow increasingly anxious, I keep expecting him to step out from the line of trees behind me, but he doesn't. Had something happened to him —

I swallow the heavy lump in my throat and take a deep breath to calm my nerves.

A branch snaps nearby, and my heart does a complete backflip. I turn around abruptly to take a look and find Cole stepping out from behind a tall pine, his eyes shimmering in the shadows. He walks with his shoulders hunched and his hands delved deep in his pockets. His sneakers crunching loudly on the grass as he makes his way towards me.

“Sorry I’m late,” he finally says as he comes to a stop beside me.

“I didn’t think you were going to come,” I tell him honestly.

He cocks his head towards me and smiles.

“What are you smiling at...” I furrow my eyebrows together, annoyed, dumbfounded and completely confused.

“You,” he says, his smile growing wider by the second.

“Me?”

“I don’t think you understand what it’s like to date you,” he says, his smile splitting his face in two. And his charming and totally cocky grin sucks me in deeper. “I wake up, and suddenly my day seems brighter just thinking about you. You hold this otherworldly power that just makes people want to be better. You make me want to be better.”

Like honey dripping from a spoon, his voice is thick and unbelievably sweet. I want nothing more than to curl up in his arms and stay that way forever.

“Cole,” I look up into his eyes and have to blink back tears to keep from crying. I’ve never had anyone say so many nice things one after the other, and my heart can’t take it anymore; it completely gives into his words. “I don’t know what to say.”

“You don’t have to say anything,” he smiles sweetly, “just promise me you’ll remember us like this.”

“Always,” I nod repeatedly.

He takes a step towards me, his hands instinctively wrapping around my back and pulling me close to him. His hands shake as he places them on my waist and his breath is

clipped and heavy. He doesn't quite seem like himself, and that's when I notice the thrumming beat of his heart echoing between us and realise that he's nervous —

"I didn't think I'd ever find this again," he confesses sadly.

"What didn't you think you'd find again?" I drape my hands around his neck and tilt my head inquisitively to the side. I search his expression for the answer but only find sadness behind his eyes.

I reach up and cup his cheek delicately in my hand. I run my thumb gently across his cheekbone as he nuzzles his head into my touch. When he speaks, he looks me directly in the eye, and there is a quiet reservation in his voice that I've never heard before now.

"Love," he says simply.

Love, I shake myself mentally, desperately trying to wrap my head around whether I'd heard him correctly.

"You love me?" I blink, tilt my head and smile all at the same time. A tidal wave of emotions rushes through me.

"I love you with every bone in my body, Lyndon." Cole's breath is warm on my face as he speaks, his voice a low quivering rumble like thunder. It drips with chaos, danger and all-consuming desire.

Mine. It's all mine.

"I love the way you smile," he whispers, taking hold of my face in both hands he kisses me slowly. The kiss is sudden and unexpected and leaves me completely breathless. When he finally pulls away, my cheeks are flushed a cherry blossom pink. "I love the way your hair flicks out all crazy and wild." He says before roughly tousling my hair with his hands, leaving waves and wisp of blond hair to fall over my eyes at even odder angles than before. "I love your blue eyes, and I love the way you're a little dorky in the cutest possible way." The whole time he talks, his smile is cocked to one side in his signature lopsided grin.

“I love you too, Cole Chamberlin.” I smile up into his eyes.

I drape my arms over his shoulders and lean into his lips. He pulls me closer with a powerful determination that only intensifies when our mouths lock together. A wild, uncontrollable fire blossoms inside me.

Something about the way he kisses me feels hungry, final, pained.

An unexplainable heat, so irresistible and world-shattering all at the same time burns relentlessly through my body. All the way from my head to my toes. It reminds me of the night before, when our bodies had been entwined and our closeness unparalleled.

Cole pulls away and takes the warmth of his lips with him, leaving his hands wound around my back. Even with the closeness of his body pressed to mine, I suddenly feel empty. Like, the fiery electricity that had coursed through my veins seconds earlier has just faded to darkness.

It doesn't feel like enough. I need more, want more.

I'm so lost in Cole that I don't notice nightfall collapse around us. I lean back and look up at the moon. It gleams coolly through the cover of clouds, enveloping the meadow in silvery darkness that's somehow terrifying and beautiful at the same time.

I turn my attention back to Cole, watching as his eyes sparkle in the moonlight.

“I've always loved you,” he says unexpectedly, and his tone turns from jovial to reverent in seconds. “I've loved you from the very first time I laid eyes on you at New Year's Eve, there was a spark in your eyes, and I knew you were different, special. And you haven't let me down. You mean so much to me. You've always meant so much to me. Thank you for loving me so completely.”

Without him even knowing it, his words hurt me in a way I didn't think possible.

“Cole,” I gulp, suddenly nervous, “why are you making this sound like a goodbye?”

I look up into his eyes, and his features turn hard, locked in place like he’s made entirely out of stone. And just like that, the sweet, kind boy who had told me he loves me turns dark, dangerous in the worst possible way.

“Cole. Is everything okay?”

He drops his hands from my back with shaky hesitancy and takes one defeated step backwards. He shoves his hands in his pockets and quickly looks down at the ground, his face consumed by shadows.

It’s all too obvious what he is trying to tell me. And knowing it doesn’t make it hurt any less. My heart completely stops, and then suddenly, all I can hear is the thrum of my heartbeat echoing thunderously in my ears. But why would he tell me he loves me and then —

“It has to be this way,” he says darkly. “Goodbye is all I’ve ever known, Lyndon.”

“*Oh.*” I gasp.

“I will never forgive myself if something happens to you. I love you too much to see that happen.” I watch the anguish and heartbreak swirl madly behind his luminous green eyes. He expels a heavy sigh he’s been holding back, and I know he feels tormented by his own words.

“What happened?” I suck in a sharp breath, but the words are out of my mouth before I have a chance to stop them. “Did you tell your parents about us?”

Silence. An ear-splitting, painstaking, crushing silence stretches between us. I knew the answer. *Yes.*

“Cole, you don’t have to do this,” I tell him, “you don’t have to push me away.” *Again.* I want to reach out and hold him, tell him that it’s okay. Though, before I have the chance, he’s taken another step back and folded his arms over his chest and closes me out completely.

“You know that us being together is too dangerous. I don’t want your blood on my hands.”

It feels like a knife is being twisted deeper into my back with no release, with every word that drips from his lips.

“Cole,” my voice suddenly breaks, and I have to press my lips together to keep them from quivering. “I don’t understand where all this is coming from. I’ve already made my choice. I chose to be with you, no matter the —”

“*Lyndon!*” He silences me.

My name sits heavy on his lips as I wait for him to say something. *Anything.*

“For fuck sake, Lyndon. What don’t you get?” He growls low and steady. “I’m giving you an out. Take it!” His words roar loudly through the empty meadow. It’s a terrifying sound that causes the hairs on my arms to stand on end. “Open your eyes and look around. We were never meant to be happy.”

I can’t shake the sudden innate hollowness that consumes me.

“This was never supposed to be our happily ever after!” He snaps bluntly. Quickly turning his attention to the towering pines that loom over the lake, completely oblivious to me standing beside him.

His words are so jarring and formidable it takes me a few seconds to comprehend them.

“Cole, you know that’s not true.” I tell him exasperatedly.

It is the truth, and I’m not going to deny myself that. The fact that I have to defend myself to the person I love seems ridiculous, obscene, utterly absurd. I’m done editing and calculating what I’m going to say to him, especially when he’s acting like a complete crazy person.

I can’t wrap my head around why he is acting so irrationally, but whatever part of his brain is rationalising this argument is clearly malfunctioning — or straight-up broken!

He takes another step away from me and unravels his arms from around his body, leaving his hands to fall by his sides in clenched balls. He pumps his hands furiously by his side, and I can see the anger and annoyance begin to bubble over.

He doesn't meet my gaze as he speaks and instead continues to stare absently into the distance. "I'm sick and tired of you treating me like the broken toy no one wants," he sneers more to himself than me, quietly shaking his head so that his brown waves bounce around his face.

"You've taken pity on me like I'm some damaged charity case, just to make yourself feel better." He speaks with his jaw clenched.

When he finally turns to face me, there's a wild intensity behind his eyes that reminds me of a panther hunting prey. He leans forwards with his shoulders hunched and tilts his chin towards the ground. When he looks up from beneath his arched brows to meet my gaze, his eyes are nothing more than two narrow green slits in the ebony darkness.

He looks dangerous — and it scares me.

"Cole, you're being mean —"

"*Mean?*" He chuckles condescendingly. "Mean is pretending like you care about someone when all you really cared about was fixing them." He sneers viciously.

"You don't have to do this. You don't have to push me away." I tell him, standing there impatiently waiting for Cole to reply.

"I don't know how else to make you understand that we were never supposed to happen," he says, shrugging his shoulders carelessly.

His words have been carefully designed to hurt me, and they're definitely doing their job. Every syllable that drips from his lips only twist the knife in my back deeper.

"*Cole.*" I look into his dangerous gaze. My eyes blurry with tears. "Please, *stop.*" I hold up a hand to keep him from saying anything more. I don't want him to say something he

will ultimately regret. I certainly don't want what we have between us to end badly. It's hard enough knowing he's in pain and there's nothing I can do to help him. "*Please*. Tell me you don't want me. And I'll go." I spit angrily. Every word that escapes my lips wavers like a building in danger of toppling over, piece by piece, word by word, I start to collapse.

He takes another step backward, shocked.

I hate him for putting even more distance between us than he already has. Before I have time to stop myself, I'm stomping across the meadow after him.

I come to an abrupt halt right in front of him and deftly take his jaw in my hand. He instantly attempts to jerk away from me, but my grip is relentless.

With him barely inches from my face now, he doesn't have a choice but to talk to me. "Say. It." I lean in close to him, our lips so close they nearly touch.

Cole's eyes grow wide, obviously surprised by our closeness. And still, he doesn't say anything. He keeps his lips pressed together firmly.

"End it, now," I whisper, my lips quivering wildly. "Be done with me."

He grinds his teeth together gruellingly and wrenches his jaw from my unwavering hold. He cocks his head to the side and snarls warningly. He gives me a lethal glare that I can only imagine is a warning not to follow him as he walks away.

"Cole, *stop*. Talk to me!" I yell loudly, my voice thick with heartache. "You can't tell me you love me and hate me in the same sentence and then walk away."

He stops dead in his tracks.

He doesn't attempt to turn and face me. He stands there motionless with his back to me, staring blankly at the looming pines that tower over the meadow.

Cole whirls around aggressively, wild fury swirling behind his eyes. "Fuck you! You will never understand!" He snaps angrily.

I take a step back, startled.

“Then make me!” I spit through my teeth venomously. All patience has vanished and is quickly replaced by breathless annoyance.

The startled look in his eyes tells me he doesn't have a choice, and his words only emphasise his expression. “I love *you*, Lyndon. It's because I love you that I have to let you go.”

“Don't lie to me.” Tears threaten to fall, but I don't let myself cry in front of him. I don't give him the power to see me in pain. “Now tell me what I don't want to hear. Tell me the truth. I want to know why you're scared. What are you keeping from me? Is it Issac? Is it about how he died? Are you scared I'll find out the truth. Tell me!” I suck in a sharp breath and exhale just as quickly. “I know Al hurt Issac. Just like he hurts you.” I accuse desperately. I know I've pushed too far this time, but I have too much to lose to keep quiet. I need to be heard. And the shock value seems to do the trick.

“You have no idea what you're talking about.” He sighs, exhausted.

“No. I don't. I have zero fucking idea. But you need to help me understand so I can help you. Do you think I'm stupid. I can see you're in pain,” I stare up at him pleadingly. “And I know whatever you're hiding is bigger than the both of us. And pushing me away is the easiest way for it to disappear. Tell me the truth, Cole. What happened to Issac?”

“We need to break up.” He doesn't mean it. But I know he does.

“*No.*” I gulp. “You don't get to push me away.”

I've never felt pain more real than I do now. Like someone has taken a pair of rusty garden shears to my chest and was slowly peeling out my ribcage bone by bone.

Broken. Empty. Cold. Silence.

I can't even begin to describe the pain that paralyses me. My legs suddenly grow shaky, and I have to lock my knees together to keep from collapsing in a heap.

My heart thrashes madly. It sounds like a thousand speakers are playing music out of sync all at once. An endless thrash, thump, wham, thrash, thump, wham...

I clench my eyes closed and, one by one, drown out the noise.

And then my heart stops beating altogether.

“Cole, *please*.” I blink, shocked.

“Goodbye, Lyndon,” he whispers sadly.

And without another word, I watch him shove his hands deep in his pockets and walk slowly to the edge of the meadow. It doesn't seem like the walk of someone who had gotten exactly what they wanted. It seemed like the walk of someone who'd been defeated. He seems just as broken as me.

He stops just shy of the looming pines where the silvery moonlight morphs into an ebony abyss, and he quickly turns to face me. He stands there with his shoulders hunched and head hanging low, and even through the gloomy darkness, I can see his face clearly. I can make out his wispy brown curls and sun-kissed cheeks and his frighteningly miserable upturned smile. And then I catch a sudden glimpse of heartache echoing behind his eyes. And then he's gone...

It isn't until that moment — as I watch Cole fade into darkness — that I actually allow myself to cry.

I'm no longer held captive by my pain and heartache. I embrace them. I finally allow them to take control. And when I do, a tidal wave of tears are released.

My lips tremble, and my vision blurs. And suddenly, my world turns dark, and the ground slips out from underneath me. I fall helplessly to the hard ground, the wilted wildflowers crunching under my knees.

And just like that — he's nothing more than a handsome stranger once again.

13 February 2020 – 9 March 2022

The story continues in *Beautiful Dead*. Don't miss the explosive sequel in the *Beautiful Chaos* series! Turn the page for a sneak peek...

Then

COLE

1

COLD

Cold.

2

EMPTY

Empty.

3

SILENCE

Silence.

4

BLOOD

Cold. Empty. Silence.

Acknowledgements

As always it takes a team, and I have so many people to thank for making it possible to release Beautiful Chaos into the wild.

A massive thank you to my super fiancé who really puts up with so much of my crazy. Dean you've dealt with my excited outbursts, ramblings and hearing me talk about Beautiful Chaos for years. Even when my heads stuck in the clouds, you're able to keep me grounded. I don't know where I'd be without you. I love you the most, always!

And to Georgia, the one and only professional third wheel, sometimes vegan and editor. You were the first person to ever read my manuscript, and you did so when it was nothing more than a stack of jumbled words and typos, and you took your red marker and made it make sense.

Massive hugs and kisses to my mother for being my cheerleader from day one. After so many years it's finally a finished book in your hands!

A shout out to my cover artist Oblivion Dreams who took my cover concept and flipped it and reversed it and turned it into a masterpiece.

And lastly, to me. I'm proud of you. We did it!

Author Note

Abuse. Trauma. Love.

I never intended to write an author's note delving into the details behind Beautiful Chaos. All I knew was that I wanted to create a book that combined love and trauma to raise awareness for domestic violence. I've never let my trauma define me. I've always used it as a beacon of strength, confidence and power. I was abused. Tormented. Beaten. And strangled. And now, it's time to tell my side.

He took a huge part of my life away from me. I'm lucky, really. It was only a small blip in my life that's been tarnished by him. There was then and now and everything in between.

I wanted to prove to myself that I didn't have to let what happened to me define my entire life. And in accepting what happened. And in writing Beautiful Chaos I've accepted that I was abused. I was never a victim. I was always a survivor.

My father abused me. I watched my mother and family be abused too. I watched how someone I once loved could tear apart something so beautiful in a heartbeat.

Beautiful Chaos was inspired by events and moments in my life that have haunted me for years. I wanted to take a glimpse into my past from an outsider's perspective and understand how someone else may have viewed my situation, how they might react in the moment, what they're thinking and how they feel.

Lyndon was the perfect outsider. He had his own problems to deal with, like, preparing for Stone and Arrow Academy and falling helplessly in love with the boy next door. He never expected to uncover what he did, and while Lyndon understands what's happened, he will never completely understand why Cole's so guarded.

I wanted to wrap a very real, very traumatic part of my life up in a neat little bow and show the readers that it's more than just you and me. You never know what someone is going through or struggling with; sometimes, they just need someone to be there for them when their life turns upside down.

I knew this book would never be easy to write. The truth rarely is. You can't hide behind twisted lies and simple truths forever as much as you want to.

It took me years to write *Beautiful Chaos*. Not because I didn't want to. I desperately needed to tell Lyndon and Cole's story – but because trauma does something to you mentally that's hard to explain. It takes its hold on you and follows you around like a dark cloud over a sunlit sky. And the only way that you're able to function is to bury your emotions and pretend that everything is okay. Even when you're completely broken inside, it felt like my mind was on pause while the rest of my body continued to move and breathe.

While writing *Beautiful Chaos*, I was forced to relive memories I would have preferred to leave behind. And at times, it absolutely killed me. One thing about trauma is the burying. I was burying memories so deep and covering them with fake ones until only scattered remnants of my past self-remained. Writing *Beautiful Chaos* was like digging a trench through the abyss of my mind and rediscovering what I'd chosen to leave behind. A version of me long forgotten. And it was hard at times. I had to fall deep into a memory to understand how the character would feel or act, but I never really had to fall too far because their experiences were my own. Every emotion, every thought was all too familiar. And mine.

After a seven-year hiatus from writing, I knew I needed to tell Lyndon and Cole's story. For a sense of closure. For me. *Beautiful Chaos* is a love letter to my past and present. Cole represents a very dark part of me, guarded, scared and tormented. And Lyndon's the annoyingly optimistic, somewhat naïve guy I knew I wanted to become.

I remember the first time I was abused like it was yesterday when my life was suddenly turned upside down. I had welts and bruises that extended all the way from my jaw to the nape of my neck. Ghastly smears of red and purple. I hadn't even noticed them until they were pointed out to me. Because you pretend like everything is normal, it's another day. You wake up. Go to school. Do your homework. Repeat.

My close friend noticed them. I was instantly embarrassed because I had no idea how else to react. Should I tell her what happened? What would happen to him if anyone found out the truth? I didn't want anything to change. I wanted to protect him. Believe he would change. After all, it had only happened one time. It wouldn't happen again, right?

I had no idea how my friend felt in that moment, but without her even having to say anything, I knew she understood what had happened. And in return, my silence answered her question too. I had been abused.

I was around at her house days later, and her mum sat me down and confronted me. I'll never forget the fear in her eyes; she had no idea what to say but wanted to let me know she understood and was there for me. It was clear that what happened to me wasn't a secret – they just knew what had happened, like the signs had always been there.

But it wasn't the last time he hurt me. It happened again. And again. Each time worse than before.

Each time he hurt me; it made it that much harder to forgive him. I allowed it to happen to me and learnt new ways to mask the pain and to handle the heartache. After it happened, it always went back to normal, at least for a while. A false sense of security that I knew undoubtedly would come to an end. As much as I hoped it would be the last time.

Time after time he hurt me. I wanted to believe it would be the last time. It wasn't. Slowly he picked me apart until I didn't have the pieces to put myself back together. And eventually, I just allowed it to happen. Even though I was scared someone would see the marks and bruises that covered my body. And every male that walked by me would make me shudder. Because I knew that wicked part of him that fed off my pain and suffering would be tamed. And everything would go back to the way it was – he would return to normal. Because he always did. It would be okay. I would be okay, even if it was just for a little while.

Abuse. It's a strange thing when it's happening to you. You want to be loved so badly. You want to be accepted. You want

everything to be okay. And yet I'd never felt so insignificant. So pathetic. So fragile. He ruined me. I watched my entire world crumble around me in the blink of an eye.

I joke about what I've been through now because it's shaped me into the person I've become. It's made me more confident. It's made me brave. And it's shaped my twisted sense of humour too. I wanted to write this book because not everyone escapes their past. I wanted to write this book to let people who have suffered or are currently suffering from abuse that. You. Are. Not. Alone.

I'm here to tell you it gets better. It takes time. Time to heal. Time to blossom from the trauma. Time to discover the real you.

It's been close to a decade since I escaped him. And I want to thank everyone who helped me, especially my mum. You're a brave woman and always have been. Thank you!

About the author

Myles Alan's novel Beautiful Chaos marks his literary debut, a dark M / M romance with heart wrenching twists and turns. He lives in Melbourne, Australia with his fiancé and puppy. When he's not writing you can find him snuggled up with coffee and a good book or watching way too many TikTok's!

Follow **@themylesalan** on Instagram, Facebook and TikTok for all things book related!