

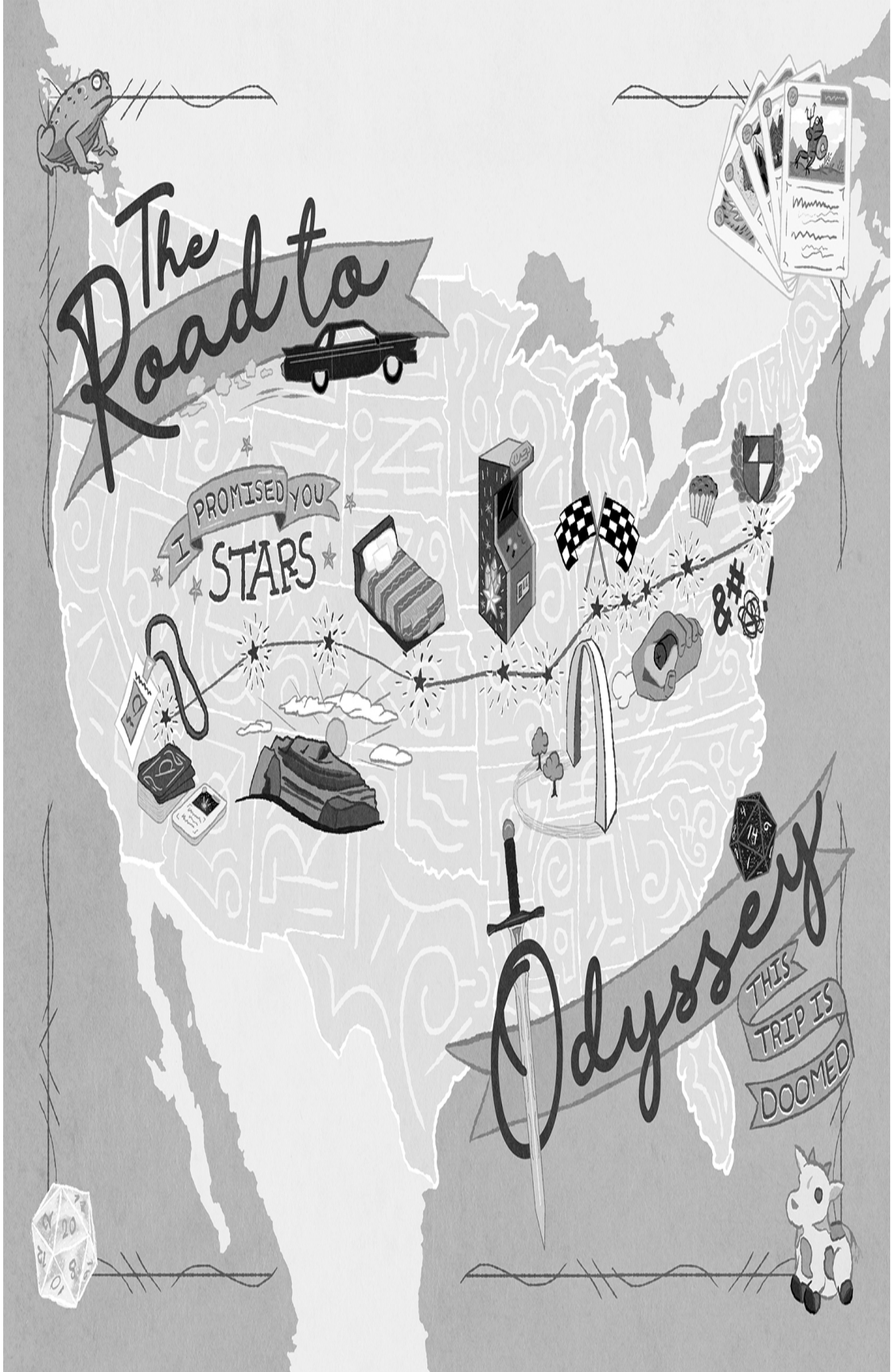
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ANNABETH ALBERT



The Road to Odyssey

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Odyssey

THIS TRIP IS DOOMED

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ANNABETH ALBERT

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But when they're stuck together on a cross-country road trip to the biggest fan convention of their lives, the competition takes a backseat as unexpected feelings blossom. Yet each boy has a reason why they have to win the upcoming con tournament and neither is willing to let emotion get in the way—even if it means giving up their one chance at something truly magical”— Provided by publisher.

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For all the date nights spent tabletop gaming and all the memories created one round at a time, win or lose.

Chapter One

Conrad

“You can’t kill me,” I said. “You don’t have the strength.”

In reality, I was already dead. My fate had been sealed by my own stupidity, but I wasn’t going down with a whimper. No, the last of my life might be spinning away, leaving me with only a dwindling collection of scrolls and my wits, but I’d rather go out fighting—or at least laughing.

I leaned back, feigning confident disinterest. “Come at me.”

“You’re rather confident for someone with no defenses.” Alden, my least favorite opponent, sounded almost bored, which only made me even more determined to hold on.

“And *you’re* so predictable,” I shot back. Maybe I could egg him on, push him into making a mistake. It seemed like the only option I had left.

“Dude. You are so screwed. At least your carcass is going to be pretty.” My sometimes-friend Jasper wasn’t helping any, taking great glee in my predicament.

“Beg for mercy.” Payton, as always, was more pragmatic.

I neither needed nor wanted an audience for this latest humiliation, so I tuned everything out, focusing every resource on staying alive.

“I move to attack,” Alden said. The swing came, just as I’d anticipated, with Alden going all in, trying for a fatal blow.

“Yeah, well, attack *this*.” I slapped down a card to create four tiny frog soldiers. Not much when facing off against everything Alden had at his fingertips, but it was the best I could manage.

One more turn. It had become something of a mantra over the last hard, seemingly endless year. And yes, this was only a card game, and no, another loss to Alden wouldn’t really be the worst thing to happen to me. But regardless, I still wasn’t going to let him see me falter.

“Really? That’s your response?” Alden shook his head, his weary expression making him look far older than twenty-three. He didn’t seem cowed in the slightest. He did superior better than anyone I knew, full mouth curving, lock of dark hair falling over his forehead as his hazel eyes gleamed. Fresh dread gathered in my stomach. My cheap-yet-effective mercenaries should have been just enough to hold him off and to get me to my next turn. But then Alden shook his head again and activated five scrolls, turning them sideways with long, clever fingers. “Unblockable Quest.”

It was a hundred-dollar card, the sort of comeback that pro players trotted out like jelly beans, and so far above my current gaming budget it might as well have been gold-plated. But I had one final answer, my last card and my last scroll to activate it. “Peace Offering.”

It would mean the sacrifice of my soldiers, but at least it would get me that *one more turn*.

“Conrad.” The irritated way Alden sighed my name always made my teeth grind. “Peace Offering is one of the cards that got outlawed with the new rules. It’s no longer tournament

legal. Didn't you freshen up your deck last week like everyone else?"

No, no I hadn't updated a damn thing because I'd needed my last forty dollars for food, not cards. But I wasn't telling Alden that, wouldn't give him the satisfaction of pitying me. Instead, I stuck my hand out. "Guess I forgot. Good game, man."

"Yeah, good one." Alden barely glanced at me as he gave a perfunctory shake.

"That's right. You missed the release event last week when they unveiled the new cards and revised rules. Hot date?" Payton asked, leaning forward, long hair swishing over their shoulders, the soft hint of southern in their lilt making *date* sound old-fashioned and dirty at the same time.

"You know it." I leaned back in my chair. I wasn't about to admit I'd been working extra hours at the pizza place, trying to replace that money I'd spent on food. I'd spent hours dodging irritable parents and hyped-up kids instead of being here at my favorite game store for the unveiling of a set I'd been looking forward to for months.

Alden made a disgruntled noise. "Can we film his death reaction now?"

"Sure thing." Professor Tuttle swung his handheld camera in my direction. "Die, Conrad. Make it good."

On cue, I sank low in my seat, almost sliding under the table as I made noises like I was melting, like a cartoon character getting hit with acid. Elimination reactions were something that Professor Tuttle's audience always loved, almost as much as his "Gamer Grandpa" game analysis. *Gamer Grandpa* was one of the most popular *Odyssey* vlogs, with Professor Tuttle analyzing our in-person card play as well as matches on the

wildly successful online version of the game. He made game theory accessible to the masses, and we were all regulars on his channel. Jasper did a lot of the editing for him, Payton did some special effects, and Alden...

Well, Alden did all the winning. He had a combination of the best decks and exactly enough infuriating skill to make him darn near unbeatable.

Oh and me? I liked to think I was the eye candy of the group. Or maybe the comedic relief. I brought the sort of trash-talking our viewers loved. That it never failed to rile Alden was only a bonus. And I'd take being seen as cocky over the truth, which was that I was the professor's latest charity case—a scrappy player with cheap cards, a fucked-up life, and a missing future.

“Great. That'll do it for this game.” Setting the handheld camera aside, Professor Tuttle bustled around, disconnecting the overhead cameras that pointed at our play mats.

“They're going to want the room back soon.” Jasper moved to help, collecting dice and counters and rolling mats. He worked part-time at the game store where we filmed the shows and was the reason why we got the private play room so often.

“Arthur can wait.” Payton was one of the few people not rattled in the slightest by the store owner's gruff exterior, and they gathered their stuff slowly.

“Give me a minute and I'll grab you some of the latest card packs, Conrad. I bought two set boxes, so I've got some to spare.” Ignoring Payton, Jasper continued to aim for employee of the year, wiping down the table.

“Thanks, man.” There was a time when I'd been one of the store's best customers, but those days were long gone, and

now, even borrowing Jasper's employee discount, I could barely afford to keep playing. I should have been too proud to accept the packs, but it was probably my only shot at updating my decks. I couldn't afford to buy individual cards on the secondary market like Alden or Payton. No, I'd be limited to whatever came in the packs. And I supposed I could get lucky, score some rares, but luck and I were hardly on speaking terms lately.

"I've got some commons you can sift through too." Alden reached for his deck bag—one of those custom deals that held a bunch of decks in their boxes securely, nothing jumbling around like my duffel, which was often where good cards went to die.

"Nah. I'm sure I'll be okay with whatever Jasper can spare." I might be able to live with myself in accepting handouts from the professor and Jasper, but not Alden. I'd sooner stop playing than take his castoffs.

"Suit yourself." Alden gave a shrug of his elegant shoulders. Not broad. Not bulky. Not even a swimmer's lean build or the more technically accurate *slight*. No, the only word that worked for describing Alden's body type was elegant. Or perhaps regal if one was feeling even more fanciful, which I decidedly was not. But it was undeniable that Alden had a presence to his posture, a way of holding himself that took up far more than his share of space, and that frequently made me forget that I was technically the taller, bigger one.

"Wait. Before you guys head out, I've got something to share." Professor Tuttle sported a gray T-shirt that proudly proclaimed "Gamer Grandpa" with his Einsteinesque wild-hair logo beneath it. Like Alden, he had a professional-grade deck bag, along with assorted camera and laptop cases. Checking

three different bags, he finally came up with a thick manila envelope. “Do you know what this is?” He waved the envelope in front of us before reaching inside. Practically vibrating with excitement, he didn’t wait for any of us to take a guess. “This, my friends, is the trip of a lifetime.”

He laid five white tickets out on the table. They looked expensive—large rectangles of thick, creamy card stock with gold lettering that proudly proclaimed, “Massive Odyssey Con West” on them.

The room went silent, the kind of eerie stillness that often preceded a summer storm back home, but in this case, it was anticipation, not a tornado, building, energy crackling as I waited to see who would speak first.

“But MOC West has been sold out for *months*. I know. I tried.” Payton’s green eyes were wide. Among all of us, they were probably the only one of us who could easily afford the high price of admission for the fan convention taking place in Vegas next month. Giant in scope, it rivaled the largest of the Comic Cons in popularity. Better yet, not only was it a showcase for the game, but also a huge tournament for players, with prize money and even seats on the pro tour up for grabs.

A spot on the pro tour could be *life-changing*.

“I know. But my contact at Odyssey Games said they’re really impressed with what our channel is doing. They want us to come—me to sit on some panels and make fan appearances, and you guys to play in the tournament. Then we’ll do a recap video about our experiences afterward.”

“Wow.” I whistled low, visions of an invitation to the pro tour and the end of my money worries dancing in my head.

“All we have to do is get there.” Professor Tuttle nodded so enthusiastically that his unruly white-gray hair bounced.

And hell. Just like that, my vision went poof, lost in a cloud of reality. “You mean we have to cover airfare?”

“Well, yes, travel expenses are ours, as are meals and—”

“Not a problem.” Payton already had their phone out and was clicking away, probably telling their trust-fund manager that they needed a boost of cash.

“For you, maybe,” I grumbled, already digging my duffel out from under the table. Time for me to get going. That ticket might be my one last decent hope of digging my way out of the hole my life had become, but the cost of airfare wasn’t even remotely within my pitiful budget, and I needed to escape the excitement of the others before my disappointment ruined their fun.

“Slow down now, Conrad.” Professor Tuttle could do stern when he wanted to. I slumped back into my seat, bag in my lap. “I’ve got a travel plan for those of us with more... challenges to face.”

More like those of us with nonexistent bank balances, but I didn’t say anything. I’d worked hard to make sure that as few people knew the extent of my situation as possible. The professor knew more than most, but no way did I want the rest to realize just how screwed I really was.

“I don’t fly.” Alden stared at the tickets as if they might hop up and bite him. I had to blink at that. In the couple of years that I’d hung around Alden and the rest of our play group, I’d never known him to be anything other than rigidly in control. Our perennial winner had a weak spot?

“Since when?” I asked before I could think better of it. I’d learned long ago that Alden, conversation, and I seldom mixed well.

“Since ever.” Alden gave me the scathing look I’d been expecting. “I just...don’t.”

“Which is *fine*.” Professor Tuttle had moved from stern teacher back to peacemaker. “You don’t fly. C—*Some* of us have limited funds. And I have a plan.”

Pulse pounding, I eyed those tickets again. Forget Alden and his blinged-out decks. I could hold my own in that tournament, and I knew it. I could solve so many of my problems. But rather than being giddy with hope, I felt like I’d swallowed Alden’s huge deck bag, a heavy weight pressing on my vital organs.

Whatever this plan was, I wasn’t at all sure I was going to like it.

Chapter Two

Alden

I straightened my shoulders, not letting my body lean forward like it wanted to. I wasn't going to let myself be overeager. Not yet. Real-world plans had a way of seldom working out in my favor, which was why I loved *Odyssey* so much. In the game, all my careful strategies could come to fruition, as they had when I'd won out over Conrad a few minutes earlier. Across from me now, he had gone pale, his usual Disney-hero face gaunt and more than a little green.

"A plan?" he croaked. I had to admit, it was nice to see the Prince of Swagger off his game, even a little. He deserved to be off his game, in no small part thanks to his endless needling and mockery. He called it trash-talking, but I'd never seen the difference. It was hard not to take his comments personally when they always felt so targeted.

My fingers itched to reach for the tickets, to make sure they were real, but I wasn't going to be the first to grab. I also wasn't about to let Conrad—or anyone else—see how badly I wanted to go. Payton and Conrad undoubtedly wanted a ticket so they could party with other gamers, and Jasper was likely already envisioning the cosplay possibilities, but all I could think about was that tournament. A seat on the pro tour. Yeah,

that would be worth something after the tire fire that was my last year.

A win like that would validate all the time I'd spent honing my game, but more importantly, it would give me the one thing my life was sorely lacking: control. I'd spent the past year racking up disappointment after disappointment, and here was my chance to seize a fresh new direction for my future that had nothing to do with the increasingly claustrophobic path my family had set me on.

I swore I could already hear the cheers, feel the weight of the trophy, the intense wave of pride washing over me. But behind the daydream was the bitter splash of reality. I didn't like to fly. It was what had kept me limited to cons and tournaments within driving distance here on the East Coast and what had held me back from registering for MOC West when it first opened.

"And it doesn't involve flying?" I asked, trying to not sound as skeptical as Conrad.

"Nope." Professor Tuttle offered a wide smile. "I've had a bunch of midwestern local game stores ask for signed books. And they've been clamoring for something of a tour. So my idea is to drive with whomever wishes to join me. We can share time behind the wheel, stop at my favorite local game stores along the way, play a few hands of *Odyssey* with their regulars, see the sights... It'll be fun."

That was easy for him to say. He had friends all across the country thanks to his storied career as a mathematics professor as well as the reputation he'd built with his vlog. He loved travel, but I knew full well that he was only proposing driving because he thought that was the best way to get us there. He'd been friends with my family long enough to know about my

issues with flying. Also, Jasper was perennially short of funds, and I was never quite sure what was up with Conrad lately. He'd had to drop out of school for reasons he was cagey about, and I could never tell whether he was as broke as Jasper, or just didn't care, or possibly a mixture of both. For all his bravado, he was tough to read—something that irritated me even more than his swagger and constant needling.

“Can it be the sort of fun that I hear all about when I see you guys at the con? Road trips are *so* not my style, and I've got plane tickets already up on my phone.” Payton waved their phone, managing to sound dismissive without outright knocking the professor's plan. I desperately wanted to learn their trick for always managing to seem above the fray without being rude about it. They were never emotionally invested in anything, whether it was grades or relationships or even the game itself. Me? My adrenaline was still thrumming from the win, my stomach yet to settle from that sick feeling when I'd thought Conrad might be about to best me. Holding back his soldier tokens had been a stroke of genius.

Not that I'd ever tell him that. *He* didn't need the ego boost.

“The convention is right after the term ends for summer break.” Professor Tuttle still taught part-time, despite devoting most of his retirement to his vlog. “I say we take two weeks—five or six days there, three days for the convention, five or six days coming home. It'll be a grand adventure. Who's in?”

I expected Conrad to agree first, because no way would he turn down a chance to go party with Payton and be a minor celebrity with *Gamer Grandpa's* following. I'd been forced to overhear too many stories of their wild antics over the years to think otherwise.

In the end, though, it was Jasper who nodded first. “I’m up for it. I’ll have to talk to my folks and Arthur, though, make sure I can be spared.”

“Excellent. Conrad?” Professor Tuttle prompted. Relief rushed through me that he hadn’t asked *me* next. I still hadn’t sorted out my reaction to this turn of events. Unlike the others, I wasn’t the best at reading situations and never coped well with sudden change. I *wanted* to go. That wasn’t the issue, but there was a ton of other mental clatter going around in my head that was making it hard to focus.

“Uh...” Conrad still sat across from me, still holding his duffel like a shield. “Work, you know? Might need to rearrange some things...”

That was typically vague. I wasn’t entirely sure what job Conrad currently had. He seemed to have an endless supply of side hustles and part-time gigs that never lasted long. Rumor was, he got fired almost as often as he went out and partied. I’d once tried to help him see that the two probably were related, but he’d almost bitten my head off, so I tried not to get involved anymore. It wasn’t my business anyway.

“That’s fine. How about you guys think about it? The tickets are yours, but you can tell me your decision about the road trip when we play Sunday afternoon.”

“Time to think is good.” That gave us a little under forty-eight hours, but it was better than being put on the spot. I nodded along with Conrad.

“The tickets are ours?” Conrad licked his lower lip as he took one from the stack. I couldn’t shake the feeling he was mentally working out what his ticket might fetch on a reseller site. And see, this was why I needed to go. I was the only one of us who truly cared about the game and the tournament.

I grabbed mine before anyone else could think about taking it.

“So, you think you’re going?” Conrad nodded at the ticket in my hand. His midwestern flat affect took a turn for the country with *you* sounding more like *ya* when he was agitated. I’d never figured out exactly where he was from—some corn-fed rural state where they grew their guys naturally athletic and tall as water towers. Conrad always looked like he’d escaped some minor league baseball team to come slum with us nerds at the game store.

“Maybe. I said I’d think about it.” I didn’t owe him a peek at my inner turmoil, didn’t want him to know how rattled I was, and my tone came out way too snappish. Something about Conrad always made me feel even more out of my depth socially, and that uncertainty tended to come out as combative—little verbal swipes that accomplished nothing other than to ensure that we were always at odds.

“Chill, Alden.” Jasper was more Conrad’s friend than mine, and the long-suffering look they exchanged grated on my last nerve.

Whatever. I wasn’t in this to make friends. I was here for one reason, and one reason only—the high I got from winning. Sure, the satisfaction of deck building was nice, and the aesthetics of the game weren’t entirely lost on me, but nothing compared to the rush of victory. And right now, at this point in my life, I needed that rush in the worst way.

Payton would accuse me of being overly dramatic, so I’d never admit it aloud, but there were days when the game kept me going. Just knowing we’d had the filming today had been good. Getting to do this professionally? Being able to call this a career choice and not an expensive hobby? That might be

worth whatever it would take to get that seat on the pro tour. I still wasn't sold on Professor Tuttle's plan, but that ticket was mine, and I wasn't letting go.

Chapter Three

Conrad

The ticket might as well have weighed a hundred pounds for how it pressed on every part of my consciousness as I walked back from the game store. It made my bag seem to dig into my shoulder and made my steps heavy. I'd used the store's Wi-Fi to quickly check the ticket's value when the others had been distracted saying goodbye and making plans for Sunday's game. I could easily make several hundred for an all-access tournament slot at the sold-out event. If I put it up tonight, I could have money in my account in a few days.

But...

I sighed as I crossed from Gracehaven's quaint main street to the district of historic homes that ringed the small downtown, cutting through the park. I could already see Professor Tuttle's frown if I told him Sunday that I'd scalped the ticket. Which honestly was the best option for me. No way did I want to go on a road trip with Alden the All-Knowing. Five days straight in a confined space with a judgmental dude who always seemed to find me lacking? Count me out. And I had zero faith that he would bow out of the trip. My luck simply wasn't that strong, and I'd seen the way he'd looked at those tickets as if they were a slice of my grandma's red velvet cake. He wanted to go, probably so he and his decks could get a "real"

challenge like he was always bemoaning, as if our play group were a peewee league and he the only pro wannabe.

Screw that. I was every bit as good a player as him. And I would have—*should* have—shown him that earlier if I'd simply been able to get that one more turn. Sure, I tended to goof off during matches, which I knew full well drove Mr. Serious Player crazy, but what good was playing if you couldn't have a little fun?

“Conrad! Hey, Conrad!” A group of kids were playing soccer in the park, assorted parents and babysitters looking on from the benches at the other end of the field. The short, skinny one calling out to me was Dominic, son of the owner of the pizza place. “Come play with us!”

“Guys,” I groaned as I came closer, setting my bag down before I was mobbed. “I'm tired. It's been a long day. I don't —”

“*Please.*” Dominic's sister, Maria, had braids and two missing teeth and reminded me so much of my own sisters that my chest ached.

“A few kicks,” I conceded, doing a fast rewind in my head to make sure I'd taken my meds that morning. And at least I *had* meds that month, which was something. Even though I hadn't been kidding about being tired, I still got a familiar burst of energy jogging toward the goal with the kids. “You want to be goalie first, Maria?”

She nodded, and I stayed out with the kids until everyone had had a turn being goalie, trying to deflect my soft kicks. Finally, I begged off before they could talk me into a stint as goalie myself.

“You should be, like, a pro,” Dominic declared. “Like on TV. *Goooooal.*”

“Ha.” I laughed. *You’re too good to quit, Conrad. No son of mine is a quitter.* Harsh voices from my past rang in my ears, making it hard to smile, but I made my tone come out light. “Not hardly. Thanks for the workout, guys.”

And with that, I continued on my way through the park toward the three-story blue Victorian with apple-green trim that, while not exactly home, wasn’t that far off either. I headed around back where I found Maxine on a low stool next to one of her immaculate flower beds, using the last of the light to get some weeding in, curly gray hair sticking to her forehead.

“Hey! Isn’t that supposed to be my job?” I set my bag on the porch and hurried over to help her as she tried to get up to greet me.

“It’s my joy.” She gave me a tired smile that didn’t reach her dark eyes. “And you’ve got enough jobs. Where are you scheduled tonight?”

“Overnight stocking at the grocery store.” I sighed as she let me lead her to the Adirondack chairs on the back porch. “And then tomorrow night at the pizza place. And I know it’s the third, and rent—”

“You’ll get it to me when you have it. I trust you.” She sank into one of the chairs, her lack of protest showing that she really was more tired than she was letting on. “And speaking of rent, I need to talk to you.”

Crap. My back muscles tensed one by one until my shoulders felt guitar-string tight. I perched on the arm of the chair next to her. “Oh?”

“I’ve reached a decision. Even teaching part-time is getting to be a lot for me. This is going to be my last term. I’ll take my emeritus status and ride off into the sunset.”

“What? The poor freshman. First-year seminar won’t be the same without you.” I forced myself to smile, even as dread continued to gather. Unlike Professor Tuttle, who continued to dabble in upper-level courses in his retirement, Maxine’s passion had always been for freshman courses, especially the seminar class where I’d first met her as Professor Jackson. She’d easily been my favorite class, and she was one of the few people outside the administration who knew the whole story about why I’d had to drop out. Faced with hard choices, agreeing to rent one of her spare rooms at a discount in exchange for yard work had been one of my better decisions. She’d spent most of the year finally convincing me to call her Maxine.

“You’re too kind.” She patted my arm. “I *will* miss teaching. And this place.”

“You’re moving?” Dread turned into full-on bile, rising in my throat. No way was I finding another rent this low.

“Even with your help, this is a lot of house for an old woman ___”

“You’re not that old,” I protested, even though I knew her to be at least seventy, having kept teaching long past when other professors took their retirements.

“I am.” She laughed, a rich full-bodied sound that belied her small stature. “And DeShawn and his wife are having number three this fall. Maya’s getting married this summer, and she’s got that look too. Won’t be long for her and Carol, I bet. I think it’s time I moved nearer to my grandbabies.”

“Can’t argue with that,” I grumbled. Both of Maxine’s kids and their partners lived in the DC area, having settled there after college, and I couldn’t deny her logic in wanting to move closer. Family was important to her, as it should be, and I was merely her renter. “So you’ll be putting the house on the market?”

“Yes. Soon. Everyone says it’ll sell fast—the place across the street got a cash offer in eight days.”

“Ah.” I chewed my lower lip, trying to calculate how much time I had.

“Why don’t you keep this month’s rent, Conrad?” She’d always been too perceptive by half. “You can add it to your fund for a new place. And I can ask around—”

“You’ve done so much already.” No way was I letting pity drive her to find me another professor with a spare room. It was beyond time for me to figure out what came next for the smoldering heap that had become my life. A vision of the MOC West ticket leaped to the front of my brain. If I could win, if I could get a seat on the pro tour, that could be my next move. Rent money, breathing room from my bills, and the chance to win big at the game I loved. What could be better than that?

Road trip with Alden, I reminded myself. *And using the last of your cash to take two weeks off would be beyond stupid.* Damn it. I hated practical reality. Would braving a road trip with Alden and his barbs be worth the payoff in the end? I still wasn’t sure.

“Well, all right.” Maxine nodded slowly. “But I hate leaving you in the lurch.”

“You’re not,” I lied. “I’ll come up with something.”

And I would. It was what I was good at—coming up with strategies on the fly, seeing opportunity where others saw only defeat. But later that night, when the manager at the grocery store sought me out, I was having a hard time not seeing doom in her sad frown.

“We’re having to cut back. Both hours and positions. I’ve got some hours for you through the end of the month, but then...” Bian looked away at a display of cereal boxes, not meeting my eyes. “You’re the most recent hire.”

“Yeah.” First in, first out. I got it. This wasn’t my first time losing out due to not having seniority somewhere. And the manager was a nice enough woman—twenty years’ experience at the store, and still able to be patient when I didn’t know where things went at first. “Listen, don’t worry about me. I’ll figure something out.”

I was less and less sure about that, and when I collapsed across my bed at seven thirty that morning, all I could see was my duffel at the foot of the bed. That ticket. It could be a few hundred to try to get another rental situation, or my last, best hope of actually turning my luck around. I tried to picture winning, being handed the check, and all I could feel was relief as I counted zeroes. And if I got on the pro tour, there would be more checks like that—enough to buy a future, one win at a time.

Maybe, just maybe, the road trip wasn’t the *worst* idea, especially if it delivered me to a better place.

Chapter Four

Alden

“You’re so beautiful.” I stroked Emma’s golden head, reveling in her presence, drinking in her calm acceptance. She was easily one of the highlights of my day, which said a lot about the state of my life right then.

“I’m pretty sure you came to see the dog and not us, didn’t you?” my mom asked from the kitchen doorway.

“I came to see you guys too,” I protested from my spot at the bottom of the staircase where I’d been brushing Emma. My hand tightened around the brush because I was totally guilty. Knowing Emma had been counting on our weekly Saturday run while the moms made brunch had gotten me up and out of bed, much more so than the thought of French toast casserole or turkey sausage. Or the grilling I knew was coming.

“Well, the food is ready. And no, you can’t take yours back with you.”

“Hey, I’m not *that* bad.” Two weeks ago, however, I had done exactly that, claiming the need to make a phone call and grabbing my waffles on the trek back to the carriage house behind my moms’ Victorian, where I currently lived. I supposed I couldn’t do the same trick again. I knelt for one last pat for Emma. “Who wants a treat?”

“You spoil her.”

“She deserves it.” And she really did. I might live in the backyard, but my visits to the main house had been irregular at best this last year—all part of a losing effort to distance myself from the pressure my moms had been exerting. Also, the dog had put up with my anxiety over the last year far better than either of my moms. That morning, she’d eagerly done an extra lap around the pond while I continued to puzzle out what I was going to do about my ticket.

I wish I knew for certain whether Conrad was going to bail. That would make everything easier. I did not want to spend days on end in a car with someone who made no secret of not liking me, even though he got along with almost everyone else. Something about the two of us was like mixing Diet Coke and Mentos—guaranteed instant eruption. I wasn’t blameless either. I knew I had a tendency to bristle at all his teasing. Just as I retreated to my carriage house to avoid uncomfortable encounters with my moms, I retreated to the relative safety of the game when around the rest of the Gamer Grandpa crew, its rules and requirements so much more reassuring than the complexities of social interactions.

And okay, *part* of me wouldn’t object to being smashed in a back seat with someone who looked and smelled as good as Conrad did, but that part of me was *not* in charge of making important life decisions, and I’d spent over two years trying very hard not to notice Conrad in that way. I wasn’t about to start crushing on someone who hated me *now*.

And if nothing else, I knew myself. I didn’t travel well. My social awkwardness tended to worsen when I got anxious—something that new and uncomfortable situations often triggered to begin with. Summer camps and field trips had

been misery for me growing up, and even now as an adult, day trips to local conventions could be stressful. And Vegas would be an entirely different beast.

Yet none of that stopped me from wanting to go, to play, to win. Badly.

After giving Emma her treat, I followed my mom into the breakfast nook where Mimi, my other mother, was setting out the food on the colorful stoneware she collected. Mimi—whose given name was Judith—had been a part of our family since I was six, and in many ways, I related better to her than to my bio mother. Actually, I looked more like her too—shorter, dark hair, thin build—and teachers frequently mixed up who was related to whom and how. I didn't care. I loved them both, even as they drove me to the brink sometimes, especially lately. My bio mom was taller, statuesque, with hair she kept highlighted, built more like an aging starlet than the renowned neurologist she actually was. She took the seat next to Mimi, leaving me to sit across from them, a double firing squad of expectations.

“Food looks good. Thank you.” Weekends were one of the rare times they cooked big meals together, and growing up, we'd anticipated the Saturday bounty like a mini-Hanukkah.

“It's that challah I made when Rebecca was home on spring break,” Mimi enthused. The mention of my genius older sister, who was in her final year at Harvard Med, made my jaw ache. But Mimi was undaunted as she served us all generous portions of the egg casserole and sides of turkey sausage and fruit. “Thought it might be a nice treat as we head into the end of the semester rush.”

“Yeah. Lots of grading for you?” I was intent on keeping the focus off me as long as possible.

“Well, lots of grading for the teaching assistants.” Mimi laughed lightly. A biochemist, she was a long-time faculty member at the university—one who brought in more than her share of grant funding for her groundbreaking research. “And you? Lots of papers due?”

Here we go. “Some. It’s a light term.”

“Well, let me know if you need me to look anything over.” Mimi might be one of the busiest faculty members, but she’d always made time for us kids, everything from homework to heartbreak.

“And don’t forget about the writing center,” Mom added.

“Got it.” Writing wasn’t my strong point, but my classes for the postbachelor certificate program were notoriously soft, most students having done what I’d intended to do—use the program as a stepping-stone toward other graduate programs. A number of students were in my same boat, having missed out on acceptance letters senior year and going for a second try at the programs they’d really wanted. But even knowing that I wasn’t alone didn’t make my situation any easier to stomach.

“Alden. Are you taking exams seriously?” Eyes narrowing, Mom set her fork aside to lean forward as she warmed to her favorite topic—how to fix my life. “It’s past time we discuss your future beyond this year.”

“Is it?” I groaned, the couple of bites of casserole I’d managed turning to glue in my stomach.

“We know you’re disappointed.” Mimi’s kind eyes were full of sympathy, but there was also a resignation there that made me want to squirm. This was high school all over again, them bound and determined to figure out why I was fine academically and floundering socially. The endless pressure to

add extracurriculars and pursue prestigious colleges like Gracehaven. Me never feeling quite good enough, letting them down over and over.

Disappointed didn't begin to cover it. Disappointed was last year, when the first wave of rejections for my medical school applications had come in. But everyone had said to try again, to spread my search wider, to be more flexible. Do this certificate, work even harder, get better references. And be patient.

This? The feeling after all that had failed, after there wasn't a single acceptance, as even the chances of being waitlisted dwindled to nothing, was devastation. Disappointment was something I knew how to navigate, but this emptiness inside me was on a scale that I hadn't yet figured out how to cope with.

"You've got options though." Mom held up her hand, ticking them off on her well-manicured fingers. "You can finish the certificate program, do the second year focusing on health administration. Or transition to an MBA."

"A PhD program is also still a possibility," Mimi added. "Especially with your strong grades. With an undergrad in math and minors in biology and chemistry, you're well set for any number of options."

Ah. Options. The moms were huge on plans of action and choosing acceptable options. But no one wanted to hear about the option I really wanted, which was to play *Odyssey* until I forgot that we'd ever dreamed of me being a doctor. But I didn't say that, just nodded and forced myself to take another bite to buy myself time.

"I do wish you'd written your entrance statement on being neurodiverse. I really think it would have helped." Mom shook

her head.

“Yes, embracing your differences and challenges would have shed a better light on your résumé,” Mimi agreed.

“So say my mothers,” I groaned. “And when not even medical professionals can agree—”

“Which is what you could write about.” Mom always acted like the parade of experts they’d dragged me to in junior high and high school were a fun field trip, a life-enrichment experience, and they both had zero problem bringing it up around other people. I, on the other hand, didn’t much care for public airing of my issues—and really didn’t like remembering their quest to fix me, unable to understand why things were so much harder for me than my older sisters, who had glided through school and landed in top medical programs with almost balletic ease.

“It’s too late now, anyway.” I did not want to rehash my shortcomings all morning. At least they weren’t dredging up how many times I’d taken the MCAT entrance exams and all the money involved in the tests and application fees and study courses. I had the grades, sure, but those *tests*. I never failed to freeze up. “I’m...weighing my options.”

I tried to sound deliberate, the way they both always managed to play uncertainty off as thoughtfulness, but it didn’t work, both of them shaking their heads simultaneously.

“You need a direction,” Mom said firmly, and Mimi made a noise of agreement. “I want to hear that you’re committed to a course of action. Soon. Deadlines are fast approaching. You need an appropriate plan for your future. You can’t keep closing yourself off from the world and losing yourself in that game.”

That game was the one bright spot in my life right now, but this was an old argument between us, and I wasn't going to relitigate it. Instead, that ticket and everything it represented flashed like a neon billboard behind my eyes. Get to Vegas. Win. Join the pro tour. Find a way past my fear of flying. Use pro tour commitments to hold off big decisions that threatened to swallow me whole. Figure out my own life and my own direction away from all their expectations and pressures. It wasn't a *terrible* plan.

"I'm not. In fact, I'm considering a trip with...friends." *Friends* was pushing it. Professor Tuttle was more of a mentor. Meanwhile, Jasper and Payton loosely tolerated my presence but didn't invite me along for anything outside of the games, and Conrad and I were closer to enemies than anything else. But, I knew the word *friends* would immediately reassure the moms, get them to back off.

"That's wonderful." Mimi beamed.

"You getting social interaction is always good." Mom sounded exactly the same as she had about the nine zillion different clubs she'd made me try as a kid, but then her tone shifted to something far more ominous. "But, I want you to come back with a firm commitment to your future. Or else we're going to need to have a different talk. One about living arrangements."

Hell. Sweat gathered along my hairline. I'd known that at twenty-three I couldn't keep living at home, under their benevolence, but I'd hoped to buy myself a little more time. And now, with both of them nodding grimly, I supposed I was locked into going on the trip, no matter what my own reservations were...and no matter who else was along for the ride.

Chapter Five

Conrad

Late. I was late for the Sunday game, and while hardly a novel situation for me, I still hated it. But flat-out sprinting from Maxine's house also wasn't an option, so I settled for a half walk/half jog that put me at the game store ten or so minutes behind schedule—which considering that I'd gone from my grocery-store gig to two hours of sleep to covering the lunch rush at the pizza place because someone else was sick, to racing home because I'd forgotten my gaming bag, to back downtown was something of a minor miracle. I was close to falling over from exhaustion, but I was there. Had to count for something.

As I entered the store, my shoulders relaxed the way my body always did there, the glassed-in display cases, shelves of board games, racks of play accessories, and tables of casual gamers reassuring me in a way that little else could. This was my place. It wasn't my hometown game store, which had been smaller and darker, but the smell of new cards and old coffee was the same, as was my feeling of belonging. After nodding at Arthur, who was looking particularly intimidating cleaning off one of the cases as if its existence offended him, I found my group at one of the back tables. Alden was glaring at the closed door to the private room, but everyone else was kicked back in the folding chairs.

“I’m here. Previous group running behind?” I asked as I took the chair next to Jasper. “Guess I’m not actually late.”

“It’s three forty-five. We said three thirty,” Alden pointed out. “That the other group is also late doesn’t make you less so.”

I blinked at him, wondering not for the first time what the hell his problem was. He had a major tendency to go hyperliteral, especially when plans didn’t go his way. His tone was more matter-of-fact than belligerent or accusing, but it grated. While less accusatory, he still sounded like my dad, all harping on personal responsibility and not interested in good excuses.

“Late Saturday night?” Payton gave me a tired-looking grin. They had on dark sunglasses and a giant fuzzy hoodie and undoubtedly were nursing a world-class hangover. They and I used to be regulars at a lot of the same places a lifetime ago, when my biggest worry on weekends had been where the action was, whether at an all-night gaming marathon or an off-campus party.

“Didn’t make it home until seven thirty.” I went for honest, even if not the whole story.

“The *best*.” Jasper gave me a high five. “I love living vicariously through you people.”

I doubted he’d want to live vicariously through six hours of shelving assorted pet-food products, but I nodded anyway. “And you? What trouble did you find?”

“Only the good kind.” Jasper pulled a deck box out of his bag and removed a stack of cards. “Opened some more packs, sifted through the single card bins, and ta-da! Boss-ass new deck. Every creature card in it transforms.”

“Formidable.” Before I could ask to see, Arthur came over. Dude was built like a wrestler, with tats, big arm muscles, rumors of a career in special forces cut short, and a deep voice that sent would-be shoplifters scurrying for safer targets. However, he also had a lot of respect for Professor Tuttle, as evidenced by the deferential nod he gave him.

“Sorry about the other group. They should be out soon. Got something in I thought you guys might like.” He held out his massive hand to reveal rainbow-striped unicorn card sleeves.

“I like.” Payton delicately plucked the pack out of his hand. “Ring me up when you get a chance.”

“Do you have any more?” Professor Tuttle stroked his chin. “Maybe those would finally convince Julio to play.”

“I’ll grab you a pack when I ring Payton up. But I doubt that husband of yours is going to become a regular here anytime soon.”

Professor Tuttle laughed, both because no way would his elegant husband go for the unicorns, and because his inability to catch onto the game was a running joke among us.

The store didn’t specialize in LGBTQ gaming or anything like that, but we also weren’t Arthur’s only group likely to have some rainbow-loving members. It was a big part of why I felt so secure here. Arthur might be scary as heck, but he ran a tight ship and didn’t put up with any offensive behavior. And while Professor Tuttle never shared anything personal beyond our first names on his show, he was a founding faculty adviser for the Safe Space Alliance on campus. I’d never admit it aloud, but I admired his forty-year partnership with his retired drama professor husband almost as much as I did his impressive grasp of the game.

They had the sort of relationship that ordinary people never achieved—like something out of a movie. I could envy it, but I also knew it was never happening for me. Hell, I wasn't even sure I'd *want* that in my life. There were too many times when I'd seen how love screwed people over, that sort of commitment setting one up for near-inevitable hurt.

“So.” Professor Tuttle turned in my direction as Arthur left our table. “Who’s up for the road trip? We should start making plans.”

“I am,” I said at the exact same instant Alden did. My gaze locked on his, catching the moment when his eyes dimmed, his face seeming to collapse in on itself, disappointment clear in the way his shoulders sagged. Yeah, he'd heard me. And it was pretty darn obvious that he'd been hoping for me to not go, but now he was stuck. As was I. *Damn it*. I couldn't change my mind now without looking like a giant tool.

Across from me, Alden's expression returned to neutral even as his posture went stiff, like no way was he going to let us see him rattled. Arrogant. Stubborn. Perfectionist. Jerk. He was all those things. Was I really going to spend two weeks with *that*?

Even as I questioned my resolve, I could see myself winning the tournament, could sense the relief, could almost feel the crispness of the check. Yeah. I was going.

“You got off work?” Jasper asked me. “I had to call in a bunch of favors to make it happen for me. Arthur's being more flexible than usual, but he wants us to take T-shirts advertising the store, like as a sponsor.”

“Yeah, I figured it out.” I managed to sound casual and not panicked. No one, Alden especially, needed to know that I was using my last cash to do this, the rent Maxine wouldn't take along with whatever else I could scrape together. I was setting

myself up for the gamble of a lifetime. If I failed, chances were high that I'd come back to no place to live, no steady job, no plan B. But I'd been there before, starting from scratch. It was simply a risk I had to take.

“Excellent. I’m so looking forward to this.” Professor Tuttle smiled even broader than the *Gamer Grandpa* logo on his shirt.

The private game room finally cleared, an obnoxious group of older adults dedicated to a popular kids’ card game filing out. As we got set up with the cameras, Alden sniffed the air.

“Did the other group have *food*? There are rules for a reason. Now it stinks of pepperoni in here.”

I looked away. With anyone else, I'd laugh and admit that the smell was undoubtedly me, still in the plain black T-shirt the pizza place asked us to wear, no time to shower and change before I'd had to hurry here. But, with him, all I could do was glare.

“My kingdom for Arthur letting us have drinks at least. He could make a killing if he'd add an espresso bar instead of just keeping that swill on in back.” Payton sank into one of the chairs. “And tell me I don't have to go first. We're doing tournament-style matches today, right?”

Friday's video had been the more casual four-person *Odyssey* game, while today Professor Tuttle wanted to do two matches in the more popular two-player tournament format.

“That's correct. And if you're going to sit out the first match, let's do Conrad versus Jasper's new deck to start.”

“Awesome.” Grateful to not have to face Alden, I unrolled my play mat and set up opposite Jasper.

“Do you need to borrow a tournament-permissible deck?” Alden was already riffling through his bag as though it was a given that I would need to borrow something.

“Nah. I worked something out yesterday.” As per my usual, I’d cobbled together a workable deck from cards I already owned and the packs from Jasper.

Once we got started, I kept waiting for my adrenaline to kick in, but all I felt was tired, three days of very little sleep catching up with me. Waiting for Jasper to make a move, I couldn’t hold back a yawn. He played a giant Cyclops Wizard, one that made me quickly need to adjust my strategy. But my brain was fuzzy as I looked over my hand of cards.

“I hit it with Sudden Extinction.” I slapped down a card.

“*Conrad.*” Alden sighed before Jasper could. “You can’t play an extinction card against a wizard. You should know that.”

“Crap.” I did know that. I was simply so darn tired, even my toes ached. Stupid, newbie mistake. And of course Alden had to be the one to call me on it. Had anyone else pointed out my mistake, it wouldn’t sting so much. Something about Alden always made humiliation that much more intense, made me feel like a newbie kid.

“You know, plenty of people go to MOC West for a lot of different reasons. You don’t *have* to play in the tournament.” Alden made himself sound all reasonable. And he wasn’t lying—these sort of cons were as known for the social opportunities as for the tournament play. I’d attended enough regional events to be able to look forward to the mingling, the speakers and panels, the after-hours parties, the casual pickup games, and continual people-watching. But unlike a day pass to a regional con, this ticket included a spot in the tournament—

usually a pricey add-on. No way was I turning that down when it was my whole reason for going, for putting up with Alden and the hassle of this road trip.

“I’m playing.” I gritted out the words. And I would. I’d prove him wrong. Prove everyone wrong. I’d play. I’d win. And maybe it would be the longest two-week trip ever, maybe I’d have to live with headphones on to tune out Alden and all his judgments, but I was going, and nothing was going to change my mind.

* * *

The weeks leading up to the road trip passed in a blur—logistics planning, helping Maxine get the house ready to sell, taking every spare hour Bian could find for me at the grocery store before my position ran out, and trying to ignore that another group of friends was preparing for graduation day while I was over here spinning my wheels and living on SpaghettiOs. I went to all the graduation stuff Friday and Saturday morning, though, because I wasn’t a shit friend. Next year would be the turn for all the kids I’d started Gracehaven with. I wanted...

Fuck. What did it matter anymore what I wanted? It wasn’t going to happen. And honestly, I fit in less and less with my old crowd, leaving me in a terrible funk when I arrived at Professor Tuttle’s place Saturday afternoon to help pack. The plan was packing Saturday with an eye to a crack-of-dawn departure Sunday morning. Luckily, he also lived in the historic district, so it wasn’t that far to tote my gaming duffel and backpack. The rest of my stuff—which wasn’t much more than a sad stack of three boxes—was in a friend’s basement so that Maxine wouldn’t have to worry if the house sold while we were gone. No way was I telling the others that I was

essentially homeless now, and I took a deep breath as I approached the tall, narrow row house, trying to put on the fun-loving face I knew they all expected of me.

Professor Tuttle and Professor Herrera kept their yard as neat as Maxine's, early June pink flowers in tidy beds that lined the way to an equally narrow backyard and detached garage where I found Jasper and Alden. Payton was flying out later in the week, after they had recovered from all the graduation parties I'd be skipping that night. Last thing I needed was Alden lecturing me if I yawned when it was my turn to drive. And speaking of the burr in my paw, he was already frowning as I walked up.

"I'm not late," I said, hating my defensive tone.

"Your punctuality isn't my issue. The suitability of our transport is my more immediate concern." As with his literalism when the game had been delayed, I could tell he was worked up because his speech was more formal, affect more wooden, as he turned his critical gaze on the car parked in front of the garage. And, *huh*. I couldn't say I'd ever seen Professor Tuttle drive. His house was located about equidistant to the downtown and the campus, and despite his age, he often walked to our gaming sessions or his class lectures.

But clearly I should have given more thought to his car preferences. Because parked there in the driveway was a *boat*. A gleaming, black boat of a car with tinted windows. Looked to be a Lincoln, at least twenty years old and totally at home in FBI and Mafia movies alike. It was the largest sedan I'd seen outside a classic car show, and the trunk alone could easily hold half a basketball team worth of bodies.

"Is this thing up for the trip?" I hated to agree with Alden about anything, but I didn't want to be broken down in the

desert in something that had seen better decades, possibly better centuries.

“We discussed this.” Jasper took on a long-suffering tone that pointed to an ongoing argument with Alden over the car. “Neither of you owns a car. Mine is a tiny hatchback with 200,000 miles and a transmission that I pray for weekly. The professor says this is in perfect repair. Quit acting like he should have sent you guys a CarFax report before you signed up to go.”

“Who’s knocking Black Jack?” Professor Tuttle came out of the rear of his house, crossing a small patio to join us. “This beauty was the one real luxury I allowed myself when my first book hit the bestseller lists. Julio’s always had our practical, everyday car, but for a trip, nothing beats a good, old-fashioned luxury sedan. I’ve kept it for just such an occasion.”

I couldn’t say I agreed, but as it was clear the car had sentimental value to him, I wasn’t about to go on record dissing his ride. Besides, I was too invested to back out now.

“Pretty sure I can drive it,” I said, trying to find some confidence. “My folks have a newer Suburban. If I can park that, this won’t be an issue. As long as you’re sure that it’s ready to go, let’s pack.”

“Biggest thing I’ve driven is a Prius,” Alden muttered, looking decidedly unsure of himself, which was novel enough to give me pause. I couldn’t say I’d seen him that much outside of filming the show—him outdoors and not under the store’s fluorescent lights was jarring enough, and him anything other than self-assured and opinionated almost never happened. Even when rattled and falling back on factual-yet-cutting remarks, he always stayed supremely confident.

“I can drive your shifts,” I volunteered, both to get us to move on and to finally have a comeback for his offers of loaned decks and subpar cards.

And as I’d expected, my proposal got him straightening back up to perfect posture, chin lifting. “I’ll be fine.”

“Of course, you will.” Professor Tuttle clapped him on the shoulder. “Now let’s bring out the rest of my stuff before we start arranging our baggage in the trunk. There’s an art to it. Biggest things first.”

We followed him to the French doors that led to the kitchen and dining area where a neat stack of bags waited. I took most of it, leaving a few things for Jasper, who was right behind me, but I wanted to make sure Professor Tuttle didn’t have to carry anything.

“Hey, I can help too,” Alden protested on the way back to the car.

“We got it.” I set the bags down next to a backpack I recognized as Jasper’s and a massive suitcase better suited to a European expedition next to a bag for one of the high-end natural-food stores in town. Looking over at Alden, I gestured at the elephant-sized luggage. “Did you leave anything in your room?”

I meant it to come off as a tease, but from the way Alden bristled, he took it as a personal attack. “I packed thoroughly, yes. You want to be prepared, you know.”

No, actually, I didn’t know, having been entirely *unprepared* for everything that had happened this past year. But I’d managed to make it through, and the way I saw it, there was no sense in overpacking. Or overpreparing. Life would do what it was going to do, and the most any of us could do was

to just roll with the punches and hope it didn't suck too badly. Too many plans simply led to disappointment.

"Leave some room for spontaneity," I said to Alden. No point getting philosophical. "And you brought food too?"

"Of course. Road food is inherently unhealthy. And you'll waste all your money on that stuff if you're not careful." Alden spoke deliberately, as if I were eleven with too much money to spend at the camp store or something. To me, road food was one of the best parts of a car trip, but his words made me feel stupid for looking forward to it. Before I could come up with a good retort, Alden added, "My moms are making muffins for the morning too."

"Oh, I do love Judith's cooking." Professor Tuttle clapped his hands together.

"Yeah." Alden sighed a little as though it was *such* a burden, having awesome parents. I'd had a biochem class with Professor Goldstein, Alden's mother, sophomore year, and I knew both from things she'd said as well as clues Alden dropped that his other mother was some sort of bigwig doctor.

And *two* moms? How fucking lucky could a queer kid get? I imagined that Alden's coming out—if there had even been need for one—had been greeted with a cake and streamers. That they were baking him send-off muffins was no surprise, and if a bitter tang gathered in my mouth, I tried to swallow it and other less-than-charitable thoughts.

"Surprised the moms are letting you off the leash." The words escaped my better efforts and earned me a disgusted look from Alden.

"I'll make sure to leave some muffins for Professor Herrera too," Alden offered, giving Professor Tuttle his full attention,

effectively dismissing me.

“He’ll love that. Now, let me just duck back inside a moment.”

“You need help?” I turned to follow him, but he waved me away.

“No, no. I’ll be right back. Call of nature, and I want to make sure I didn’t leave anything upstairs.”

More like he probably wanted to escape the tension between Alden and me, but I was still smarting too much from Alden’s comments to apologize for my own crack, especially not when Alden waited until the professor was back in the house to remark to Jasper, “I’ve been thinking. Given the age and sentimental value of this car, perhaps certain ground rules are prudent. Like no drinking or smoking.”

“I don’t smoke.” I didn’t know what he’d heard, but that wasn’t among my many vices. And he might have been addressing Jasper, but I knew darn well that he meant his rules for me, and I was having none of it. “And if you’re implying that I’d be stupid enough to try to drive—”

“But I heard—” He stopped, the silence damning. I had a pretty good idea what kind of crap he had *heard*. “You did have a car, but it was taken away. I’ve been worried that perhaps you don’t have a license anymore.”

“It wasn’t a freaking DUI,” I growled at him, fierce enough to make him take a step back. “And I am a damn good driver. Like I said, I’ve driven big SUVs. I’ll be just fine with this car. You’re the nervous one, not me.”

“I’m not nervous.” Alden plucked at something on the cuff of the sweatshirt he wore over khaki shorts.

“Sure you—”

“I’m going to go check on the professor.” Not waiting for a reply, Jasper headed for the house. A natural peacemaker for our little group, he’d never been much on conflict, and I should have felt bad for chasing him off, but Alden and his stupid-ass assumptions had me too worked up.

“You are. You’re scared about this trip.” I stared Alden down. “You’ve been like a nervous rabbit ever since the tickets appeared—all twitchy and on edge. Maybe you should just bail.”

“Like you did on school?” Alden shot back. Then he flushed and looked away, as if he hadn’t meant to rise to my bait.

“That’s what you think? That school was too hard for me? Or that I flunked out?” It felt good, actually fighting with him instead of us just taking random swipes at each other.

He shrugged, picking at that fraying cuff again. He wouldn’t meet my eyes. “You never say what happened, but you *did* like to party.”

“And so does half the damn school. You don’t know dick. If you knew the truth—”

“Conrad! Come quick!” Jasper’s panicked yell cut through my rage. I turned toward the house, emotions reluctant to disengage from Alden, but then Jasper called out again, “It’s Professor Tuttle! Call 911.”

And with that, every dream I’d clung to for the past few weeks froze, crumbling like flowers caught in a surprise spring blizzard. I should have known better than to pin my hopes on anything.

Chapter Six

Alden

Jasper hadn't called for *me*, but I still ran after Conrad, already fishing my phone out of my shorts.

"I can call," I yelled, already dialing. "What do I tell them?"

"Professor Tuttle fell down the stairs carrying a box of books. He's conscious but hurt bad." Jasper lowered his voice to speaking tones as we entered the house. His skin had taken on a sickly green cast. "I'll go unlock the door for the paramedics. Tell them to hurry."

"Got it," I said right as the dispatcher picked up, and I relayed our information to her, trying to catch my breath enough that she could understand me. Even though I was flustered, I still got the address right. I always was far better with numbers than words, and I trailed after Conrad who'd already headed to the front staircase. My stomach roiled as uncertainty over what we might find rushed through me.

Professor Tuttle lay in a heap at the base of the stairs, copies of his book scattered all around him. There wasn't any blood that I could see, but the low, pained moans were enough to make my hand clench tighter around my phone.

"Please hurry," I told the dispatcher.

“You should hear sirens any moment,” she soothed me. Gracehaven was a small enough city that the main fire station was only a few blocks past the other side of downtown. “I’m going to let you go so you can let the EMTs in.”

She was gone before I could tell her that Jasper was handling that, leaving me to stand helplessly by while Conrad knelt next to Professor Tuttle. I was the one who was supposedly going into medicine, and I was ashamed at how my hands were shaking and my sinuses burning. My head kept ringing with memories of how my moms were always remarking on how badly I handled unexpected disasters, their assumptions that I would freak out often feeling like a self-fulfilling prophecy that ratcheted up my anxiety and dulled my ability to cope.

“Can you hear me?” Conrad asked Professor Tuttle with none of my own hesitance.

“Yes, yes.” The professor sounded weak, but also more like himself than I’d expected. “Still here. Just a bit of a... predicament.”

“Don’t try to move,” Conrad ordered as I finally picked up on the sound of sirens in the distance. “Can you feel your toes and fingers?”

It was the sort of question I should have thought to ask, but my throat remained too tight to even squeeze a reassuring word out—not that I was sure what one should say in such circumstances. I couldn’t lie and tell him everything would be okay, not when it so clearly wasn’t.

“I...can. Everything hurts.”

“I bet.” Conrad was the sort of sympathetic that I should have been. “Do you want me to find a blanket?”

“No. My...phone. Right pocket. Call Julio. At...graduation party.”

“I will.” Conrad leaned in, gently extracting the phone. “I’ll make sure he meets us at the hospital.”

“No need...trouble you guys.”

“We’re going,” Conrad said firmly, and I supposed we were. The ambulance crew arrived right then, a man and woman, Jasper trailing behind them along with two firefighters. Apparently they’d sent a truck too. Despite Professor Tuttle’s protests that he had sensation in his limbs, they strapped him to a backboard with a cervical collar before transferring him to a stretcher. His groans as they moved him made my teeth grind, that helpless feeling continuing to well up inside me.

“All...so...unnecessary,” Professor Tuttle gasped as they got him settled on the stretcher, strapping him down. “Feel... foolish.”

“Don’t,” Conrad said. “This is our fault. You shouldn’t have been trying to carry something down the stairs.”

From the way he glared at me as he said it, it was clear that he blamed me for the professor’s injury. Which probably wasn’t that far from the truth. If we hadn’t been arguing, he might have been more likely to ask for help instead of trying to escape inside, and Conrad and his insistence on carrying triple loads would have been the one with the box. Which meant, really, it *was* my fault because I’d let Conrad’s comments and my anxiety about the car goad me into an argument that I wouldn’t have otherwise started. Stupid anxiety, always in the way, making me say exactly the wrong thing at exactly the wrong moment.

Conrad's harsh glare remained as they wheeled Professor Tuttle out to the ambulance, and we scrambled to Jasper's tiny car to follow. Jasper drove like the emergency was an excuse to try out for the Indy 500, even though his car seemed prone to an ever-more-alarming series of noises—rumbles and shakes and squeals. While I rode in the back seat, praying that we made it to the hospital in one piece, Conrad spoke into the professor's phone, leaving a message for Professor Herrera.

"I'm not sure who else to call. They don't have kids, do they?"

"Nah," Jasper answered as he badly parked in the hospital's lot. He was on the white line, and the urge to point it out was almost overwhelming. "Professor Herrera will come, and he'll know who else to call. It'll be okay, man."

I wished I shared both his certainty and his ability to calm Conrad down. Not surprisingly, the receptionist for the ER wasn't able to allow us to go be with Professor Tuttle or to tell us anything more than we already knew. She directed us to have a seat in the waiting area.

"Can you call your mom? The doctor one?" Jasper asked after we'd been there long enough for our breathing to even out and our silence to turn awkward. It was the first time one of them had spoken to me directly since the accident. "Maybe she can find out more for us."

"Good idea. I can do that." Having a concrete task was good, and my hands were steadier as I got my phone back out. "HIPAA stuff probably means she can't tell us much, but if he's got a head injury, they might have already paged her. She's on call this weekend."

"Excellent." Jasper nodded, but Conrad kept right on glaring at me. Needing privacy and an escape from that anger, I took

my phone away from them, stepping into a side corridor.

“They haven’t rung yet, which is probably a good sign, honestly,” Mom said after I explained what had happened. “But I’ll call in, see what I can find out, and I’ll have Judith try Julio herself. She might know which party he’s likely at.”

“Thanks.” It helped just telling her, knowing she was looking into the situation.

“Do you want me to head there?”

No. Things had been weird enough earlier, her and Mimi all excited about me having *friends* like I was a kindergartner with their first playdate, baking muffins and handing out unwanted advice. But I didn’t want to start another argument. “We’ll work it out.”

When I returned to the waiting area, Jasper was nowhere to be seen, and Conrad was sitting with his head down, hands in his hair, shoulders slumped. He looked utterly defeated. I might not have the first clue what I was supposed to say to him, but I knew I couldn’t simply take the empty chair next to him and ignore his despair.

“The doctors here have excellent ratings, you know. It’s not a nationally ranked teaching hospital for nothing. They’ll take good care of Professor Tuttle.” Facts were more comforting to me than false platitudes, but given the way Conrad blinked at me, perhaps I should have opened with something more like “he’ll be okay” even though I had no way of guaranteeing that.

“What did your mom say?”

“They hadn’t called her for a neurology consult yet, which she says is good. She’s going to see what she can find out.”

“Good.” Conrad scrubbed at his hair, making it even more unruly than it already was. He used to always keep it short and

tamed with product, but lately it always seemed a few weeks overdue for a trim. “Can’t believe this happened. It’s all my fault for not insisting he let me carry everything.”

“It’s not your fault.” I wanted to pat his leg or arm, the way Mimi might if I were the one upset, but I knew better than to touch Conrad right then. “It’s mine. I shouldn’t have argued with you. And I’m sorry.”

“‘Sorry’ isn’t going to fix Professor Tuttle.” Conrad blew out a harsh breath. “But I argued back. So it’s on both of us, really.”

That wasn’t the same as “apology accepted,” but it was probably about as good as I was going to get.

“Yeah. But I’m the one who...” I swallowed hard because admitting I’d been wrong was never easy. “What did you mean by if I knew the truth about you and school?”

His laugh was a brittle, jagged thing. “You don’t get that story. Not now. Not while I’m still so pissed at you—at me, at both of us—that I can’t think straight. Sorry.”

“Fair enough.” I hated the disappointment that made my muscles sag. He was right. I had no right to his story, whatever had really happened to him, but it didn’t stop me from wanting it as the minutes ticked away. The initial rush of trying to make it to the hospital had given way to the monotony of waiting, time passing with the slowness of a standardized test even as the urgency in my chest didn’t let up.

“I’m here.” Professor Herrera came charging into the waiting room right as my eyes started to glaze over from waiting. Tall and broad-shouldered and somewhat younger than Professor Tuttle, he had a commanding presence as he loomed over us. “What happened? Tell me everything.”

“I’m so sorry, sir. It was an accident.” Conrad did a better job than I was capable of at relaying the limited facts we had.

“And how is he now?” Professor Herrera’s cultured voice was way calmer than either Conrad’s or mine.

“We don’t know,” Conrad said miserably. “They haven’t told us anything.”

“Well, they better tell *me*. You guys wait here. I’ll go see if they’ll let me see him, then come back and update you.” Radiating confidence, he hurried away, and I settled further into my chair. He wasn’t the kind of guy who could be argued with. If he said wait, then wait we would.

Sometime later Jasper came back with three cans of soda. I almost never had soda—the moms had been strict about junk food growing up—but Conrad accepted his gratefully, so I did the same thing, right down to mimicking his nod.

“Thanks, man,” he said to Jasper.

“Thanks,” I repeated and took a sip before I set it aside. The last thing we needed was me hyped up on sugar and caffeine.

We watched a bad true-crime show on the waiting-room TV and generally avoided talking to one another. My mom messaged that she didn’t know much more than that he was stable and getting tests, which I shared with the others, who nodded, then went silent again. I wished yet again for the sort of social ease people like my sisters had. They’d know how to cut this tension, get the other two talking. Anything to make this feel less funereal. Someone must have texted Payton, who stopped by on the way to a graduation party, bringing sandwiches that we all picked at. Shortly after Payton left, Professor Herrera came back out in time to claim one of the remaining sandwiches.

“He has a broken collarbone, a broken hip, and shoulder and knee injuries,” he reported, sinking into one of the empty chairs. “No concussion that they can see, but they’re working on admitting him now, getting him comfortable before surgery in the coming days. I know you’ve all probably got places to be, but he did say he’d like to talk to you once he’s in a room.”

“Don’t worry, sir. We can wait.” Conrad didn’t bother looking at either Jasper or me, not that I would have objected. My guilt over what had happened kept clawing at me, making it hard to think. And while I didn’t think that Professor Tuttle would be able to make me feel any better, I wanted to see him, see if there was anything we could do for him.

“Yeah. I told my folks I’d be here awhile. They wanted to know if there’s anything they could do, and Mom said to tell Professor Herrera that she’s making an extra lasagna tomorrow for you for when he comes home.”

“Your parents are good people, Jasper.” Professor Herrera gave a weary half smile before standing. “And I’ve told you before, Julio is fine. Gus doesn’t need all that Professor Tuttle business either. You guys are friends now, not simply students.”

“I don’t think I could ever get used to that.” Conrad’s laugh was brittle, but I had to agree. I didn’t have his propensity to tack “sir” onto the end of sentences, but I also couldn’t see either of them as anything other than professors. As Professor Herrera walked away, I tried thinking of him as Julio. Nope. It simply didn’t compute. It made me strangely warm, though, knowing that Professor Tuttle thought of us as friends, and that made it easier to keep waiting.

Finally after several episodes of some courtroom drama on the waiting-room TV, Professor Herrera reappeared. “He’d

like to see you now. They've given him some medication, but he's remarkably alert considering what he's been through. Still, let's not keep him too long."

"Understood, sir." Conrad led the way as we followed Professor Herrera away from the ER, down several corridors to a hospital room. Not the ICU—a regular room with two beds, one of which was empty. Professor Tuttle looked smaller, lying there in a blue hospital gown, and older too. Professor Herrera was probably early sixties like my moms, but Professor Tuttle was more like midseventies, a fact that I often forgot because he brought so much energy to the classroom and the game.

"This is not your fault," Professor Tuttle pronounced as we lined up in front of the bed, Conrad closest to him, continuing to look as though he'd flunked every final and lost his dog the same day.

"Yes, it is," he said miserably.

"I was foolish, forgetting the box upstairs and not waiting for help. And now I've ruined all our plans."

"It's okay." Jasper's sigh echoed that of Conrad, who was now studying his beat-up sneakers. "They can probably use me around home anyway. It'll work out."

"No, no, you are *not* staying home." Professor Tuttle's voice was surprisingly firm, given his situation.

"Last-minute plane tickets..." Conrad shook his head. "Not happening, sir. Sorry."

Nothing that had happened in the last few hours had made me any more capable of flying, despite how disappointed I was. I had wanted that victory so, so badly. I swore I could

almost *feel* the trophy slipping through my fingers. I, too, shook my head.

“It’ll be okay.” There. See? I was capable of the feelings-sparing white lies that other people could reel off so easily. Occasionally.

“No, it won’t. And I’ve been talking to Julio in between tests. I want you to go. Take Black Jack with our blessing. Julio’s going to give you cash for gas. I was always planning on paying for that myself.”

“We can’t take your car, sir.” Conrad’s eyes flickered briefly, like a hope he’d immediately stomped down. “No offense, but this is probably the painkillers talking.”

“It isn’t.” Professor Herrera spoke from behind us. “We’re in agreement. Gus was so looking forward to this trip. And that car... Not like we use it daily, and not like Gus is going to be up to driving it for a few months. Like he says, it was meant for a trip like this. And if he can’t go, at least you guys can.”

“We can’t—”

“You can. And you’ll be helping me.” Professor Tuttle frowned then, the first sign of pain I’d seen on his face since we entered the room. “Apparently I’m going to be laid up *weeks*.”

“Months,” Professor Herrera corrected.

“Yes, yes. That. And if you don’t go, then we’re hanging around, all of us miserable. But if you go, you can send me pictures and videos from the road, distract me. Give me content for the channel.”

“Like you need more subscribers,” Professor Herrera muttered before brightening. “But if it keeps Gus happy, then

I'm in favor of it. Send him lots of pictures. FaceTime. Keep his spirits up, probably far better than I can."

"Exactly. And you are all celebrities in your own rights. The local gaming stores will still be happy to have you stop in, I'm sure. I'll make some calls tomorrow."

"More like I will call for you," Professor Herrera said gently. "But yes, you guys can take the signed books and *Gamer Grandpa* merchandise. And the car is already packed, right? It simply makes sense."

Packed was an optimistic overstatement—we'd tossed the luggage in the trunk in an untidy heap as part of our mad dash for Jasper's car.

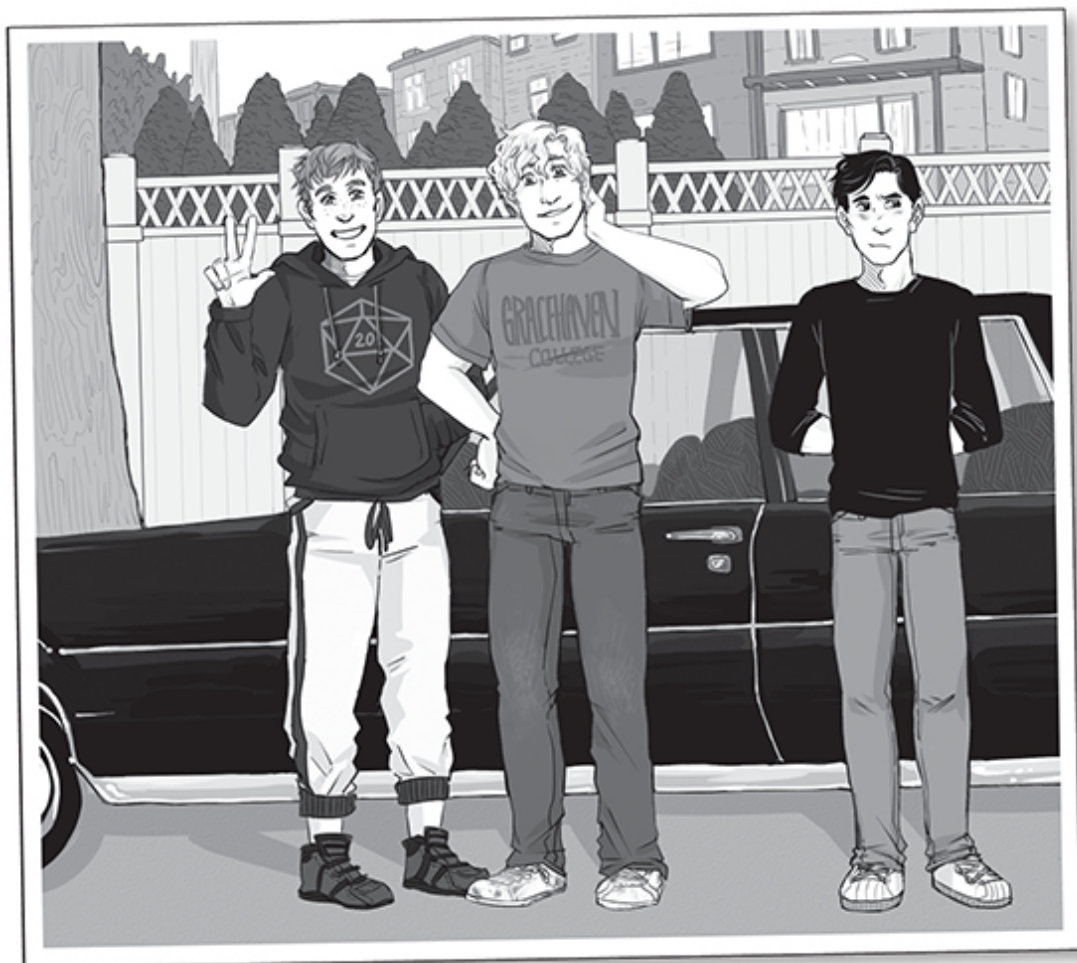
"I still think this is nuts, but if it'll make you happy, I'll do it, sir." Conrad was first to agree.

"Me too," Jasper added.

"Alden?" Professor Tuttle looked right at me.

I had a feeling the other two would probably like it if I declined, and honestly, it might make their lives easier. But despite our earlier argument—or maybe *because* of it—I couldn't let Conrad take on the trip alone. Jasper either. At least if I went, I could help with expenses. I'd figure out the driving part and get past my nerves there. I could help the professor, too, make sure the others didn't do anything stupid. And even after all that happened, I still wanted to go, wanted to win. I needed to prove to myself that I could do this. The thought of spending the next few weeks at home, Mom and Mimi pushing me to make decisions I wasn't ready for, me trying and most likely failing to meet their expectations, made my back sweat—the sort of itchy, clammy feeling I hated. At least going would be doing *something*.

I took a deep breath and nodded. “I’m going.”



Chapter Seven

Conrad

I wasn't forgiving Alden anytime soon.

Wait. That wasn't entirely accurate. As I made my way to Professor Tuttle's house Sunday morning, dodging early-morning sprinklers and crack-of-dawn joggers, it was more myself that I couldn't forgive. I couldn't help feeling like I could have prevented his injuries if only I hadn't been distracted by Alden and our stupid argument. Seeing the professor lying there at the bottom of the stairs had made my chest feel split open, made it hard to breathe in and out, be calm for him.

I wasn't going to get over it anytime soon. Neither Alden nor Jasper had been as upset as me the day before. Alden had been all infuriatingly logical, while Jasper had been overly helpful, and I was the one freaking out. Which I supposed made sense. They wouldn't understand where I was coming from. Alden had his moms doting on him, while Jasper had his huge family that baked casseroles for people they barely knew, and I had...

Well, I supposed my life was divided into before and after. Before, I had a wide friendship circle. Not too many besties, but lots of people who knew my name and invited me to things. And I had my family. After? My social life had shrunk as the result of work until it was basically only the game play

group. The less I thought about family the better, but that too was gone. Professor Tuttle wasn't my dad or my grandpa or anything like that, but he was important to me in a way that I doubted he was for the other three in our group.

Maxine, my professor landlord, had heard about the accident and had been all upset the night before when I'd finally made it in. I'd already lied and told her I had a plan for after the trip, so adding one more lie that we'd be fine without Professor Tuttle barely registered on my list of sins.

"Professor Goldstein's son is going, right? He's got a good head on his shoulders. You listen to him if you run into trouble."

"I will," I'd said, even though Alden was *not* the leader of this little trip, no matter what he thought. He might be older than me by a couple of years, but he wasn't the boss of me, and as for having a good head on his shoulders, that remained to be seen. Good at a card game did not automatically translate into real-world street smarts as I had so rudely found out in the past year. And listen to *him*? Him with his big opinions and his low assumptions? *Ha.*

Jasper was exiting his older sister's Bug when I arrived at the house. He'd bummed a ride from her because he hadn't wanted to leave his car at Professor Tuttle's house. Alden was already there, waiting by Professor Tuttle's car. And yeah, the professor kept pushing for us to call him Gus, but old habits died hard. I kept thinking of Maxine as Professor Jackson half the time, even now. And it was still Professor Herrera to me, not Julio. Julio was a buddy you played cards and drank with on a Saturday night, not this stately older gentleman crossing the lawn, holding out a fat envelope of cash.

He was fully dressed in what looked to be churchgoing clothes—button-down shirt, tie, pressed pants. He and Professor Tuttle were regulars at some sort of inclusive church downtown, the sort of “welcoming” congregation that went against most of what I’d thought I’d known about religion before arriving at Gracehaven for school. And they must have been pretty darn tolerant, given the professor’s obsession with a card game where we regularly summoned demons to journey through the underworld with us. I had to smile at that thought as I sped up to meet Professor Herrera partway. My parents’ church wasn’t nearly so cool.

Oh well. I’d long ago stopped caring what any church thought of me or what I did. But, still, it was nice of Professor Herrera to see us off. Nicer still for the gas money, which would make my own limited funds go further.

“Thank you, sir.” I took the money. The car had a locking glove box, so I placed the money there before Alden could suggest that he take possession of it. Last thing I wanted was *him* doling out funds like Jasper and I were his wayward charges. “We’ll take good care of Black Jack, I promise.”

“I know you will. Gus thinks the world of you guys. And you flooding him with messages and photos and videos will be exactly what he needs.”

“Let’s start now.” Jasper whipped out his phone and had Professor Herrera take a picture of the three of us by the car. I glanced at the picture before he hit Send—Jasper looked sleepy but excited with a wide smile, while Alden had a suspicious tilt to his firm jaw and narrowed eyes. I was in the middle between them, closer to Jasper, taller than both, warier than Jasper but less apprehensive than Alden. If this was the

before picture, I could only hope the *after* when we arrived in Vegas wouldn't show us battle-worn and bloody.

"Who's driving first?" Professor Herrera held out the keys, which were on a ring with a twenty-sided die key chain and another with the logo for the *Gamer Grandpa* show.

No one rushed to answer, so I took the keys. "I am."

"I suppose that works." Alden could say he wasn't nervous about driving until he turned purple, and I still wasn't going to believe him. The car intimidated him. It did me, too, but I was determined to not show it as I slid behind the wheel.

"Shotgun," Jasper called, which left Alden to ride behind us. First, he gave Professor Herrera a little basket of muffins. Like, not even a plastic container or bag like normal people. A basket, as if it wasn't enough that his moms had brilliant medical minds, but they also had to have mad domestic skills. At least he had the decency to blush, as though he knew how absurdly perfect his family was.

"We can have ours when we stop for gas," he said primly. "No eating in the car."

I sighed because I had a feeling this was the first of many decrees from Alden that I'd have to ignore.

"It cleans." Professor Herrera laughed, but Alden didn't. "Drive safe. Text Gus often."

"We will," I said before I closed the door. Backing out with him watching us made my neck prickle and my hands tense, and I waited until we were safely clear of the house to say to Jasper, "Can you call up GPS on your phone?"

"I took the liberty of printing maps as a backup as well as copies of our itinerary and scheduled stops," Alden spoke up before Jasper could answer.

“Thank you.” I worked for a civil tone, as that was helpful even if the subtext was that we were both too stupid to think of such things.

“Even if you go slightly under the speed limit, we should still keep to the schedule—”

“Are you going to watch the speedometer the whole way to Vegas? Seriously, man? How about you let me get on the highway first?” The car drove exactly as I’d expected it to—wide turns and plodding acceleration balanced by a smooth ride. Unless I floored it, the risk of speeding wasn’t anywhere near what Alden feared. A Ferrari, this thing was not.

“Fine. Jasper can turn up the GPS to help you.” Alden neither promised to not watch my speed nor changed his autocratic attitude. I could practically feel the tension rolling off him, and I got that he was likely uncomfortable about this whole situation, but damn it, so was I.

“No music?” Jasper pouted even as he complied, setting his GPS to bark at me in the weird British voice that he had his set to. “Not that this stereo looks like it can connect to my phone anyway, which sucks as I’ve got the perfect playlist for us.”

“No music yet,” our back-seat tyrant decreed, and my jaw went tight enough to carve ice sculptures, but I didn’t say anything. We didn’t need an argument ten minutes into the drive, even if part of me was itching for the fight.

From Gracehaven’s downtown, we wove our way to I-295, which would take us into Pennsylvania, and lead us to our first tricky section—navigating Philadelphia’s many interchanges, while avoiding as many tolls as we could, and trying to avoid accidentally heading for the city center. I’d driven this part before when going home to Kansas—back when I *had* both a car and a home—and on other occasions when I had wanted a

more happening club scene than the one in our sleepy little college town. With about an equal drive or train ride to Philadelphia or NYC, we had plenty of options if we wanted the whole big-city experience.

But as much as I loved the food and night life, driving around Philly was always a challenge. Not so much the traffic, as I could handle that, but the confusing exits and signs and rapid need for lane changes. And knowing Alden was waiting for me to screw up wasn't helping matters any. With a car full of friends, we'd miss an interchange, end up circling for an extra fifteen minutes or whatever, and no harm, no foul, but with Alden, I felt new pressure to be perfect, to not get lost.

Which naturally meant that I did screw up. Because of course I did, messing up the part where we were supposed to connect with the outer-belt highway that skirted the city on our way to I-76, instead ending up on a straight shot to downtown—exactly what I'd hoped to avoid.

“Rerouting. Rerouting. Rerouting,” the GPS chided in that stupid faux British accent.

“Hey, how are we headed back into New Jersey?” Jasper tapped away at his phone as we approached signs for a bridge and Burlington, which was not at all where we wanted to be. But traffic was far heavier on this section, and the stupid boat of a car wasn't exactly nimble for lane changes.

“We'll turn around. Double back.” I started looking for any possible exit prior to the bridge. In the back seat, Alden was rustling papers.

“Take the U.S. 13 exit,” Alden pronounced. “We'll hook back up with I-95. Not ideal, but—”

“It’ll do.” I took the exit at pretty much the last possible second, but we made it. “Thanks.”

“This is adding a great deal of time onto our day. If we get too far behind, we won’t make the game store before they close.” Alden sounded more anxious than angry, that earlier tension coming out in faster speech and restless hands drumming on the seat. Mad I could tune out pretty well, but anxious hit me somewhere softer. Away from the game, he really was a big ball of worries—the car, the trip, my driving...

It made me less inclined to bite his head off for his decrees, which, while saving the peace, was also unsettling.

“It’ll be okay. Promise.” The gentle words came out of my mouth without my brain’s permission. I didn’t *want* to feel compassion for Alden, didn’t want to try to understand where he was coming from, didn’t want to think of him as anything other than an annoying jerk who was also my biggest competition. And I still wasn’t over our argument from the day before, not by a long shot, so I hated this sudden urge to calm Alden down.

As I sorted out the necessary lane changes, I tried to hold on to that sneer of his from the day before, the way he’d judged me. We weren’t friends, weren’t going to be friends, and me feeling bad because he was anxious wasn’t going to change any of that. This whole trip would be so much easier if we could simply stay enemies. The last thing I needed was the complication of suddenly seeing Alden as human instead of as the competition I had to defeat if I stood any chance of straightening my life out.

Chapter Eight

Alden

I was done with back-seat riding before we reached our first stop. My anxiety kept spiking because I wasn't remotely in control, and I wasn't sure I trusted Conrad to get us there in one piece. Of course, thanks to Mimi and Mom I had pharmaceutical options for the jittery feeling that no amount of quiet breathing would relieve, but I hated taking them when I knew I had to drive later. That was the thing about anxiety—worries over whether to take the medication and when could be worse than the primary symptoms sometimes. But my current situation wasn't that usual garden-variety dithering over when to take a pill. No, my pulse was pounding because Conrad kept missing interchanges and didn't seem that fazed by it.

Nothing threw him or changed his affable demeanor, not even almost crossing back into New Jersey. He and Jasper kept joking around with the GPS, which led to even more confusion. Finally, though, we were heading back out of the city proper, its collection of tall buildings behind us, morning sun fully up, but sky gray and hazy.

“Not sure why I always seem to flub the exits downtown. Guess my brain wants to head to the clubs like old times.”

Conrad's laugh was as attractive as the rest of him, warm and sweet like maple syrup, but his words had me bristling.

"Didn't you just turn twenty-one? Like two months ago?"

"I maybe had an ID. And not all the gay clubs in Washington Square look *that* closely."

"I wouldn't know." I let my scorn cover any other inconvenient emotions like regret or longing.

"As in you waited until you were twenty-one before you went out? Or as in you've never been?" Jasper turned around in his seat to gape at me.

"Parties are not a requirement of college life." That longing was back, sharper now, a distinct wish to be casual like them, able to turn up at events and parties and find friendly faces without much effort. I tried hard never to let myself dwell on those sorts of feelings, and frustration over my emotions came out in my tone.

"You're missing—"

"Leave it, Jasper." Conrad kept his head facing the road, but I could almost hear his eye roll. "If it's not an extracurricular for the ol' résumé, Alden wants no part of it. He's the only one who shows up just for the Safe Space business meetings and never for the social stuff."

No way was I telling him that I only went to the Safe Space meetings to keep Mimi's nagging at a minimum and that the special events, particularly the unstructured gatherings, tended to require skills for interacting I simply didn't have. Not to mention triggering my anxiety. But note-taking and voting on new rules and initiatives, that, I could do. I went to exactly enough meetings to satisfy Mimi and tried not to regret the lack of filter I'd had as a little kid, talking about "my husband"

around the time that Mom had Mimi move in. I hadn't known better and had simply assumed that adult people got to pair up as they saw fit.

Fast-forward a bunch of years, and I knew the truth—there was no pairing up for me, no knight riding in to make me believe in soul mates again—but the whole “husband” phase had lit a fire under Mimi and Mom to get me in every rainbow-clad activity they could find. So yeah, I showed up at the meetings to *work* while kids like Conrad lounged around, picking up their next conquest as easily as shuffling a deck of freshly sleeved cards. And if I couldn't even make small talk at those meetings, there wasn't any hope for me at a gay nightclub, and I knew it.

So, I let Conrad speak for me, let it seem I was just too studious and stuck-up to be bothered with partying. Neither of the other two was ever going to understand me, and there wasn't much point in trying. Instead, I focused on the suburbs flashing by, gradually turning into farther-spread-out towns until our first stop, a little over three hours in, when Jasper began complaining about being hungry and Conrad started looking for a gas station.

“All the signs for Hershey make me remember this one time when my folks brought all of us to tour the factory and go to the amusement park.” Jasper gestured out the window at one of the many billboards we'd passed. “You guys ever go?”

“With my sisters. And school groups.” I wasn't really much on field trips like that, but they already thought I was some sort of anti-fun prude, so I wasn't about to elaborate, instead adding a lame “It was all right.”

“I've been once. On the way to freshman orientation, when my folks drove me out.” Conrad's voice was distant. “This exit

look good?”

Even I could sense that he was wanting to change the topic. “Sure. I’ve still got muffins for us.”

Because of course I did, Mimi and Mom having packaged them in ridiculous baskets amid more reminders of how to act that had had me gritting my teeth and hurrying out the door.

“Good. I’m starving.” Jasper stretched in his seat as Conrad took the exit, following the signs that directed us to a truck-stop gas station—a large, low white building with red and blue details that was surrounded by dozens of idling trucks and cars packed with weekend tourists.

Paying with cash for the gas turned out to be more complicated than a card purchase and necessitated two trips inside the store, but eventually we had a full tank of gas and were parked in the relative shade of a row of trees. A few picnic tables had been placed closer to one of the fast-food places sharing a parking lot, and we made our way there with the food. As I handed out the muffins and napkins, Jasper took some pictures for Professor Tuttle, mainly him and Conrad goofing off.

“Man, your moms can cook,” Jasper said around a mouthful of muffin after a few minutes of quiet eating.

“And healthy stuff. My mom does the oat-and-apple combo too.” Conrad sounded strangely wistful, same as he had earlier when the subject of his family had come up. I wasn’t sure how to respond, but before I could figure it out, he pushed away from the table. “I’m gonna go find the restroom and get a drink.”

I thought about reminding him of the whole no-food-in-the-car rule, but he looked so determined that I kept my mouth

shut.

“I’ll drive the next part,” I said instead, trying to mimic some of Conrad’s easy confidence. I was done sitting in the back seat, and since Jasper seemed well installed in the passenger seat, driving was my only way out.

“Okaaay.” Conrad drew the word out. “It’s pretty flat and easy until we hit Pittsburgh at least. Yeah, you can have a turn.”

I wanted to tell him that he didn’t get to be the leader just because he’d driven first, but he was striding away before I could find my voice. A short while later, we were all back at the car, but instead of Jasper taking the passenger seat like I’d expected, he headed for the back seat.

“You’ve got longer legs,” he said to Conrad. “And I wanna nap while Gramps here figures out how far under the speed limit he can get away with.”

They both laughed as they climbed into the car, but I didn’t. True to his word, Jasper was asleep before we were even back on the highway. And yeah, I was creeping along. This...*tank* drove nothing like the sporty compact that was my only comparison, as both moms owned matching Prius hatchbacks. We’d always lived close enough to campus that a separate car for me hadn’t made sense. The gas pedal was too mushy, the steering too boxy, the shifter too sticky, and my already-galloping pulse didn’t like any of it.

“Turning radius is weird, but you should be okay on the highway.” Conrad probably meant it as encouragement, but knowing he’d picked up on my discomfort only made me feel patronized, shame snaking up my spine. And frustratingly, he was right. The relative openness of the highway did help once I found an equilibrium for the accelerator.

“You gonna freak if I browse the radio?” Conrad had a ridiculously big soda in his hand, one too big to fit in the cup holder.

“No radio.” My jaw and neck were still final-exam tight.

“Okay. You’re doing good.” The compassion in his voice made me want to crawl under the seat. I *hated* pity and false praise more than just about anything, and hearing it from Conrad—who was usually so dismissive of me—had the skin on my back prickling.

“Don’t baby me.” I didn’t exactly snap, but the words were far from light and breezy.

“I’m not. You really are doing fine.” This time, his praise hit a different place inside me—some place soft and vulnerable that desperately wanted to believe him...and not just about my driving.

“Thanks.” Remarkably, some of the tension left my face. I didn’t quite manage a smile, but I wasn’t scowling either. Was this what it would be like if we were actually friends?

Obsessing over that had me almost miss the brake lights of the semi in front of us as traffic slowed markedly.

I braked hard, probably harder than I needed to, and Conrad’s soda sloshed, a frigid river of sticky fluid hitting my pants leg.

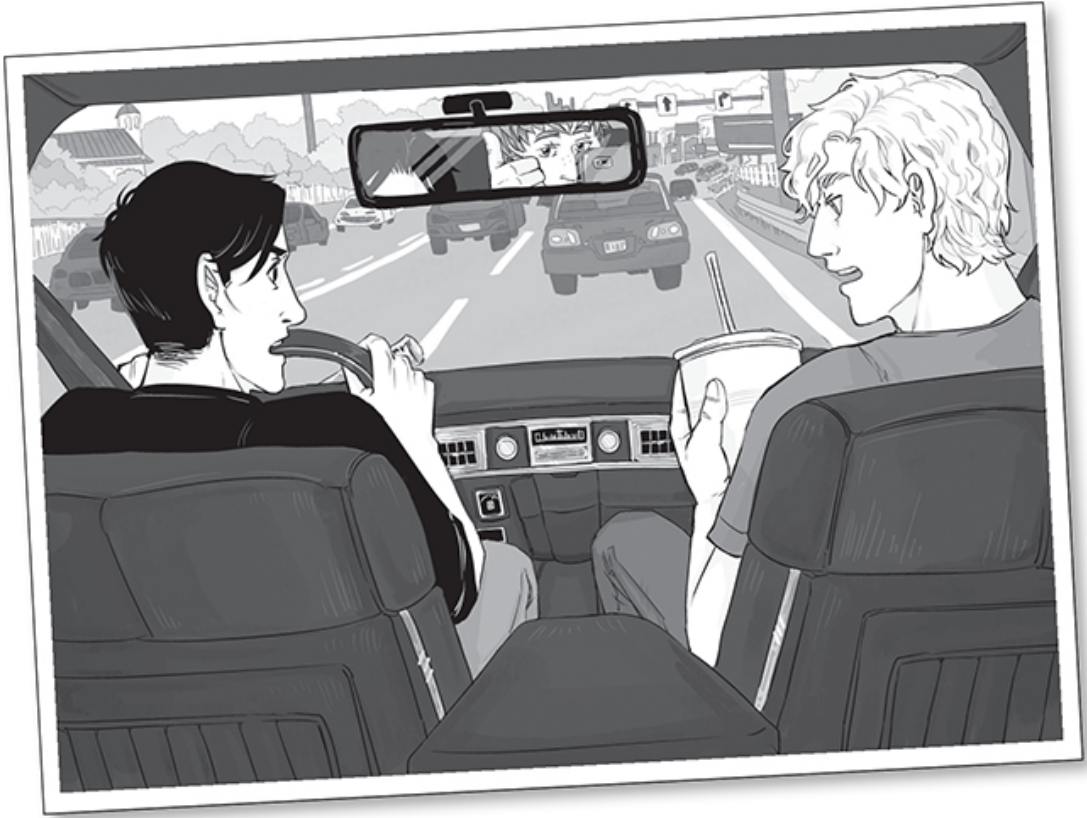
“Watch it!” We both had identical angry tones.

“You shouldn’t have brought a drink in the car.” The words came out before I could recall them, a literal knee-jerk reaction that I regretted almost as much as letting him distract me in the first place.

“And you shouldn’t be driving if you can’t watch the road.”

With that, we were back on familiar ground, moment of compassion quickly forgotten. It was so much easier to be mad at Conrad than to try to figure out how to deal with him being nice. In fact, as we continued to bicker, traffic crawling, I relaxed further, shoulders softening and hands no longer clenched on the wheel. Fighting with him was familiar. Reassuring even, with none of the awkwardness of those fake compliments.

I knew perfectly well that we were never going to be friends, and there was little point in pretending otherwise.



Chapter Nine

Conrad

I didn't kill Alden. That needed to count for something. Even after hours and hours of his slow-as-hell plodding along in the truck lane. And his complaining about everything from traffic to my soda. Which to be fair, I let rankle me until I was debating stupid stuff with him, the two of us bickering our way through Pennsylvania. We finally changed drivers again outside Pittsburgh with a quick stop—gas, restrooms, some fast food, and back on the road.

Now, it was probably safe to say that neither Alden nor I was particularly eager to see Jasper drive, not after his Mario Kart-level racing demo the day before. However, fair was fair, and I kept my reservations to myself. Alden, of course, had no such restraint, tossing around words like *prudent* and *caution* and *best intentions* while Jasper got us back on the road. I was still in the passenger seat since Alden didn't want to sit where my sloshed soda had gone unfortunately sticky and gave me an exasperated look before climbing into the back. Finally, I'd had enough of his back-seat commentary, and I turned around.

“Dude. I thought you were some wannabe doctor. Is law school the backup plan or what?”

“No.” One word, but there was a world of condescension behind it.

“Darn. The big-name law firms are probably all weeping over the loss of all your fine-print warnings.” I’d meant to get a laugh, make him see how ridiculous he was being, and maybe lighten him up a bit, but all he did was *harrumph* like a bear awakened too early from hibernation.

“Come on, guys. How about you give it a rest?” Jasper sighed as if we were the most exhausting thing ever, and maybe we were. “And I’m calling it. Radio time. Conrad, you can be DJ. Do your worst with the dials.”

“Fine. As long as it doesn’t distract you from driving, I guess we could listen to the news,” Alden allowed, which only ensured that I passed right by the NPR station.

“Do you even listen to music, or is it all educational programming with you all the time?” I asked as I browsed the stations.

“It depends. Music with lyrics can be distracting to me. I don’t *dislike* it, but sometimes it’s too...emotional, I guess.” It was more of a real answer than I’d expected from him, and I softened my tone before replying.

“I guess I can see that. But music is supposed to make you feel. We’re human. Feeling is good. See?” I landed on a contemporary country station that reminded me of what we got on the radio back home. And as the singer romanticized his small town with dirt roads and old pickup trucks, I almost had to agree with Alden. Sometimes the feelings were simply too much. Maybe news would have been easier.

“My ears. They’re like literally bleeding. Something else,” Jasper demanded as the song changed to a twangy classic about killing cheating exes.

“Many English professors agree that misuse of the word ‘literally’ is one of the worst things about our generation.”

“Says the dude with a *literal* pole up his ass.” I gave Alden a dismissive hand wave before turning back around, finding Jasper an alternative station that lasted until we hit a stretch after crossing into Ohio where it was all rural and the only choices that weren’t crackly were country and AM radio. I made them suffer a sports radio station debating whether the Pittsburgh or Cleveland MLB team would have the better season before we were able to catch another alternative station. We reached our Sunday evening stop in the late afternoon, pulling into a small town on the outskirts of Columbus.

Like Gracehaven, it had something of an old-fashioned downtown, a main street with a mix of empty buildings with For Sale signs and little businesses, most of which were closed since it was a Sunday. Jasper easily found us parking, which unlike most places around Gracehaven was free. The game store was located in what looked to be a former bank—a long, narrow brick building on a corner with a colorful logo on the door bragging about “unplugged fun.” Merchandise was organized in what had probably once been the bank lobby, with gaming tables set up behind the old teller stations, one of which had been left behind and repurposed as a register.

The store had been warned that Gamer Grandpa wasn’t with us, and the owner, a short older dude who was Arthur’s exact opposite, greeted us with a fake-cheerful attitude that didn’t match his pointed questions.

“Are you still filming a vlog?” he asked with a frown after the introductions had been made. “We were counting on the exposure.”

“Yup.” Jasper held up the laptop bag, which also contained the camera. Alden and I each had our gaming bags, while I also carried some of Professor Tuttle’s signed books for the store.

After I gave him the books, I gestured at the busy space. “Why don’t you show us around?”

Like most stores, this one had the usual collection of goods for various fandoms, board games, and plenty of different trading card games. But this place also had a number of sidelines going that made the space even more cluttered—handmade jewelry, greeting cards, toys, and books.

“Dude. You carry *romance* novels.” Jasper sounded both horrified and impressed.

“They sell.” The owner gave a shrug of his bulky shoulders and continued to lead us back to the gaming area, which was pretty crowded for a Sunday evening. “Reserved you a table. And we’ve got a couple of people eager to play you.”

On the one hand, I was happy to not have to play Alden in front of a crowd while Jasper filmed—something we’d discussed in the car as a possibility. But on the other hand, playing a stranger was its own challenge. They paired me with the owner’s daughter, who was a few years older than me with long, straight brown hair that matched her somber expression.

“I like your T-shirt.” I gestured at her shirt, which had a Godzilla-like creature eating a guy and an “I eat stupid for breakfast” slogan. Her play mat featured the same hulking creature.

“Uh-huh.” She didn’t look up from shuffling her cards, and the rest of the match was more of the same, me trying to make small talk to get good footage for Jasper and her resisting all

efforts to be social. Some players were just like that—intensely focused on the game—but I couldn't help but worry that maybe her dad was forcing her to play for more publicity. I knew exactly how heavy parental pressure could get, and I tried to be sympathetic.

“Your dad get you into the game?” I asked.

“Uh-huh.” She took the rest of her turn, then lowered her voice. “You can lose the flirting. I don't get with *Odyssey* players. Ever.”

Well. Okay then. I wasn't about to tell her she had me all wrong. Knowing my fellow *Odyssey* players, she probably had good reason for the rule. And she wasn't the first person who'd assumed that me being nice equaled flirting. But it did have the effect of getting me more focused on the game. After I won pretty easily, we cleared our stuff to make way for Alden, who was playing a younger guy with the energy of a squirrel and sharp, pinched facial features to match.

“Can't believe I get to play on the show.” The kid bounced on the balls of his feet, making his cheap sneakers squeak on the linoleum floor. “I've seen every episode. Twice.”

“Awesome.” I gave him a smile because I liked his chances versus Alden, who deserved to be taken down a peg or six. Maybe the kid could succeed where my frog-soldier deck had not. “Good luck.”

“So, like, what's the real deal with you guys?” He gestured between me and Alden, who made a strangled sound.

“What do you mean?” I asked cautiously. I didn't *think* he was implying we were a couple, but I wanted to tread carefully, especially with Jasper nearby with a camera.

“Like are you really enemies? You hate his guts, right?” He leaned forward, thirst for gossip clear in his eyes. Suddenly, I was much less inclined to see him win. But his question gave me pause. Were we true enemies? Did I actually *hate* Alden, or was it more of an annoyance thing? I did want to see him lose, but I wasn’t sure that equated the sort of hate the kid seemed to be implying.

Before I could figure out an answer, the guy lowered his voice. “It’s okay. You can tell me. He’s annoying as fuck on camera. I’ll wax him for you.”

“Dude, he’s right here,” Jasper said before I could say anything. Alden looked away fast, probably coming off as dismissive to the others, but I caught the brief slip in his stoicism, face flattening like a clay sculpture getting squashed by a bully, hurt and misery radiating off him for a brief instant before he buttoned himself back up tight again.

“I hate everyone, not simply Conrad. Now, are we playing?” Alden’s voice was even more formal than normal, and the tension in his shoulders was clear. I couldn’t help but feel responsible, a feeling that lingered even after Alden beat the squirrel, a mere seven turns to victory—the sort of methodical dismembering that made him so damn scary-talented.

“Good game,” I said to him on the way back to the car.

“It was okay. I misplayed a counter in turn five. I should have been able to win on turn six.”

“Still impressive.”

“I’ll need to be better at the con. Are we eating prior to getting a motel room?”

“Starving,” Jasper spoke up as we stowed our gear in the trunk.

We ended up at an old-fashioned diner off the main drag with red booths, tons of kitschy memorabilia, and prices that Jasper's app promised us were low. Jasper and Alden took opposite sides of the booth, but I stopped myself before sliding in next to Jasper. Still feeling bad for what happened with the stupid kid, I took the seat next to Alden. His surprised, slightly distrustful expression was further punishment for me not being able to speak up fast enough back at the game store.

"What are you doing?" he asked, eyes narrowing.

"I don't hate you." My voice came out too defensive, and his dismissive sigh said he knew it.

"The kid was all talk. I won the game." Alden made it sound as though that was all that mattered, and maybe to him it was. But I wouldn't soon forget his hurt expression.

"Hey, this place actually has liver on the menu." Jasper made a face. "My grandma would be so impressed."

"And biscuits and gravy. I like it already." A few places near Gracehaven offered the midwestern staple, but New Jersey as a whole either failed on the buttermilk biscuit part, offering up a doorstep instead, or made glue of the white gravy. I liked the dish, not just because it reminded me of weekend breakfasts with my long-gone grandpa, but because it was a dirt-cheap option. That, some water, and a side of home fries and I still wasn't at ten bucks.

"I'd rather have liver." Alden made a face before ordering a chicken sandwich. Jasper got some sort of local burger special with a pretzel bun. Over dinner, we debated pushing on a couple of hours or sticking to the itinerary we'd worked out with Professor Tuttle.

“We were in the car for nine hours. Let’s just get up early. Stick to the original plan,” Jasper said around bites of burger. “I vote we either play some rounds back in the hotel room or see if Columbus has a gay bar that Mr. Newly Legal can use his ID at.”

“We are not going to a *bar*.” Alden made it sound as if we were proposing naked dancing at a morgue, not a totally legal beer and some people-watching. It wasn’t like any of us could get lucky, not with sharing a room and needing to be on the road early.

“Game is fine. I need to work on my decks some more anyway.”

“You do,” Alden said, not cutting me any breaks despite the fact that I’d just sided with him. *Whatever*.

We split the check, and I made sure to add to the tip even though my funds were tight. I’d worked enough crappy jobs in the last year to know that every buck counted. The many papers Alden had been juggling contained information for all the planned stops, including motel recommendations, and we ended up at a chain place favored by budget-minded older folks. Personally, I would have been okay with a total fleabag motel at half the price, but I wasn’t going to make too big a stink.

I was still doing mental math when Jasper unlocked the door and revealed the small room with two beds. “Okay, so who’s sleeping with who?”

Chapter Ten

Alden

The two beds seemed both football-field huge—taking up all available visual space and looming large in my brain—and birdbath small, like, no way could two guys share easily. Add to that the fact that I had never slept next to another person that I could remember. Maybe when I was little, but another guy was different. More significant than I wanted to admit, and I was mortified that this possibility hadn't entered into all my pretrip planning.

Add in that I wasn't sure what the protocol was. Was I supposed to pick one? Jasper versus Conrad? Or stake my claim to a bed? In the end, I ended up standing there, total deer in the headlights, Jasper's question rooting me to the spot. And honestly, Conrad didn't seem much better, staying silent until finally Jasper huffed, which seemed to jolt Conrad into speaking.

"Guys. It's only sleep." He threw his bag on the closest bed, then grabbed a pillow and turned it lengthwise. "Jasper, man, try to restrain from cuddling me. Alden, you can have the other one."

I had absolutely no business feeling disappointed that he'd so easily chosen Jasper over me. Did I *want* to sleep next to Conrad? Have him lecture *me* about no cuddling? Accidentally

touch arms in the night? Was I seriously sad over missing out on that? As illogical as it was, the pressure in my chest said yes. Yes, I felt like I was missing out on something, and yes, I wished he'd chosen me, like this was dodgeball and I was the kid without a team all over again.

“No snuggling?” Jasper pouted before sitting cross-legged on the bed near the headboard, and I supposed he was joking, but my inept sarcasm meter made it hard to tell as usual.

“Dude. You're like...a cousin or something. Weird city. And besides, we don't want to freak Alden out.” He gestured at me as though I were some sort of affection deterrent. And maybe I was. If I wasn't along, maybe they'd hook up, the casual way guys like them always seemed to excel at. Me, I couldn't manage a handshake without awkwardness, but as long as I'd known him, Conrad had always rolled from guy to guy, changing partners more easily than I changed out my card decks. Jasper didn't have quite the same reputation as Conrad, but he'd had a regular boyfriend part of the previous year, and I was certain he hadn't been celibate since.

“I don't freak out,” I lied as I put my bags on the other bed.

“Yes, you do.” Conrad sat on the edge of his bed, digging in his backpack. “If we started making out, you'd squawk like my neighbor's chickens back home.”

He wasn't wrong, but I still took umbrage with his assessment. “Not wanting a...sex show doesn't make me a prude.”

“Yeah, it does. Kind of the definition right there.” Jasper set several deck boxes on the bed in front of him. “Now, at tomorrow's stop we're supposed to film a casual game, partner style. Think you guys could be on the same team?”

“No,” Conrad and I said at the same time. I should have been insulted, but I couldn’t deny that no way were we suited to working together, hashing out a joint strategy. If Mr. Fly by the Seat of His Pants even *had* a strategy.

“Well, okay then. We’ll give you each a local. But you’ll want to make sure you’ve got a deck that melds well. How about I film each of you talking deck tech for that sort of match, and then we can send those clips to Professor Tuttle?”

The camera had a stand, and we didn’t technically *need* Jasper acting as a cameraperson, but I couldn’t deny that he was a good buffer. Making the videos and discussing decks, breaking down the cards that we’d included and why, took us all the way up until we were yawning.

“I’m showering tonight,” Conrad announced. “I probably still smell like soda.”

“Yeah, you do.” Jasper good-naturedly agreed, waving him toward the small bathroom while he and I cleaned up the cards and camera equipment. But even as I stowed my cards, my brain kept drifting to Conrad in the shower. I tried not to let the visuals distract me. Fantasy had never really been my strong suit, but my imagination was proving a new capacity as it kept calling up images of Conrad wet and soapy. And Conrad emerging some time later with damp hair and a T-shirt that clung to his back didn’t help at all.

Thus, it really was no wonder that I lay awake for hours, listening to the other two breathing and wondering about trivial details like whether Conrad had socks on and whether his bare foot might brush whomever he was sleeping next to and whether it was his or Jasper’s soft whistle of an exhale. I tried not to make too much noise rolling over, desperate to find

any position that didn't make the bed feel too big and my feelings way too small.

* * *

Somehow, I did manage some sleep with weird dreams of being in a crowded space and bumping into people, all of whom looked and smiled like Conrad. I'd set a phone alarm the night before, but it was actually Jasper's phone bleating out multiple text alerts that woke us all up.

"Crap. Crap." Bleary-eyed, Jasper scooped up his phone and headed to the bathroom.

"Guess I'm up too." Conrad stretched, T-shirt bunching around his ribs to reveal a stripe of bare stomach. I looked away before I got caught staring. I supposed we should get dressed, but I preferred to do that in the bathroom, not in front of Conrad. Jasper, however, was still in there, and I could hear him on the phone, talking in low tones.

While I was going back and forth in my head, Conrad had no such issues, pulling a hoodie on over his T-shirt and switching his flannel pants for shorts. "There's a free cold breakfast, right? Why don't I go snag us some doughnuts or whatever they've got?"

"If they have cereal or something with less sugar, could you bring me a box?"

"You've got it." Conrad gave me one of his easy smiles, the same type that never failed to distract me, and I waited until he was gone before I slid from bed and quickly dressed myself. I wanted a shower, but I wasn't about to evict Jasper from what sounded like an impassioned conversation. He finally emerged from the bathroom right as Conrad came back with a stack of

doughnuts in one hand and a prepackaged bowl of cereal and a carton of milk in the other.

“Thank you.” I took the cereal and perched awkwardly on my bed to eat.

“What’s up with you?” Conrad asked Jasper. “Everything okay?”

“No.” Jasper shook his head. His eyes were red and his shirt and hair damp, like he’d splashed a lot of water on his face. “It’s April.”

“Shit.” Conrad whistled low. I was missing something—it was June now, not April. And Jasper looked despondent. Even I could sense his misery from the way he kept twisting his hands and his somber tones.

“What?” I didn’t like being out of the loop, and my question came out a little demanding.

“April is his younger sister.” Conrad’s voice was more patient than I probably deserved. “She has some sort of rare blood disease.”

“Yeah.” Jasper nodded. “And she’d been doing really good the last few months. But now she’s back in the hospital. The local one just transferred her to the big children’s hospital, so I know it’s serious, even though my mom is telling me it’s not.”

“You need to get home.” Imagining myself in his place was easy—I had sisters. I knew how I’d feel if one of them was ill.

“Yeah.” Jasper’s expression was pained. “But Professor Tuttle is counting on us taking this trip. I can’t ask you guys to turn around for me.”

“It’s your sister.” My mind was locked on that fact. My own might drive me nuts with how perfect their lives could be, but

they'd also stood up for me for years, even when it wasn't the most convenient, and there wasn't a lot that I wouldn't do for them.

"Exactly. You'd do it for us." Conrad clapped him on the shoulder.

"But if we turn around, who will send content to Professor Tuttle? I hate the thought of him disappointed that all of us had to go back."

"What if we keep going, but you take a bus or plane back?" My mind was racing, considering and discarding scenarios that could get Jasper back to April quickly. I got what he was saying about Professor Tuttle, but I also knew that I couldn't let Jasper soldier on when his family needed him.

"Same-day airfare from Columbus is crazy expensive. My mom looked. She says to just keep on the trip, and she'll update me." Jasper groaned. "God, I can't even think right now. My brain is mush. Last time, we almost lost her. And I hate leaving you guys with all that driving between just the two of you."

"It's your sister, man," Conrad said firmly, his conviction so strong that he had to have at least one sister himself. "You need to be there. I don't have much cash—"

"I do." I fished out my wallet. Conrad might be better at the emotional support, but knowing that there was *something* I could offer made my voice stronger, more decisive. "I have an extra credit card for emergencies. I've never had to use it, but this counts. I can explain to my moms later if you use it for a plane ticket."

"You'd let him use your credit card?" Conrad gaped at me. "For real?"

“It’s his sister.” My face heated. I didn’t like him looking so intently at me. And I truly did not like the idea of continuing on the trip without Jasper, but I couldn’t deny that splitting up was probably our best option. Keep Professor Tuttle happy and distracted while he recovered, get Jasper back to his family, and get Conrad and me to the convention as planned. It was only practical, but my heart still pounded like the bass tracks that always seemed to filter out of the frat houses on Saturday nights. Glancing away from Conrad’s inquisitive eyes, I fished out my phone. “I’m going to look up tickets.”

We quickly ruled out the bus—all the options we could find that weren’t already sold out were like fourteen-plus hours to get back. Airfare was several hundred, but it would get Jasper there a lot faster. I found a flight that worked, used my credit card, and figured out how to forward the boarding pass to Jasper’s phone.

“Now let’s get loaded.” While Conrad said all the right words as he sat next to Jasper on the bed, I gathered up Jasper’s things and packed them back into his backpack before hustling us out to the car.

I made sure Jasper ate one of Conrad’s doughnuts, letting go of my no-food-in-the-car rule because him not getting sick from lack of eating was more important. As I rushed around, I was a little surprised that my anxiety was strangely at bay. Unlike when Professor Tuttle had fallen, I wasn’t frozen. Here there had been an urgent need, and I’d been able to meet it with a clear plan that helped all of us meet our goals—get Jasper home, get us on our way, keep the professor happy. And having that plan accomplished made me feel great, buzzed almost as if I’d had too much soda but without the racing pulse.

The airport was in the far northeast corner of Columbus, and even with the GPS, we still got turned around trying to find the right exit and had to hurry to get Jasper to the drop-off point on time. It was only when Conrad slammed the trunk after Jasper grabbed his stuff that it really hit me that I was about to be *alone* with Conrad. Days and days of *alone*. In the chaos of Jasper's emergency and doing what needed to be done, I'd lost sight of the enormity of that reality. And judging by Conrad's stunned expression, he had too.

Our eyes met. Held. Neither of us said a word. We were truly on our own now. No turning back.

Chapter Eleven

Conrad

It was only the two of us now. Two guys, one big, black monstrosity of a car, an increasingly optimistic itinerary, and a burning desire to make it to the convention on time. We weren't doing this just for our own selfish reasons anymore. We were doing this for Professor Tuttle and Jasper both. The weight of that added to the little hitch in my pulse as we left Jasper at the airport and headed out on our own. Alden had been...impressive that morning, and he continued to be in all-business mode as he rearranged the contents of the trunk to make sure Jasper had all his stuff.

After the way he'd frozen when Professor Tuttle had been injured, I hadn't expected much of Alden in an emergency. Hadn't really expected him to be the sort of guy who could sympathize with a family crisis either. But not only had he stepped up with the credit card, he'd been good at locating flights and keeping us all on track to get Jasper to the airport on time. And he'd seemed to *care*, in a way that I hadn't seen from him before. While he hadn't been patting Jasper on the back or anything, the efficient way he'd packed him up and his little reminders to eat and such all showed a depth to Alden that I hadn't seen before. It was more than a little humbling, realizing that maybe I'd prejudged him based solely on who he was playing the game.

“That was nice of you, man. You did Jasper a real solid,” I said as I slid back behind the steering wheel after Jasper had dashed into the terminal. Surprisingly, Alden hadn’t argued when I said I’d drive, instead installing himself and all his papers in the passenger seat.

“Like you said, he would have done it for us.” Alden’s neck flushed pink, and he looked away. Even though he seemed embarrassed by the praise, there was something...different about him now. Hard to pin it down, but it was a sort of confidence to his voice, a new level of firmness that made him seem more...*real* in a way he hadn’t previously.

“Yeah. He would have. He’s a good guy.” I followed all the signs back to the highway. The interchanges here were every bit as confusing as Philadelphia, and I’d set my GPS to get us back to I-70, but I still had to concentrate to not accidentally end up at the capitol or the university. Traffic was predictably heavy for a Monday morning, and our detour to take Jasper to the airport had put us right in the thick of rush hour.

“I didn’t know about his sister.” Alden sounded wistful. “He talks about his family all the time. Maybe I wasn’t paying attention.”

“Nah. Don’t beat yourself up. I only know because I had to crash with them a few days last year. She’s a cute kid—like fifteen or so now. I really hope she’s okay.”

“Crash? Were you guys...” Alden trailed off.

He’d been nice enough that morning that I tried to let his nosiness slide. Besides, something about his reflective tone made me soften mine.

“Dating? No. We’ve never been like that. He was with someone when I first got to Gracehaven, and after that, he was

already in the friend zone. Didn't want to screw with my access to his employee discount." I laughed, but predictably, Alden didn't. "Kidding. He's a bro. Too good a friend to mess with only for a hookup. You know how it is."

"Not really." Alden drummed his fingers against the console. A quick glance his direction revealed that he was blushing again, a deep stain on his usually pale cheeks.

"What do you mean? You hook up with your friends? Or you don't friend-zone people?"

"Not that it's important, but I...uh...don't hook up. With friends or otherwise."

"You're a virgin?" The question was out before I could call it back. In front of us, a school bus jockeyed for lane space with a semi, both creeping along with the clogged traffic. A nearby billboard advertised some sort of history museum, and I wished I could make my ill-thought-out question part of the past too.

"It's not scarlet fever. You don't have to sound so horrified." Alden's reply was about as bristly as I'd expected.

"You're missing out." Of that I was sure, but why it made me a little sad to think of Alden alone, I wasn't so sure.

"Perhaps." His sigh was a soft, fragile thing. "But not all of us see college as a nonstop chance to party."

Instead of getting defensive the way I had back at Professor Tuttle's place, empathy over Alden always being on the outside looking in, combined with gratitude for how he'd helped Jasper, broke free a chunk of my truth.

"I didn't. I know people say I did, but I loved school. Just because I liked to let loose on weekends doesn't mean that I wasn't taking my GPA seriously. It's possible to make honor

roll and have hookups both.” As we crept forward, another billboard advertised a personal-injury law firm, and I totally would have volunteered to sit through a hour of cheesy law-firm commercials to avoid this uncomfortable topic.

“But... Why leave then?” Alden sounded more thoughtful than demanding, which kept me from giving him a flip answer.

“No choice. It’s a long story that I’d rather not get into, but my parents kicked me out. Couldn’t work out the financial aid, despite the college trying to help. No money, no school.” I kept my voice even, as if reciting a multiplication table rather than summing up all the awful the universe had thrown at me.

“They kicked you out? What did you do?”

“Do?” I laughed, but it came out crackly, laced with all the bitterness of the last year. “I didn’t do shit.”

That wasn’t precisely true, but I didn’t want to air the entire tale to someone who wasn’t likely to get it at all. *Do*. Fuck that noise.

“If you didn’t... Then... Was it because you’re gay?”

“Yeah. A-plus deduction, Sherlock. Can we talk about something else now?”

“But...*why*?” The outrage in Alden’s voice was gratifying after his initial skepticism, but after all these months, I was more resigned than angry myself.

“Because. Not all of us get the TV-show perfect family with two great moms and cookies when we come out or whatever. Some of us get assholes.”

“Oh.” Alden was quiet a long moment, and I figured I’d shocked him into giving up the conversation. His GPS—the normal-voiced kind, not the wacky version Jasper ran—

warned me that we were approaching the merge back onto I-70. Finally, as I made sure we were in the correct lane, Alden spoke in a soft whisper. “It’s not always. Not always perfect.”

“Them caring about your grades doesn’t count, sorry.” I’d picked up before on his moms probably being hard asses where GPA was concerned, but hell, I’d give a lot to have someone worry over me like that.

“It’s more than... You don’t get it.” Alden huffed out a breath. I waited for him to enlighten me, but what came out was even more surprising. “Mimi wasn’t always a part of our family. My dad died when I was a toddler. Plane crash. And I’m not saying that’s the same as whatever happened to you, but quit acting like you have a monopoly on life being unfair at times.”

“Sorry.” He was right. I was being an ass. Outside, we were finally out of downtown Columbus, heading more into the suburbs again, exit signs advertising fast-food chains and golf courses. Someone needed to take a nine-iron to my head, keep me from putting my foot in it, but somehow I kept talking. “Guess that’s why you have your thing about flying? I was kinda surprised that you were so in favor of Jasper taking a plane back.”

“Yeah. I do get scared for other people too. I’ll worry until Jasper texts you that he’s safe. And when Mom or Mimi travels, I’m... a mess. Somehow, both of my sisters are normal. They fly all the time. They don’t have panic attacks when the moms have to fly. I’m the one who ruined vacations and stuff like that as a kid and who still can’t seem to get over it.”

“Don’t they make meds that can help people with phobias like that?” My hands tensed on the steering wheel. I didn’t like thinking about him being so miserable. And shame coursed

through me that it hadn't occurred to me that he'd care about whether or not Jasper was safe.

"This is *with* medication. It's not a magic cure." He sounded so disgusted with himself that it made my chest hurt.

"Sorry. And your moms... They give you a hard time about the anxiety?" We were starting to leave the suburbs behind, signs shifting to tell us how many more miles to Springfield and Dayton. I should have been hungry by this point, but the weirdness of the conversation distracted me from the rumbling of my stomach.

He groaned. "You have no idea. Yes. The neurologist who can't fix my brain. It's a pride thing with her, I guess. But trust me, if it's out there as a possible evidence-based solution, I've tried it."

"That's rough. But at least she cares, you know?"

"There's caring and then there's the third therapist that month and the trip into the city to see yet another specialist and the new medicine that might possibly help or might actually be worse than the old medicine. At a certain point..."

"It's just all too much." I got it then, at least a bit of it. "You want to feel like their kid, not a problem to be solved."

"*Exactly.*" He shot me a grateful smile.

"My parents—Dad especially—thought they could fix me too. So I kind of get it. It's hard when it feels like they aren't seeing *you* any longer."

"You being gay is not a problem to fix, medically or otherwise." Alden's indignant tone soothed places inside me that I hadn't even realized were still raw. "My anxiety at least has *some* actual science behind things that could help. It's no

one's fault that none of it works for me. Flying and other things are simply going to always be hard.”

“But...” A thought that I'd had ever since Professor Tuttle had said that Alden didn't like to fly popped out before I could find some tact. “How the heck are you going to cope with the pro tour if you get a space on it? It's a lot of conventions and travel. You can't drive to every stop.”

“I can try.” Alden's chin had a stubborn tilt to it when I glanced over at him, and his voice was full of fake bluster, as if he was trying to convince himself as much as me. “And like you said, there are pharmaceuticals for the trips where plane travel simply isn't avoidable. They're not perfect, but they at least can hold off the worst of a panic attack. I *want* to work on this. I want to get over it. I know logically that flying is safer than driving. Maybe if I do it enough times... And I *want* to be on the pro tour. I need that win.”

So did I, but this wasn't the moment to bring that up or to play the I-deserve-it-more game. “Well, if you've had the anxiety all these years, it seems silly to think you can white-knuckle the fear into submission.”

“I choose to believe I can.” His voice was firm, back to the haughtiness I was used to. *Well, okay then.* And maybe he legit didn't need my sympathy—I sure as hell didn't need *his*—but I couldn't seem to stop the way my mind sped ahead, worrying about other situations that might trigger panic attacks for him. And my body went all floppy, as if it couldn't decide how it felt about all this talking. This was more talking than we'd done in the three years that we'd been around each other, and getting to know Alden, to have him be a complicated person rather than just an annoying rival, was a development I wasn't sure I was ready for.

Chapter Twelve

Alden

If there was one thing I was fast learning, it was that a hungry Conrad without access to the continuous stream of sugar and junk he seemed to favor was a cranky Conrad. And as we approached Dayton later than we'd planned, Cranky Conrad kept muttering under his breath about the traffic.

“Why is the game store Professor Tuttle picked clear on the other side of Dayton? And why are all the idiot drivers out here at once? God, I just want to get to the stop.”

“We need food first.” I tried to make my voice sound as no-arguments as it did when I was playing the game. Somehow it was far easier to be bossy there than in real life. But some of my earlier confidence from helping Jasper had carried over to the rest of the day, making me more relaxed. Obsessing less over Conrad's driving and every little detail beyond my control.

“Guess I could eat lunch. All I've had were those mini doughnuts for breakfast.”

“You really need to overhaul your eating. It's not healthy to live on crap food.” I pulled out my phone and my folders of papers, trying to find some food options.

“At the moment, I’m kind of a freegan.” He laughed. “Doughnuts were free. Therefore, I ate them. But growing up, my mom was a major health nut. Dad, too, really.”

“Ah. So junk food is like your grand rebellion?” I’d never attempted anything resembling rebellion before myself, but I understood on an academic level how it could be appealing.

“No, I think going to a liberal East Coast college instead of the school where my dad is the football coach pretty much handled that. And the whole being-outed thing took care of the rest.” Conrad’s voice was dry and distant, no more laughing.

“Your dad is a football coach?” Certain things about Conrad were starting to make more sense.

“Yup. Smaller religious college in Kansas. Been there over twenty years now, first as an assistant, then as the head coach. Every now and then he’ll get interest from a bigger program, but he never actually ends up leaving. So, where are we eating?”

“Do you trust Ohio pizza?” Picking up on his desire to change the topic, I surveyed a list of places along I-75, which would take us to the other side of Dayton where we needed to be. “Oh, wait. Their menu is showing pictures of square slices. Just no.”

That got another laugh out of Conrad. “Square pizza goes against Alden’s rules of order? How dare they.”

“Some things are not meant to be improved upon.”

“Says the guy who tinkers with his decks nightly,” he scoffed. A strange, warm feeling spread through my chest. What were we doing here? Joking like this? It was unfamiliar and more than a little unsettling. Needing distraction, I scanned the list of restaurants further.

“In the also wrong-bad category, they have a zombie-themed hot dog place. Cheap, but—”

“Put it in the GPS,” Conrad demanded. “This I have to see.”

“It’s nowhere near Halloween,” I complained even as I complied.

“I love scary movies any time of year,” he countered.

“And I’ve never seen the appeal. Deliberately scaring yourself? No thank you.” Life was bad enough all on its own. I didn’t need help getting scared silly, but I also didn’t want to be too much of a wet blanket. “But you go ahead.”

“See, this is where the whole never-hooking-up thing is working to your disadvantage.” Conrad dispensed advice as though he was a good ten years older than me, making my teeth grind together. “Watching scary movies definitely increases your chances of getting lucky. You’re all cringing and hiding your head and freaking out—”

“None of which is exactly sexy,” I had to point out. I’d had plenty of freak-outs, and none had ever turned me on in the slightest.

“You need more imagination.”

“You’re hardly the first to think that.” I paused to let the GPS direct us off the interstate. “But I’m still not seeing how you go from being scared to making out or something.”

“Subtlety. First, you sorta put your arm around the other person. Then you wait. And then before you know it, you’re kissing.” He made it sound ridiculously easy when I knew perfectly well that it was anything but. “That’s how it happened the first time for me at least.”

“When you were probably some absurdly young age. What were you, thirteen?” I tried to ignore the flush creeping up my neck at the thought of Conrad kissing anyone.

“Fifteen,” he corrected me with a smug tone. “His parents’ basement. He moved the next year, but man... While he was there, life was pretty sweet. Lots of horror-movie marathons.”

“I don’t need all the details.” I knew I sounded like a prude again, but for all that he told me to get an imagination, I wasn’t sure I could handle visions of Conrad tangled up with some nameless, faceless person. “And we’re almost there.”

The zombie-themed hot dog place looked like an old pizza parlor that someone had redone in shades of orange and black, decor from various horror movies on the wall, big spiders and other mutant creatures creeping along the counter where we ordered. Conrad got the “nightmare” dog, which had jalapeños, onion, and spicy relish loaded on it. I wanted to make a joke about how it was good he wasn’t planning on kissing anyone that day, but I wasn’t sure how to say it without making it sound like I was dropping a hint. Which I most definitely wasn’t.

At least I didn’t think I was.

Did having constant flashes of Conrad kissing someone mean that I wanted to kiss him myself? I honestly wasn’t sure anymore, and that made my stomach churn, back muscles tensing as I ordered my own chicken hot dog with only standard toppings. I wasn’t up for any bizarre combos that might make my insides that much more rebellious.

“Tater tots?” the bored cashier asked me after Conrad ordered just the hot dog and water.

“Sure.” I figured if nothing else, we could share.

“You want some?” I asked, putting the basket between us at the high-top table we’d snagged. The opposite wall featured a mural of a particularly creepy doll that made me keep my eyes on my food. “They gave me way more than I was expecting.”

“If you’re sure...” Conrad had already downed his hot dog in three bites and was eyeing the tater tots the way I did rare cards.

“Go ahead.” I had to hide a smile as he dug in. “Freegan” indeed. I’d had a feeling he was trying to cut expenses with his minimal order and might actually be hungrier than he was letting on. I made a mental note to try to feed him more. It was a practical thing. A fed Conrad was likely to be a more pleasant traveling companion. Mom and Mimi had often despaired over what they termed my lack of empathy, but I preferred to think of it more as selective caring. It was true that I struggled to see things like school and game losses from others’ perspectives, but other things—like wanting to help Jasper with his sister or Conrad be more comfortable—came easier to me. I wasn’t exactly sure why, but unlike my moms, I didn’t need an explanation for every quirk of my brain.

“Guess I was hungrier than I thought,” Conrad said sheepishly as he polished off the last of the tots. “Sorry.”

“No worries. I wasn’t going to eat them,” I said honestly as my phone buzzed with a message. Conrad scooped up our trash, which gave me an excuse to pull out my phone. I knew even before I clicked Open that it was likely Mimi since I’d texted her earlier that I had to use my emergency card.

Impulsive purchases aren’t like you, so I’ll trust that your friend had a legitimate need. We will work out payment when you return. Also, I saw your adviser at a meeting today. Hope you are thinking about your future. You need to make some decisions when you return.

I groaned aloud before I even realized what I was doing.

“What?” Conrad asked as he returned to the table.

“Nothing. Just my mom.” I stood to follow him to the exit as we made our way back to the car, which fit right in with the decor, looking like we were ready for a funeral procession.

“Oh. Is she pissed about the credit card charge?” Conrad settled himself back in the driver’s seat, but I didn’t argue. We could trade off after the game store.

“Not really. It’s more...” I trailed off because Conrad didn’t need to hear what a loser I truly was.

“Yeah?” Something about the gentle way he prodded made my shoulders loosen up, made it easier to talk about the one thing I usually ran from discussing.

“Mimi and Mom are concerned because I have yet to finalize my plans for the fall.” I chose each word as carefully as I would which card to play to end a game.

“What? You? Haven’t you had your future mapped out for years now? Med school, right? You’re one of those supersmart kids who knew they wanted to be doctors at like three or something.”

“You’re not wrong.” I didn’t look at him as I reset the GPS on my phone. “I mean at three, I wanted to be a preschool teacher like Miss Betsey, my favorite person in the world. But between Mom being a doctor and both sisters heading that direction, it wasn’t long before I wanted to be a doctor too. But with kids, rather than brains like Mom or surgery like my sisters. I liked the idea of pediatrics.”

“You like kids? They don’t irritate you?” Conrad headed back to the highway. “Would have figured kids would annoy you. You always like things just so.”

“I do.” I wasn’t going to try to lie on that one. “But kids are so much easier to understand than adults. They tell you exactly what they are thinking. Not as much guessing. They don’t do fake nice.”

“Huh. Guess that’s true. And you are good at showing newbies the game, which is kind of the same thing. I never have that patience for going over each and every rule, but I’ve seen you. You’re good at that.”

My face heated from the unexpected compliment. I hadn’t been aware of him noticing anything about me, let alone anything positive. “Thanks.”

“But, what changed for you? I thought there was, like, a doctor shortage or something.”

“Ha.” I couldn’t keep the bitterness out of my voice. “Yeah, the country needs more doctors. But tell that to medical-school admission committees.”

“You didn’t get in?” The shock in Conrad’s voice both irritated and validated me at the same time.

“Not a one. Two years running,” I admitted. Outside, Dayton’s city center zipped by, giving way to the older, urban neighborhood we were headed for. My brain felt similar—like the last year had whizzed by, and now here I was in an unfamiliar landscape. Unlike us, though, life had yet to give me a GPS for navigating. “And now... They want me to have a plan. But I just...” I let my voice trail off. Even talking about this was exhausting. I’d counted so much on medical school solving a lot of my problems, not the least of which had been getting the moms off my back. They’d be proud and supportive from afar, and I’d be off doing my own thing. But instead, here I was, way too old to be getting lectures about my future, but not really sure how to get out of it.

“Hey, I get you. Plan Bs are hard.” Conrad sounded as frustrated as I felt. It was nice, having someone who got it. Someone else searching for a direction. “Professor Tuttle and Professor Jackson keep getting on me to find a new plan too. Some way of finishing my degree maybe, or a track to a better job. But I’m not even sure what I want at this point. Going back to school... Hell. I don’t know. And that’s why I *need* this win. I mean, there are so many reasons, but it’s the best plan B I’ve got.”

“Yeah,” I echoed weakly, all that camaraderie giving way to tense muscles and an unhappy gut as I was reminded again of the extent of our rivalry. It was *my* plan B too. If I could win, I’d get the distance I so desperately needed from all the pressures and questions and doubt. It wasn’t just about the validation of winning or even the money. I’d known, of course, that he wanted to win at the tournament, but that wasn’t quite the same as hearing him say it, hearing the conviction in his voice, knowing deep inside that he wanted this every bit as much as I did.

One of us was bound to lose big, and the last thing I wanted was to feel sorry for Conrad if—*when*—things didn’t work out for him.

Chapter Thirteen

Conrad

Stopping for zombie hot dogs had been a mistake—both because it pushed us even later getting to the Dayton game store and because all those jalapeños burned a path down my throat that wasn't helped any by the sour feeling of knowing Alden needed this tournament win. Maybe not as much as me. But still, the guy was in search of a plan B, and I could respect that. Understand it even. And realizing that Alden wasn't as perfect as I'd thought was also weirdly discomfoting—like meeting a movie star and having them be human, not living up to expectations. I'd come to depend on seeing him as an unfeeling academic robot for whom everything came easily. Sympathy was a dangerous emotion—I knew full well the consequences of letting feelings guide my actions.

So, as we unloaded the merch at the game store, I tried to steel myself from unwanted emotions. Feeling sorry for Alden wasn't going to help anything.

“Here. Let me take something.” Alden held out his hands.

“I've got it.” My voice came out far snappier than usual as I shouldered the equipment bag along with the box of T-shirts and books.

“Well, I'll get the door.” He sounded put out, which I supposed was fair. Rushing ahead, he got the old-fashioned

wooden door. This game store was in a neighborhood of older buildings, most of which had a sort of European look—lots of brick and unnecessary gables and trim on the roofs. It gave what would otherwise be a typical strip mall a quaint feel. The game store was on the first floor, tutoring service above it, insurance agency next door, jeweler on the other side, pub on the corner.

The space inside was bigger than it looked from the street, but rather than taking in the floor plan, I was distracted by the appearance of a large man dressed in full wizard gear—pointy hat, velvet robes, plush frog riding on one shoulder, and even a wand clutched in his meaty hand.

“Welcome, welcome. We’ve been expecting you!” He had a booming voice, and as he stepped forward to offer a handshake, he revealed an equally tall woman in a full-on burgundy Victorian ball gown, complete with fancy hair and skirts wider than the doorway.

“Uh. Thanks.” Alden seemed about as gobsmacked as I was.

“I’m Mage Ulric, wizard to the beast kingdom, and this my lady, the fair Aria, a sorceress of the underworld.”

“Nice. I...uh...have your cards.” My brain might be mush, but I did recognize them as important figures in *Odyssey*. Jasper made a better wizard when he dressed up in my opinion, but this couple deserved major kudos for going all in.

“Excellent. Your reputation precedes you, young Conrad.”

“You know our names?” Alden frowned.

“But of course. We are but humble fans of your show.” The guy kept up the Old English accent, which was starting to get annoying. “And I have gifts!”

However irritating his gimmick, gifts sounded promising. “Awesome. Thank you.”

Mage Ulric bustled to the back of the store, leaving Alden and me to trail behind.

“Don’t thank him until you see what it is,” Alden said in a low whisper. “Better not be anything alive. I remember that Mage Ulric travels with goats as well as frogs in the game lore.”

“Crap.” My hands tightened around the box. Now he had me worried. This guy did seem to take his cosplay pretty seriously, and I wasn’t sure whether to be relieved or horrified when he presented us with a large plush goat wearing a shirt with his store logo emblazoned across the front.

“Thank you.” It was going to take up a fair amount of space in the back seat, but I wasn’t sure how to decline the honor.

“And of course, some packs for our noble warriors.” Ulric had a box filled with older packs of *Odyssey* cards. Now those I could use, and I swapped boxes with him, giving him the books and *Gamer Grandpa* swag. We sent a bunch of photos of their costumes and gifts on for Professor Tuttle, then did some filming, having them show us around the store. Unlike a lot of game stores, here the player tables were in front, beneath a sunny window, with the merchandise spread throughout the space, intermingling with more spots to play. Because we were both pressed for time and down a helper, we decided to only play a single game.

“You play the Mage,” Alden demanded in a whisper when we conferred over who would play as we set up the camera at a table in the front corner of the store. “I can’t play people in costume. It’s distracting. Cosplay kind of freaks me out—like

Halloween or clowns. Makes it even harder to read people and to know when they're serious."

"Huh." I hadn't ever thought of it that way before, but Alden did seem to have a harder time picking up on jokes than most, so I supposed it made some sense. "Good luck with that at the tournament. There will probably be a ton of cosplayers all over the place."

"As legitimate players in the tournament?" He shook his head. "I'm hoping not as many. It's impossible to take the game seriously with someone wearing a *robe*."

"Dude. The game itself is supposed to be fun. We pit reptile armies against underworld beasts and stuff like that. It's supposed to get crazy."

"Well, *I* take it seriously." He narrowed his eyes, voice firming as if he could make the rest of us jokers fall in line through sheer force of will. "I'll film you. Try not to get distracted."

"Yes, sir." I gave him a mock salute before I sat down across from Mage Ulric. However, it wasn't the dude in velvet who distracted me. Alden hovering with the camera was far more disconcerting than I would have thought, and I'd been filmed for a couple of years now. It was more his nearness. Which was weird. I wasn't used to being aware of him, and I wasn't at all sure I liked it.

He fell into this strange undefined category—he wasn't a total off-limits straight guy, not a firmly-in-the-friend-zone bro like Jasper, neither too old nor too young, but until recently he'd occupied the same slot where I put most people who annoyed me, and I wasn't sure I wanted a few nice gestures moving him into some jiggly gray area where I started noticing the way his hair swooped forward or the way he bit

his lip when he concentrated. I'd been *aware* of guys in that way as long as I could remember—at first seeing it as a curse of sorts, then later working hard to view it as simply how I was wired. But accepting that about myself didn't mean I was going to embrace my body suddenly turning traitor and *noticing* Alden.

So, I tried to block him out, failed miserably, and lost in short order. To a fake-accented dude in a *robe* as Alden would say. It was embarrassing.

“You need to stop relying so much on what you top deck late game,” Alden lectured as we returned to the car. “Card draw won't always save you. Pay more attention to your early board state.”

“Yeah.” I couldn't disagree with his assessment. But it was his fault I hadn't spent enough time thinking out my moves at the start of the game, so I wasn't feeling particularly grateful for the advice.

“You need more power in your decks.” Sliding into the driver's-side seat, Alden clearly wasn't done with his pointers.

“My decks are fine, and hey, I don't mind driving more.”

“It's my turn.” His stubborn expression reminded me so much of my sister Cassie, making fondness and longing gather in my throat—and making it so that I had to look away as I walked around to the passenger side.

“Yeah, but you hate driving this car. I don't.” I tried using logic, but his jaw remained firm, eyes straight ahead.

“I'm fine. Set the GPS for Indianapolis.”

“Aye, aye, Captain, but I'll need your phone to do it.” I did his bidding after he handed over his latest-model smartphone, but I couldn't help adding in some heavy sighing to convey

how insufferable I thought he was being. Also, being irritated about his bossiness was better than being embarrassed that he had the better phone and that I didn't have enough of a data plan to risk continual GPS without major overage charges. As I studied the map on Alden's shiny phone, though, some of my bad mood started to fade. "Hey, we'll be going right by where they have the Indy 500. We should get a picture there for Professor Tuttle."

"How is car racing related?" Alden's attention was riveted to the road as we made our way back to the highway. "I thought this trip was all about *Odyssey*."

"It can't be all cards twenty-four seven. My head would explode. Besides, some things are just fun. Live a little."

"We're already pressed for time—"

"We'll make it up. Please. I wanted to stop last time through with my folks, but it was raining hard and no one else wanted to see it."

Alden didn't answer right away, mouth pursing like it did when he was considering what move to make next. And when his eyes narrowed, I braced for his refusal...but instead, he shrugged. "All right. If it means that much to you, we can stop. But quickly. Speedway, then on to the next game store by dinner. I don't know if we're going to make St. Louis tonight, but we should try. The western states are going to take way longer to get through."

"Trust me. I know. Just wait until Kansas and Colorado." I regretted the words almost instantly, back muscles stiffening. Even saying the word *Kansas* was enough to call up a lifetime of memories of the little town that had been home right up until it wasn't. But if Alden picked up on my sudden angst, he didn't show it, concentrating on the road as we followed the

signs to merge back onto the correct highway for Indianapolis...muttering under his breath about the goat in the back seat blocking his rear view and the afternoon traffic impeding our efforts to make good time.

Because Alden was so focused on the road, I occupied myself getting nosy about which apps he had on his phone. Oh, I didn't go snooping through his email or anything like that, but I was curious about what games he had and stuff like that.

"Dude. How is it that the only game you have on here is *Odyssey* online? You've got a brand-new phone. I'd be downloading all sorts of things."

"Restrain yourself from adding anything, please." His tone was dry and tight, not joking, and I couldn't tell whether it was the road or me messing with his phone that he didn't like. Maybe both. "I don't like clutter on my phone. And it's the one game I like. I don't need others."

He made it sound so simple, that kind of one-track loyalty, that I envied him his commitment. "*Odyssey* is my favorite too, but I still play lots of others. Sometimes just to be social, but also sometimes I get bored and need a change."

"I've noticed. I'm surprised you've stuck with *Odyssey* this long, to be honest."

"Gee. Thanks." Appreciation for his loyalty went out the window at that.

"How did you even get into the game? I would have figured a guy like you would have been super popular in high school—parties, sports, that sort of thing, with no time for tabletop gaming."

“I thought we already established that I’m not the party animal you thought I was.” I couldn’t help sounding wounded.

“We did. I meant more...” Alden coughed and his neck turned pink. “Everyone likes you. You look like...you belong more on the varsity baseball team than hanging around with the geeks. You’re not exactly the nerd stereotype.”

I had a feeling that with all his blushing and coughing, Alden was trying to imply that I was better-looking than most *Odyssey* players. The implied compliment made me shift in my seat.

“Uh. Thanks. I think.” We were approaching the Indiana state line, and traffic had finally lightened up, but we still had a way to go to Indianapolis. Something about the time stretching in front of us loosened my jaw, made me share more than I intended. “I might be tall, but I was never that much of a jock. Really disappointed my dad. Asthma kept me out of a lot of sports. I was okay at soccer, but I had no real interest in any of the other sports he tried to push me into.”

“I can sympathize. My mothers tried to get me into countless extracurriculars. Most were torture.”

“Yeah. Exactly. If it’s not your idea, it just sucks. But Dad was super set on me playing football. That was our first big disagreement, when I put my foot down before high school.”

“You must have been super brave.”

“Or super stupid.” I half sighed and half laughed at my own naiveté back then, assuming that me quitting sports had caused the worst argument we’d ever have as a family.

“No, it was brave,” Alden insisted, voice as earnest as all the endless green fields we kept passing. “I...uh...don’t do so well at standing up to either of my moms.”

“Yeah, but they seem so cool. I doubt there’s that much tension—”

“‘Seem’ being the operative word.” His tone became weary, worn down like old tires.

“Sorry. Now I’m the one making assumptions. And I should know better. Everyone at my dad’s college and our church and stuff thinks we are the perfect family. Even strangers tell me how lucky I am to have him as my dad.”

“And they’re wrong?”

“You have no idea,” I groaned. “He’s...not always the nicest.” As always, I chose my words carefully, thanks to a lifetime of tempering my speech where my family was concerned. It was a constant push-pull between not wanting to sugarcoat my reality and wanting to protect my family all the same. “And anyway, that’s how I got into the game. He was so angry about me not doing any high school sports that I started escaping to this little game store near our house. Even before I was old enough to drive, I was allowed to bike up to this strip mall—mainly to get sodas at the convenience store, but I started going into the game store. The owner was nice. She gave me a free intro deck.”

“Game stores always give those away. They know people become regular customers once they’re hooked.” Alden’s tone was knowing, but it didn’t make me defensive as it might have in the past. I got now that he wasn’t trying to be intentionally rude or dismissive.

“Yup. But she was good to me in other ways too. She listened to me complain about my folks and our tiny town and wasn’t all judgmental. She was easy to talk to, and she was a Gracehaven alumni, which made me want to go east for college, escape like she had.”

“That’s cool. It’s nice to find people who really listen.” Alden’s thoughtful tone said that maybe he hadn’t had a lot of that himself.

“Yeah.” I paused because I hadn’t thought of myself as lucky in months, but I really had been during those years when I desperately needed someone on my side. “And you? How did you get into the game?”

He flicked a glance my way, almost as if surprised I had asked. “Sort of similar to you, actually. Distraction from... stuff. Mimi gave me some decks as a bar mitzvah present, and they had a code for the online version, which was really basic back then, but it still captivated me.”

“Knowing you, you probably cared more about all the winning you did than the graphics.” I laughed before glancing over at him.

“Guilty.” His shy smile did something to my insides, something I wasn’t sure I liked.

“But later you found the store, right?”

“Yeah. I had Professor Tuttle, and he used examples from the game in class, so I worked up the courage to tell him that I played too. He got me into going down to Arthur’s store more, playing with real people, not just the computer.”

“Dude, real people are *so* much better than the computer.”

“Says Mr. Popular. I’ve never been very good with people. I’m a little better, now, but there are still plenty of days that I prefer online game play.”

“I can see that. It would drive me nuts, but you’re more of a lo—introvert.” I’d been about to label him a loner, but thought better of it at the last minute. We had this nice sort of peace going, and I didn’t want to lose it by being judgmental. I never

would have guessed we had even this much in common, and it was a weird, unsettling feeling. “Besides, the computer doesn’t come with as much trash talk.”

“Your specialty.” His shy smile widened into a genuine grin, a rare joke from him, and it was sort of like seeing a rainbow after a hard thunderstorm, the way the smile transformed his usually stoic expression. He had a dimple, which I couldn’t recall noticing before, and smiling made his brown eyes flicker with gold.

This Alden, the joking one who understood far more than I’d ever thought possible, was so much more appealing than the cranky rival snapping cards down, and I honestly wasn’t sure what to do with this transformation.

Chapter Fourteen

Alden

As we approached Indianapolis, Conrad became more excited, like a little kid on a field trip. It was sort of...cute. And I didn't find much cute, so that was truly saying something. I wasn't sure what to do with this new desire to make him happy, which had led to agreeing to this side stop, setting aside my already-strained schedule.

I followed the GPS's directions toward the northwest part of the city. Driving was decidedly easier now, my hands less cramped, back not so surgical-steel-rod tense even though I had to navigate city traffic. Black Jack might still be an intimidating dinosaur of a car, but my nerves weren't nearly as bad as they'd been the day before.

"Why do you like car racing anyway?" I asked as I took an exit.

"My grandpa. He's dead now, but when he was alive, we'd watch the Sunday races together after church. Both IndyCar and NASCAR. There's this racing museum not too far away from our town too. He used to like to take me there, and he taught me to drive the year before he passed on."

"I'm sorry." Condolences always felt so empty, and this was no exception. I was never sure exactly what to say in the face of loss.

“Eh. He got really sick toward the end. I miss him, but I didn’t want him to keep hurting, you know?”

“Yeah.”

“Anyway, because of Grandpa, I had a monster crush on this one younger NASCAR driver. Couldn’t ever tell anyone, of course, but I kept up with his career even once I outgrew the hots for him. And Indy and the hall of fame there is like...the ultimate goal for race car drivers. Like MOC West is for us, kinda.”

“We won’t have a stadium full of cheering fans,” I pointed out, keeping my voice even. I’d almost snapped at him before I realized that it wasn’t irritation I was feeling at all. Part of me apparently didn’t like the thought of Conrad having a crush on someone, even some race car driver I’d surely never heard of. Which was patently ridiculous. I had no business caring who he crushed on.

“Well, yeah, if you’re going to be literal. But a win at MOC can set you up, make you a legend in *Odyssey* circles, just like how history doesn’t forget Indy winners. Maybe we can do some pictures for Professor Tuttle of the winner’s circle at the speedway. Good omen of things to come.”

“I think you just want to see the fast cars.”

“Yup.” He laughed as if I’d made a joke, and while I hadn’t meant my statement to be that funny, I joined in. I didn’t believe in omens, good or otherwise, but I couldn’t completely deny Conrad his fun.

We arrived at the Speedway in midafternoon, and the vast parking lots were all but deserted. I had to admit, the sheer size of the place was staggering. I’d been to New York City during Fleet Week with my family to see the big ships, but

Conrad wasted no time in telling me that an aircraft carrier would fit in the middle of the speedway. Indeed, the long walls seemed to go on forever as we made our way to the large tower that housed the front entrance. We took some pictures there before wandering to the museum located on the infield of the track.

Admission was ten bucks—twenty bucks if we wanted a tour around the oval—and I could pretty much see Conrad deciding which meal he'd shortchange himself on next.

"We're here. We should do the tour, right? It's only thirty minutes..." His mouth twisted.

"If we do that, we should get fast food for dinner. Save time." I kept my voice decisive and didn't mention the obvious fact that it would be a big cost saver.

"That works." He gave me a grateful smile, a full-wattage one that made suffering his love of junk food worth any sacrifice. We paid our admission, then he gestured at one of the cars in the lobby. "Here, let me get a picture of you by this car for the professor."

The car was an old-style roadster, festooned with bright-colored flags and a gleaming grill. Benches surrounded the raised platform, and I took a seat near the front tires.

"Use my phone." I'd picked up on his phone being crappy even before our trip. He could never seem to look up rules for the game like the rest of us. Now that I knew more about his family situation, I found myself strangely angry on his behalf. Like, what sort of parents cut off their kid just because he wasn't straight? Thinking about it made it hard to smile when Conrad prodded me.

“You look like a hostage proof-of-life photo, but I sent it,” he said before he handed me the phone back while we were waiting for the tour to start. Our fingers brushed—something that had happened dozens of times over the years, but this was the first time it made my breath hitch.

“Thanks.” My voice came out huskier than usual, and I swore I could feel his lingering warmth on the phone.

His eyes narrowed, almost as if he was about to speak, but then my phone buzzed with a reply from Professor Tuttle.

Looking good, Alden! Pleased to see you both having fun! Kiss the bricks for me!

I blinked several times, trying to decode the message. Did he have some sort of sixth sense for our earlier conversation about kissing? “What the—”

“He means at the end of the tour.” Conrad leaned over my shoulder to peer down at the message, not even bothering to hide his nosiness. “That’s what the winners usually do—they kiss the finish-line bricks.”

“But they’re probably filthy!”

“It’s tradition.” Conrad shrugged. “And it’s not like they’re using tongue or something.”

I made a weird squeaking noise, just as he and Jasper had predicted the night before, but I couldn’t help it. The thought of Conrad kissing someone, tongues tangling, invaded my brain and short-circuited something vital. I still hadn’t recovered by the start of the tour and quickly realized that I should have read the tour’s description closer. We were crammed onto a small bus with no option but to sit together because a large family with grandparents, parents, and a bunch of kids was taking up most of the seats. This meant that our

legs rubbed together with every jolt, far closer than we were in the car.

At the front of the bus, the tour guide droned on about all the sights, but my every cell seemed to be honed in on all the spots where Conrad and I were touching—the brush of his arm, the press of his leg, the accidental thump of his foot as the bus jostled along. I was undoubtedly missing out on many great historical facts, but all my brain seemed capable of was wondering what brand of shampoo Conrad used. When we had the option of exiting the bus at the start-finish line, I was only too eager to escape, drinking in big lungfuls of the fresh air, trying to chase Conrad from my consciousness.

Bizarrely, a lot of other tourists did kiss the dusty bricks, taking pictures of one another doing it.

“You can go ahead,” I said to Conrad, getting my phone back out. “I’ll take the picture.”

“Nah. Think I’ll spare my lips.” He gave me the sort of smile I hadn’t seen from him before. Kind of sly and silly at the same time. My insides fluttered, as confused as the rest of me. I had no clue whether to smile back, and before I could decide, the moment passed, his smile tucked away as he wandered over to look at a plaque.

Back on the bus, the close proximity seemed worse instead of better, because each time Conrad leaned forward to hear what the guide was saying, our shoulders collided and heat snaked all the way down my arm. Back at the museum, my body continued to buzz as if I’d licked a battery, and I was rattled enough to not protest when Conrad said he’d drive to our next stop. We’d lingered far longer than our planned half-hour break, but I wasn’t as put out about that as I would have

thought, the experience of seeing Conrad so happy more than worth it.

As he drove, I studied my pictures of him with the various cars and exhibits, trying to pick out the best ones to send Professor Tuttle and Jasper, who had texted Conrad that he was back safely and that his sister was in stable condition. I liked the way Conrad's hair looked like a golden halo in the sunlight and the way his grin showed his dentist-ad perfect white teeth when he stood next to some big-time racer's favorite car. I kept noticing details about him that had never registered before—the breadth of his shoulders, the size of his hands relative to his lean arms, the crooked collar of his shirt. Off-kilter, I hit send on a couple of pics before I could obsess further.

We had a stop in Terre Haute, and I reluctantly let Conrad break the no-food-in-the-car rule on the way there so we could make it before the store closed. No one was doing cosplay at this stop, thank goodness. The owner, Blake, was a skinny guy with a goatee and was younger than most small-business people, probably in his early thirties or late twenties.

He seemed especially taken with Conrad, in the way that everyone back at Gracehaven in the Safe Space Alliance had been at first. Part of it was undoubtedly that Conrad was a friendly guy, one of those people who radiated confidence and easy popularity. People simply wanted to be his friend. But there was something else in Blake's demeanor too—the same sort of puppy-dog expression and tendency to follow Conrad closely, laughing too loudly at whatever he said.

I'd known him long enough to predict how this usually played out. Conrad would laugh along, lean in closer than appropriate, be all casual and familiar as though the other guy

was a long-lost best friend, and then, inevitably, the rumors would filter in that they'd hooked up. Now, I didn't really think Conrad would go off with this guy for a backroom tryst, leaving me holding the equipment, but if Blake touched Conrad's arm one more time, I was going to throw something. Possibly Blake.

"It's too bad you guys are trying for St. Louis tonight. I'd love to take you out for a drink after we close." Blake spoke to both of us, but his eyes were firmly on Conrad.

"Yeah. We need to press on." Conrad sounded far more reluctant to get moving than I would have, and that made my neck muscles tense. "But we do have time for a quick game if you want us to film one."

"Of course. We need the publicity." The store was a small, freestanding building with mismatched windows and a cramped interior with all the merchandise shoved against one wall to make room for some game tables. "Do you want to play each other since your rivalry is like the *thing* on the show? Or one of you could play me."

"It's not a thing." I refused to believe people were tuning in simply to see Conrad and me bicker. It was the *Gamer Grandpa* analysis that was the draw, not us. "And I'll play you."

"Be glad you're not in costume," Conrad joked to Blake, only increasing my desire to win. I chose my deck full of big, rare creatures with expensive cards that had taken me years to assemble and that utilized a complex strategy to win. It seldom lost, and I wasn't expecting much from this wannabe Romeo. However, Blake had my least-favorite style of deck—the pest. Lots of blocking my ability to attack, lots of card stealing, lots of rule bending, and just an all-around pain in the neck to play

against. This type of deck rarely won, but it tended to make winning a slog for the other side.

And the game dragged on even slower because Blake kept joking with Conrad as he filmed us. Finally, I'd had enough, and I waited through three turns of inaction, saving all my scrolls for several moves in rapid succession, first wiping out all Blake's creatures, then making him discard his hand so he had no chance to repopulate, and finally power-boosting all my giants at once so I could go in for lethal damage with a single attack.

"Uh. Wow. Good game, I guess." Blake blinked at me as he realized just how completely he had lost.

"Yes." I shook his hand, same as I would anyone else, but I was already packing up my cards, not interested in postmatch chitchat.

"You sure I can't buy you dinner?" Blake didn't even bother looking my direction this time.

"Yeah. We sort of already ate." Sounding both hungry and regretful, Conrad had a hearty handshake for Blake, complete with arm slap—the sort of easy "bro" contact that I had absolutely no talent for.

"We need to get going." I headed for the exit, trusting that eventually he'd follow when he finished basking in all the attention.

"Gee. You couldn't let him get in even a single hit on you?" As I'd expected, Conrad easily caught up with me right as I was unlocking the car. "You completely waxed him."

"Yes. That was the point." Too irritated to drive, I climbed into the passenger seat.

"Wow. Remind me to never piss you off."

Conrad being impressed with my play went a long way toward calming me down. “It was an easy win. Those decks always think they squeeze like a vise, but really, they’re just jokes. You could have won against him.”

“High compliment from you. And yeah, I could have beat him. But I might not have cut off his balls to do it.” Conrad laughed. “With these sorts of things, you need to play friendly, you know? Let the other person think they have a shot at winning at least. It’s not all cutthroat.”

“It is to me.” Not liking how petulant I sounded, I added, “Besides, I need the practice. I don’t want to get soft right before the tournament.”

“Being nice isn’t the same thing as going soft.” Turning onto a busy main road, Conrad headed back toward the interstate. “Can we get more food before we get on the highway? The stuff we had earlier has already worn off.”

“You should have taken Blake up on the dinner offer. He seemed rather determined to take you out.”

“He was just being nice.”

I had to snort at that. “Nice isn’t looking at you like you’d make an awesome dessert.”

“Okay. Maybe he was a little flirty.” Conrad’s careless shrug and pleased half smile irritated me to no end.

“You didn’t need to encourage him.”

“What the heck, man? You jealous he wasn’t flirting with you?”

“Hardly.” No way was I confessing that any jealousy, if that’s what one wanted to label it, went more the other

direction. “I simply don’t want either of us getting distracted. We’ve got a lot of miles to go.”

“He wasn’t exactly my type either, but there’s nothing wrong with taking a break here and there. Life has a way of screwing people over regardless, so you might as well find fun where you can.”

I scoffed at that. “In my experience, a careful plan goes a long way to avoiding disaster.” Except of course when it didn’t, but I didn’t want to think about that right then—think about how years of planning had failed me. And maybe my big, grand plan hadn’t come to fruition, but I still believed that preparation and caution were vital character traits.

“And your experience is rather...sheltered. No offense.”

I forced myself not to sound insulted as I pointed ahead of us. “There’s a hamburger place. Get some food.”

It wasn’t until we were in the parking lot, him with a cheap burger, me with some fries, that I finally gave in to my unrelenting curiosity. “What do you mean Blake wasn’t your type? He was into you. Even I could see that.”

“Hey, I’m not *that* indiscriminating. A guy has to have some standards. Just because someone is available doesn’t mean I have to tap that.”

“Yeah,” I said weakly, really wanting to know what his “standards” were. I mean, I doubted they included “short, Jewish, and nerdy” as prerequisites, but I wasn’t above hoping. “He wasn’t unattractive though.”

Conrad laughed hard enough to make me fidget in my seat. “I really do need to take you to a bar or party, show you how this works. Cute isn’t everything, and you can’t let yourself be overly distracted by the packaging.”

“I don’t need...sex lessons or something.” Appetite gone, I set my fries aside.

“Yeah, you kind of do.” Conrad’s voice was light, but my muscles still clenched and I swallowed back a quick retort. “Assuming you’re into the idea of hooking up with someone eventually, we need to teach you how to pick well. Or else you’re likely to get screwed over and not in the fun way.”

“It’s all hypothetical for me anyway.” I simply couldn’t imagine a situation where his advice might help.

“Oh?” Conrad considered this. “Like you’re just not interested in sex? Or relationships? Like aromantic or something?”

I barely stifled a groan, and my voice came out more stilted and formal. “I’m not completely opposed to the concept of sex. I have considered the possibility of being somewhere on the asexual spectrum, but I don’t feel I meet the technical definition.” Looking away, I brushed crumbs off my pants.

“Is that a superpolite way of saying that you think about sex and get crushes?” Conrad laughed.

“Crushes are pointless.” I didn’t address the other part, which wasn’t wrong.

“Yeah, they are. But that doesn’t stop most people from having them.” Making a happy noise, Conrad polished off the last of his food. “And my offer still stands—I wouldn’t want to see you get hurt.”

“You wouldn’t?” I couldn’t keep the skepticism from my voice. I’d been under the impression Conrad wouldn’t notice if I fell under a bus. He certainly wouldn’t mind if I was replaced in our play group by someone more...personable.

“Nah. I’ve been there, man, and it sucks. I had to learn the hard way not to trust a cute face and not to believe every pickup line.”

“I’m sorry.” And I was. I didn’t like the pain in his voice and wanted to smash whomever had put it there.

Gesturing with his wrapper, he waved my attempt at compassion aside. “Anyway, time to get back on the road.”

“Yeah.” I let the conversation die, not really wanting to go into more depth about my shortcomings. It didn’t matter what sort of advice Conrad dished out—I sincerely doubted I’d ever get a chance to put it into practice. I wasn’t kidding about crushes being pointless for people like me. The few I’d indulged in had been intense, one-sided affairs that only left me feeling hopeless and like even more of a loser.

Did I want sex? Well, duh. My body wasn’t subject to the same realities as my mind. It loved the idea of sex, and while the idea of hookups with strangers did nothing for me, my body wasn’t terribly picky about what things it found appealing. So sure, sex sounded awesome. But I knew better than to go hoping for something that was less likely than a meteor strike.

The only outcome of our conversation was to make things more awkward when we finally stopped for the night at a small Illinois town. My pretrip notes had included a number of possibilities like this—cheaper stopping points than those found around the bigger cities like St. Louis. Conrad’s financial situation kept me from suggesting separate rooms as a practicality, which meant I was intensely aware that we were about to be alone. Not that we hadn’t been alone all day, but this felt weirder. More intimate.

“Oh, thank God. Two beds.” Conrad flopped onto the closest one as soon as I unlocked the room. I wasn’t sure that I shared his relief, which made me cranky. I should have been happy to have been spared the awkward conversation of the night before, but even with a bed for each of us, my mind still raced. Thanks to our earlier conversation, I couldn’t stop thinking about all the things other than sleeping that people did on beds.

“We’ll need to get an early start. No oversleeping.” I kept my voice firm, trying to banish those sorts of thoughts.

“Yes, warden.” Conrad fished out his phone. “This might be a piece of crap, but it still has an alarm. There. Set. You can have the first shower if you want. I’m not planning on moving for a while.”

Frowning, I considered his exhausted expression—heavy eyes and slack mouth. “Is the driving too much for you? I’ll do more tomorrow.”

“I’m fine.” Conrad’s groan didn’t exactly inspire confidence, but I didn’t press him on it. Instead, I headed for the shower. And there, under the warm spray, day rushing past me in vivid mental snippets and little replays, I tried valiantly not to think about Conrad and kissing and tongues and sex. And failed. Miserably.

I emerged even more frustrated, and it was hours before I slept. I honestly wasn’t sure whether I was up to three more days of torture driving with Conrad. But I had no choice. If I wanted to get to the tournament, this was my best chance. And I wasn’t letting anything or anyone stand in my way.

Not even Conrad with his distracting smiles and disconcertingly tempting offers.

Chapter Fifteen

Conrad

My alarm never went off. It was all my fault. Or rather, it was the fault of my stupid, piece-of-crap phone that could barely be bothered to hold a charge and apparently thought wake-up calls beneath it. Sunlight hurt my eyes as I blinked awake, the sound of my name and not the phone's chirping waking me up.

“We overslept.” Captain Obvious glared down at me. Which, since Alden's hair was hopelessly ruffled and his T-shirt half-bunched-up, was pretty comical.

“You might wait until you deal with the bedhead before you lecture me. How late are we talking?” I sat up, letting the covers pool around my waist. I'd worn a T-shirt to sleep in, something I seldom did, and it was all sticky. So much for trying to keep the peace and not shock Alden—now I was sweaty and grungy and still getting complaints.

“It's almost nine. I never sleep until nine.” Alden sounded horrified at his body's disobedience. I'd already figured out that he was a guy who loved his order and routine, but he seriously needed to chill.

“It's not noon. We'll make up time. You want to raid the breakfast stuff? I'll take the world's fastest shower since I didn't get one last night.”

“Fine. I want to change first.” Alden scooped up some clothes from his suitcase.

“You can change in front of me, you know. Not gonna offend me. I’ve seen—”

“I *know*.” Alden bustled off to the bathroom, all Victorian maiden princess, as if I couldn’t be trusted to see a cute guy and—

Hold up. What the hell? Since when had Alden fallen into the *cute guy* category?

True, my preferences—the same ones Alden didn’t seem to think I had—did tend to run to a certain type. I was happy to leave macking on older guys to Payton and the whole love for muscle-bound jocks to Jasper. For myself, I dug guys my own age and had a thing for ones shorter than me. Not that I wanted to feel like I was on stilts or the Incredible Hulk, but ever since my first kiss with a slightly built science geek, I’d liked that body type a lot. And I supposed Alden’s bossy nature counted as the sort of vivid personality that usually drew me in.

But even if Alden technically fit the profile, my body had never really registered that before yesterday when all that proximity had apparently corroded my common sense. In so many other ways though, he was far from my type—too prickly, too adverse to fun, too rule-driven, and too immune to my charm. I needed to remember all that before I went labeling him *cute* and making everything far more complicated than it needed to be.

But then he came out of the bathroom, and something about his freshly combed hair and minty scent made my brain trip over itself again. I stayed confused through a lightning-fast shower. When I emerged, Alden had food and our bags by the door.

“Bananas? Yogurt? Cereal? You trying to clean up my act?” I faked outrage as I accepted the food, grateful he’d gotten enough that we wouldn’t need to buy breakfast.

“Complex carbohydrates are digested slower by the body. You won’t get hungry as fast. You hungry is...a problem.”

My head tilted as I tried to decode his meaning. “Is that your way of saying you care?”

“No.” Alden swallowed audibly, and his cheeks turned an adorable shade of pink.

No, not adorable. Bad Conrad. Bad. I tried to lecture myself away from dangerous lines of thinking.

“Well, thanks. Give me a second to eat and then I’ll drive.”

“I can drive. You got exhausted yesterday.” Alden continued his surprising turn as caretaker as we made our way to the car. It made my chest warm. I wasn’t used to being worried over, at least not in the past few years.

“Let me get us through St. Louis—the interchanges can be tricky with the bridges, and I’ve at least driven there a few times.” It might be nice to be cared about, but I also didn’t want him thinking that I needed babying.

“All right. But I’m keeping an eye on your total drive time.” Alden legit took out his phone and set some sort of timer. My brain continued its dance down that crazy path as I wondered whether he’d be so rigid about taking turns in bed or whether he’d finally let go of all that tightly held control and...

Not helping anything, Conrad. Stop. I forced myself to focus on getting back to the highway. Once we were underway, the Illinois farmland started to give way to more built-up suburbs.

“There’s good pizza in Columbia. Maybe that can be lunch.” Even with all the food Alden had brought from the breakfast buffet, I was already looking forward to my next meal.

“Are the slices square?” Alden sounded more suspicious than interested.

“Triangles. Promise. The square thing is all over St. Louis, but this is good stuff in a little college town. You’ll like it. They even have a whole-wheat crust for your health-nut side.”

“I’m not *that* healthy. Regular New York–style white crust is fine. No pepperoni or sausage.”

“You’ve got it. Is the no-pork thing religious or just preference?”

“Both. My moms are hardly that strict beyond the major Jewish holidays, but they don’t usually cook it. My grandparents were more strict. But pork has always felt like breaking the rules. I don’t like breaking rules.”

“I’ve noticed.” I laughed, but quickly stopped when he didn’t. “It’s cool with me. We can split a pizza with some vegetables or something. I’m not incapable of eating green stuff.”

“Good to know. We wouldn’t want you getting scurvy or something.”

“I’m not *that* bad. I ate the banana.”

“And mine,” Alden added, his voice as dry as the granola had been.

“See? Healthy.” As we hit the mess of highways intersecting on the Illinois side of St. Louis, I had to focus more on driving. The GPS wasn’t a ton of help as the exits and merges came fast, and somehow we ended up approaching the city on

I-64, not I-70, but I decided to roll with it rather than double back. I knew from past trips with my folks that we'd hook back up with I-70 soon enough.

"When do we see the Arch?" Alden dealt far better with this interchange mixup than he had in Philadelphia.

"Soon. But the view from the car isn't the best. We need an actual picture."

"Our schedule—"

"Can wait thirty minutes. I'm already taking the fast way through, and we're after the worst of rush hour—"

"I know."

"So another detour isn't going to be that big a deal. Trust me."

Alden made a noncommittal sound, but he didn't protest when I took the downtown exit coming off the bridge. Parking downtown was as much a pain as I remembered from trips with my parents, especially with this boat of a car that didn't parallel park easily.

"It's not going to fit," Alden warned.

"That's what he said." I couldn't let the opening pass, and even if Alden sighed, I still laughed before I proved him wrong. "See. Didn't even need lube."

"Don't be crass." Shaking his head, Alden followed me out of the car and onto the sidewalk where the humidity smacked into us. It was only early June, but the day was still warm and sticky.

"You're no fun."

“So I’ve been told.” Alden’s face subtly fell, and I instantly regretted my crack.

“Sorry. That was rude. I’m sure you’re plenty of fun in the right situation.” I dug in my pocket for some change for the meter. I wasn’t going to use my already-strained card for less than an hour of parking.

“Is that a very polite way of saying that I’m an acquired taste?”

“Possibly.” Trying to show no hard feelings, I grinned at him as I led the way to the riverfront park and historic area that housed the Gateway Arch. I’d been as a kid, more than once, but Alden’s look of awe as we approached the mammoth structure had me wishing we had enough time to go up to the top. “Hey. What do you say we plan on stopping again on the way back? We can do the museum and tour both. The pictures from the observation deck are worth it.”

“Maybe.” Alden sounded thoughtful, but I could tell from the way he worried his lip with his teeth that he was interested. “Won’t you be in a hurry to get back to work?”

“Not if I win the tournament.” I winked at him to cover the lie-by-omission. I wasn’t quite ready to confess the direness of my situation to him. We might be getting along better, but I still didn’t want his pity. Or worse, his lectures about poor life choices and lack of planning.

“Well, if I win, I’ll buy your ticket to the top.” He probably meant the offer to sound generous, but my back muscles still tensed at the reminder that he wanted the win too. And I didn’t like the way he sounded so confident about his chances and so dismissive of mine.

“Don’t be so sure I’m going to lose. I wouldn’t want you pissy the whole way home when I win.”

“I’ve calculated my chances—”

“Seriously?” I took the steps up to the base of the Arch. “That’s some faith in math right there.”

“Most people don’t understand probability and prediction.” Alden launched into a series of examples worthy of any stats class. He was impressive when he got to talking math, showing the same sort of thoroughness and patience he had for explaining *Odyssey* to newbies. Somehow his intensity made him even more attractive, made it hard to concentrate on his words.

“Professor Tuttle would be proud, dude. Since medical school was a no-go, maybe you should think about being a professor or something. I mean, it’s not as fun as being like your Miss Betsey, but you could talk math and calculations all day.”

“Maybe.” Alden sounded deflated, which I could get. Moving on from a tightly held childhood dream was hard. The way he sighed said he was ready to change topics, and I wasn’t surprised when he asked, “What was your major anyway?”

“I kept changing,” I had to admit. “Not like Payton and the perpetual undergrad plan, but more like everything interested me the first two years of college. Didn’t have a class that wasn’t fun on some level. Professor Jackson wanted me to think about law school, but I had a hard time picturing life after school. I just wanted the degree. Figured that I’d deal with the future as it came.”

Alden, king of plans, was silent a long moment as he took a few pictures of the base of the Arch. “If all you want is the

degree, why not transfer to a cheaper school?”

I groaned at that. “It’s not necessarily that much cheaper, especially if you can’t get financial aid. And I dunno. It’s sort of...a pride thing, I guess. I want a Gracehaven degree. Want to prove to my dad that he couldn’t take that from me. Switching schools feels like...him winning.”

“You can’t get financial aid? I didn’t think loans were that hard.”

“Says the professor’s kid.”

“Sorry. Point taken.” Gaze shifting away, he looked chagrined at his assumption, which softened my response.

“Anyway, yeah, I had some scholarships for Gracehaven, but not a full ride, and even after...everything, the financial aid office couldn’t find the rest I needed. Which shouldn’t have been that big a deal, because like you said, loans and grants are a thing. Except my parents claimed me on their taxes, and I didn’t qualify for this year. Even if I switch schools, the fact that they keep freaking claiming me is a big hurdle. And there’s a small trust from my grandfather, but Dad controls that until I’m twenty-five. It’s a mess.”

“They want to deduct you on taxes after they kicked you out?” Alden’s eyes narrowed, and he looked ready to do battle on my behalf, which was weirdly gratifying. “That’s totally unfair.”

“Yeah, well, life isn’t fair. And I think Dad figures that if I’m not eligible for other aid, I’ll be more likely to come home, agree to go to his school, and agree to their...plans. But that’s not happening.”

“Of course not.” Alden bristling like an indignant rooster was a great distraction from the heaviness of the conversation.

“You can’t just give in. And what...be not gay? That’s hardly logical. Or possible.”

“Logic has zero to do with it for him. But thanks.” Desperate to move away from this topic, I gestured to a nearby plaque. “Give me your phone. I’ll get some pictures.”

“We need some of you too. Proof of life and all that.” The tentative smile he gave me, almost as if he wasn’t sure whether he was making a joke, made some tender place deep in my chest vibrate like a guitar string.

“Here, how about a compromise: selfie mode.” I moved in closer to him, close enough to smell the hotel shampoo he’d used and for our arms to brush. But it wasn’t quite near enough to get us both in the frame, so at the last second, I tossed an arm around his shoulders, pulling him against my side. He made a startled squawk and the first picture captured his stunned expression. “Try not looking like I’ve just confessed to cannibalism.”

It was the first time I’d deliberately touched him, and I was surprised at how very warm and solid he felt next to me. The thrum of awareness that had started the day before worsened. The height difference wasn’t so much as to make picture-taking a comedy skit, but it was enough that he felt...*right* tucked next to me. Too right.

I moved away quickly after the second shot, hitting Send to the professor before I could overthink it.

“Okay? We should probably get back to the car,” I said as I handed the phone back after snapping a few more touristy shots for him.

“Yeah.” He sounded a little off, as if maybe the contact had unsettled him, too, and that wasn’t as reassuring as it could

have been. I didn't want these weird sizzles to continue and wasn't sure I wanted him noticing either. Maybe if I drove fast enough, I could not only make up time, but also outrun this strangeness.

Chapter Sixteen

Alden

“Did you have to wedge in so tightly?” I complained. Conrad had reluctantly agreed to let me drive the two-hour stretch between St. Louis and our lunch stop in Columbia, but I was more concerned with getting out of the narrow space where he’d parked than any highway interchanges.

“Good luck getting it to fit...” He winked at me, which made me sputter and fumble the keys. “When we park, I mean. Downtown Columbia can be dicey for parking.”

“And you’d know?” My tone wasn’t the kindest, but I couldn’t decide what to make of his teasing, and my confusion made my words sharper than I intended.

“I’ve been there a lot when Dad’s school played one of the smaller colleges. Mizzou is Division I of course, but there are a few other smaller Division II and Division III colleges around there.”

“Ah.” I took a few minutes to focus on getting out of the parking space—a process made harder knowing Conrad was watching—and getting us back on the interstate. A weird but comfortable silence settled over us—Conrad messing around with his phone, me driving, busy St. Louis traffic whizzing by as we passed through the city proper into what felt like endless

suburbs. As in Indiana, driving felt easier now, with not quite so many anxieties all competing for attention at once.

“Jasper says hi.” Conrad looked up from his phone right as traffic finally started to thin out. “His sister is still in the hospital, but they think she’s going to make it. He said your mom—the doctor one—called his parents to see if she could do anything. That was nice.”

“Mimi must have told her about the reason for the credit card charge.” I didn’t like how Conrad seemed to want to put my moms on a pedestal. Yes, they could be nice, but that didn’t mean that growing up with them had always been easy. Explaining that, however, was challenging because I didn’t want to seem too ungrateful. “Did Professor Tuttle reply to the pictures we sent of the Arch?”

“Permission to browse your messages?” He was already reaching for my phone, which was in the console, GPS set to the pizza place in Columbia that Conrad was so set on.

“Sure.” It wasn’t like I had anything worth keeping from him. Other than lots of back-and-forth with the moms, I didn’t get a lot of messages. I wasn’t completely friendless, but my contacts tended to be more situational, like my online *Odyssey* play group, and not the sort of random friends that Conrad probably had dozens of.

“The prof says, ‘So glad to see you two getting along’ and adds that his surgery went well. I’ll reply to see when he gets to go home.”

“Okay.” I wasn’t sure I agreed with Professor Tuttle’s assessment that we were getting along. Getting *awkward* perhaps. My shoulders rolled, the memory of his arm around me still fresh enough to make my body hum. But we weren’t

active enemies at this point, which could be seen as an improvement, I supposed.

“I’m also telling him how you waxed that dude last night and that I’ll send the video as soon as we’ve got free Wi-Fi somewhere.”

“My phone works as a hot spot,” I pointed out, kind of liking him bragging on me.

“Because of course it does,” Conrad huffed. “If I reach around to grab the laptop bag, is that going to distract you from the road?”

“Yes.” Better I answer honestly than lie and endanger us both. But not wanting to be a total drag, I added, “But you can turn on the radio if you’re bored.”

“First letting me eat in the car, now radio. Boy, when you let loose...” Conrad laughed, but it wasn’t a mean sort of laugh—at least, I didn’t think so. It was warm, almost affectionate. He found a mutually agreeable contemporary station after nixing my suggestions of jazz and the news. “We need to remind you that you’re twenty-three, not eighty-two, Grandpa. Pay attention, and I’ll teach you what’s popular with all the kiddos these days.”

“Says the guy who listens to country.”

And so I suffered Conrad’s surprisingly entertaining music education class until we arrived at Columbia, right in time for the lunch rush. Conrad pointed out the town’s famous columns as we looked for a place to park Black Jack. Unlike Conrad, I wasn’t squeezing in anywhere, so we ended up needing to walk a few blocks. As we passed, we did pictures at the columns—remnants from some long-ago building. To me, they

looked weird—nothing to support, nothing to hold up. Almost lonely. They needed a *purpose*.

Conrad, however, had no trouble goofing off around the sad structures, making faces for my camera before leading the way to a large pizza parlor that had an old-fashioned vibe to it—lots of wood and decor straight out of a seventies movie.

“You get us a table,” I ordered as we joined the long line waiting for the counter. “I’m pickier about toppings.”

This also left me to pay, which was my desired outcome. It meant making sure Conrad both ate and saved some money, and also ensured that I could get half with cheese and green peppers for me and half with meat lover’s for the carnivore.

I took our ticket to the booth Conrad had snagged by the back corner, almost too private, but nicely insulated from the busy room. He fished out some cash, but I waved it off.

“We’ll work it out later.”

“I don’t need charity.” He glared at me.

“I didn’t say you did.” This was what I got for trying to be nice—him all moody and playing with the straw dispenser and not talking to me while we waited for our food.

But he softened some when the pizza arrived on a little elevated stand. It wasn’t quite New York standard—crust thicker, sauce less spicy, cheese a little less stretchy—but it was still very good, and watching Conrad devour his half was worth suffering through his bad mood over me paying.

“Man, this is even better than I remember.” Each bite seemed to evaporate more of his funk until he was grinning at me again.

“I’m glad,” I said and meant it. There was something about doing things for him that I found deeply satisfying—like a long run or solving a particularly complex equation.

“Thanks.” His tongue darted out to capture some melted cheese before it escaped his crust, and warmth gathered low in my gut, all that talk the day before rushing back with a vengeance, a fresh set of inappropriate thoughts taking over my brain.

“What?” Head tilting, he blinked at me.

“You have some sauce on your face.” No way was I confessing what I’d really been thinking about, but I also wasn’t lying. He had a little smear on his chin that somehow made him more, not less, attractive.

“Where?” He swiped at his lips with a napkin a few times but missed the bit on his chin entirely.

“Oh, here.” I grabbed a napkin myself and reached over to blot the sauce away before I could think through the invasion of his personal space. I hadn’t realized how close my fingers would come to his lips, their softness grazing my knuckles.

He made a low, startled noise that went straight to all the parts that had no business being interested, making my insides dance as I awkwardly shifted on the wooden bench.

“Sorry,” I murmured, my voice a bare whisper as my body tried to figure out what the heck was going on.

“Two can play at that game you know.” His eyes flashed as he did the same thing to my cheek, fingers brushing my skin. Something was happening. A sort of...anticipation. Like when I knew a big turn was coming in the game, a chance to play a card that I’d held since my opening hand. My breath sped up as our gazes met. The moment hung there between us, all

charged energy, hands resting too close to each other on the table, eyes holding—

“Stop it, Lance.” A mom chasing a kid came rushing by our booth, and all the energy fizzled away. I should have been relieved by the interruption since I’d had no idea what my next move was supposed to be, but instead, I was irritated, as if I’d lost my chance to win a game I hadn’t even realized I wanted to play.

“We should go.” Conrad’s eyes shuttered. “There’s probably at least one game store in town, but it’s not on the agenda, and we’re already behind.”

“Yeah.” I followed him back to the car, where predictably, he insisted it was his turn to drive.

“I’m better at making up time.”

“Better at speeding, you mean.” I wasn’t sure why I was arguing with him. I didn’t actually *want* to drive. But something in him pushed all my buttons, both good and bad.

“At least I’ll leave the slow lane.” He slid into the driver’s seat without waiting for my reply.

“Fine. Don’t get a ticket.” I took the laptop with me into the passenger seat and spent the next portion of the trip using my phone as a hot spot to upload video until the cell phone signal fizzled out, exactly like whatever had happened back at the pizza place. Not wanting to deal with Roam, I put both phone and laptop away and turned my attention to the increasingly rural scenery. We’d filled up the tank in Columbia, and Kansas City was our next scheduled stop, which I associated in my brain with barbecue sauce and baseball and little else.

“Are there any landmarks in Kansas City that we should get a picture of?” I asked, shuffling my pages of notes as I studied

the billboards.

“Nothing iconic like the Arch, but I’ll think of something.” Conrad sounded distracted, but talking felt better than strained silence.

“Hey, do you hear something?” Conrad frowned, tone turning serious as he signaled to move from the fast lane back to the middle and then the slow lane.

Concentrating, I focused on the car’s noises, anxiety returning all at once as all sorts of terrible scenarios rushed through my head.

“I hear something,” Conrad said again, voice tight. “Steering got wonky on me for a second too.”

“What?” I strained, trying to hear any errant sounds, but I wasn’t a car guy. A glance over at the console didn’t reveal any warning lights. The engine hummed, road noise same as—

Rattle. Thump. Rattle. There. An ominous sound that did nothing to help my anxiety. “That?”

“Yeah.”

“There’s an exit ahead.” I hated the idea of losing time to investigate what was probably nothing, but I also wasn’t an idiot. Conrad took the exit right as the maybe-something noise became a massive thumping, rattling, shaking *event*.

“What the—”

“Watch out!” The car lurched, each second we were still on the highway an eternity. Sweat gathered in my lower back and my throat tightened.

“I’m trying. I’m not sure... *Fuck.*”

My pulse bucked right along with the car, frenetic surges of energy. I hated how helpless I felt, unable to do more than hope Conrad made it to the shoulder at least.

Cursing, Conrad gripped the steering wheel with white fingers, struggling to take the exit, car lurching and thumping louder as he slowed down. He barely managed a right turn at the base of the exit as we shuddered to a stop on the shoulder of a tiny country road with nothing but a view of endless rolling green fields. Empty. Desolate. Nothing was around us—no gas stations, no houses, *nothing*.

“Fucking tire blowout. *Fuck*.” Conrad rested his head on the steering wheel. His body trembled, and I reached out, some alien impulse leading me to put my hand on his shoulder.

“How do you know?”

“Didn’t you feel that? Thank God, I had it happen once before at way slower speed. We could have wrecked there.”

“Oh.” My mouth opened and closed a few times like a fish. “What caused it? What did you do wrong?”

“Wrong?” Conrad shrugged my hand off, whirling toward me and making me instantly regret my word choice. Stupid anxiety, making me dwell on the wrong things, making my voice way more accusatory as I tried to quiet my trembling insides.

“I did something wrong?” His eyes were shooting sparks of amber. “Did you not hear me? We almost wrecked. And here we are now, safely off the highway, all in one piece. And you want to know what *I* did wrong?”

“I meant that something made the tire blow.” I managed a more even tone, brain finally slowing enough to use logic, not simply reactive emotions.

“Seeing as how the car is older than me, it could simply be an age thing. Or we could have picked up a nail in Columbia. All that circling side streets you did.”

“It’s *my* fault?” So much for less emotional. I twisted in my seat, staring him down.

“Quit worrying about fault and start worrying about changing a tire.” Conrad made an exasperated noise, one I supposed I deserved. “The tire blew. Who cares why? Next step is to get to the spare. You want to see if you can find us a how-to video on your phone?”

I had to shake my head. “Can’t. There’s barely any signal. I’m on Roam.”

“Damn it.” He knocked his head against the window.

“Sorry.” I wanted to say something else, wanted to apologize for letting anxiety get the worst of me again, wanted to thank him for saving our lives, wanted to tell him that I didn’t think he was a bad driver or at fault, but none of that managed to come out.

“It’s okay. Spare tire first. I’ve seen this done before. Can’t be too hard.”

“I thought you said you had a flat tire before?” I was careful this time to keep my tone conversational, not accusing or angry.

“Yeah, but I was on my parents’ insurance back then, and they had Triple A, so I used that.”

“I’ve got that through Mom!” I brightened, glad to finally be useful. I might not be able to formulate a proper apology, but I could at least do this. “I’ll try to get enough signal to call.”

“Awesome. I’m going to work on getting to the spare tire in the trunk while you do that.”

“Okay.” It took a few tries, but I finally connected and explained our emergency to the dispatcher.

“That’s too bad, hon.” She had a soothing southern accent. “Looks like I can have someone to you in about an hour.”

“An hour? That’s not acceptable.” I sounded an awful lot like Mom when lab results were taking too long.

“Sir, I’m sorry, but you’re in a fairly remote area—”

“*I know.*” Now panic crept into my voice for the first time, anger and shock giving way to real fear.

“I’ll ask them to hurry, but I can’t make promises.” Her tone stayed soothing, but there was a firmness there, too, which strangely helped me to resign myself to a long wait. She was doing all she could. That was all I could really ask.

“Thanks.” I ended the call, then exited the car carefully to go tell Conrad the wait time. But before I could speak, I found him with all our luggage in untidy piles at his feet, shaking his head, muttering more curses.

“This car is doomed.”

“How so?” I quickly scanned for smoke or other signs of imminent danger. The front passenger tire was all mangled—no amount of inflation was going to save *that*—but I couldn’t see another obvious threat.

“No spare.” He pointed at the empty well where one would expect to see a spare tire.

“Wow. How did Professor Tuttle overlook that? A cross-country trip. I thought he checked everything,” I sputtered.

“Me too. But he was kind of distracted.”

“By us fighting.” Fresh guilt swamped me.

“Among other things.” Conrad’s thunderous expression made it clear that somehow my shortcomings were a big part of those other things.

“That’s not fair.”

Conrad huffed out several breaths. “Fair or not, we’ve got no spare and I think the rim is bent.”

“Well, heck.”

“You can say fuck, Alden. I won’t tell.”

“Fine. Fuck it.” The curse felt sharp, unnatural in my mouth. “Nope. Cursing doesn’t help.”

“True. But it feels better momentarily, right?”

“For you maybe.”

“*God.* Can’t you stop being so damn perfect for like ten minutes? Please?” Conrad paced back and forth in front of me.

“I’m not perfect.” How utterly hysterical a concept. Rather than give in to the urge to laugh like a maniac—another impulse that wasn’t likely to help—I started repacking the trunk in the correct order.

“Oh? You’re Mr. GPA, never a single misstep. Perfectly virginal. Perfectly studious. Have you even been drunk? Or fucked up?”

“All. The. Time.” Pausing from my work, I ground out each word. “Messed up, I mean. Not the drunk part. My anxiety meds tend to contraindicate alcohol.”

“My point. You can’t even violate a prescription warning.”

“I don’t like *dying*, thank you very much.” I placed the next bag in the trunk with more force than necessary, making the other bags jump.

“Fair enough.” He looked slightly chagrined, chin tucking in, eyes shuttering. “But I don’t mean messed up like a panic attack at the wrong moment. Or a B on a test. I mean big, huge errors in judgment. The kind that change everything.”

The pain in his voice gave me pause. “I’m not sure,” I admitted slowly, putting the last box away more cautiously. “But I’m not perfect. That much I know. And I’ve got the bulging medical file to prove it.”

“Doctor stuff?” His mouth twisted. “Not sure that health problems count or—”

“Just stop.” I rounded on him, bristling with twenty-odd years of righteous indignation over people and their assumptions. “You’re so darn sure I’ve got the perfect life just because I’ve got two moms, the nice house, the tuition, and whatever else you wish you had, but you can’t see past the external and I am sick of it.”

“Sor—”

“I’m not done.” I’d rarely been this angry, and it felt like a freight train trying to leave my chest, like I couldn’t hold it back any longer. “You want to know how imperfect I am? Fine. My moms have spent *years* trying to get a label for my imperfection.”

“Oh. You mean like a panic disorder?” His voice was cautious, but I plowed on.

“That. Personality disorder. Learning disability of some sort. Speech problem. Autism spectrum disorder—what they used to call Asperger’s. The moms were desperate for an

explanation for why I wasn't like other kids. They latched onto neurodiversity, but all the doctors they dragged me to couldn't come to a consensus on a single label. But they all agreed that whatever I was, I wasn't a typical kid."

"Well, duh. You're a genius. Don't plenty of geniuses have neurodiversity or whatever you want to call it?"

"My IQ isn't quite that high," I felt honor bound to correct him, even as I warmed to the compliment.

"Okay, maybe not a *literal* genius, but dude, you're hella smart."

"That wasn't enough," I whispered as the wind whipped through my hair, heat of the day beating down on me just as much as the memories and shame were. "Not enough for medical school, at least. I'm smart, sure, but there's tons of applicants with the same GPA. And good at math doesn't mean good at baring my soul in an admissions essay. That and socially awkward equals fast rejection."

"I wouldn't say you're *that* socially awkward." His tone was kind, but I hated that I couldn't tell whether he actually meant it or was being nice to get me to calm down. Which wasn't happening. My pulse was still pounding, the need to make him understand as intense as the sun, impossible to hold back.

"And the worst part—the truly worst part—is that the moms wanted me to write about being neurodiverse. Like they knew it wouldn't be enough to just be myself to get in. It's never enough being me. We have to label it. Work to overcome it. Treat it. Fix it. Because, yeah, I'm *imperfect*."

Conrad was silent a long moment, undoubtedly stunned by my tirade, chewing on his lower lip as he squinted into the sun.

“I don’t think so,” he said at last. “And it’s not me having rose-colored glasses about your family situation. I get it now. They were too hard on you. But you’re not imperfect. Neurodiverse or not, you’re right. You’re just you. Just Alden. It’s who you are. Changing any of it isn’t necessary.”

“It’s not?” I could barely get the words out. I wasn’t sure anyone had ever quite so readily defended me.

“No. Like...you wouldn’t ask a German shepherd to suddenly become a toy poodle.”

“I am *not* a *dog*.”

“Okay. Terrible metaphor. But what I mean is why waste time trying to change who you are? Trust me. I’ve spent a ton of time trying to change me. Pray away the gay, so to speak. But it didn’t work. Some things about us are just how we arrived here on earth.”

“Yeah.” Voice coming out weak, I had to lean against the car.

“And I don’t think that makes us imperfect.” He put a hand on my shoulder. Not a hug or even a squeeze, but there, warm and present. His conviction, the way he seemed to deeply believe his words, made my knees wobble, body not sure it could withstand this much compassion all at once. “I’m not trying to say that being gay is the same. And I can’t say that I know what you’ve gone through. But I do know what it’s like to believe you’re broken when really all you are is...*you*. And I’m sorry that your moms maybe can’t see that.”

“Thanks.” My eyes burned in a way they hadn’t in years, hot and tingly and dangerously close to welling over. I wanted to believe him, wanted to trust that he wasn’t feeding me some positivity mantra out of pity. For the first time, maybe ever, I felt *seen*. Heard, like maybe I hadn’t ranted in vain. I turned

toward him, still searching for the right words to say thank you with, and our eyes met. Held. His were full of compassion. But not pity. I'd seen pity plenty of times, and this wasn't that. It was understanding, and it was potent. I leaned in to his touch, soaking it in.

Right as I was about to say something—probably the *wrong* thing, but at least *something*—the beep of a horn made me jump. Conrad's hand dropped as if he'd been burned. A tow truck pulled up in front of us.

“Someone need a rescue?” the driver, a gray-haired woman, called out her open window.

Oh, lady, you have no idea. And even as Conrad rushed toward her, I couldn't help feeling as though she'd interrupted something significant, a moment I might never get back.

Chapter Seventeen

Conrad

Our rescuer was named Mary from Mary & Blue's Auto Repair, and she was a strapping woman who was easily almost as tall as me, with shoulders that rivaled many linebackers. But her voice was all gingerbread and hot cocoa—a caring grandma who wanted to cluck over us as much as the car.

“Oh, this car is a beaut.” She circled Black Jack. “But you poor boys. What rotten luck. Did you have to wait long?”

“No,” Alden said softly, still sounding a little dazed. “Not long.”

Weird answer because to me it felt like years had passed since the tire blowout—as if we were most definitely in a different place and time now, the very air around us changed. It wasn't simply the argument or Alden's confession. Rather, something had happened inside me, some unearthing of tender places I hadn't been aware of having. And in telling Alden that he wasn't broken, I'd reminded myself that this applied to me too. It had been so easy to feel like damaged goods the past year, but when I'd told Alden that we weren't imperfect, I'd actually believed it myself.

And I'd meant it when I said that I didn't see Alden as imperfect—I never had. If anything, I'd been guilty of some unrealistic golden-boy assumptions. I'd always seen him as

supersmart, super competitive, and yeah, maybe a little quirky. But everyone has idiosyncrasies. And whether his stemmed from neurodiversity or anxiety or some other cause, I didn't think that made him flawed.

“Well, good. Wouldn't want to keep you waiting. My first call out in a few days.” Mary slapped Alden on the shoulder before bending to inspect the damaged tire. “And yep, you've got a bent rim. Fixable though. Luckily, with a sedan like this, even a luxury model, we probably have a tire that will work back at the shop. We'll tow you in. Should have you back on your way in a few hours.”

“Hours?” Alden, keeper of the schedule, groaned, and for once, I had to join in. We couldn't afford to lose that much more time.

“By dinner,” Mary assured us. “You're lucky it's a slow day at the shop.”

I had a feeling most days were slow in this tiny blip of a place. Mary's was the only other vehicle I'd seen since taking the exit ramp. I couldn't see any town yet, but the sign on the tow truck advertised some place I'd never heard of.

“Thanks.” I couldn't help my sigh, but we really didn't have any other options. “And uh...how much?”

“The tow is covered by your friend's Triple A. And unless we're looking at an alignment, it'll be the rim repair and the new tire. Hard to estimate on the fly, but two fifty? Maybe three hundred. We'll try to keep it down.”

“F—*heck*.” The dollar signs invading my brain made my whole face clench. Fast math said that even split, that was going to cut into my reserves in a big way. But no way was I letting Alden cover the whole thing. And calling Professor

Tuttle like little kids who needed bailing out just wasn't happening either.

"That's fine." Alden shot me a look, but there was concern in his eyes too. I remembered what he'd said about his emergency credit card not having an unlimited balance. When Mary stepped away to start prepping the car for a tow, he lowered his voice. "Hopefully, it's not too bad. I'll put it on my card."

"I don't want your moms saving the day," I argued. I was much less inclined to accept their help after what Alden had told me.

"Me either." He sighed. "I'll put it on my personal card—"

"You'll put half on it. I'll do other half." I was prepared to be stubborn about this. Alden didn't reply right away, his mouth moving as if he was trying to decide how to get around my decree.

But then Mary came back over, and he gave me a long stare. "Okay."

"Y'all have a kid in the back seat?"

"Uh, no." I scratched behind my ear. "Goat."

Mary blinked. "Eh. Can't say as I haven't heard that one before, but no animals in my truck. It tame?"

"It's a toy." Alden was blushing. It was cute, him getting all embarrassed over the stuffed animal.

"It's kind of our mascot." I grinned over at him, trying to make the best of a crappy situation. The tentative grin he gave me in return definitely counted as something good, the way it made my skin heat.

“I see. Well, climb on up in the truck, boys, and let’s get you back to the shop.”

The truck was an older one, with just a single large bench seat. It was going to be a tight squeeze in the cab with the three of us. I took the middle because I figured Alden’s anxiety might do better closer to the door and not having to bump against a stranger. At least we’d been pressed together the day before on the Speedway tour.

“Thanks,” he whispered as he climbed in after me. Our feet jostled for space and Alden was practically diagonal, half up the door to avoid contact with me.

“That’s not going to work.” I laughed and yanked him down into my lap. And hey, now I had a lap full of Alden, warm and smelling far better than he had any right to—*solid*, his back against my chest. My pulse revved in a way it hadn’t in months. I’d squeezed into cars before or at concerts with friends, people ending up in my lap or squashed against me, no biggie. But this felt different than if it had been Jasper or some other friend. Way different.

“Oh good. You figured out how to fit.” Mary swung herself up into the driver’s side of the truck. Alden tensed against me, but if she cared how we’d arranged ourselves, she wasn’t showing it. “Town’s not that far.”

Not that far ended up meaning about fifteen minutes north up the bumpy rural highway, and each pothole and curve in the road made Alden shift in my lap, forcing me to strike up small talk with Mary as a way to distract my brain away from how good—and *wrong*—it felt.

Luckily, Mary was happy to tell us about Marshall, a small college town surrounded by what felt like endless farms. The

way I figured it, they probably had more cows than people in the population.

“Spit and you’ll miss it,” she said, laughing. “But even if we’re not right on the interstate, tourists like us. You boys can wander around while I get you up and running again. Bunch of bed-and-breakfasts. Some restaurants. College kids like to eat and sure like their coffee. People also come for the fishing. Hatchery’s not too far off—”

“I don’t fish,” Alden said stiffly.

“Too messy for you?”

“Yes.” He shuddered and the ripple of his back muscles made electricity zoom up my abs.

“That’s fine. More fishing for me.” Mary laughed again. Despite wishing we were anywhere else, I liked her. “We’ve even got a Walmart now. And there’s a quilt show every September.”

“It’s June.”

“Relax.” Hoping Mary wouldn’t notice, I used my right hand to pat Alden’s leg. “We’ll find something to do.”

“There’s always the Jim the Wonder Dog Museum.”

“That...uh...sure.” I tried to sound more upbeat than Alden, but growing up in the middle of Kansas, I’d had my share of strange small-town museums and attractions.

“Of course, kids also like the arcade just off North. But y’all are probably too old for games—”

“Oh, you’d be surprised.” I grinned as she pulled into an old yellow gas station with a bay of repair garages behind it. It had modern pumps but an aging canopy over them and a decrepit hound dog standing guard by the repair shop.

“That’s ol’ Blue the second. Ex-husband left me the dog and this here business. Reckon I liked the dog and the work better than him anyhow.” Mary bent to pet the dog as we exited the truck. Alden seemed like he couldn’t hop off my lap fast enough, but I needed a couple of deep breaths before I could climb down.

“Let me get a phone number from you, and I’ll call after I find the right tire and look at that rim. I’ve got a mechanic who will help me out with that.”

We exchanged contact information, and I tried to be all casual as I secured walking directions to the arcade. It might be a kid thing, but it still sounded better than exploring local attractions or trying to find food. I was still stuffed from the pizza, and thanks to having had Alden on my lap, the only thing I was hungry for was something I shouldn’t want and couldn’t have.

The town was small enough that we could walk to most of it from the repair shop. North turned out to inexplicably be an east-west road, but once we got turned around right, we found the small downtown with a row of buildings on either side bookended by a large church on one side and a courthouse on the other. As we neared the buildings, we discovered a large food packing plant and then the promised Wonder Dog Museum with its immaculate garden—neater than many cemeteries and country clubs. We sent a picture of the bronze dog statue to Professor Tuttle before continuing on.

“That courthouse clock looks like something out of *Back to the Future*,” I joked, pointing at the redbrick building. “Better watch it, or we’ll be running into other versions of ourselves.”

“That old movie?” Alden said. “You just want an excuse to floor it in the car.”

“Guilty.”

Eventually we reached a narrow, flat lot near a stately post office. A metal arch over the turn-in proclaimed “Enchanted Arcade.” The white building was set back from the road with some fanciful metal sculptures out front—two mini elephants just calling for tiny kids to sit on them, some giraffes, a boat that was probably supposed to be the Ark with cutouts for faces for picture taking, and right next to this quasi-biblical scene, a bunch of dwarfs surrounding another cutout that seemed to be Snow White in a long, blue metal dress.

“Stand over there,” I ordered Alden. “We need a picture of this.”

“I’m not putting my face up against one of those.”

“Fine. I will. You do the camera.”

I had no problem being silly with the sculptures, crouching down among the dwarves, dancing with Snow White, and pretending to pet the animals, letting Alden get some photos, but also not stopping until he was smiling too. “You’re such a goofball.”

“Yup. And proud of it.”

“I never expected...” His voice trailed off, and he looked over at the field beyond the building.

“Me to be silly?” I supplied.

“Something like that.” He gave me one of his rare smiles. “Are we going in?”

“You know it. Even if it costs money, it beats wandering around town.”

The interior of the building was bigger than it looked from the outside, sort of a big, cavernous warehouse filled with

flashing lights and bright machines. All the classics I remembered from kid birthday parties—Pop-A-Shot, Whac-A-Mole, a big wheel to spin for prizes, a photo booth, and more. And rows of arcade video-game machines, including several iterations of *Pac-Man*, *Donkey Kong*, *Street Fighter*, and *Joust* along with a line of pinball machines. In the rear of the building, a Tilt-A-Whirl-type ride jockeyed for space with a mini carousel for little kids, two flight simulators, and a driving game. Out back, there were go-karts and a small oval track.

It being early afternoon on a weekday, there weren't many other patrons—a couple of kids out driving the go-karts, bored moms sitting in the shade, some teens on the video-game machines, and a few little kids being chased by a young caretaker. One almost ran into us, but Alden gently redirected her back to the high-school-aged babysitter.

“Careful. No escaping!” He laughed, his voice surprisingly gentle. It really was remarkable how much more patience he had for kids than for adults. Two fingers in her mouth, the little girl smiled, clearly taken with Alden. He gave her a little wave before we continued to the counter where a guy as ancient as Mary's dog greeted us.

“How many tokens can I do you for?” The man sized us up with bleary eyes. The long counter had a register at one end and a wall of prizes behind the clerk, mainly assorted stuffed animals and plush figures, with more in the cases under the counter. He pointed to a special on the board in front of the register—two sodas, popcorn, and a hundred tokens. “This is our best deal.”

“Do we need a hundred tokens?” Alden frowned at me. “She said it would only be a few hours. How many tokens can we

go through anyway?”

“You’d be surprised. And car stuff has a way of always getting delayed. If we have leftover coins, we can just give them to a kid as we leave.” The way I saw it was that this was my last splurge before I had to pay my half of the tire repair. I’d load up on free breakfast in the morning and cheap snack food to save money later. I passed the clerk some cash before Alden could talk me out of it.

“You got lunch,” I said when he pulled out his wallet. “Let me get this.”

“Okay.” He didn’t seem too thrilled, but he followed me to the end of the long counter where I accepted our bucket of tokens and vouchers for the food.

“You’re strangely happy,” he observed as we passed through the old-style metal gate to enter the main part of the arcade. “You play a lot of games as a kid or something?”

“Oh yeah. The convenience store that I told you about, the one I was allowed to bike to, had some old-school games in the back. And there was a pizza place in town with a ton of games that everyone used for their birthday parties. So many parties. Didn’t you have that too?”

“Some. I...uh...didn’t get a ton of invitations.”

“Damn.” My heart squeezed. I got that Alden could be a little prickly, but every little kid deserved a crowd of friends. “Well, we can make up for lost time. You pick first.”

“Okay.” Alden studied the offerings as though there might be a quiz on the layout later, finally pointing to the driving game. “I know we’ve been driving for days—”

“Not video-game style.” Happy, I led the way over to the machines. “And not head-to-head.”

“Yeah, it’s a two-player game.” The way he said it slowly made it clear he hadn’t had a lot of takers to play those with him before.

“Put the tokens in,” I ordered him with a grin. “And if you’re lucky, I’ll even do a rematch once I kick your ass the first time.”

My competitive side wouldn’t let me go easy on him, even if I did feel bad for all his childhood hurts, and I didn’t think he’d want that anyway. He was every bit as competitive as me, and I liked that about him. Liked that I could talk trash and not offend him.

“Who says you’re winning?” he said as he took a seat next to me.

“I’ve seen you drive. You need me to show you the accelerator?”

“Big talk. I’ll have you know I have excellent reflexes. And maybe I took notes yesterday at the Speedway.”

“Bring it on.” The game started up, and he chose a bright-red racer after we agreed on a urban setting backdrop. The tinny music and sound effects brought back a flood of memories, and it wasn’t hard to remember how to drive like a maniac and dodge obstacles, laughing as Alden did the same, giving me a much better race than I’d expected. I still won, but it was damn close.

“About that rematch?” Alden’s brown eyes sparkled, like sun shining through honey.

“Totally.” I loaded us up with more tokens, switching it up by picking a slick yellow roadster. Knowing that he was better at this than I’d assumed made my muscles tighter, made me concentrate that much harder, trying to outrun him. And it

looked like I'd succeeded when at the last second a line of barrels came rolling toward me and I couldn't swerve fast enough. I wiped out, leaving Alden to zoom to the finish line.

"I win!" The look of pure elation on Alden's face was one that I wanted to memorize. Not photograph and share with the others, but map for myself to take out and examine later—the joy and openness there utterly intoxicating. I couldn't help grinning back. His nose wrinkled. "What? You're looking at me weird."

"Nothing. You're cute when you win, that's all. Good game, man." A saner person would probably not admit the cute part—or at least try to take it back once the words escaped—but I didn't. The way I figured it, Alden *was* cute, true facts, and he probably hadn't heard that very often in his life, which was a damn shame.

"I'm not cute." His cheeks stained pink. "And it's all about anticipating disaster. Trust me. I know how to see bad things coming and duck."

"Yeah, well it was still impressive." I clapped him on the shoulder. "Let's try a different game now."

"Your turn to pick."

"Pop-A-Shot. Love that one."

"I suck at sports involving balls."

"There's a joke there, but I'll be nice." I laughed as I led the way to the row of mechanical basketball hoops with flashing lights over each hoop. "And it's not a sport. Just put the ball in the hole. Easy. I'm gonna win us a friend for the goat. Watch me."

"Like you need a bigger fan club." But Alden didn't sound particularly put out as he watched me feed tokens to the

machine that delivered a row of small basketballs to the well in front of me.

“You’re not going to try?”

“Like I said, me and balls... Oh, never mind.” He seemed to realize at the last second how he’d sounded, going from mildly pink to beet red as he looked away. “You have at it.”

I easily made my first couple of baskets, earning bonus balls as the clock ticked down, increasing my score. I played a couple of fast rounds, earning an impressive stripe of tickets and a round of mock applause from Alden.

“Now, you need some tickets toward our quest to make the goat less lonely. I worry about him, as an only kid.” I laughed, expecting Alden to join in, but only got a quizzical look in response. “Get it? Only *kid*?”

“I get it now.” Alden shook his head, but a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. “You enjoy being ridiculous, don’t you?”

“Sometimes.” I shrugged. “Life’s too short and unpredictable to take seriously. Might as well have fun.”

“Well, you’re good at it.” He walked over to the Whac-a-Mole. “I never saw the point of this one.”

“Stress relief.” I handed him one of the mallets. “Come on, Mr. Reflexes, show me what you’ve got.”

I took the spot next to him, and we both got way too invested in smacking the mechanical creatures, whooping and hollering until we both got more tickets for our efforts.

“My score is higher,” Alden pointed out.

“So it is.” I playfully shoved him, the sort of move I’d done with friends hundreds of times, but with him it felt...charged

somehow. “Want to do the photo booth?”

“Haven’t we been squashed together enough?”

Not nearly enough. I tried to push that thought away. “Come on. Have you ever tried it?”

He shook his head so seriously I wasn’t sure we were still talking about photo booths, but I didn’t need any further encouragement to drag him over and shove enough tokens into the machine to get us a strip of four pictures. We squeezed in, him in front of me again. With the curtain drawn, the temptation to touch him, to pull him close became almost unbearable. My hands didn’t seem to know where to go, hovering over his torso and thighs, refusing to listen to my command to mind their own business. Finally, the urge won as I gave into the impulse to rest my hand on his flat stomach, pulling him more against me. His scent filled all my senses, making my body hum like a space heater, warmth zooming everywhere.

The bare skin of his neck seemed to beckon me, made it too easy to lean in and—

“Do we make goofy faces or what?”

I pushed the start button hard enough to make the booth shake. “Yeah. Get silly.”

Silly was good. Silly would allow me to regain a grip on my sanity, remember all my very good reasons for not doing something truly ridiculous like kissing Alden’s neck. But man, how I wanted to.

Chapter Eighteen

Alden

We could have been squished into a file drawer and possibly had more available space than in the microscopic photo booth. Conrad's hand on my abdomen seemed to burn a path straight to my brain, wiping out essential neurons. He said to be silly, but all I could focus on was his big hand, right there, pressing me tighter against him. I made myself smile as the camera flashed, hoping like heck that my inner turmoil wouldn't be apparent in the pictures. This was probably how Conrad acted with all his friends. No way could I let him know how this was affecting me.

His breath was hot on my neck, warm prickles, more sparks of heat. I shifted and he inhaled sharply right before the final picture. He was so solid behind me, and the temptation to relax into him was almost overwhelming.

Almost.

I could still hear voices outside, kids laughing, parents calling after them. Despite how it felt, this wasn't actually a private cocoon. And even with the curtain drawn, my muscles were tense with worries about misstepping—what would happen if I did sink into him? Let my head tip back the way it seemed to want to? What would happen next? That was where my brain kept short-circuiting. I prided myself on my ability to

use probabilities and statistics to make predictions, and right then it seemed about fifty-fifty whether he would laugh and push me away or hold me tighter, inhale like that again, maybe...

No. I couldn't let myself even daydream about it. This was Conrad being nice. Friendly. I couldn't risk messing that up, risk a terminal case of awkward derailing our trip and distracting me from my reasons for being here.

"Let's see the pictures." My voice came out low and husky, something wrong with my vocal cords.

"Yeah. Let's do that." Conrad seemed to have the same issue, voice rough as he inhaled and exhaled like we were at a yoga class.

I exited first, grabbing the strip as the machine spit it out.

"Oh, wow." Conrad peered over my shoulder, still way too close. "Not silly at all."

No, they weren't funny pictures in the slightest. Instead, we looked...happy. Like my-oldest-sister's-wedding-pictures happy—like a couple radiating the kind of affection that seemed to transcend paper and ink. It was...unsettling. Like seeing my deeply hidden private wishes exposed for public consumption, leaving me raw and vulnerable.

"Want me to snap a copy of it?" Conrad asked, still looking himself. I wondered what he saw, if I was hallucinating about the happiness in our eyes.

"We don't need to bother the others with a picture right now." I tried to sound decisive, but when I went to tuck the strip of pictures in my pocket, Conrad plucked it from me.

"I want to keep it anyway."

Well, so did I, a private souvenir to obsess over later, and not inevitably lost to the laundry as it would be with Conrad, but I let him keep it, not wanting to give away too much by taking it back.

“What next?” I asked, my voice somewhat back to normal.

“Pinball.” Humming some tune under his breath, Conrad made his way to the row of shiny games along one of the side walls. “I wish our pizza place had had some of these instead of just kid games.”

Something he’d said earlier poked at my brain. “You’re going back to that job, right? Like they gave you vacation time?”

Conrad was silent while he fed tokens to the pinball machine, which made it light up and the music start. “Hang on.”

I almost forgot the question as I watched him play, the way his whole body seemed to vibrate with focus and energy, shoulders flexing, eyes narrowing, same hand that had been on me working the knobs and buttons. It was the weirdest thing in the world to get turned on from—right up there with my thing for the latest Captain Kirk and about as unrealistic.

Finally, the turn came to an end and I asked again, both as distraction from getting worked up watching him and because I couldn’t let it drop. “So about that job? They’re holding it for you?”

Conrad sighed. “Not exactly.”

“Not exactly how?” Tilting my head, I studied him carefully, noting the rare blush on his cheeks and his skittish gaze.

“Listen, if I tell you something, can you promise to not tell the others?”

“Yes.” Agreeing was easy. I hardly gossiped with the rest of our play group as it was, and being singled out for a secret—something that almost never happened—was too good to pass up.

“The grocery store let me go right before we left. And I... uh...” He rubbed the back of his neck. “I might have quit the pizza place when they wouldn’t give me time off. They might rehire me once they have a chance to miss me. Or I’ll find something else. But it won’t matter. Because I’m going to win.”

No, *I* was going to win, but even I knew better than to point that out right then. “Well, at least you’ve got your place with Professor Jackson right? She won’t kick you out while you find something else.”

“Yeah. About that...”

“Not that either?” My mouth falling open, I gaped at him.

“She’s selling her house. Like I said, it won’t matter when I win. And I’ve got places to stay. Jasper’s mom said I’m welcome to their couch anytime.”

“Couch surfing is not the same thing as having a home.” It was on the tip of my tongue to volunteer my own couch, which didn’t see very many visitors but was acceptably long enough for overly tall persons like Conrad, but then his face shifted from sheepish to something closer to one of his old sneers.

“Says the guy who lives with his mothers.”

Fine. Let him be homeless. See if I cared. Except I did. Way more than I wanted to, and as he gave the machine more tokens, my gut churned. I didn’t like him operating without a

safety net, didn't like knowing he had literally everything riding on this tournament.

“Conrad—”

“In a second.” He waved me off as the game started, giving his all to managing the little bouncing balls, racking up points, and making me ridiculously frustrated that he could be more attentive to pinball than to his future. I wished that I knew him better—knew what to say to make him focus, to make him see the seriousness of the situation without pissing him off. But I didn't, and the tension between us continued to simmer, a toxic stew.

But maybe there was something to staying quiet as slowly, his shoulders relaxed, his face softening, his eyes less angry. As the machine flashed with a new high score, he turned back to me, his voice calmer. “You said you wouldn't tell. That means no trying to solve my problems either. I just need to win. It's no biggie.”

“The probability of that is less than optimal.”

“But it's not zero.” He gave me a lopsided smile that didn't reach his eyes. “You want a turn?”

“No, thank you.” No way was I following his high-scoring performance, and no way was I risking this very tentative peace we had going.

“Okay. I'm going to use the vouchers for our drinks and popcorn then. That worked up a sweat.”

He wasn't lying—little beads of moisture clung to his temple, and I had to shove my hands into my pocket before I could do something stupid like brush them away. We made our way to the small snack bar where the same clerk fetched us popcorn of indeterminate age, a soda for Conrad, and water for

me. There were tables outside, under an awning, and we carried the food there.

The go-kart track was quiet, leaving us alone on the patio area. I was painfully aware of the purse of Conrad's lips as he chugged his soda through a straw, the flex of his throat, the satisfaction in his eyes. The more he drank, the more I was desperate for one of the kids to run outside, aliens to land, planets to collide, anything to distract me from my sudden obsession with his mouth.

A thousand scenarios raced through my mind, each more improbable than the last, and I had to force my mind away from things that weren't ever happening. Better to focus on things I could control. Like making sure Conrad wasn't left in the lurch after the contest.

"I bet Professor Tuttle could help—"

"No solving my problems." Conrad glared at me. "The various professors have already done enough. I made the mess out of my life. I'll fix it."

"You did? I thought you said your parents—"

"It's complicated. Really complicated and I don't want to go into it, not now when we're having fun."

"We are?" I wasn't sure anyone had ever called me fun before.

"Well, yeah. I mean, I wish the tire hadn't blown, but this place is kind of awesome. And once you're not trying to kick my ass in *Odyssey*, you're not bad company. Plus, it's nice to not think about the tournament and all the other pressures for a while."

Face heating from the compliment, I nodded even though if our positions had been reversed, I was pretty sure I would be

unable to do anything but dwell on the pressures. “I get that. But if you want to, I don’t know, make a list later of your options, I could help.”

“Thanks.” Our eyes caught and held, and without waiting for my brain’s permission, my hand traveled to his arm, gave him what I hoped was a reassuring squeeze. His bicep was firm and solid, and my hand lingered far longer than advisable.

“I mean it. Winging it by putting everything on this win... That’s simply not prudent.”

“Not prudent?” Conrad laughed, and I quickly dropped my hand. “Uh, dude, don’t look now, but aren’t you doing the same thing? What’s *your* backup plan?”

Crap. He was right. I *was* in a similar predicament, wanting the tournament to give me direction, to solve my dilemma over the future for me. I bit my lip. Hard.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “My moms have all sorts of ideas, but...coming up with a plan is hard. It’s like... everything feels second best. Choices I don’t want to make.”

“Exactly.” He gave me a fist bump, which landed on my wrist because I didn’t know it was coming. I flinched, making him laugh. And even that glancing contact was enough to have my skin sizzling again. I was utterly hopeless.

“I wish it were easier.” I didn’t just mean life and coming up with a plan, but also this, making sense of all this weird energy that had been building all day.

“Welcome to the Plan B Sucks club. Not finishing out at Gracehaven feels like admitting defeat. At least winning the tournament would be something. It’s the first thing that’s made sense since this whole mess started. First thing I’ve wanted

other than to go back to Gracehaven and have things be exactly how they were.”

“I get that,” I said softly because I truly did. It just utterly sucked that we both wanted the same thing, needed it even. He laid his hand on top of mine. Not a fist bump this time. More of a squeeze. An understanding. And this time, my skin didn’t sizzle as much as melt, softening into the contact, welcoming his touch every bit as much as his sympathy.

“I’m sorry medical school didn’t work out.” His eyes were as warm as his voice. It wasn’t the first time someone had said that, but something about his tone made my chest contract with emotions I’d rather not try to name.

Our eyes met again, the energy surging in a way I didn’t quite understand, but definitely didn’t want to end. It felt as if I could look into his lake-blue eyes for years and still not see all his depths. They darkened, like they had back at the pizza place, making me wonder what he saw in my own gaze. Whatever it was, it must have pleased him because he hissed out a breath, the sort of sound I associated with uncovering a treasure in a game.

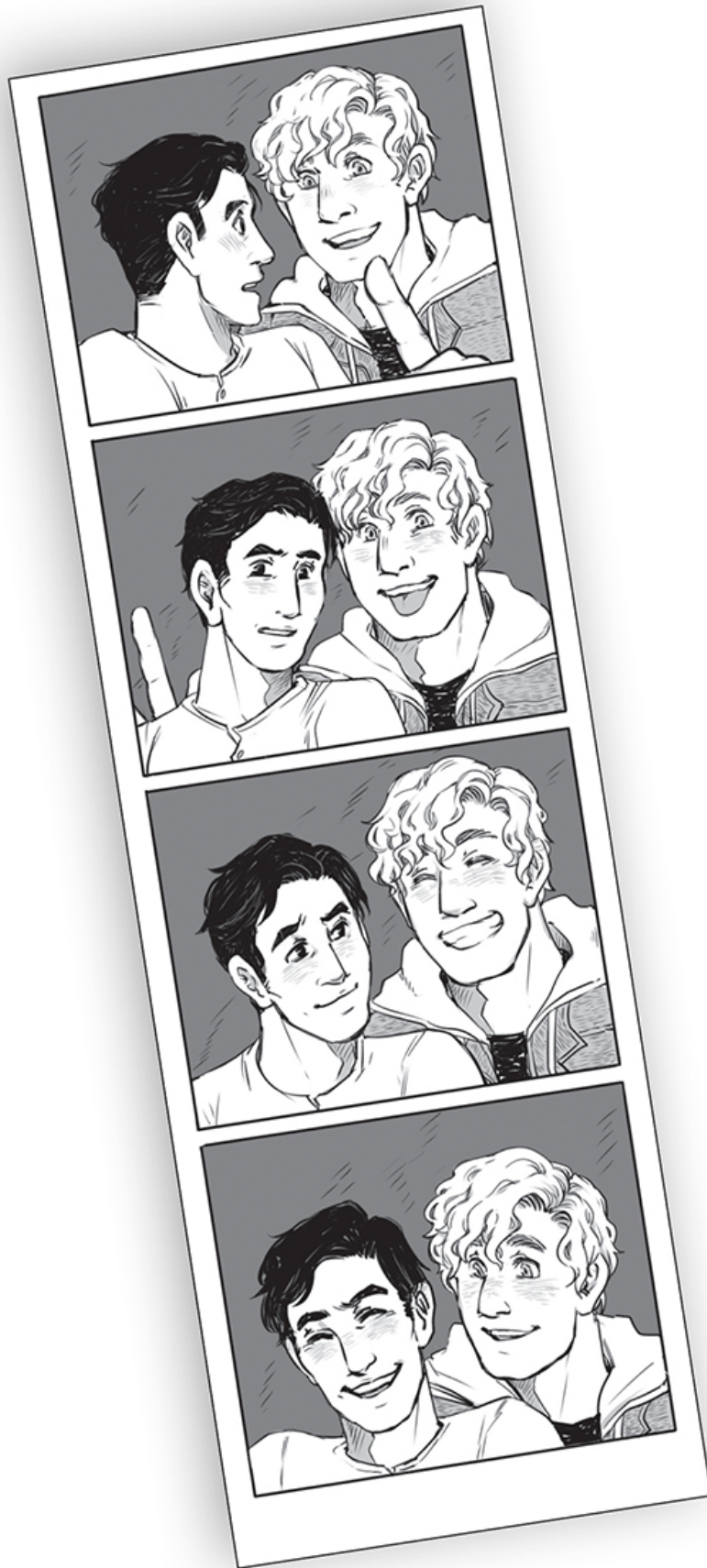
“Thanks.” My tongue felt twice as thick as normal, and I had no idea whether I was thankful for his empathy or thankful for this weird, wonderful moment. I still didn’t drop our eye lock, and it was impossible to miss the way his eyes flashed with purpose, as though he’d solved some vital equation.

He leaned in, and as with the fist bump, I didn’t quite know what was coming, what he expected me to do, couldn’t figure out how to react fast enough, and I recoiled right as my phone buzzed.

Conrad jerked away, out of my personal space, out of whatever moment we’d been having there. “Better get that. It’s

probably the car.”

“Yeah.” My shoulders slumped, chest as hollow as it got after a bad loss in the game—only I wasn’t sure what I’d lost this time. I only knew that it was significant.



Chapter Nineteen

Conrad

I almost kissed Alden. And the worst part was that I wasn't sure whether he knew it. Had he pulled back because his phone buzzed? Or because I spooked him? Was that a distinct *ew* in his eyes? Maybe he didn't want his first kiss to be some lame guy who had just confessed to being a few steps away from homelessness. I was merely guessing about the first-kiss part, but it wasn't that big a leap from "I'm a virgin" to "never been kissed." And it was also entirely possible that I'd confused him. Maybe he didn't read my intent at all and was neither frightened nor repelled but rather irritated at the invasion of his personal space.

Not knowing plagued me as we made the trek back to Mary's garage. The car had been ready, and once we petted the dog and parted with two hundred bucks, we were back on the road. It was already late afternoon, heading into evening, and we hit a ton of traffic as we approached Kansas City, slowing us to a crawl. Alden was driving, which left me to navigate to our intended stop at a downtown game store.

"F—*heck*." I looked up from studying the map on Alden's phone to see more bumper-to-bumper cars jockeying for rush-hour positioning. I had no idea when I'd started reining in the f-bombs around Alden, when his comfort started mattering to

me, and I wasn't entirely sure I liked this turn of events. "Professor Tuttle would have to be friends with the one game shop in the area that closes at six."

"Six?" Alden's forehead creased. "I thought all gaming places had evening hours. Where else are people going to play?"

"Apparently they only stay open until nine on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays."

"We're not going to make six." Alden gestured toward the barely moving traffic that stretched as far as we could see. "Call them?"

"Okay to use your phone? I think you have a better signal." And he undoubtedly had more minutes available than me, but I didn't add that part.

"Sure."

This left me to deal with a rather irate owner, who didn't want to wait for us.

"You said you'd be here sometime after lunch," he complained. His deep, midwestern voice reminded me of my dad—and not in a great way. "I've got to get my son soon. First, you cancel on bringing Gamer Grandpa, and now you two kids can't keep to a schedule."

"We're sorry, sir. We had a tire blow, and now we're stuck in traffic. We didn't expect this kind of delay."

"Well, I didn't expect this much hassle either. You're a small-time vlog, and I'm doing *you* a favor, not the other way around."

I wasn't sure how Professor Tuttle knew this jerk, but I kept my tone even. "Actually—"

“You know what, forget it. I’ve got to get to my kid’s baseball practice, and I don’t have time for this.”

“Fuck.” After I ended the call, I went ahead and dropped the f-bomb, Alden’s sensibilities be damned. “There goes that stop.”

“From the sound of it, we’re better off for it,” Alden said pragmatically. “Maybe we can figure out some content for the show to make up for not getting that stop.”

“Yeah. We can always play each other.” I was strangely reluctant to play Alden again, to undo all the progress we’d made that day toward something...well, maybe not exactly friendship. I didn’t generally go around getting the urge to kiss my friends’ necks. But something. More than rivals.

“Or open the packs from that cosplaying owner.”

“Oh. Yeah! Dibs on anything good.” I grinned over at him, liking that suggestion far more. Traffic was finally moving, so his eyes were on the road, but his mouth curved as if he’d sensed my shift in mood.

“Do you want to stop for dinner?” he asked as we continued to fight clogged roads. “I’ve never understood the barbecue thing, but just pick somewhere with decent parking.”

“My only requirement is cheap, but if you’ve never tried good barbecue, you’re missing out.” I used his phone to search possibilities. “Okay, I found a little place that’s pretty inexpensive but locals rate it highly. They’ve got smoked chicken for you—it’s not all pork. And supercheap BBQ street tacos as the Tuesday special for me.”

“Barbecue *tacos*?” Alden sounded as horrified as he had by the concept of square pizza.

“No fusion cuisine for you.” I laughed. “Do I need to look for the kosher symbol for the chicken? I’m not seeing it, but it seems like a no-frills sort of place. They might not have precise ingredient labeling.”

“I’m good. Just no barbecue sauce in a taco.” He shuddered, ten kinds of adorable and all the temptation that I couldn’t let get to me.

I’d been right about no-frills. The restaurant was a low-slung brick-and-wood building that looked like it might not survive a thorough fire code inspection, and the interior was similarly humble—long tables with red-and-white-checked plastic covers for communal eating, walls cluttered with pictures and memorabilia, and a small stage off to one side where a blues duo played. No cover because it was a weeknight, thank goodness.

We both got carded at the door, but I had a feeling Alden would have opinions and thoughts on a beer with dinner since I was next to drive, so I didn’t go there, instead getting the cheap tacos and water to save my cash. Alden got the half-chicken dinner with the apparently famous battered fries and coleslaw. He ended up sharing both the fries and the meat with me.

“Ordered too much again?” I asked with a raised eyebrow, not really complaining. I didn’t want to be his charity case, but I also wasn’t stupid enough to turn down free food.

“Something like that.” He at least had the decency to blush. The sultry live music, combined with sharing food, had this evening feeling rather date-like, but right as I started to feel like we were in a cozy bubble, a fry came whizzing by my head. *Oops*. I’d forgotten that we were at the end of one of the long communal tables, sharing space with two noisy families.

My head whirled, trying to figure out where the fry had come from.

A group of kids who looked around ten years old were having the sort of fry-and-straw wrapper fight that reminded me of camp and family reunions, antics with my cousins. Beyond the tweens, three young teen girls trading selfies made me think of my sisters, and I fingered my phone in my pocket, wishing for one of Cassie's erratic sneak-texts, missing the days when they'd been able to blow my phone up with silly pictures of friends and dance class.

I must have let my smile slip because Alden frowned. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing. Just missing my little sisters."

"You don't...ah... They're not allowed..."

God, I hated sharing this, but I also wasn't going to lie. "Yeah."

"Like at all?"

"I'm a forbidden topic apparently, and Dad threatened to take their phones if they kept texting me."

"That sucks." Alden's voice had the same sympathy he'd had for Jasper's family situation, and the outrage in his eyes made it easier to keep talking.

"The oldest one, Cassie, sometimes sneak-texts me from a friend's phone. She's watched the show some too."

"That's cool that she watches. My older sisters think the game is stupid. I can't imagine not being allowed to contact them though. That would suck."

"Yeah. It does." Exhaling hard, I picked at the last of the chicken he'd given me. "Ready to go?"

“Yes. We better push on a few more hours.” As he consulted his phone, his mouth twisted. “We were supposed to make it farther through Kansas tonight. We’ve got a stop tomorrow in Denver if we can make it.”

“We’ll make it. Just keep me awake, and we can do Salina tonight at least. And you won’t be missing much—the scenery gets flat and boring after Topeka.”

When we exited the restaurant, night had fallen, a warm, muggy evening greeting us with a sliver of moon and the mingled scents of barbecue and roses.

“Think we’ll be far enough into Colorado tomorrow to really see the stars?” Alden asked. “I’ve heard that you can see a lot more stars out west, away from the cities.”

“Yeah. You can. I’ll make sure we get some stars for you.”

“Thanks.” The gratitude in his eyes warmed me through as I slid behind the wheel. Doing nice things for him was simply too easy. Felt too good. And to be able to make someone else happy with merely the promise of some stargazing? Yeah, that was heady stuff.

“Did you like space stuff as a kid?” I asked as I headed back to the highway. “I always wanted a rocket ship. My grandpa taught me all the constellations, but I was always more concerned with discovering alien worlds.”

That made him laugh. “I wasn’t so much on intergalactic travel. Fear of flying, remember? But I loved space stuff. I had this amazing fourth-grade teacher who let me write a whole essay on why Pluto should be reclassified as a planet again.”

“That’s awesome.” We spent the first part of the drive talking science classes and favorite teachers, and Alden warmed to the topic, his fondness for particular teachers

coming through even though the distance he'd felt from peers was also clear.

Distracted by a particularly funny story about Alden's pre-algebra class, my pulse barely jumped as we passed the "Welcome to Kansas" signs at the border. But after we passed Topeka and the highway turned achingly familiar, each exit a memory, my muscles tensed one by one. And to make matters worse, I kept yawning. Apparently my body had decided escaping to sleep might be preferable to this onslaught of emotions.

"What's wrong?" Alden asked.

"Nothing. Maybe we'll stop in Salina for coffee or an energy drink or something." I needed to get through this stretch as quickly as possible.

"No. We'll stop sooner. You keep blinking. Coffee now. And I'll take a turn driving."

The blinking wasn't entirely tiredness, but I didn't want to explain, so I nodded and started looking for an exit. "We could probably use gas anyway."

We ended up at a truck stop, getting gas before going inside where I tried to decide between a pricey energy drink and cheap coffee. Cheap won out, but I added a ton of powdered creamer and sugar and grabbed some granola bars to chase it with. I'd been tempted by the candy, but Alden's prodding about the quality of my diet had me making the healthier choice.

As we paid, a family came in, sleepy little girl in her dad's arms, older boy holding his hand. Something about the way the boy gazed up at his dad made a memory slap into me, so hard I almost gasped.

I'd been nine. Maybe ten. We'd been on the way back from some football scouting trip, back when he took me along all the time. And maybe it had been him trying to get me into the game, but to me, it had been...magical almost, that time together, long hours on the road, away from Mom and the girls who were just toddlers back then. Dad had been laughing, letting me load up on soda and candy, telling me how good I'd been at the game while he took notes. Back then, his praise had been easy and free, long before I started disappointing him at every turn.

Back in the present, my adult self struggled to see beyond the ghosts, feet rooted to the spot.

"I'm hungry," the boy said. His T-shirt was faded, two sizes too small, sneakers more battered than even my own. The dad's ancient work boots weren't much better, and his jeans looked like they were about three washes away from disintegrating.

"You're always hungry." The father yawned, eyes filled with the same weariness I'd seen in my own mirror a lot the past year. "And we're only here to use the restroom. We don't have money for anything extra. You know that."

The boy's face fell, the kind of crumple that preceded a major tantrum, and without overthinking it, I stepped forward, addressing the dad.

"Hey, sir? I happened to buy extra." I held out two granola bars. "Think I could give some to your kids?"

"We don't need—"

"Please," the boy whined, eyes pleading with his dad.

"Okay." The dad sounded defeated, the sort of worn out that came with long days of worry. I knew that sound well. "If

you're sure?"

"Yeah. Big dinner, and I don't need more snacks anyway." I passed him over the food.

"I've got an extra juice." Handing over a container, Alden gave me a searching look.

"Thank you, guys. Really." The guy nodded at us. "God bless."

"You too. Have a good night." I had to swallow hard, and when we got back to the car, I slumped into the passenger seat, head falling back. I'd put my coffee in the cup holder, but I knew I wouldn't be touching it now.

"What's wrong?" Alden frowned at me as he turned the car on. "Do you want to go back in? Get more food for you? That was a nice thing you did."

"It was nothing. And I'm good." My breathing like a freight train said otherwise, and I knew I needed to calm down if I didn't want to have to dig an inhaler out of my bag. It had been years since I'd had a situational-triggered asthma attack, but I could feel one teasing at the edges of my awareness.

"No, you're not. Tell me." Alden's usual bossiness was mixed with a gentleness I didn't usually associate with him, and it was that quiet kindness that made me start talking as he headed back to the highway.

"I'd been there before." My voice came out ragged. "That truck stop. As a kid. With my dad. Probably more than once."

"Oh." Alden made a noise that was halfway between surprise and understanding. "Conrad, are we close to your town?"

"Don't worry about it."

“Do you want to stop? You could try texting—”

“Wouldn’t help. And I don’t want to get Cassie in trouble.”

“But your mom,” he persisted. “Maybe if you call? We could go ahead and stop for the night. Maybe in the morning, you could—”

“No.” This was why I hadn’t told him how close we’d be coming to my hometown. I’d known I’d get both pity and advice I didn’t need. “She follows Dad’s lead. Always has. Gets panic attacks when they fight, especially when he yells.”

“And he yells a lot.” Alden’s voice was quiet, but it wasn’t a question.

“Yeah. He does. He’s not... I don’t think he *means* it. Like, he isn’t violent.” I didn’t mention the occasional smashed dish. *Don’t tell, Conrad. He doesn’t mean it. It was only a bad day. I’ll clean it up.* My mom’s pleas rang in my ears as even now I was still making excuses for him.

“Still doesn’t make it okay.” Alden sounded ready to go to battle with my dad, voice taking on that same tone he used right before waxing an opponent.

“It’s okay,” I lied. The darkness outside seemed to stretch to infinity, the occasional glow of headlights not enough to counter the overall mood of desolation. “I probably deserved some of it. And he’s never going to forgive me, so there’s no point in trying to contact Mom or the girls. It’ll just make trouble for them.”

“Forgive you for being gay? What the heck? That’s profoundly unfair.” His indignation would have been cute if I hadn’t been so down, trapped in my own feelings. For once, I was glad we were in the slow lane, plodding along behind a

row of semis. Zooming past all these memories would be almost worse.

“No. Not for being gay. Or at least not entirely that.” I groaned, knowing the whole story was about to tumble out—the real one, the one that not even the professors had heard all of. “There was this guy...”

“He wanted you to come out?” Alden prodded when I trailed off, unable to find the words after all.

“No. Yes. I don’t know.” I groaned. “I mean I already was out on campus. You know that. Hell, you probably know this kid too. Angelo. Short, Italian guy from Chicago?”

“He’s not unfamiliar to me. Big mouth. Followed you around. Always wanted to break the campus rules about alcohol at sponsored parties.”

“Yup. That’s the one. Anyway, we hooked up a few times. Nothing serious.” Guilt churned in my gut. Alden wasn’t wrong about Angelo following me around. I’d kinda known he was more into me than I was him, but I’d liked his attention, hadn’t thought there was any harm in encouraging it. Even before him, I hadn’t wanted a relationship, having had too much of my parents’ messed-up marriage to believe in love. But I had liked attention, liked playing the field, and liked running my damn mouth. “But we talked enough that he knew about this other guy. One from my high school who I used to hook up with on the sly.”

“Another horror-movie fan?”

“Something like that.” I laughed, but it was tempered by the knowledge that I probably shouldn’t have told Angelo about Dan, shouldn’t have teased him, shouldn’t have liked how his jealousy had made me feel. “Anyway, Dan went off to

Nebraska after graduation, and I went to Gracehaven, so no hard feelings. We stayed friendly.”

“That’s good.” Alden’s voice was cautious, but encouraging, as if he really did want to hear this whole stupid story.

“It wasn’t bad.” Or at least it wouldn’t have been, had I been able to keep my stupid mouth shut. “But anyway, I came back early to campus last summer. Angelo and I got drunk one night, and we were...uh...fooling around with my camera phone. If you know what I mean?”

“I can guess. Go on.”

“Anyway, I eventually went to sleep, but Angelo stayed up. And I still don’t entirely understand why, but he thought he’d text Dan with my phone. Send him some of the pictures we took. Sort of a...taunt, I guess.”

“That’s a terrible way to tease someone.” Alden had all the righteousness of someone who’d never fucked up before, the sort of guy who never let emotions get the better of him, but the disapproval he had for Angelo was also gratifying. “Even if he thought it would make your friend jealous, that’s just *wrong*. And an invasion of privacy.”

“Agreed. But Angelo has impulse issues.” Even now I still made excuses, much as I did for my dad, but with Angelo it was tempered by the knowledge that I played a role here, had encouraged him too much. “Anyway, he was probably still buzzed, and instead of Dan, he texted the entry above it, the one for Dad, but it wasn’t just Dad—it was a group text with a bunch of relatives. So they all got the pictures. And I woke up to my phone blowing up. Dad was livid. And the rest...” I sighed, eyes squeezing shut. “Guess I deserved it. Encouraging his crush. Egging on his jealousy over Dan. Getting drunk. Taking pictures I knew I probably shouldn’t.”

“You made an error in judgment. But that doesn’t mean you deserved your dad cutting you off. You didn’t deserve Angelo abusing your trust like that either. You’re not the one who hit Send.”

“Thanks.” I liked that he didn’t sugarcoat it. Because it had been a judgment error for sure. And hearing him say that I didn’t deserve it warmed icy places that had frozen over that awful morning when everything had changed. “In Dad’s defense—”

“There isn’t one,” Alden said firmly.

“Well, I think he thought I’d give in quickly, head home, do what he wanted, do counseling or whatever shit he had planned to ‘cure’ me. First he cut off the phone. Then the car. And when I still didn’t give in, he went for the tuition that was due right then. That’s why financial aid had such a hard time helping me—there just wasn’t a lot of time.”

“But you didn’t give in.”

“Nope. Stayed in Gracehaven. At first I thought I’d just outlast him. Figured I was his kid and he’d have to care sometime. Then his health insurance dropped me. And I knew.” My voice dropped to a bare whisper. “Knew he really didn’t care how I was. I *need* my daily asthma meds. And they’re not cheap. But he didn’t care. He just wanted to be right, wanted to prove to his stupid relatives that he’d brought me in line. Didn’t care what it did to me in the process.”

“Wow. That’s heartless.” Alden sounded as stricken as I felt.

“And that’s why I can’t go home. Can’t let them know I’m close by, even. I don’t trust him not to use me seeing Mom or the girls as a reason to try to force me to do what he wants.”

“Like kidnap you, you mean? I wouldn’t let him do that. You shouldn’t have to be scared to call your mom. I don’t care if he showed up with a team of ministers and so-called therapists. I still wouldn’t let them take you.”

His vehemence soothed something raw and sore inside me. Back at Gracehaven, I’d had the professors looking out for me, but they hadn’t known the whole truth. I’d told them I’d come out to Dad, not the how. But Alden knew the entire story and still he defended me. And fearlessly too. Like my dad could bring an army, and Alden would defeat them all, one by one to keep me safe.

“Thanks.” It was so inadequate for everything I was feeling, but it was all I could manage. “But I’m still not calling. I...” I squeezed my eyes so tight my face pinched, but it still wasn’t enough to stop the burning. “I’m not sure I could handle it if Mom didn’t answer. That’s what really kills me. I’d figured out that he was a ba—not a very nice person years earlier. But her going along with it...”

I licked my parched lips.

“Yeah. That would be the worst,” Alden agreed. “I mean, I get panic attacks too. I get her being afraid. But still. She’s your *mom*.”

“Yeah.” My heart hammered, everything I’d held back for the past year threatening to overflow. I took some deep breaths, but they didn’t help at all. If anything, they made it worse, reminding me of what it felt like to struggle for air.

“Conrad.” His hand on my arm was my first clue that we’d stopped. At some point, he’d taken another exit, this one a middle-of-nowhere rural road, no civilization in sight. “Look at me. It’s going to be okay.”

I wanted to believe him, but my soul felt as empty as the night around us, and I wasn't sure when I'd ever get past this guilt and anger. "Not so sure."

"It will." Alden's voice had the sort of confidence I desperately needed right then. "You've made it this far without them. It's their fault if they can't see how cruel they're being. But you, you're doing awesome." He didn't say it with false cheer, the way a lot of people would, instead stating each word as a careful fact.

"Doesn't feel like it a lot of days," I admitted, heart still pounding. "Barely hanging on. Dead-end jobs just to afford my meds. Missing my folks even as I hate them."

"I get that. You can't simply stop loving someone." He squeezed me, a tentative half hug that I leaned into as if I'd discovered a life raft in the middle of the Atlantic.

"Thanks." Him understanding was *everything* right then, everything I'd been craving for a year and not even realizing how much I'd needed to tell someone and to be heard. Be understood. And his face was right there, head resting against mine as he awkwardly tried to hold me.

Not really sure what I was doing—only knowing that I was grateful and sad at the same time, and desperately wanting to feel something other than awful—I ghosted my mouth across his. His lips were soft and warm, a bulwark against the cold night, and I wanted to sink into him even as he pulled back. His retreat this time was unmistakable, and I instantly regretted the impulse.

"Sorry—"

"It's okay," he said, even though it clearly wasn't.

“No, it’s not. You deserve better than me falling apart on you.”

“I don’t mind that. I’m...glad you told me. But you’re tired and upset and confused, and I’m...convenient. I don’t want to be convenient.”

“I get that.” Guilt and shame gathered in my gut, made me shift in my seat. The last thing I wanted was to make someone who had been so cool to me feel used. “And you’re not.”

But I didn’t move to kiss him again, not sure that would prove anything or help either of us. And when he headed back to the highway, I closed my eyes and faked sleep. Too much was churning in my head for actual sleep to claim me, my brain lurching between guilt and shame and anger over my family situation—all those regrets that had nowhere to go, and sweeter emotions that kept creeping in with memories of the near-kiss, how soft Alden’s lips had been, how much I’d wanted him in that moment. Not getting to know what he tasted like was another regret for the pile, and hell if I knew how to resolve it.

Chapter Twenty

Alden

Conrad was faking sleep. I wasn't an idiot—I could tell by the tension in his body, the unevenness of his breath, and the careful way he'd angled himself away from me. He might suck at pretending to be asleep, but his actual emotions were much harder to read. However, no matter what he'd been feeling, he'd definitely been looking for trouble when he'd tried to kiss me.

And I still couldn't believe I hadn't let him. I wanted to kiss him, that much was certain. Even that glancing contact had been enough to have me craving more, more, more. But I also didn't want to be the mistake he regretted later when he wasn't sad and things were back to awkward between us. Casually awkward was preferable to outright avoidance. I wasn't sure I could bear to see regret in his eyes, be one more thing he beat himself up over.

But without Conrad speaking and with only memories of the kiss-that-wasn't to torment me, it didn't take long before my eyes were burning, and not simply with anger for Conrad's sake. No, I was tired.

“We need to think about stopping for the night.” I didn't bother pretending that I was waking him up when I knew I wasn't.

“We could switch again.” He did an exaggerated stretch, keeping his fiction of napping going. “Do an all-nighter.”

“Not prudent. If I fall asleep, who will keep you awake?” I was also concerned about his wrung-out emotional state, but I didn’t add that. I knew myself and knew how sleep could reset me after a big upset. I hoped it would work for him too. I’d do just about anything to take some of his pain away, make it hurt less. “And we promised Professor Tuttle and Professor Herrera that we’d take care of the car, not take stupid risks. We’ve already had one incident.”

“Yeah, but we could find a rest stop, sleep in the car—”

“Dangerous. Our best option is an inexpensive motel, then get an early start. I’ll set my phone this time. Can you see how far to the next motel?”

“Okay.” Defeated, Conrad huffed out a breath as he reached for my phone in the console. “Emphasis on cheap.”

It didn’t take him that long to find a suitable place at an upcoming exit. It wasn’t where we’d planned to stop, and we still had a good four hours to Denver in the morning, but the motel advertised free continental breakfast and looked clean if a bit dated from the outside. Conrad got the bags while I secured the room, and we met back up at the stairs. They were the exterior kind that led to a narrow covered walkway containing the doors leading to each room. It wasn’t my favorite style of motel by far, but it was close and cheap, so I tried not to complain.

However, when I opened the door, I couldn’t help my groan. One bed. No wonder the room had been so cheap. It wasn’t a double.

“Crap.” My anxiety started to ramp up, a shudder racing up my spine, flutters in my stomach. Apparently in no such panic, Conrad clapped me on the shoulder.

“It’ll be okay. Made it work with Jasper, and he’s a roller.” Voice full of fake cheer, Conrad approached the bed and turned one pillow sideways, the same way he had with Jasper. Except I wasn’t Jasper, and I’d spent the whole day confused and vaguely excited, drawing closer to Conrad despite my best efforts. Further, he hadn’t tried to kiss Jasper, and even if he had, they’d had me as chaperone, a built-in wet blanket.

We had just us and the kiss-that-wasn’t hanging between us, a big neon sign reminding me of what I couldn’t have. And even worse, Conrad still looked miserable—eyes puffy, skin pale, shoulders slumped. I was perilously close to volunteering to be his convenient thing, the thing that made him forget, even if only for a little while, but then he straightened as if he was zipping all his emotions up tight.

“I’m going to shower. You want to set up the camera for opening those packs, or are you too tired to make content tonight?”

“Tired.” It wasn’t a total lie, but really, I wasn’t sure I could continue to act normal around him, act like nothing had changed. “Is it okay if I shower in the morning?”

“Sure.” Rummaging through his bag, he shrugged. Following Conrad’s shower, being in the same small, damp space where he’d been naked moments before, simply seemed unbearably intimate. When he headed to the bathroom, I changed quickly into flannel pants and a different T-shirt—a soft, faded one I’d slept in for years. This was the first time I’d given any thought to my bedtime attire, worrying that maybe the shirt was too old, the pants too thin, the—

Stop. I tried to force the anxiety back into place. Stupid worries. It was me that wasn't ready, not my clothes. Disgusted with myself, I climbed under the covers and flipped out the light on my side of the bed. Now it was my turn to fake sleep.

I figured I was doing a pretty good job at that when Conrad tiptoed out of the bathroom a short while later and flipped off his own light even before he got in bed. The covers dragged across my torso as he settled. Weird. This sleeping-next-to-someone business was simply strange in so many ways, a type of social politics I'd never been very good at. For example, how much blanket was I entitled to? Was it rude to yank back my half that he just stole? Not to mention feet. His bumped mine several times as he shifted around, but I figured that pulling my feet back would make it obvious I was awake.

Further, I could tell *he* was still awake, possibly even more so than in the car, because his side of the bed seemed to practically vibrate with an energy I couldn't name, his breathing shallow, legs restless. And that restlessness was contagious, making my chest feel like a can of soda about to fizz over, making sleep impossible, and making my brain race with a jumble of random thoughts. Finally, I couldn't stand it a second longer.

"Are you still thinking about your family?" I whispered.

"Wha—" He startled, rolling toward our pillow barrier. "No." He flopped back against his side of the bed. "Okay. Yeah. Maybe a little. What's your excuse? Why aren't you asleep?"

You. You're my reason. But I didn't want it to sound like I was blaming him for keeping me awake. Or worse, like a bad

come-on that would make him laugh at me. So, instead, I lied. "I'm worried we're too far behind schedule."

He scoffed. "You said it yourself. We'll make up time tomorrow. Get an early start. Make the Denver stop a quick one."

"Yeah." We both drifted back to silence, but I wouldn't call it a comfortable one at all. As he shifted around again, his hand brushed my arm.

"Whoops. Sorry." He pulled it back across the pillow.

"It's okay." I lacked the words and courage to tell him that I wouldn't mind if he did it again. My arm tingled, but it was my brain that took longer to quiet, our earlier conversation weighing down on me. "Conrad?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm sorry about your family."

He was quiet a long minute before the bed moved, him rolling back toward the pillow. "Thanks."

That should have been it, the note to head to sleep on, but another thought that had been prickling at me kept me talking. "Earlier...when you said you didn't want me to get hurt picking the wrong person, was that because you got hurt?" My limbs got strangely warm, thinking of him caring like that. And there was also that weird flare of jealousy again. "With Angelo? Like, heartbroken hurt?"

"No." He groaned. Relief surged through me, increasing at his resigned tone. "Not heartbroken. He was probably more into me than I was into him, and I feel guilty about that. I maybe encouraged him more than I should have. Ego trip. That's probably part of why he tried to send the pictures. But I sure can pick them. Learn from me. Pick better."

“It’s not your fault. I know you think it is. But it’s not. It’s not you that messed up.”

“Oh, I’m pretty sure it is.”

“No, it’s not.” I warmed to my topic, my voice getting firmer. “You made some bad decisions maybe. Trusted the wrong guy. But it’s his fault for sending the pictures. And your dad’s for how he reacted. You can’t keep blaming yourself for other people’s bad actions.”

The room stayed quiet save for the hum of the air conditioner, but I swore I could *feel* him over there thinking.

“It’s hard,” he said softly, pain cutting into a tender place I hadn’t realized I possessed.

“I...I get it now. Why you want to win.” It was a clumsy way of saying that I understood him better after today, got why he’d needed to escape into *Odyssey*. I’d let myself be blinded by his looks and popularity and hadn’t seen the complex guy underneath. I understood now why he wanted to prove himself at this tournament so badly.

“Using a game as an f-you to my father probably isn’t the healthiest.” His laugh was rough.

“There are many worse possible coping mechanisms.”

“True.” He was quiet another long moment, then rolled again, this time his torso coming across the pillow so that he could press a quick kiss to my forehead. Every one of my muscles froze, tensing as my pulse pounded. I licked my lips, anticipating...

But then he retreated, only whispering, “Alden?”

“Yes?”

“You’re not convenient.”

For a second I thought he meant it as a put-down, an acknowledgment that I was a difficult person. Which I'd agree with. But then I realized that he was referring to what I'd said earlier about not wanting to be a convenient physical interlude for him, and my heart stuttered, my throat tightening around an unfamiliar surge of emotion.

"Thanks." It was possibly the nicest—and weirdest—thing anyone had ever said to me. I kind of expected him to try to kiss me again. Okay, I *wanted* him to try to kiss me again. But he didn't, instead settling back on his side of the bed, grabbing my hand as he made himself comfortable on his back again, this time with our linked hands resting on his chest. Very faintly, I could feel the thrum of his pulse. I wanted to hear his heartbeat, to press my ear against his skin and really listen. I needed to learn its steady pace and to absorb some of his undefinable energy.

"This okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," I whispered, trying not to break whatever spell this was. It was more than okay. It was great. Possibly the most thrilling moment of my adult life, lying in the dark with Conrad, holding hands, listening as his breathing finally slowed and knowing that he was falling asleep clinging to a part of me. That impulse I'd had earlier—the one where I'd wanted to be Conrad's convenient thing, even if only for the night—softened, changed. I realized I wanted to be the thing that gave him comfort for real. Wanted to be a safe place for him. I couldn't give him back his family, and I'd be the first to admit I wasn't exactly best-friend material, but he made me want to try, made me want to be someone he could count on. Someone who took care of him, not simply because it was the right thing to do, but because it felt so good to do it. Strange and confusing, but *good*.

And I wanted more.

Chapter Twenty-One

Conrad

We woke up at the appropriate time, everyone in their appropriate sleeping spots, with no unexpected morning snuggles. Which I was not nearly as relieved about as I might have expected. The only part of me touching Alden was my big toe, resting on his leg, and I took my sweet time removing it as he stretched himself awake, instead using it to trace the curve of his calf. He was more muscled than he looked, with runner's legs, strong and lean.

“Hey, we survived, right?” I grinned over at him, hoping my eyes didn't give away how much I wanted to run my fingers through his sleep-rumpled hair, find out if it was as soft as it looked. I'd ended up with most of the covers, and as he stretched, his faded blue T-shirt rode up on his stomach, revealing smooth muscle and a line of crinkly hair. Warmth pooled low in my gut.

“Yeah.” He moved his leg—not away, but almost as though he was playing back, foot rubbing against mine, flannel pant leg dragging against my bare skin. Then he gave me the sweetest, most tentative smile, and my chest pinched. This was why I couldn't give in to the urge to pull him closer. Beyond the über-competitive, sometimes prickly exterior, he was one of the good guys. He cared. He'd taken care of me last night in

a way that I hadn't been taken care of and listened to in a very long time.

And I knew myself, knew how I usually acted with hookups. Alden wasn't that kind of guy. He deserved better, probably better than I could give him.

"I should go find the food." I didn't want to break this cozy little wake-up, but I was about thirty seconds away from saying fuck it to my reservations and kissing him silly.

"Yeah. If you want to put the bags in the car, I'll shower and meet you there." He sat up, yanking his shirt back down.

"Sounds good."

As he made his way to the bathroom with a change of clothes in his arms, I couldn't help but noticing that he was—

Stop it, Conrad. I had to force myself to study the bland painting on the wall, not wanting to be caught perverting on him. Happened to all of us in the morning. No big deal. Didn't mean anything. Didn't mean that he'd been as affected by our feet tangling as me, didn't mean that he'd wanted to kiss as much as me, and it still didn't mean that he needed what little I had to offer.

Dressing fast, I carried everything down to the car, then made my way to the small motel office where a pot of coffee, some doughnuts, and a few other sparse offerings waited. Some other guests were already there—a retired couple sitting by the window and a young family closer to the food. I had just helped myself to two doughnuts and a little carton of milk and snagged the last table when Alden came in.

When his eyes landed on me, he gave another of those hesitant smiles that made my stomach wobble. Then he made a face at the doughnuts, and I seized the chance to tease him a

little, to try to bring back whatever passed as normal between us.

“Don’t mock my breakfast, Mr. Healthy. And they were all out of twigs for you, but there are little packets of oatmeal and hot water.” I pointed to the counter. My plan didn’t work though, my body still insisting on noticing the droplets of water on his neck, the ripple of fabric across his shoulders as he turned.

“That’ll do.” He mixed two oatmeals with hot water and milk before coming to sit across from me, sliding me a sad-looking banana. “Here. Have some vitamins.”

“Yes, Mom.”

“He’s not your mom.” Next to us, one of the kids, a boy with glasses, turned around in his chair.

“Nope.” I offered him what I hoped was a friendly smile.

“Brother?” he persisted.

Hmm. What was Alden anyway? Three days ago, I would have said he was a pain in the neck. My fiercest rival. But not a friend. And now... I simply wasn’t sure. And apparently, my indecision showed on my face because Alden released a long-suffering sigh.

“We’re traveling together to an *Odyssey* convention,” he explained, literal to a fault, but the kid accepted this answer with a solemn nod.

Across the table, the kid’s older brother tilted his head, eyes going wide with surprise and recognition. “Hey! I know you! You guys are on YouTube! You’re famous!”

“Well, maybe not *famous*.” My face heated, but Alden merely gave the kid an indulgent smile.

“You play?” he asked. As at the arcade, the kid responded to him instantly, smile broadening as he leaned forward.

“Yeah. On here.” He held up a tablet. “But I keep losing. It’s like I can’t play my cards fast enough before the other side kills me.”

“Tim. Don’t bug people while they’re trying to eat,” the mom broke in.

“It’s okay.” Alden waved her concern off. “If you’re falling behind, play smaller cards more strategically. Don’t wait for your big stuff. What sort of deck are you playing?”

With that invitation, the older kid moved to the empty chair at our table, showing Alden his tablet, and they spent the next several minutes deep in strategy conversation. Alden was ridiculously good at patiently explaining little details to the kid, pointers that I wouldn’t have thought to mention because some stuff had become second-nature to me. And I stayed amazed that someone as competitive as Alden could have any sort of tolerance for newbies, but he was surprisingly gentle with the kid, cheering when the kid got a few moves right with his advice.

“Wow.” The mom laughed. “I haven’t seen him so focused in ages. You’re good. Is your day job teaching?”

Alden flushed. “No. I’m...still in graduate school. Trying to figure out my next steps.”

“Well, you’re great with kids.” She offered him an encouraging smile.

“You do love explaining stuff,” I teased him. “And you’ve got all those teacher heroes. I’m telling you. You should teach.”

“Professors have to publish. Frequently. Writing is hardly my favorite use of my time.”

“So don’t be a professor.” I shrugged. Didn’t seem that complicated to me, but he frowned. “Remember your whole Miss Betsey thing? No reason why you couldn’t teach whatever age you wanted to.”

“You don’t understand. There are certain...expectations.”

I rolled my eyes because I was pretty sure those expectations were as much his own as whatever his moms heaped on him. His little-kid dream of teaching was damn adorable, and I hated that his moms had never encouraged it. But I didn’t have a chance to push him on that because the kid had another question, and then it was time for us to hit the road. I took the first shift, in large part because I was eager to see the ass-end of Kansas in the rearview and because the distraction of driving would keep the memory beasts at bay.

At least I hoped. My chest kept the weird tightness of the night before—too much dry air, too much emotion, too much awareness of Alden. Mainly that last one. Despite its size, the car was too small. I could smell his soap and whatever he’d used to shave with, something spicy that made him seem even more lickable.

Bad, Conrad. No licking. I made myself focus on the road, not my increasingly inconvenient reaction to Alden.

The familiar ads for Wizard of Oz and dinosaur-themed attractions sped by, but luckily, Alden seemed more focused on getting to Denver by noon than on stopping and exploring. We mainly talked the game—a nice, safe topic that got us through Kansas. My shoulders unkinked a little at the border even as my chest stayed fluttery, but as the terrain started to shift in Colorado, I relaxed a little more. By the time we

needed to stop outside Denver, at a sleepy little truck stop, I was able to appreciate the pristine blue skies and arid, high-desert air. *Not in Kansas anymore, Dorothy.* I took a big breath of memory-free air, still trying to shake the cobwebs or whatever from my chest.

Alden wanted a picture of me goofing off with a funny sign decorated with mountains and hearts at the edge of the parking lot, behind the main buildings, so I obliged him before pointing out the mountains in the distance. From our vantage point, countryside extending to the start of the hazy, gray range, it felt as if we were two pioneers on a great trek, us against the world. I smiled at my fancifulness.

“See? You can tell we’re out of Kansas. Finally.” My chest felt tight and crackly, but I couldn’t tell whether it was altitude or pent-up emotion.

“You know, on the way back, we could—”

“No more talk about my family.” I tried to get a deep breath and failed. “I just meant that we’ll make Las Vegas in time. Promise.”

“Are you okay?” Studying my face, Alden touched my arm.

I tried again to breathe, but a cough came out instead.

“Damn it. Altitude. Forgot how that always affects me,” I explained between coughs, lungs tightening further. Hell. All the weird chest feels suddenly made more sense, and familiar dread filled my stomach. “Took morning med. But...”

“Where’s your inhaler?” Alden sprang into action, pushing me to sit on a flat rock, concern evident in his dark eyes, but as with Jasper’s emergency, he was firm and decisive, not freaking out. Funny how it was often the little things that seemed to make him more anxious. Right then, however, I was

more grateful for not being alone than for his cool head in a crisis.

“Car. Backpack. Front pocket.” More coughing as Alden sprinted away. The asthma attack that had threatened the night before was nothing compared to this full-on constriction, each breath a shallow cough. It hadn’t been this bad since...

Wait. This place was not memory-free after all. My last trip west, right after high school graduation. The never-ending dust and high elevations had turned what was supposed to be a fun family camping trip into an exercise in frustration—me battling the asthma and Dad not understanding. But there had been good moments too, like him telling me he was proud of me for graduating, and family pictures with the mountains as a backdrop. Hell. Asthma and all, I wished I could go back to my past self, tell him to slow down and enjoy it, to not be so eager to race ahead to Gracehaven.

Alden returned far faster than I expected, running back, barely winded. And I wasn’t so far gone that I couldn’t appreciate how fine he looked jogging—long strides, confident motions, striking features.

“Thanks,” I wheezed as he sat next to me, holding out the inhaler. His eyes were still tight with concern, but his hand was soft and soothing as he rubbed circles on my back. A little self-conscious, I used the inhaler as he kept a hand on me. Him taking care of me felt a little too good, like icy lemonade on a hot day. And it brought back memories I didn’t want—my mom wrapping me in a winter scarf, my grandma’s towering cakes, my grandfather’s booming welcome. Alden’s gentle touch and concern felt like everything I’d been missing and hadn’t even realized, but it also felt like something I had no right to enjoy.

Oh, he'd said it wasn't my fault, and part of me wanted to believe him, but guilt still clouded my thinking. And behind the guilt was frustration too. I'd handled my business all damn year. I didn't suddenly need a caretaker, and letting myself get too used to his quiet sympathy was dangerous. Didn't want to have to miss him along with everything else.

"Better now." My voice came out defensive as I shrugged away from his touch.

His exhale was shaky, as if he needed to steady himself, and even more guilt flooded me. I hadn't meant to hurt him. But before I could apologize, he spoke, voice deliberate, as though he was having to will himself to stay even. "Good. Let's sit another minute, though, before walking back. Take our time."

"You don't have to baby me." Snapping was far easier than giving voice to the part of me that wanted to beg for the return of his touch, that wanted to wallow in how nice it was to not be alone right then.

"I'm not." He sounded pained, but I was too full of jumbled-up emotions to slow down, adrenaline, longing, embarrassment, fear, all of them competing for mental real estate.

I whirled on him, words tumbling out one after the other, fear winning the war in my brain and all my worries spewing to the surface. "Why the heck have you been so nice to me? You hated my guts for three years. Why the change? Is it because I told you about my family? It's because you feel sorry for me, isn't it?"

"You think I hated you?" His voice was small and faraway.

"Didn't you?" I demanded, even as I wasn't sure I wanted the answer.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Alden

“You think I hated you?” I sounded stricken even to my own ears. Silence stretched between us, whipping wind chilling me every bit as much as his lack of reply. He shrugged, which made me need to swallow hard before I could continue. “I always thought it was the opposite—all your teasing. You always seemed to barely tolerate me.”

His forehead creased. “You mean my trash-talking? You thought I was serious all those times I dogged you?”

“Sometimes.” I shrugged, hating this. “It can be hard to tell.”

“Sorry. I didn’t think...” Conrad exhaled hard. “And okay, maybe I made things worse, but you never seemed to like me, even from the first. Come on, admit it. You hated me for a long time.”

In that instant, I wished more than anything that lying came easily to me. Especially around him. Because I could feel the truth welling up, and I wasn’t sure I trusted him with it, but a quick retort simply refused to come.

“No. I wish.” I looked away, studying the mountains.

“What do you mean?” His tone was less demanding now, more curious. My brain kept flashing back to the night before

—to holding hands in the dark, to how close I'd felt to everything I'd never let myself want.

I couldn't not say the words. "I wanted to hate you," I admitted. "You came in as a freshman, and it was like... Everyone loved you. Every. One. The professors. The lovesick kids at the Safe Space Alliance who followed you around. The play group. You were...golden."

"Ha. I'm not golden. Just look at my last year. More like tarnished brass or some crap. You mean you were jealous because I was popular?"

"A little." More like I'd wanted a piece of him for myself, wanted to capture all that golden sunlight he didn't seem to think he had, but I didn't know how to articulate that. "It all seemed to come so easily to you. Friends. School. Dating. I was...bitter, maybe. Harsh. Rude, probably."

"Not that rude."

"Liar." I managed a rusty laugh. "That's what I mean though—social stuff, it's never been easy for me. Getting hung up on rules, getting anxious about stupid things and then snapping, that's easier. And I'm sorry. I don't mean to be...difficult."

"You're not difficult." His reply was a little too quick to be believed. "Really. Not everyone needs to be an extrovert. And sometimes, it's a curse—like everyone expects me to be happy and fun to be around. And then this last year, I haven't been much fun at all, and a lot of my crowd drifted away. Better to have a few good, loyal friends than a good-time crew that ghosts as soon as shit gets hard."

"I wish I'd known," I said softly. "About it being hard for you. And I should have known. Should have seen the signs—"

“No, you shouldn’t have. I worked damn hard to make sure that few people knew the whole story. Heck, you know more than the professors now. I just didn’t want to admit how badly I screwed up.”

“You didn’t—”

“So you keep saying. And that proves my point. You’re not difficult. You’re a good guy.”

This time his words had the sort of warmth to them that I associated with sincerity. It could be tough to figure out truthfulness from body language, but there was a certain pitch he seemed to reach that had the ability to make my insides melt. And they worked like a caramel-coated truth serum.

“I didn’t hate you. I couldn’t. I kind of wanted to, but I liked you too much to hate you. Later though, it was...easier to focus on the things that annoyed me.”

“I *can* be annoying.” He laughed, then sobered. “You really liked me?”

I nodded. I’d come too far to yank the words back, even though my heart was performing an entire marching-band half-time show against my rib cage. He didn’t say anything for a long time, but right when I was about to head back to the car in disgrace, he put his hand on mine. Our gazes met, and my stomach wobbled at the intensity I found waiting in his blue depths.

“You were wearing a yellow button-down shirt when I saw you at the store the first time Professor Tuttle invited me to come play. You looked older than everyone else there. Important. Like...a hot TA or something.” It was the first time anyone had described me as a hot anything, but he didn’t give me a chance to enjoy the compliment because his mouth

twisted as he continued. “Then you told me what I did wrong losing to Jasper.”

“Sorry.” I really was the worst. The things I’d ruined simply by opening my mouth... I had to look away briefly, eyes stinging.

“Don’t be. You were just...you.” His hand tightened, like it had last night, and I couldn’t have pulled away even if a million dollars had landed in front of us. Maybe not even if the money was accompanied by little green space aliens, because the look on Conrad’s face was like nothing I’d ever seen before, impossible to decipher. Soft. But warm too, like his words. Eyes more open, lips parted, breath audible.

And then, still holding my hand, he leaned in. This time I knew it was coming, and I didn’t flinch away. No phones rang. No loud people walked by. No one was having a meltdown, and the sun was shining, so there were no late-night excuses. Conrad was going to kiss me, and I was going to let him.

Wait. *Let* was the wrong word. I wanted this, had wanted it far, far longer than I was willing to admit, even to him. Even to myself for that matter. I wanted this, and I wasn’t going to let the moment slip away, not this time. Instead, I met him halfway, our lips colliding—a little artlessly at first, nothing lining up evenly, our noses bumping.

But then he shifted, pulling me closer, and I forgot to worry about what lined up where. For the first time maybe *ever*, logistics were less important to me than feelings. The margins of our mouths and angles of our noses became fleeting concerns, replaced by *sensation*. The feel of his lips, soft and satiny. The slight rasp of his cheek. The tremble in his hand. The strength in his fingers. The hitch in my heartbeat at the

slightest increase in the pressure of his mouth. The sigh in my soul, a knee-melting *feeling* of absolute, utter rightness.

Right as I started to sink into that feeling, though, he pulled back, resting his forehead against mine for a second. Probably longer than the actual kiss, but my lips still tingled with awareness of where his had been.

“We need to get back.” His voice was thick as he released my hand. I wished I could tell whether it was lust or regret that made his eyes dark.

He was right, of course. We were in the middle of nowhere Colorado, right out in the open. It was a completely foolhardy place for kissing. But still I wanted more, and as we made our way back to the car, I couldn’t help but feel like I was leaving something important behind on that rock.

* * *

Actually kissing someone for the first time didn’t rearrange the planets or suddenly make magical unicorns appear on the path back to the car. No, I was still the same Alden with the same awkward not-sure-what-to-say dilemmas in my head, same worries about our schedule, same desire to win the tournament. Just...*different* too.

And heck if I knew what happened now. Conrad was no help, giving no clue as to how I was supposed to act, what it all meant, and most importantly, what would come next. He didn’t even look my direction as he tried to angle for the driver’s side.

“I know Denver at least a little from family trips,” he argued, voice a little too bright and quick. “And I know you hate parking Black Jack.”

“Fine. I’ll start looking for places to eat after the game-store stop.” I was proud of how steady my voice came out. I searched with my phone while he took us into Denver proper, heading for the Cherry Creek neighborhood. “It’s not quite as well-known as the pizza place you liked, but I found a deli with a ton of stars that supposedly has New York–style bagels and blintzes. Prices aren’t terrible for a big city.”

“Sure. Your turn to pick.” His smile was indulgent, the sort Mimi would give me when taking us for onion bagels on a Sunday, and somehow it grated on me. I didn’t want to be coddled by him or for him to act fake nice to make up for whatever perceived lapse in judgment he blamed for the kiss. I’d much rather have Cheetos and gas-station nachos and the prospect of more kisses than him retreating like this.

“I’m sorry if—”

“Take the exit for Speer Boulevard,” the GPS bleated.

“Let me focus on driving.” Conrad’s tone was more curt than usual, and I hated it.

Finally after we’d found the store and sorted out parking in the small lot next to the red-painted brick building, he turned to me. “You don’t have to be sorry.”

Nice as that sentiment was, it told me precisely nothing about how he was feeling, and I made a frustrated noise. “Do you want to pretend it didn’t happen?”

I sucked at pretending, but for him and the sake of getting back to that easy place we’d found together the past few days, I’d try.

“No.” His expression was impossible to read—distant eyes but soft mouth and gentle hand as he patted my knee. “But

right now, let's get the store visit over with so we can get you those blintzes."

"Okay." There really wasn't much to do other than agree and collect our stuff—my deck bag, the laptop bag, and the box of books and swag. Easily the biggest game store we'd stopped at on the trip, the place occupied a one-story corner building with giant curved front windows displaying costumes and toys. The whole top floor was a kids' paradise—aisles and aisles of toys, costumes, games, and books. The finished basement level was a more adult space with tabletop games, cards, and space for playing. It felt a bit like venturing to an underground club as the clerk waved us downstairs, where an older man in an expensive-looking gray suit waited for us.

At least it wasn't cosplay, but his officious attitude was still unsettling, a feeling that intensified as he introduced his equally slick adult sons, both of whom were larger than Conrad even. Their crisp white shirts and smarmy smiles seemed more suited to a used-car lot than a game store. They were each older than Conrad and me, probably late twenties. We did some video with the owner showing us around, but my anxiety kept rising.

You're being ridiculous, I lectured myself. This is not a bad seventies movie. No one is out to get you, and you're not leaving here wearing cement shoes.

My unease wasn't helped when the suit-clad owner announced, "Bart is my best player. Regional champion at the Denver con this year." The look of parental pride he bestowed upon his mammoth son would have been heartwarming if Bart hadn't looked ready to sell me a lemon. There was something untrustworthy about his eyes—like this was a guy who would have no problem running an odometer back.

“The competition was for shit.” Bart made a dismissive gesture.

“He could go pro, but...we need him here.” The owner looked over Conrad and me the way my mom inspected roasts for Sunday dinner. “Who wants to play him for your little show?”

I was about as reluctant to play Bart as I’d been with the cosplaying wizard, but I didn’t want to look like I had a complex. Or like I was afraid. Which I wasn’t. Okay. Maybe a little. I trusted my decks and myself as a player, but I didn’t trust Bart to play clean. However, I also wasn’t going to make Conrad bail me out of an uncomfortable situation again.

“I will,” I said at the same time that Conrad said, “Alden’s our better player.”

That should have made me preen, but instead, the praise settled like a mantle of heavy expectation on my shoulders. I couldn’t help but feel I’d be letting him down—as well as myself—if I lost. The owner drifted away to take care of something business-related, leaving Conrad and I alone with the sons in the back of the downstairs room.

We sat down at a long folding table to play, Conrad filming, me trying to tune him out to focus on my game. I wanted to put headphones on, the way some pro players did to further get in their zone, but Bart was already being rude enough for both of us, turned around, talking to his brother about a “seriously smoking” woman while shuffling, completely ignoring me. His play mat featured one of *Odyssey*’s most expensive cards—an underworld chariot so powerful and rare that it was on several ban lists. Bart also had the highly annoying habit of snapping his cards. Terrible for card value and awful for my concentration too.

He got out to an early lead, attacking my life total with the sort of methodical precision one might expect from a player who scowled as though he was busy thinking of ways to dismember me for real and lose the body. His underworld-themed deck was full of reapers and dark spirits—creatures that fed off other things' demise. Including scrolls. His first card out was a scroll eater, and I had to work to control my inner flinch. I didn't like to play cards that attacked the other player's collection of scrolls as there was something unsportsmanlike to me about robbing the other player of the ability to put anything out. But Bart had no such issues, making me fall further behind because I couldn't play the cards in my hand.

If you're falling behind, play smaller cards more strategically. I flashed back to my conversation that morning with the kid. I'd been thinking about Conrad at the time and how he always seemed to eke value out of every single play, playing cards that didn't cost that many scrolls in deceptively skillful ways. Interacting with the kid had felt good. Fun. I liked being the expert, and I'd liked watching his eyes light up when he'd understood what I was trying to show him. Conrad was right—I was good at teaching people the game. I still wasn't sure what that meant for my future, and certainly didn't have time for that sort of soul-searching midgame.

Channeling that conversation and returning to basics, using each turn to its fullest, I came back with a couple of good plays and at least got enough of a board state to defend myself. But I still felt behind, a frantic sort of flutter in the small of my back. I didn't like not knowing how I was going to win. I usually could see the endgame from the first few plays, knew exactly how I'd go in for the kill. But not here.

However, then Conrad, whom I'd done a pretty good job ignoring, coughed. My back tensed further. Was he about to have another asthma attack? Did he have enough air?

Air. Attack by air. I didn't think Conrad was trying to feed me tips. He was a lot of things, but a cheat wasn't one of them. However, that didn't stop my surge of gratitude.

"You okay?" I asked him in a low voice as he came by with the camera.

"Totally." He patted his front pocket where he'd stashed his inhaler after his earlier scare, and I relaxed enough to actually carry through my attack on Bart. Finally, I had a strategy, and with a set strategy, I could win. Bart might be good at the underhanded tactics, but I was the expert at carrying out a complicated plan.

Which I did, escaping with the narrowest of victories. It wasn't quite the waxing I'd hoped for, but a win was a win.

"Way to go." The approval in Conrad's eyes was almost better than the victory itself.

"Rematch." Bart's voice was coldly calculating. *Great. A sore loser.* "I don't know how you did it, but your *boyfriend* over there was feeding you tips."

"He wasn't." My mind flashed back to that cough, and I wasn't as decisive as I could have been. "And he's not."

"Whatever." Bart had the same tone as every homophobic bully I've ever had the misfortune of meeting. The kind of guy full of inappropriate locker-room humor along with an almost toxic level of competitiveness. "Play me again. This time both of you, so he can't be over here seeing my hand."

"We really need to be going." Conrad sounded more regretful than I would have. "Sorry, man. Rematch some other

time? Too bad you're not going to Vegas."

"Who says I'm not? Flying out tomorrow night. I'll stomp both of you there too. But you're going to play me again right now."

"No, we're not." Conrad was firmer this time, and I nodded to back him up.

"You are if you want your cards back." The brother, whose name I hadn't caught, spoke up, dangling my deck box bag off one of his meaty fingers. All my decks were in there—my casual play ones along with my tournament-legal ones, and no way could I afford to replace them on short notice, not after the car repair and using my emergency card to help Jasper.

My earlier lecture to myself to relax seemed absurd now, panic returning in a rush. This might not be some cheesy Mafia movie, but in a way it was worse—every school bully I'd faced, all grown up and drunk on power, and me still unsure how to win against their underhanded tactics.

"Yeah. Play us, and you can have your shit back." Bart smiled, but it was a hard, calculated thing that left my blood cold and my stomach churning. I had no clue what we were supposed to do now, how to get out of this without losing my cards—or worse.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Conrad

Was Alden panicking? I didn't know because I wouldn't let myself glance over at him to see. I was pretty sure he was, and if he was seriously distressed, it was going to make it that much harder to take care of these jokers.

"You want us to play you?" I stared them both down. "Fine. But teams."

Playing in teams of two was a less common format than playing a four-person game, but I had an idea in mind that would require Alden's cooperation.

"You already colluded to cheat out that win," the guy holding Alden's deck bag scoffed.

"If we do teams, at least they can't use hand signals or what-the-fuck-ever they had going on last time. Come on, Danny, you know. That deck never loses."

"Maybe Alden's that good," I said coolly.

"The hell he is." Bart's face went red. "Fine. Teams. Then we can stomp you both at the same time. No way are you getting a second win off me."

"Conrad." Alden's voice was an urgent whisper as he tugged me into the corner. "This is *criminal*. We should call the

police. Or go find the owner. *Something*. They can't get away with this."

"We don't have time for the police. And their dad would be no help either. You know how bullies work."

"Yeah." The haziness in Alden's wide eyes said he probably had even more experience with this than me, which I hated.

"They'll make it out to be a whole big misunderstanding or, worse, get *us* in trouble. *Gamer Grandpa* doesn't need bad publicity like us getting arrested. We'll just play them for our stuff. Faster. Easier."

"We don't exactly make a great team."

"Hey now." I was legit wounded at that. I thought we'd been making a pretty great team traveling together, except maybe the part where I couldn't seem to keep my lips to myself.

"I mean in the game."

"No time like the present to try." I clapped him on the shoulder. "Come on. You beat him fair and square. You know that. Just got to do it again."

He looked utterly miserable at that prospect, mouth drooping as he lowered his voice further. "You coughed."

"I what?" My face wrinkled as I tried to figure that one out.

"Coughed. You coughed. Then I went in by air."

"You think I was sending you signals?" I matched his barest hint of a whisper. "Dude. No. It was a cough. You won. Fairly. Just play your game, and don't let him in your head."

"Fine." He marched back over to the table as if he were being led to the gallows. And not letting Bart and Danny in our heads was easier said than done. I'd played slick

underworld decks like his before, and I had just the deck to counter it—a mining deck that would let me get value out of the stuff he destroyed. All I needed was Alden to trust me, and from the stiff way he held himself, I could tell that was going to be an uphill battle.

“Listen.” I leaned in so I could whisper in his ear, not caring one bit what these homophobic goons thought of it. “You need to go big, every time, and let me bat cleanup.”

“Go big or go home is hardly a strategy—”

“Trust me, Alden. Just once. Please.” His usual complex strategy of needing the perfect board state wasn’t likely to win here, but if he played enough big stuff that then got destroyed, my little landfill miners, a pair of vulture gnomes, could net us the game. Whenever Alden played teams before on the show, he’d always insisted on going second. A lot of players thought that was the stronger position in a team, and I could tell it was chafing him to have to concede that role to me. If we weren’t among idiots, I’d offer more kissing to sweeten the deal. Not that it would be a hardship, but I wasn’t above trying to bribe him into trying things my way. Assuming, that was, that he’d even find the prospect of another lip-lock a compelling reason to agree.

I’d spent the last few hours alternating between elation at having kissed Alden and anger for letting myself go there. I was still convinced Alden deserved better, but at the same time I couldn’t fully regret the kiss. It had been sweet, almost painfully so, waking up tender places deep in my chest, and I wanted more, so much more. But right then, I had dudes to crush before I could let myself replay the kiss for the thousandth time.

He studied me carefully for a long moment. Whatever he saw in my eyes must have reassured him somehow, because he nodded sharply. “Okay.”

The early part of the game was an ass-kicking—and not by us. My initial hand had sucked, and Alden was playing very conservatively, which made it hard to keep up. Danny played like a more reckless version of Bart—more card thievery, more scroll destruction, and double the sneer while doing it. I could feel the tension rolling off Alden, and not being able to touch him to reassure him or to give too much of the plan away was killing me.

But then finally Alden put out a valuable card—a scroll vault that could let us play bigger creatures—and Bart promptly destroyed it. But I had been waiting for this sort of move and played a mining card that gave us a life advantage while zapping them for the card’s value. Alden’s eyes went wide with recognition. Thank God. He’d finally caught on to my strategy, and from there we became an unstoppable duo, him playing his biggest cards, no holding back, and me using Bart’s blocking to hurt him and Danny until we were a turn away from victory.

Alden cast his eyes at me, a question there about whether to go for it, and I nodded subtly, hoping like heck that I wouldn’t lead him wrong. Finally, he went in for lethal damage, and Bart tried to use a reaper to send the damage back at us, but I was there with a shield—a cheap, older card that worked surprisingly well against reapers.

“Game.” Danny groaned. “Damn. You guys are—”

“Cheats.” Bart’s mouth was a hard, scornful line. “You probably have some system in place.”

“Mind meld,” I deadpanned. “Hand signals are so last year. Seriously, dude. We won fair and square. Now, give us our stuff.”

“Whatever.” Danny all but tossed Alden’s bag at us. “We weren’t going to keep it anyway. Just having fun with you. Good job letting yourselves get suckered into that game, though.”

“We still won.” I held the bag tightly while Alden made quick work of cleaning up our cards and counters. Adrenaline still surging, I wanted to celebrate, but not in front of these losers. Pride made my shoulders lift—pride at Alden for trusting me, and for both of us working together, and a little for myself, at having an idea that actually worked. It was a good omen heading into Vegas.

Also, the combo of adrenaline and pride had me feeling better about the kiss. Maybe I wasn’t totally useless to Alden. Maybe it wouldn’t be the worst thing to kiss him again. A celebratory thing. And okay, a thing I really, really wanted. The chance to be alone again couldn’t come soon enough.

* * *

It was too bad we were already behind schedule, because a couple of beers and a lengthy make-out session sounded like the perfect afternoon to me. But as a second choice, watching Alden enjoy himself at the deli he’d found wasn’t bad. Little smile on his face, he studied the paper menu we’d grabbed from the hostess station like a little kid deciding between ice cream flavors. Blintzes versus latkes was apparently that exciting. I’d wanted to kiss him back at the car, but he’d immediately started fiddling with the GPS, and we’d been a bit too exposed in the game-store parking lot for me to press the matter.

“I still can’t believe we won,” he said as we waited in line for a table.

“I can. We’re the better players.” I didn’t let on that I’d been nervous too. “Especially you. Aren’t you the one who’s always saying you’re better than our competition?”

“Do I really act that way?” Mouth twisting, he bit the inside of his cheek. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. You’re confident about your abilities. It’s one of the things I like about you.”

Blinking, he made an adorable surprised squeak. “*One* of the things?”

Right then, the server, a woman around our age, arrived to lead us to the table.

“I’m not letting that drop,” he whispered as she retrieved glasses of water for us.

“Look at your menu,” I ordered, insides far too mixed up to give him a real answer. I did like Alden, despite trying hard not to, and it wasn’t just his ability as a player that attracted me. Nor was it how he cared far more than I’d ever given him credit for. Or the fact that he was pretty cute to look at. There was something else there, something more elusive and harder to name.

“Fine.” He gave me an incredulous look, like maybe I’d sprouted some horns. But blessedly, he let the matter drop. “I still can’t decide. If I get both, can we share? You can add a side of some meat for you if you want.”

“Sure.” It was another blatant move to feed me on the cheap, but I was too relieved to protest too much. While we were waiting for our food, we both checked our texts. Necessary, but also another chance to avoid talking. Because if we talked

about anything *real*, that kiss was going to come up again, and I still didn't have a very good answer for him. I hadn't been lying—I didn't regret it, couldn't regret anything that achingly sweet and sexy, but I also had no clue what to do next. Oh, my body had plenty of ideas, including blowing off the rest of the day's driving, but my mind refused to let my baser impulses do the driving.

“Professor Tuttle is looking forward to the Denver footage,” I reported to Alden as part of my effort to keep the conversation on neutral subjects. “That should make a good story for him later.”

“How about we don't tell him about the near deck hijacking?” Alden had that vaguely guilty expression of a kid who'd never been in much trouble.

“What, and miss the chance to look all victorious?” I grinned at him. “Trust me. I can tell it so it doesn't sound so bad. And he'll be happy to hear we're working well together.”

“We did make a good team.” Alden's ears went pink as if he too might be thinking about the kiss. Good. At least I wasn't the only one whose brain kept going there. But also bad because it meant we'd have to talk about it eventually and *gah*.

“See? Great teamwork, no one injured, and all our decks safe and sound. He'll be thrilled.”

“If you say so.” Even Alden's eye roll did something to me, made me grin. I was behaving like a fourteen-year-old with a crush, and I needed to rein it in, hit the reset button or something. Funny how before the trip, I'd been so sure Alden's greatest risk was to my sanity, not my heart. I might take a lot of risks, but never that one. I knew better than to go chancing that kind of hurt. Not that it kept me from wanting

more kisses, but I tried to use the reminder to focus on something other than his cuteness.

Returning to my phone, one of my other messages caught my eye. “Got one of those rare sneak-texts from my sister. Wonder if she sensed me close by or something.”

“Maybe.” The soft look Alden gave me wasn’t pity, but rather understanding—as if he got how important my sisters were to me and how messed up my situation was.

“Anyway she says she liked the last game the professor put up on his channel. The one where you crushed Jasper like cracker crumbs, and Payton and I went back and forth before I beat them. She says, and I quote, ‘The bossy one sure wins a lot. But he’s cute so there’s that.’ Hmm. Gotta agree with her there.” I laughed just to see if I could get him to blush again.

“Am not.” Alden studied his placemat.

“Are too,” I said right as our food arrived, my resolve to not flirt apparently not lasting even thirty seconds. But I tried to steer things back to safer shores as we ate—talking about food we liked growing up, things our grandmothers made. Alden had never had a red velvet cake, and I liked hearing about the various Jewish holidays, liked picturing little Alden.

“These latkes are good, but Mimi’s are better. You should come by some weekend. She and Mom like cooking together.”

“Invite me over and maybe I will,” I countered. And okay, I was still flirting a little. It was kinda nice to think about some future where Alden and I stayed friendly, where I got to hang out with him even after this trip was done. I didn’t like thinking too much about the future, but that vision of a meal with his family made me smile.

But I wished I could make up my mind about whether that vague and comforting future might include something *more*. Logic—Alden’s favorite thing—would say no way, but my body kept not listening to my brain. I wanted him. In a way I hadn’t wanted *anything* in quite some time. Kissing him again felt almost inevitable, something that both elated and terrified me as we finished eating.

Finally back on the highway west, we made decent time leaving the suburbs of Denver behind. Alden was driving, which meant plenty of time for me to appreciate the mountains and gorgeous scenery. The mountains were every bit as majestic as I remembered, the perfect blue skies making me itch to escape the confines of the car. And maybe my unsettled brain too.

“There’s a scenic overlook coming for the Dillon Reservoir.” I stretched in my seat. “And we’re making good enough time that I think we’ve earned a brief detour.”

“Okay. We can get some good pictures for Professor Tuttle. At least there’s not another game-store stop until St. George tomorrow.”

“Here’s to hoping they’re not part of the *Odyssey* Mafia network,” I joked, but seriously, I was happy to see the last of Danny and Bart.

Even for a weekday, the dam road bypass off the highway was crowded with RVs and tourists, but as we continued on, we found a not-too-full overlook to park at. Alden snapped some pics of me with the turquoise lake and craggy hills in the background before we discovered a short trail that led closer to the lake.

But my stupid lungs still weren’t cooperating the best with the altitude and dry air, and I needed to take a breather on a

log off the path.

“Sorry.” I fingered my inhaler, trying to decide whether I needed another dose or if the moment of rest would be enough.

“Don’t be sorry.” He moved so his hand hovered near my back, then seemed to think better of the gesture, pulling it back.

“You can touch me. Sorry if I was a jerk about that earlier.” I bent forward, still trying to find my breath. Alden took my permission seriously, using his hand to tentatively stroke my back.

“Can I do anything? Water?”

“Nah. Just sitting is good. At least it’s pretty here.” I gestured at the lake in front of us, farther down the path, and the canopy of the trees sheltering us from the sun.

“Yeah.” He licked his lips, which was probably way more about the dry air than being sexy, but it still hit me like a shock wave.

Don’t. Don’t. I tried to remind myself of all the reasons I shouldn’t want this, shouldn’t go there again, but all I could seem to remember was how soft his lips were, how good he tasted, how much I liked the little gasp he’d made...

Yeah. I was a total goner, and I wasn’t surprised when my next words came out flirty.

“But you know... If you want to see if a kiss would cure me, I wouldn’t stop you.”

“Medicinal kisses?” He frowned, not jumping at this excuse as I’d hoped he might.

“Sure. Why not?” God, why couldn’t this be easy? This was the conversation I’d been dreading all afternoon, and I supposed I deserved the wary look he gave me.

“Are you going to turn weird after again? I like it better when we’re talking.” Kicking at some pine needles, he turned his head away.

“Sorry about that. I liked kissing you.”

“Same.” The shyness in his voice shook some of the truth I’d been holding back loose.

“I just... I don’t want to hurt you. I don’t want you to feel convenient. Or, I don’t know, used somehow.”

“I appreciate that, but there are far worse things to be used for than my lips.” His tone was so serious that I had to laugh. Maybe we could get through this awkward part after all.

“I mean it. I don’t want you hurt here. I think you could do better than kissing me.”

His laugh was a harsh bark. “Yeah, Conrad. Because there’s such a long line of guys waiting for the privilege.”

“Hey.” Hands on his shoulders, I turned him back toward me. “Don’t sell yourself so short. You’re a great guy. I meant what I said back at the restaurant. I like you. And I haven’t liked anyone in a long time. Not like that.”

He considered this for a moment before he nodded. “I’m sorry for all the times I implied you were...indiscriminate.”

“Oh, I definitely went through that phase.” I laughed before sobering. “But Angelo and everything else that went down kind of cured me of that. And even if it hadn’t, kissing you... wasn’t that.”

That was as close as I was going to come to admitting that he was something other than my usual über-casual hookups. I still wasn't sure exactly what *other* was, but this felt big. Important. As if our bodies had been secretly building toward this for years and our brains were only now catching up. Whatever this was, I knew I wasn't easily walking away come morning. And scary as it was, I wanted him to know that.

"Then what was it?" he whispered.

"Do we have to name it right this second?" As big as this felt, all my muscles tensed at the idea of trying to define what this was to either of us.

"Maybe not *right* now." His forehead creased, uncertainty in his eyes.

"I don't need a label or technical definition to know that I want to kiss you again so much it's almost painful. It seems like a waste to not enjoy as much of this trip as we can."

"Including kissing?" He didn't sound entirely opposed to the concept, which I counted as a huge win.

"Absolutely."

"Maybe..." Alden licked his lips again, and I could almost see the gears grinding in his impressive brain, could see the moment when he decided to kiss me again, eyes going darker, more focused as he leaned in. I met him halfway, as much out of eagerness as self-defense, not wanting to bump faces again.

This kiss was softer than the first, slower. We were alone on the path, had been for some time, and besides that, we were slightly hidden by trees. This sense of our own private hideaway made me bolder than the first time. I focused on bringing more of my A game, taking my time to nibble and tease, coaxing little gasps from him. He tasted sweet, as I'd

known he would, but not cloying like candy. Rather more elusive and addictive, something unique to him that drove me crazy wanting more of it. His lips were as soft as I remembered, far fuller than they looked, but even more than their feel, the noises he made spurred me on. Figuring out what my buttoned-up control freak liked was both fun and a revelation. He seemed to like it when I took the lead and when I was aggressive, but also was eager to imitate whatever I showed him.

I sucked on his lower lip, making him gasp, shoulders shuddering under my hands. Just as in the game, once he caught on to what I was after, he was a quick study, immediately copying my move in a way that had me almost dizzy with want. His tongue ventured into my mouth, and I captured it, making him groan before he did the same thing to me. At first, my hands stayed on his shoulders, steadying myself, but then gradually, I let them roam over the lean muscles of his back. Following my lead, he did the same thing, fingers electric against my spine. We traded kisses back and forth until I was breathless in a way that had nothing to do with asthma and everything to do with him.

“We should...” His voice trailed off when I stole one last kiss. “We need to head back?”

I loved how he made it a question, like maybe we could simply put down roots here, stay for all eternity in this pleasant little cocoon where the real world couldn't reach us. But he was right. *Damn it.*

“Yeah.” Standing, I offered him a hand up. He took it, but didn't let go, glancing down at our hands, a solemn expression on his face as though maybe he expected me to drop his hand or for things to get weird again. So, I squeezed his fingers,

lacing our hands together, trying to tell him without words that this thing between us wasn't over yet. I couldn't guarantee it wouldn't get weird, but I wasn't going to ghost him either. I kept holding on as we made our way back to the main path.

His hand felt solid in mine. Real. Electric like his touch, but also grounding. I'd never really stopped to appreciate how awesome holding hands was. It was a different sort of closeness, a level of sweetness I wasn't sure I'd ever reached before.

"We'll stop again." He sounded as regretful to leave this place as I was.

"Plenty of other overlooks. And besides, I've got a plan if we can make Utah before stopping for the night."

"Why does you with a plan worry me?" He gave a nervous laugh as we approached the car, still not dropping my hand.

"Because you know it's going to be awesome." I beamed at him, promise sizzling between us. "I'm going to show you stars. I promised, remember?"

There was so, so much I wanted to show him. Keeping that promise seemed like the most important thing in my life, as if I was thawing from a long winter where my only focus had been survival to arrive at a summer where he was the sun, and basking in his warmth the best thing ever. I wasn't going to take this gift of time together for granted.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Alden

Colorado was forever going to be synonymous with kisses in my head. We stopped in Vail, with all the ritzy ski-themed businesses, for pricey gas and a few sneaky kisses parked behind some towering trees. Glenwood Springs apparently had a canyon and a pretty view of where the Colorado and Roaring Fork Rivers met, but I'd been more focused on fast kisses on a bench overlooking the meeting of two bridges. And that's exactly what it felt like inside me—new bridges being discovered that led to the most unlikely of destinations. Two strong bodies, each an independent force, meeting in the middle, some sort of emotional physics at work.

An overlook near Rifle led to some great pictures for Professor Tuttle of the river and the mountains and some stolen kisses in the car as “just one more” ended up being long moments of bliss. I had no idea what all of this meant, only that I loved it. I'd waited my whole life for kisses like these, and I wasn't about to ruin it by overthinking it the way I always did. Conrad liked me, improbable as that was, and he wanted to kiss me. Repeatedly. That had to be enough for my analytical mind, which kept wanting to figure out the trajectory of where we went from here. But I'd spent a lot of years with that brain standing between me and fun, so I tried

hard to enjoy this instead, saving up memories that I'd be able to take out later to remember back to these perfect moments.

The light was starting to shift as we reached Grand Junction, where Conrad had the brilliant idea of grabbing sandwiches and drinks from a little shop on the business loop and then taking the food and the money we saved to nearby Colorado National Monument. We watched the sun start to set over the brilliant red rocks with our impromptu dinner picnic, gorgeous shades of pinks and purples I'd never seen before, the sky hanging like silk curtains over the giant rock formations and scrubby vegetation in the valley below.

“Do we need to start thinking about where we're stopping for the night?” I asked as he leaned against me. We were using a rock as a table and a blanket from the car as seating. And apparently my new job was as a backrest for Conrad. Not that I was complaining. We'd managed to find a quasi-private spot, mainly Conrad's doing as he seemed to have a sixth sense for good spots to be alone. But alone was something of a mirage since the amount of traffic we'd been battling said that the rest of humanity wasn't that far off. “With all the summer tourists around here, it might be harder to get a room than back in the Midwest.”

“Already on it. I made good use of my time with your phone while you were driving.” Conrad grinned like my dog, Emma, when she actually managed to perform one of her tricks for a treat. “Arches is one of the best places in the country to see the stars, apparently. And I used one of those last-minute-deal sites to nab a teeny cabin at one of those motel places that have a lot of separate cabins, all in a row.”

“Oh, cool.” The prospect of that kind of privacy with Conrad all night long was almost more thrilling than the promise of

stargazing. Thrilling and also daunting. Kissing was one thing, but I wasn't sure I could compete with whatever skills his prior hookups had offered. Ingenuity, especially that kind, was hardly my strong suit. Pushing aside my reservations, I focused on what I was good at—logistics. “Your card was okay to make the reservation? Want me to get you cash when we're back in Grand Junction?”

He made a face. “Yeah. Cash would be good. Hate how close I'm playing this. Just wanted to do something nice for you.”

“Financial realities don't negate the niceness of your gesture,” I said reasonably.

That made him laugh. “See that's why I l—*like* you. I get that being literal can be a challenge, but sometimes I like how simple you make things.”

“Yeah, well, I miss a lot of jokes and subtext,” I grumbled, not entirely sure I liked his compliment.

“Sorry. Not trying to say that it's not hard. And I'll just have to be more obvious. Luckily, I've never been that good at subtlety.” He turned, unmistakable intent in his expression, sunset reflected in his eyes, his gorgeous features more compelling to me than all the natural beauty surrounding us. And I didn't have to be the master of reading of social cues to know to pull him closer, to meet him halfway in a kiss that made my toes curl in my sneakers. He tasted sugary, like his citrusy soda but also something else, something I couldn't name but that made him my new favorite flavor of everything. His lips were firm but supple, a contrast that I loved exploring. Learning from earlier, I used my tongue to outline their contours, memorizing their velvety feel and the way he moaned and held me tighter when I ventured into his mouth, in

a way that had heat zooming all over my body, an almost giddy sort of pleasure.

Groaning low in his throat when I tried to repeat the move, he pulled away. “Better head out if we want to make our date with the stars.”

Date. I’d never had one of those, had nothing to compare it to, but the perfection of this day would be hard to beat. It had set a ridiculously high bar for all future encounters to try to live up to. Not that I wanted other encounters, some future with faceless people who weren’t Conrad. No. I only wanted this, right here and right now, even if there was no viable strategy for keeping him beyond this trip, beyond this brief moment in time.

* * *

“See, wasn’t it worth beating those losers to get here?” Conrad grinned from his perch next to me on the hood of the car. We’d parked on a tiny side road, no other cars or people for miles. Above us, a glittering canopy of infinite stars stretched like something out of an astronomy text. On multiple levels, I couldn’t believe I was actually here. “Look at these stars. If we’d gotten arrested in Denver, we never would have made it here.”

I wanted to quip about how if he hadn’t kissed me that morning, we wouldn’t be here either, with this wonderful rapport between us, a closeness I’d never had with another person. But I simply didn’t know how to find the words for that. So instead, I went with something else that had been on my mind since Denver.

“I’m not sure I liked how that game went.”

“What do you mean?” Conrad frowned, pausing midnibble on a handful of the caramel popcorn we’d brought with us.

“I didn’t like needing you. Not being able to win outright on my own. Needing your cards to bail me out.”

“Dude. That’s the whole point of teams, right? Working together. Needing each other. I needed the big, expensive stuff in your deck to make mine work better. If you hadn’t been able to put out rare cards with high scroll cost, then my deck wouldn’t have worked as well.”

I considered this. “I don’t like being dependent. Which I know seems converse to the rest of my life—living at home, listening to the moms’ ideas for my future. But I don’t like feeling like I’m not up to a challenge. I’ve had enough of that.”

“Join the freaking club.” He bumped shoulders with me. “If this last year has taught me anything, it’s that relying on others *sucks*. I get it. People aren’t often trustworthy either. They let you down. Jobs that were supposed to last don’t. Friends who were supposed to stick around leave.”

I wanted to promise him that I wouldn’t let him down, that I’d be different, that I’d be the one who stuck around. But I wasn’t sure I could keep that promise, so instead, I squeezed his hand.

“Anyway, trust me, I understand wanting to be independent.” He held my hand tightly. “But sometimes winning means figuring out how best to use others’ resources.”

That sounded a bit mercenary, even for me. “I don’t want to use you,” I whispered.

“Then don’t.” With that, he kissed me, stars above us, galaxies worth of emotions unspooling in my chest. When we kissed like this, I felt like the person I’d always wanted to be—ten feet tall, powerful, confident. Liked. I spent so much time pretending that things didn’t matter, pretending I didn’t care about being alone, but when we kissed, I no longer felt left out. And all those rules and cues that often seemed beyond me became so easy when he put his arms around me.

Instead, it felt like the best kind of game—like taking turns that built on each other. He did a concrete action like licking the seam of my mouth. I did something in response like capturing his tongue between my lips, making him groan and shudder. Back and forth we went until we were both breathing hard, losing all track of turns, both winners, and maybe he was right and it didn’t matter who went first or second or who did more when we had the same common goal.

His hand was warm, urging me closer as his mouth continued to coax more gasps from me. My own hand got bold, toying with the hem of his T-shirt, fingertip grazing the warm skin of his back, making him hiss and break the kiss.

“I’m supposed to be showing you constellations.” His laugh was as unsteady as my breathing.

“I like this better,” I assured him, even as I let him scoot back a little. “But sure, teach away.”

“You’re going to kill me.” He rested his head on mine, tucking me against his shoulder. I liked this almost as much as the kissing, liked the calm closeness of simply being here like this. The night air was chilly, even with the picnic blanket around our shoulders. He pointed up at the sky. “So okay, that’s the North Star. And from there you can start to make out different constellations.”

As compelling as him talking science was, he didn't make it very far through his astronomy lecture before we were kissing again. I wasn't even sure who started that round, only that one second he was talking about Orion's Belt, and the next we were lip-locked as urgently as if we hadn't already spent huge chunks of the day like this.

"Damn. You're hell on my astronomy knowledge," he said as we came up for air.

"We'll just have to do this again."

"We will," he said firmly, eyes linking with mine. There was a message there. A promise maybe even, and that made it easy to gloss past the con and everything it represented, everything that could happen, good and bad, and to focus on our return trip—to fantasize about more days spent like this. With him not having a job to get back to, maybe we could even stretch it out further... The thought made a happy shiver race through me.

"Cold?" he asked, pulling me closer.

"Not really, but maybe we should go? Should we go find the cabin place?"

"Yes, we most definitely should get a room." He waggled his eyebrows at me. I maybe liked him silly best of all, but even him adorable didn't stop the flock of elephant-sized butterflies migrating through my insides.

"I didn't mean it like that," I said quickly. Too quickly.

"Please mean it like that." He lightly tickled along my ribs. I was ticklish to start with, and even through my shirt, his touch made electricity crackle all along my torso.

"You're better at this than me," I groaned because I wanted to touch him too and had no idea where to start. And no idea

what would happen when we got back to the cabin.

“You like science, right?”

“Uh...yeah.” I didn’t completely follow him.

“Well, after kissing you all day, I can definitively say you are excellent at it. Too good, really. But you know, if you want to keep testing that hypothesis...”

“Dork.” I pushed at his arm, but not hard enough to actually move him. I was pretty happy exactly where I was, even if the conversation was less than comfortable. “I mean I don’t know what to do. What comes next. I hate not knowing the rules.”

“There are no rules.”

“That’s not helping.”

“I’m serious. I know you like rules and all, but there really aren’t any for this. This is just us messing around. It’s not brain surgery.”

Saying it was that casual for him really didn’t help, so I made a frustrated noise.

“Does it help if I say we can keep kissing—and only kissing—when we get to the cabin? We don’t have to do anything else simply because there’s a bed there. That’s not like...a requirement or something. I mean, sleep at some point would be good. And maybe some horizontal kissing, but I’m not asking you to go further than you want.”

“I want,” I groaned. “I just need...a map. Guidelines. *Something.*”

“Good.” He kissed me again, a quick, hard one. “Think you could let me navigate for a while?”

“You *are* the one who’s been here before.” My tone was probably less than charitable because I hated my own inexperience so much. I just wanted to know what all those other guys knew, wanted to know exactly how to make him happy in a multitude of different ways.

“Hey now. I thought we were done calling me indiscriminate?”

“That was me being grateful,” I protested. “Really. I’m glad one of us knows what they’re doing.”

“Oh, Alden. None of us know. Not really.” He rubbed my head like a freaking puppy as he climbed down from the hood of the car. I wouldn’t say I pouted, but I also wasn’t particularly talkative on the drive to the motel, which turned out to be as advertised, several rows of tiny log cabins, all surrounding an outdoor pool and main building with a check-in desk and other amenities like a small convenience store.

Ours was one of the smallest, a single room with a quilt-covered bed, slim counter with a coffee maker, and narrow bathroom in the rear of the space. The one bed, not particularly huge, might as well have been a tarantula for how welcoming it seemed and how wide a berth I gave it as we set our things down.

“You okay? We survived last night, remember?” Conrad’s forehead creased.

“Last night was different,” I whispered, swallowing hard.

“I know.” He took my hand, pulling me closer to him, near the window through which the sky continued to twinkle. “Do you want to pretend that we didn’t—”

“I suck at pretending. And no, I *liked* today. It was the best day ever,” I admitted.

“Me too.” His eyes were as soft and generous as I now knew his lips to be. And warm with concern, which I knew was my fault for freaking out. I didn’t want to freak out. Didn’t want to ruin his nice gesture of finding this place. And I wasn’t scared. It was more wanting to be good—no, *great*—for him. Perfect. I hated not knowing what to do or say to make that happen.

But if I’d learned nothing else over the course of the day, it was that Conrad was exceedingly easy to distract. It didn’t take more than me leaning in for his eyes to shift from worried to something else, something hot that made my pulse thrum.

He flipped the light closest to us off, and by the light of the moon and stars, we kissed standing up for what felt like an eternity. And honestly, stars could have gone supernova and I’m not sure I would have noticed, drunk as I was on his taste.

Time ceased having meaning for everything except my increasingly weak limbs, each kiss melting more of my knee joints until finally I was the one to pull away, gasping, “Horizontal kissing?”

“Not going to make you too nervous?” His voice was kind even as he was already heading toward the bed. “We could simply lay here together too.” Stretching out on the bed, he patted the spot next to him. “We don’t *have* to kiss.”

“I kinda think we do.” Voice serious, I lay next to him, not touching, but close enough to feel the heat rolling off his body. It felt like the very atoms that made up my body were one zooming particle away from disaster. Or unmitigated triumph, a human particle accelerator. The jury was still out on which was more likely. “I need to make sure my...passing grade isn’t a fluke.”

He smiled, wide and pleased. “It’s not. And damn, I love when you joke.”

“I am capable of humor.” I frowned at him, equal parts frustrated and turned on.

“I know. And I like that. I like when I’m not the only wacky one.” He tugged me closer, our legs tangling.

“You’re not. But it wasn’t a joke. I take my science very seriously.” Hovering my face over his, I studied his eyes, which reflected both the dim bedside light and the magic of the earlier moonlight kissing. “And you said I was good—”

“Alden?”

“Yeah?”

“Shut up and kiss me now.”

I did, following what I’d learned so far about what he liked—him being the one in control, me responding to his lead. But he also liked when I tried things, as evidenced by the way his chest rumbled and he held me tighter when I sucked on his tongue. We were close enough that I could tell he was as excited as me, but he seemed quite happy to take our time, not pressing for more than kissing, and letting me explore.

If anything, I was the one who wanted to plunge ahead. Driven by an instinct I still wasn’t sure whether to trust, my hands roamed over his back, snaking under the smooth cotton of his T-shirt. He moaned his approval as I cataloged each of his lean back muscles. Rolling to my back, I pulled him more fully on top of me.

“This okay?” Voice rough, he had glassy eyes and unsteady hands on my face as he brushed my hair off my forehead. I basked in the effect I had on him.

“Yeah. But I think this is the part where you navigate.”

“Maybe we both can. Go where it feels good.” He kissed me again, sweet and slow, and it was impossible not to follow him. *Go where it feels good.* That was silly because it all felt amazing. His lips on my mine, warm and urgent. His hand tangled in my hair, other hand on my side, pulling me even closer. His body against mine, strong and insistent. And maybe my brain still didn’t know the protocol, didn’t know what to do, but my body did, moving with his. On their own, my legs shifted, bringing him more fully against me, thighs seemingly made to cradle him like this.

We kept kissing as our bodies set a slow, hypnotic rhythm, lips like magnets that would stray to cheeks and ears and necks only to return to each other, hungrier than ever. I’d always thought of this as a path, a clear destination, definite mile markers along the way, but in actuality, it was more of an ocean of sensation, all directions equally pleasurable, no map required. It was a journey for sure, but not a progression as much as a ride, floating along on good feelings until I almost couldn’t stand it anymore.

When he broke the kiss to suck in a breath, a pained moan escaped my throat, as much a demand as protest. “More. Need...”

“I know. Me too.” He paused to breathe deeply, and I could feel his heart hammering against my own. “But if I go faster, this will all be over, and I don’t want this to end. Want to kiss you forever. Want this to go on and on.”

“It can.” And he might be the one with more experience, but I still had one thing in my favor—logic. “It doesn’t have to end. We can just do it again.”

“Are we sure you’re not a genius?” He laughed, but I captured his mouth in another kiss before he could finish.

Something seemed to snap in him, some last piece of control, and I reveled in the new intensity of his kiss, of the way his body moved more intently against mine. More. I wanted more. And my body was already one step ahead, a familiar build in the most unfamiliar of circumstances.

“I’m—”

“Me too. Me too.” His breath was harsh in my ear, hands urgent on my hips, pressure so achingly perfect that I too wanted this to last forever. I cursed the layers of fabric between us, but no way could I slow down enough to deal with something mundane as undressing. No, I needed—

“*Alden.*”

That. Right there. His voice breaking, my name on his lips. The trapped-in-a-particle-accelerator feeling intensified until I was exploding, a billion pieces of light and energy, no holding back, hurdling forward right along with him until our moans mingled as our bodies shook.

Slowly, I came back to myself, aware first of my breathing, as uneven as my heart rate. Then my limbs, heavy and sated. My throat, scratchy and raw. I knew a flash of gratitude for the relative privacy of the little cabin, hoping the logs were as soundproof as they looked. With that gratitude came a healthy dose of embarrassment—I’d been loud. And sort of out of control.

But then, so had he, and from the dopey grin he offered me, he was neither horrified nor embarrassed himself. “Doing okay?”

I had to consider the question, and as I did, his eyes shifted from laughing to something more tender and concerned. It was

that hint of vulnerability, something I almost never saw from him, that had me nodding. “More than.”

“Good. We...uh...need to clean up.”

“Yeah.” I hadn’t really ever considered that part of this enterprise, the awkward and sticky part. I studied the curtains. “You can have the first shower.”

“We’ll share.” Not giving me much chance to object, he tugged me toward the bathroom. “I got you messy. Now I get to clean you up.”

For all we’d just shared, this was weird—undressing with someone else, trying not to stare, even though he was too gorgeous to ignore. His body was tall and lean, with ropy muscles and freckles in unexpected places, hair hopelessly ruffled from us rolling around, and kiss-swollen lips that made my blood hum and made me want to kiss him anew. Maybe I’d wait until we were clothed though. I felt supremely naked, on multiple levels, negotiating the small space and even smaller tub. And I wasn’t sure there was anything romantic about trying to make sure neither of us ended up cold and wet. Letting him have more of the hot water seemed only polite, but shivering was hardly sexy either.

“Come here.” He pulled me under the water with him, right into his arms, slippery and soapy, and suddenly everything made sense again as his mouth found mine. Nothing stayed awkward for long when we kissed. This kiss was different too, transformed by the memory of what we’d done and the future promise of good things to come.

“You really are brilliant,” he said as he pulled back.

“I...am?” I’d seldom felt fewer working brain cells, but if he said it, I wanted to believe him.

“Yup. When in doubt, just do it again. Rinse and repeat.” He didn’t give me much time to bask in his words before he was kissing me again, carrying through with that promise, and as our mouths met, over and over, all I could do was hope that I could give him his wish—that this didn’t have to ever end.



Chapter Twenty-Five

Conrad

Never had I wanted to drive less than I did that final day of the trip. We had about seven hours of driving time plus the stop in St. George ahead of us, and we needed to be in Vegas for the evening registration for the tournament so that we'd be ready to play first thing in the morning.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow everything could change. Tomorrow we'd be rivals again. Or something. Not this... *Whatever* this was, it wasn't what we'd been, what we'd have to be again, and I did *not* want to think about it until tomorrow.

And today, today I wanted to spend hours in bed in this cozy cabin. When the alarm went off at the crack of dawn, I pulled Alden close to me and buried my face in his neck, pretending I hadn't heard it, pretending for a moment that this wasn't a motel but rather a little house with a little bed and a warm guy who was mine and that this was every bit as real as it felt.

Because it did feel real. All the kissing our way through Colorado and the sex here in Utah felt more real than anything else had in years. I wasn't imagining the tidal wave of emotions that kept threatening to swamp me, wasn't imagining the way Alden looked at me with a combination of awe and longing, wasn't imagining the way my body responded to his. It *was* real. The bigger question was for how long, but I

refused to consider that with a warm Alden pressed against me, smelling like hotel soap and sex.

Then he stretched, rolling in toward me, all sorts of interesting parts bumping together. “Can we...”

Even in the dim morning light, his blush was visible as was his meaning.

“Totally. We can.” I claimed his mouth in a kiss before he could have second thoughts about hitting snooze for this.

No way was I passing up an opportunity for more. I was perfectly happy to go at any pace Alden needed, wasn't in a rush to try other things, and was perfectly happy letting him lead the way that morning. I wasn't ever going to get tired of the combination of his lips against mine and our bodies moving together.

And thus, we were late getting out of bed. Fantastically, splendidly late. Later still after another shower. And I wasn't going to complain in the slightest.

“We can skip breakfast,” I offered as we loaded up the car. “Save time.”

“No.” He gave me a stern look. “I've seen you skip meals. It's a long way to St. George to have you grouchy.”

“I'm not that bad.”

“Yes, you are.” His expression managed to be both affectionate and exasperated, and I liked it, liked him fussing over me more than I should have. “And if we don't eat around here, there's not a whole lot until we hit the Salina area an hour or two from now.”

“Okay, you've sold me. Feed me.” I let him use his phone to find a cheap diner with a fifties vibe, red vinyl everything

inside a squat adobe building. I continued my quest to find decent biscuits and gravy, partly to save cash, and partly to watch Alden make a face before he ordered buckwheat pancakes. It didn't escape my notice that Alden didn't turn down the bacon that came with his breakfast, only to add it to my plate.

"I don't need—"

"Consider it my contribution to the no-cranky Conrad fund."

"Fine." God, I wanted to win at the tournament in the worst way, put these money worries behind me. The last few days hadn't changed anything in that regard. If anything, I wanted it more than ever, wanted to be someone worthy of a guy like Alden, and maybe a part of me wanted to impress him as well. Just as he'd wanted to be able to beat Danny and Bart on his own, no help, I wanted to be able to beat *life* on my own and not need his help, however well meaning it was.

As we ate, Alden kept glancing around as if he were casing the joint or something.

"What's your deal?" I asked, polishing off his unwanted bacon. "Anxious about making St. George on time or what?"

"Not that." He rubbed his neck and studied his remaining pancake pieces. He lowered his voice. "I don't know how other people do it."

"Do what?" I asked cautiously.

"Be casual. About, you know." He continued his whisper, his eyes still shifting around. "Feels like everyone must be able to tell."

I had to take a sip of water to hide my smile. Matching his whisper, I leaned forward. "You think everyone can tell you —"

“Yes.” He cut me off before I could say *had sex* aloud. Which was adorable, if confounding.

“They can’t,” I assured him. “Any more than you can tell which of them—”

“Okay, okay.” The tips of his ears were red, as was his nose. “Point taken. It just feels...weird.”

“You’re still you. I’m still me. Nothing *that* much has changed.” I could tell from the way his face scrunched up that he didn’t like that explanation. And maybe it wasn’t completely accurate because darn near everything had changed for me internally—the way I saw him, the way I saw my life, the way I saw this last year. All of it. So I tried again. “Okay. A lot changed. But my point is that we’re fundamentally the same people. We just happened to figure out that we like k—”

“Yes. That.” He shot me a warning look, dropping back to a whisper again. “We’re in public.”

“Yes, and as soon as we’re not, I’m going do *that* to you until you stop worrying about stupid stuff.”

I don’t think I was imagining that he ate faster after that, and I was as good as my word back at the car. But quickly, because we had to make St. George. The scenery all the way there—all rugged rocks and vast landscapes—was spectacular, but unlike the day before, we kept the stopping to a minimum. Limited kissing, much to my disappointment. And at the game store, it was my turn to be uncomfortable.

It was located in an upscale-looking, newer strip mall, with a nail salon neighbor, taco place on the end of the row, and ample parking for Black Jack.

“So, you boys have a good night last night?” the owner asked. He was an exceptionally tall man who looked

somewhat like Gandalf or maybe Dumbledore, with long, white hair and beard—not a costume—and his earnest demeanor made me feel bad for my mumbled reply.

“It was all right,” I said right as Alden said, too cheerfully, “We saw the stars at Arches.”

Damn it. Now we sounded suspect, but I kept my voice cool and my body a proper, friendly distance from Alden.

“Yeah. That was pretty cool.” I tried to tell Alden with my eyes that it was what had come after the stars that had been truly spectacular. But it felt somewhat like trying to flirt in the presence of my grandfather. Not Professor Tuttle, who although older, was way cooler—or at least I figured he’d be cool if he got wind of Alden and me being...

Whatever Alden and I were. I didn’t think we were likely to march into the next game night at Arthur’s store holding hands with matching deck boxes or anything, but we *could* and no one would care except to tease us—me especially, given my rep—mercilessly. I had to tamp down the surge of longing at that vision. I could *not* go getting sentimental about the future. And it was the present I needed to worry about, here where I was far less sure about our reception than back in New Jersey.

The owner guy was pretty ancient, with the vibe of his store being more “Grandpa’s special collectibles we don’t touch” than a hangout open to all. Almost everything remotely valuable or interesting was in locked glass cases, and the place was operating-room-level clean. The clientele was a weird mix of clean-cut young men our age in white button-down shirts and dark pants playing some of the more “family friendly” card games along with scruffy tourists in tie-dye browsing the souvenir racks.

“Do you want to play one of us, sir?” I asked after he’d shown us around with me filming and asking polite questions about his store. “Or maybe you have a particular patron you want us to play?”

“Oh, play each other. I always do enjoy the animosity between you two on the show. And after, I’ll give my critique of where you went wrong. I’m a ‘Gamer Grandpa,’ too, you know.” He laughed at his own terrible joke, but I couldn’t join him. My heart was too busy sinking to his immaculate tile floor. I hadn’t played Alden since...everything. The kissing. The hours and hours of talking about the most important things and nothing at all and all the points in between. The meals. The falling asleep together and waking up together—*everything*. And now I had to play him? What if it ruined this thing before it even had a chance to get started?

As I set up the camera, Alden’s worries from the diner finally caught up to me, got into my head. What if our viewers would be able to tell? How weird would that be? But wouldn’t it be worse to go back to sniping at each other like usual, trash talk and all that, and ruin this fragile new thing between us?

Hell. I just didn’t know. And I could tell he was struggling similarly because we fell into a ridiculously stilted conversation, both of us playing fake-nice until I was about to go nuts and drag Alden outside to remind us both who we really were.

“Which deck are you playing?” Alden asked as he arranged our play mats, tone similar to my mom asking other ladies at a fancy luncheon whether they wanted a tea refill.

“Not sure, and you don’t need to do that. I can get my own stuff out.” I sounded way too chipper, but I couldn’t seem to rein it in.

“Oh, it’s no problem,” the suddenly social and sunny Alden pod-person replied. “The sun is coming in over here, so I took this seat so it won’t be in your eyes. Maybe you want to play one of your aggro ones? Make it a fast game?”

Him suggesting that I could play the sort of aggressive, free-wheeling style he *hated* was a major clue that things had taken a turn for Weirdsville, population us.

“Nah. Not feeling very aggro. No need to bring out all my best burn spells before Vegas.” Hitting him repeatedly with direct damage to his life total just didn’t appeal to me right then. “Why don’t you play your time-winder deck? You always seem to have such fun with that one.”

“Yes, but you’ve never beaten it. I want a *fair* game. Would you like to play one of my other decks perhaps? Your choice?”

“My decks are fine.” My voice tightened up. I definitely did not need a pity victory. But I remained reluctant to fight on camera, or even in person, really. “But thank you. I think I’ll play my frog soldiers. Old favorite. You can go first, no need to roll for it.”

“Thank you so much.”

“Where’s the fire in your veins, boy?” the owner asked me as I took my seat across from Alden. “You don’t let the opponent go first if you don’t have to. Get in there and give us a good game.”

But I didn’t *want* a good game, just one that got me out of this store and back to Alden with what little time we had left before MOC West ruined everything. Because if this was hard, being at the tournament was going to be nine million times harder, playing where the stakes actually mattered, where we

both still wanted the same thing, and where no amount of politeness was going to save this fragile thing we'd built.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Alden

Conrad was playing like crap. But to be fair, so was I. However, for the first time, I found his mistakes far more distressing than my own. One of the things I'd always secretly admired about Conrad was his threat assessment—his ability to know what was the biggest risk to him and address that risk with single-minded intensity until the next big obstacle cropped up. I relied more on sequencing—combinations of cards and complex plays that didn't respond to what the other player was doing as much as simply setting myself up as an unstoppable foe through the correct series of actions.

I never would have told him prior to this week, but Conrad was the best player I knew at improvisation, and even after years and years of playing, I didn't always see the board the way Conrad did. At his best, it was like he was a mind reader, like he knew exactly what card I was going to play before I played it. Sometimes before I even drew it.

But that day, Conrad played with all the insight of a garden gnome. It didn't help that the owner of the store was watching us with avid eyes, vulture-ready to feast on whoever lost with more of his commentary. He kept giving each of us unhelpful advice—telling Conrad to be more aggressive when his main

issue seemed to be muddled thinking and telling me to use defensive strategies that weren't even in my deck.

Because both of us seemed reluctant to go in for the kill, the game dragged on far longer than it needed to. I didn't want to stomp Conrad though. For the first time, maybe ever, I had something I liked more than *Odyssey*. Him. Us. The private moments we'd shared. And I'd take losing if it meant getting closer later. After all, this was a throwaway game, not even likely to yield usable footage, not with the owner getting in the frame and making his commentary by talking over us.

Come on, Conrad. Attack. I tried to order him into action with my eyes. But he didn't, leaving himself wide open to whatever I wanted to do next.

"Guess I got a bad hand," he said, stretching. He was lying. I might not be the best at reading people in general, but I knew him by now, knew how distant and deceptively casual his voice got when he lied, how he refused to make eye contact, and how he fiddled with his cards when he was nervous. I wasn't sure what he had to be nervous about right then, but I was disgusted enough at the lie to finish him off with a single attack.

"Good game." He reached across the table to shake my hand, a brief electric sizzle racing up my arm. "That was practically a mercy killing. I just didn't have enough firepower."

I didn't believe that for even a second, but I wasn't about to call him on throwing the game with the owner right there.

"I didn't have all afternoon," I snapped instead, my frustration getting the better of me. My irritation continued to mount as we had to suffer the analysis of the owner and a few rambling stories about meeting Professor Tuttle at another convention. Finally, though, we were free.

“You want tacos for lunch?” As we finished putting the stuff in the car, Conrad gestured toward the place at the other end of the parking lot. “At least it’s right here, no need to go find something else, and it doesn’t look like some sort of fusion cuisine, so maybe it won’t drive you too crazy.”

“Unlike you,” I muttered under my breath, but apparently not quietly enough because he grabbed my arm.

“Hey. What’s your problem? You *won*. I made sure—”

“I know. You think I wanted you to throw the game just to keep me happy?” I slammed the trunk harder than Black Jack deserved.

“Well, when you put it like *that*, it sounds bad.”

“Because it is.”

“I just didn’t want to ruin things,” he mumbled, studying his scuffed sneakers, kicking a stray pebble on the asphalt.

“Me either,” I admitted, leaning against the car. “I kept holding back my best stuff too. It was the most miserable game I’ve played.”

“Other couples manage it. I see them all the time at the game store, waxing each other and talking trash and then going off to do that thing you don’t want me talking about in public.”

“We’re a couple?” I squawked, both delighted and appalled. After our talk at the lake yesterday, I’d assumed I’d be lucky if Mr. Let’s-Not-Define-This was up for a series of repeats, let alone any sort of public acknowledgment. *Couple* sounded pretty close to definition to me.

“Unless you *wanted* to be a hookup or a one-night stand. Which I was under the impression that you did not.” Conrad,

King of Swagger, actually managed to look unsure of himself, which made the truth that much easier to spill.

“I don’t want to be a hookup. Thought I was clear about that.” On that much at least I was clear. I might not get all of what I wanted, but I knew that I wanted as much as he was willing to give me. “But I’ve never...”

“I know.” His smile seemed to have recovered some of his ordinary easiness, and he headed in the direction of the taco place, leaving me scrambling to catch up, as usual. “Me either, really. And I’m sure that you’re going to tell me there are rules and expectations—”

“Aren’t there?”

“Oh, I’m sure.” He made a dismissive gesture with his hand. “But maybe we can just keep winging it? Figure out the rules as we go.”

“I’m not good at spontaneity.”

“No kidding.” Pulling me behind a large cement pillar, he gave me a fast kiss on the cheek. “How about you try? And start with forgiving me for the crappy game.”

“I can’t stay mad at you,” I admitted, which earned me another quick kiss. “Just don’t do that again. You could have won. I’d still want to...you know.”

“I know. That-which-we-do-not-name. But that which we are damn good at. Better than gaming at least.” Laughing, he waggled his eyebrows at me. “Maybe eventually we’ll figure out how to play like normal.”

Eventually. Normal. Two loaded words that conjured up a vision of a future where we were a couple, a real one, not just as shorthand for not-a-hookup, but a real one with a future filled with games and an endless stream of nights. A couple

that had a normal to fall back on. And, man, I wanted that future more than I'd ever wanted anything, and that scared me, making me shiver despite the desert heat, and wonder what the heck I'd gotten myself into.

* * *

I remained off-kilter through our taco lunch, alternating between freaked out and happy beyond belief. Happy won out temporarily when we shared some spicy kisses in the car parked behind the gas station where we'd filled Black Jack's always-almost-empty tank. With that fill-up, we were over halfway through the gas money, but I didn't want to point that out to Conrad and add to his monetary stress.

I was pretty sure he noticed anyway because he stayed quieter as we dipped down into Arizona, following the interstate for what was supposed to be the last two hours of our journey. But we hit road construction and a major traffic snarl almost as soon as we crossed the state line.

Conrad was driving, and he kept fiddling with the stereo while making frustrated sighs at the line of cars in front of us. I wanted to ask him what exactly would happen in Vegas between us, what the plan was. He'd said we could figure things out as we went, which was all well and good, but I *needed* a strategy. Rules of some kind. Were we only a couple on the road? Only behind closed doors? Somehow I already knew he wasn't going to be rushing to tell Payton about this latest development when we saw them at the convention. And nothing had changed in terms of either of our motivations to win the tournament.

A good boyfriend, one worthy of the couple label, would root for their other person, even if it meant losing themselves. But I was clearly lacking some important boyfriend traits

because I still wanted to win. I'd had another message from Mom asking if I'd come to any conclusions about what I wanted for my future. I figured "Kissing Conrad" didn't count, so I'd answered only enough to let her know that I was still alive and ignored her real question.

"Can you check and see what time the registration tables are open until?" Conrad drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. "I'm worried about missing our window to check in."

"We'll get there. We're almost to the Nevada border." It was my turn to be the reassuring one, a role I usually sucked at. I fell back on what I was good at, logistics, finding out that the registration area was open later than we'd thought and updating Conrad on how far the highway was backed up. "We can do registration first, then check into the hotel after."

"Add a late dinner somewhere in there. I'll feel better once we have our official tournament badges."

"Me too."

Las Vegas rose out of the endless desert like a glittering jewel, an ostentatious diamond, a stark contrast to the simple pleasures of the previous day, with the natural beauty of all those overlooks. After so many hours of desert and countryside, it was weird to be back in a decidedly urban area. And this was a metropolis on steroids, everything done on a grand scale, even the clogged highways.

Finished with all those hours fighting the construction traffic, we finally found a parking garage near the convention center, only to have a lot more waiting ahead of us, with endless long lines at the registration area. *Odyssey* cosplayers jockeyed for space with families, dads in ironically geeky T-shirts, moms chasing excited tweens clutching deck bags. Groups of friends, guys our age, stood around the wide

hallways of the massive convention center in big clumps, all different languages and ethnicities represented. I took a picture for my sisters of a group of female gamers, all in matching pink shirts that proclaimed “Ready to Lose?” Serious pro-player wannabes in dress clothes were right alongside actual pro players and internet celebrities, much bigger ones than us, slumming it in faded jeans and ball caps pulled low.

“That guy has a quarter million subscribers,” I whispered urgently at Conrad, not pointing but wanting to.

“Look.” Conrad nodded in the direction of four guys ahead of us in line in black “Gaymer” shirts with rainbow-shaded game controllers on the back. Two of them held hands, and they weren’t the only same-sex couple we’d seen. Two witch cosplayers in long velvet gowns kept kissing each other for pictures.

“I can’t believe we’re really here.” I didn’t only mean Nevada, that we’d made the whole journey relatively unscathed, but also *here*. This place that had only existed in my most private of fantasies, the ones I hardly ever let myself have, the place deep inside me that had wanted Conrad all along and that couldn’t believe its luck.

I wasn’t quite as bold as the “gaymer” contingent, didn’t want to risk Conrad pulling away if I reached for his hand, but I also didn’t flinch when he bumped shoulders with me.

“Me either.” He grinned at me before the line moved, and he stepped back out of my personal space. I missed him already, even though he was still right beside me. I wasn’t ready for everything to change yet again.

“Next.” A bored volunteer with a purple silk head scarf summoned us forward, and we produced our tickets. She frowned as she tried scanning them. “Hmm.”

“What?” My voice almost cracked. We had not come all this way for our tickets to not work. We just hadn’t. The universe wouldn’t be that cruel.

“Weird. It’s not scanning. Let me get someone else.”

“It’s okay.” Conrad leaned in to whisper in my ear, his breath a warm tease that distracted me away from my rising panic.

“What if—”

“We’ll deal.” He shrugged, face impossible to read. “Hit the casinos or something.”

Right as I was about to tell him what a horrible idea that was, the volunteer arrived back with a supervisor, an older man with a neck beard and an officious attitude, who examined our tickets closely.

“These are promotional tickets. Comps. You have to input each number manually. Try again.”

I held my breath, and next to me, I heard Conrad do the same, audibly sucking in air and holding it, tension rolling off him. He could pretend all he wanted, but I could tell how much he wanted this, how much he was counting on it.

“Oh, there we go.” The woman smiled as her printer started spitting out papers, and she produced two badges in clear plastic lanyards. “Two tournament registrations plus convention badges. I’ve got your schedule for tomorrow. Rounds begin promptly, no exceptions, so it’s best to be ten to fifteen minutes early for each of your matches. A map is included with your schedule. Updated standings will be available late in the day tomorrow with elimination rounds starting Saturday. Finals on Sunday.”

Need to make it to Saturday. Then Sunday. The enormity of being there hit me all at once, and Conrad had to nudge me to

keep moving once we had all our paperwork. Open doors to the convention hall revealed vendors scrambling around, setting up booths for selling merchandise. The whole place had an air of anticipation—like the night before a big birthday. As we made our way out, we passed a number of informal groups playing *Odyssey* in the hallways sitting cross-legged, cards strewn around them on the red carpet. Conrad's steps slowed as he kept glancing around, not trying to hide his people-watching.

“Do you want to stay and find some people to play with?” I asked, even though unfamiliar in-person play groups were not my thing at all. I knew that socializing and playing with a lot of different people was a big part of the draw of the con for Conrad, though, and I didn't want to be the one to hold him back.

“Nah.” His mouth quirked, something soft in his eyes. “I'd rather get food with you. There will be plenty of games tomorrow—ones that actually count. Let's have fun tonight. Just us.”

I was so pleased that he'd choose hanging out with me over meeting new people that I almost forgot to be nervous over the coming seriousness of the competition. Happy as I was to be alone with Conrad, my back tensed with worry that maybe this would be our last chance to be *just us*. Everything seemed so simple when he put it in terms like that—just two guys who liked spending time together. And kissing. Which in his eyes made us a couple of sorts. But my brain kept trying to complicate everything. Stupid logistics mucking everything up.

“Stop thinking,” Conrad ordered once we were out on the sidewalk.

“Who said I’m thinking?”

“I can *feel* you thinking. Stop it. Just have fun with me.” He grabbed my hand. “Please?”

No way could I deny him anything, especially not when he made that goofy, pleading face. “I’ll try.”

“Good.” He didn’t drop my hand as we made our way away from the convention center, toward the famous Las Vegas strip. The wide sidewalk was crowded with people, and holding hands was almost a necessity for keeping together, but I still thrilled at the connection. Casinos and huge hotels towered above us, but all my awareness was on him, on this once-in-a-lifetime moment.

“So I’ve got an idea.” As we paused by a huge illuminated fountain, his eyes sparkled the way they always did before he did a particularly tricky play in the game.

“Should I be afraid?”

“Nah.” With his free hand, he dug in his pocket and came up with a fist full of quarters. “Let’s each do quarters in the next casino we pass. If it wins us anything, that’s what we eat with.”

“We are not gambling for dinner money.” I tried to sound stern, but his enthusiasm was a little contagious.

“Sure we are.” His grin was almost enough to make me willing to risk a public kiss. He was simply that appealing. “If it doesn’t pan out, we’re only out some quarters, and we can get something cheap. But if we win...”

“Getting you to eat something other than tacos and biscuits would be nice,” I conceded, letting him lead me farther down the sidewalk. “Statistically speaking, though, the odds are not in our favor.”

“There you go.” He slapped me on the back as we turned toward one of the mammoth glittering casino/hotel complexes. “You use that gorgeous brain of yours to logic out which machine is most likely to yield us steak money.”

“Alright.” After we were in the casino, I took my responsibility seriously, studying the room filled with row after row of whirring, chirping, and blinking machines. “The problem is that these are rigged in seemingly random ways. If we were playing blackjack, say, I could better predict—”

“You want to use the last of the gas money on blackjack?” His eyes went wide, and I couldn’t tell whether the idea shocked or excited him.

“No! Pretty sure that’s the start of a terrible movie, not to mention a gross betrayal of Professor Tuttle’s trust.”

“Fine. Be reasonable.” He walked up to one of the machines, which proclaimed itself “Super Lucky.” Not surprisingly, it ate Conrad’s first quarter, but he was not dissuaded.

“And there are rules—we’re not playing beyond the quarters you brought in,” I warned him even as he pressed one into my hand.

“You try.”

I was similarly unlucky as him, although he did yield an extra spin on his next try. It didn’t take long for us to burn through most of his quarters, even with a few small wins of extra turns, and a thrilling five-buck win at one point.

“God. I’ve been here all day. Stupid machine.” An older woman with hair so blond it was white slapped at the machine she’d been playing since we came in before moving on.

“That one,” I said decisively to Conrad.

“Really? You’re not thinking it’s a dud?” His head tilted, but he fed it a quarter anyway. Nothing. He held up his one remaining quarter. “Last try?”

“Might as well.” I leaned in, so he could hear me better over the casino noise. “For what it’s worth, I’m okay with hot dogs and popcorn or something else supercheap. Hanging out with you...that’s the fun part.”

“Aww. Offering to eat junk food *and* a compliment.” He put a hand on his heart. “Tell me I’m the better game player, and this might rank right up there as the most romantic moment of my life.”

“Dork.”

“You love it.”

I did, but I wasn’t telling him that, because loving his antics was perilously close to loving *him*.

“Logic would say I better not hate it if I want...*that*.” My lips were close enough to graze his ear and still I couldn’t say the word aloud. “Later.”

“Hot dogs, popcorn, and a proposition? It’s a date.” He grinned at me as he dropped the last quarter in. *Ching. Ching. Ching. Ching.* The machine chimed like crazy, but no quarters spilled out like the machine had done when we won the five dollars. “Wait. Why is it printing something?”

I reached down for the ticket it spat out next to the coin hopper. “We won a hundred bucks!”

“Yes!” Conrad pumped his fist as he plucked the ticket from my hand. “Winner, winner, steak dinner. Or okay, maybe chicken dinner. But we won! Told you we could do it. And I’m a better date than popcorn, which must mean I’m getting 1—”

“Yes. You are.” Cutting him off, I glanced around, but no one was paying us any attention.

“Now, decisions. We could use your blackjack skills to double this or—”

“Or.” I extracted the ticket from him and started heading to the cashier area. “We won. Let’s not press our luck.”

It seemed to be a good motto for the weekend—win, but conservatively. I had *him*, which was the greatest stroke of luck of all, and I didn’t want the universe thinking I was getting greedy. Him, some food, and hopefully winning my matches at the tournament qualifiers the next day. That was all I wanted.

“Okay.”

After we cashed out the ticket, he cast a last longing glance at the casino floor on the way out, but brightened when we used my phone to find restaurant possibilities nearby. A hundred didn’t get us the swankiest place in town or anything, nor was it enough to add good wine, but it did get us giant portions of meat and pasta at an Italian-themed place with a decent view of the strip, and I was plenty drunk on Conrad’s company.

After dinner, we took a lot of pictures along the strip to send to the professor before we finally headed for the hotel. I didn’t want to know what the per-night lodging fee was on a big convention weekend like this, but the complimentary MOC West tickets had included a room for us to share. Payton had opted to get their own room, while the rest of us had been planning to share the free room. Which meant two beds. Which meant me standing there, staring at them as Conrad set his bags down.

After the relative simplicity of the past two nights, I was stumped. Were we each supposed to claim one? What if he didn't *want* to share, and I looked needy for assuming? What if—

“Oh, hey, a spare bed.” Conrad tumbled me onto the closest one, landing squarely on top of me. “When we ruin this set of sheets, we can move to that other one.”

“When?” I blinked at him. Maybe I truly was overthinking things and it really was this simple and easy.

“Okay, *if*, but I'm optimistic.” His hand was already making a beeline for my fly, lips skating across my cheekbone. “And we're alone now, finally, so we can say all the words—and do them too. Whatever we want, right?”

“Uh-huh.” I made a strangled sound as his hand reached his objective. His grin, wide and wonderful, was such that I couldn't deny him anything, and when he kissed me, I ceased thinking altogether. Everything else, including all that loomed the next day, could wait. Him. Me. *Us*. It was exactly that simple after all.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Conrad

I woke to a racing heart. Double alarms blaring. Even my body knew what day it was. I pulled on the gray T-shirt Arthur had provided advertising his store. God, Gracehaven seemed a million miles and that many years away, a distant memory given everything that had happened. Next came my jeans and lucky socks—goofy superhero-themed ones that my sister had gotten me a couple of years prior. My poor battered kicks were by the door. If I won, they were first on the list to be replaced.

If I won. When. When I won. I had to think positively. No room for doubts. The scents of coffee and sweet oatmeal mingled as Alden bustled around, scrounging us breakfast from supplies we'd picked up at a convenience store the day before. We didn't want to fight the crowds and the high prices before we had to. As I buckled my belt, it felt like we were preparing for battle, and in a way we were. Needing a distraction, I grabbed the box of card packs that we'd received from the cosplaying wizard store owner in Ohio. We'd been rather...*occupied* since then and never got around to opening them up.

But now I had a few minutes, so I sat in the center of the other bed, the one that was still made—other than our stuffed goat mascot that I'd tucked under the covers to make Alden

laugh the night before—and divided the six packs into three for me and three for Alden.

“Come over here and crack some packs with me,” I ordered, pointing to the spot across from me.

He frowned midsip of coffee. “My decks are pretty set. I’m not sure I need to open cards.”

“For luck. This is one of my favorite things. Like birthday presents. All shiny and wrapped, and you never know what you’re getting. Come on. Indulge me.”

“You’re easy to please.” Setting aside his food, he came to sit opposite me and picked up a pack of cards.

“Yeah, I am.” I winked at him. We might not have had enough time to start something, but I could still enjoy teasing him. I was already looking forward to that night, to the moment when we’d be alone again. I loved the moments before sleep when we curled around each other, drowsy confessions and wordless cuddles, like floating away on a cloud of good feelings, sweet emotions tucked all around us like quilts. In those moments, I was invincible and happier than I’d been in years.

And even with my mounting nerves about the competition, I kept that feeling going as we opened the cards. My first two packs only yielded things I either already had or couldn’t use, but I wasn’t that disappointed. Something about the act of unwrapping them, the scent of new cards, and the company was enough.

“Here. This goes more in your frog deck.” Alden held out a card from the stack he’d opened.

“Have it already, but thanks.” I added the card to my pile before opening the final pack, thumbing through past the

commons, to find the couple of included rares. “Holy wow.”

“What?” Alden leaned forward so he could see, and I had to squash the old impulse to hide the find from him. This wasn’t my *competition*. This was my...well, my *guy*, if nothing else. The one who would probably be happy for me, not try to take the card.

“I scored a Transforming Scroll Scribe rare.” Turning the card this way and that, I marveled at the artwork and my luck both.

“Really?” He whistled low. “Jasper’s been wanting to score one of those for years for his transforming deck, but it’s a two-hundred-dollar card. The sort of card that makes any deck stronger.”

“I know.” My heart rate galloped like a pony on the first day of spring, but I forced my brain to work as well. “It’s not fair for me to claim it though. The cards were for both of us.”

“You opened the pack. It’s yours. Those are the rules.”

“Regular rules for opening packs in a group don’t apply to *us*. You really okay with me claiming it? I don’t want a card—even one this cool—to come between us.”

Alden was silent a moment, which I appreciated because it meant he was actually thinking. Finally he nodded. “It’s yours.”

“Thanks, man. Think I’m going to play with it this weekend, and then maybe give it to Jasper for his deck. I feel weird keeping it.”

“The odds of getting such a rare are so minute that you shouldn’t feel guilty. And if it enables you to win, then you should play it. Winning is the whole point, right? Logically, you’d be silly to pass the card up.”

I wasn't so sure I agreed with him about winning being the whole point, not any longer, not after everything that had went down between us, not after he'd shown me so much more than the game. But I nodded because the rest of what he said made sense, and if winning was still *his* most important thing, then far be from me to get all sappy and emo.

"Okay. I'll use it." I stretched so I could give him a fast kiss. "Thanks. Did you score anything worth keeping?"

His face went soft, more tender than I'd ever seen it. "Maybe," he whispered, and I knew from the gravity in his tone that he didn't mean the cards, so I kissed him again, long and slow and sweet. I tried to use my mouth to tell him that he wasn't the only one who felt that way. Maybe we'd both already won.

* * *

It was easy to feel like a winner up in the confines of our hotel room, and much less so on the convention floor. We walked over to the convention center together, but Alden's first match started before mine, so we separated near the entrance. He headed to the cavernous tournament play space which had a sea of tables, all occupied by players huddled over their cards, rules judges circulating around, scorekeepers hovering. This was the real deal, not another day at a local game store with friendly play, and my stomach flopped around just watching Alden head off to check in.

Alone and more than a little adrift, I set a phone alarm reminder for the start of my round, then wandered around the event. Even with the early hour, artist alley with all the handmade merch from card artists and accessory crafters was crowded with shoppers. The vendor space was similarly packed, people haggling over card prices and trying to level up

for upcoming games. Casual players were everywhere—on the hallway floors, on benches, in designated play spaces for pickup games and different nontournament formats, and even in stairwells. It wouldn't have been too hard for me to find a play group, meet some new people, and get a warm-up round in. And ordinarily that's exactly what I would have done.

Yet something kept me at a distance. I wouldn't go so far as to say that Alden had turned me into an introvert, but whether it was nerves over the coming competition or a lesser need for interaction than usual, I hung back. Various panels were getting started in the smaller rooms lining the long hallway, but none grabbed my attention. Cosplayers and *Odyssey* celebrities like the big streamers posed for pictures, but so far no one had recognized me from *Gamer Grandpa*.

“Conrad!” Oops. Maybe I'd had that thought prematurely as I heard a familiar voice calling my name. I whirled to find Payton striding down the hall toward me. They looked like some space-age emissary in a long cotton tunic with a flat collar and wooden toggle buttons over slim-fitting pants, long hair gleaming in the morning sunshine filtering in through the skylights. Not cosplay as much as Payton doing Payton-things in their inimitable style.

“Hey.” We weren't hugging sort of friends, but we traded handshakes and shoulder claps. “You made it!”

“I did. Flight got in yesterday, and I thought about texting, but then I got dragged off to this club...” From Payton's dreamy smile, I gathered the dragging had hardly been against their will.

“It's okay. Good to see you. You got your schedule of matches?”

“Yeah.” Payton shrugged. “I’m honestly hoping to not advance though. I want to party tonight with a clear conscience and not have to worry about playing tomorrow. I’ll leave the nail-biting to you and Alden. Speaking of, tell me all about the trip. How many times did you almost kill the poor dude?”

Oh man. I should have been ready for this question. But I totally wasn’t. How was the trip, indeed. Awesome. Life-altering. Exhausting. Emotionally draining. Sexy as hell. Special. All the adjectives in the world crammed into my brain, but none made it to my tongue.

“It was okay.” Rather than meet their eyes, I studied one of the many giant posters hanging from the ceiling advertising upcoming *Odyssey* products.

“Just okay?” Payton’s refined eyebrows went up. “Tell me he doesn’t drive with that same pole up his ass that he plays with. God, I’m sympathizing with you just picturing all the rules he must have made you follow.”

I legit had to glance over my shoulder to make sure Alden wasn’t about to walk up. “He’s not that bad when you get to know him. You’ve said before he’s good with the newbies at the store.”

“Good at explaining endless rules doesn’t equal fun to hang out with.” Payton rolled their eyes. “I’ve known him for years. He’s not like wine or something—he doesn’t improve with age—but I’ll take your word for it.”

“He’s a good guy. Helped Jasper get home when there was an emergency.”

Why I wasn’t telling Payton the whole story, I wasn’t quite sure. I’d told Alden we were a couple, and we’d wandered all

over the Strip last night holding hands. It wasn't like I was looking to keep him a secret, but it also felt...private. Like more than the sort of gossip Payton was looking for. *They'll have to find out eventually*, my conscience reminded me, calling up that vision I'd had of us walking into Arthur's store together. It was silly and probably never happening, but that didn't stop a huge part of me from wanting it, wanting some sort of future together beyond this weekend, improbable as that was.

But right then, I felt more protective than triumphant, wanting to keep the special parts of Alden safe and all to myself. Something must have been evident on my face because Payton's lips pursed and their eyes narrowed. "Tell me you didn't—"

Chirp. Chirp. Right then my alarm went off, reminding me to head over to the tournament space. "Sorry. Gotta jet. First match."

"Oh, I see how it is." Payton laughed before clapping me on the shoulder again. "Go get the win. I heard last night that it's probably going to take going undefeated or close to it to advance. But no pressure."

No pressure. Ha. I was nothing other than a ball of pressure at that point. But no time to dwell on that. I hurried toward the tournament check-in station, taking my phone out to make sure it was off for the match. To my surprise, I had a series of texts wishing me good luck—Professor Tuttle, Jasper, even Professor Jackson and Professor Herrera. And my sister. My heart leaped at the unfamiliar number, familiar emoji-laden message stream.

The professor said on his channel that you guys are at some big convention out west. Tell me you didn't come through Kansas and not even *try* to stop. I get it, but I miss you, Con. So much. And as pissed

as I am if I missed the chance to see you, I want you to win. You're the best player on the show. Go make some noise and WIN!!!!

Heart in my throat, I dashed off a quick response. You know I can't come back to town. Not while Dad is still... My fingers paused, trying to word things best. Cassie didn't know the whole story, and no way was I going to go there with her. Unreasonable, I settled on before continuing. I don't want to risk him mad at YOU. None of this is your fault, Cass. Thanks for the good luck. I'm going to try to win for you.

My reasons for winning had become murkier over the course of the week, but the message from Cassie was a swift kick to my lust-addled head. I needed to win. Needed a future her and my other sisters could be proud of. Needed money so that once they were older and not under Dad's thumb, I could see them, show them that I made it, even without his help. I needed the validation, the money, the recognition—all of it. All the stuff with Alden, all the complications, none of that changed my reality.

And knowing that, knowing how much each match was worth and what was riding on me advancing, I played tight in my first match. I was playing one of the "Ready to Lose?" pink-shirted women, a redhead with distractingly glittery nails, and she was a damn good player with an expensive dragon deck. It didn't take long before she had me on my heels, watching my life total tick away.

Despite having scored the kick-ass card earlier that morning, it wasn't simply a matter of waiting to draw it. I needed to set up for the win, regardless of what I drew, and needed to stop playing so defensively. But it was hard when her dragons kept coming at me, the way they kept crashing through whatever paltry barrier I had. It was like trying to drive a car race with only three tires.

Wait.

Three tires. I'd been there. And I knew better than to drive on a bent rim. That wouldn't win me the game. But a diversion—like oh, say, an arcade with a cute guy in the middle of nowhere—that might buy me enough time to find that metaphorical fourth tire. Rather than keep playing defense, I started throwing out things as distractions, trying to get her attention on those while I slowly built back up enough force to attack with. And when I had enough to win, I floored it. Top speed, so the dragons never saw me coming as I went in for the kill.

“Good game.” The woman spun her life counter down to zero, and I resisted the urge to fist pump. One down. As I cleaned up my stuff, I thought about digging my phone out, sending a quick text to someone like Professor Tuttle or Cassie, telling them that I got the win. But they weren't who I really wanted to tell. Funny what a difference a week made. The last person I would have thought about before was the first one I wanted to know.

How'd your match go? I texted Alden. I beat a dragon deck. Watch out for the pink-shirted women—ruthless. Lunch later? I added a dragon-toppling-over GIF and hit Send.

His reply was gratifyingly fast. About to go again here. Won first one—digger deck. Tricky new card to watch for called Underworld Superstition. Yes, lunch. Must feed the Conrad! His GIF was one of a big dinosaur eating leaves.

Herbivore food? Too healthy for me ;) See you then, I replied, my soul lighter than I would have thought possible. Just having him to share this with made a huge difference, his little tips and texts powering me through two more games. I warned him about saving scrolls versus fire demons, and he reminded me

to be patient with ogres. He made sure I had my inhaler in my bag, and I reminded him to drink water. Him caring about me like that, and having him to care about in return, felt good on a level I hadn't had in years. Like wrapping up in warm towels from the dryer when I hadn't even realized I was freezing.

And when I saw him again in person, across the crowded lobby area, it was as if my whole body lit up, every cell tuned in to his frequency. I liked everything about him—the way his hair fell across his forehead, the protective way he held his deck bag, and most especially, the way he went from solemn and somber, standing off by himself, to a slow, satisfied smile as he spotted me.

“Glad I'm not the one playing you. You've been kicking ass.” I shoved at his shoulder in lieu of the hug I desperately wanted to give him.

“I have.”

“And so humble about it.”

“Facts aren't bragging.” He adjusted his bag so he could take my hand. It was the first time he'd initiated anything in public, and my heart revved like a Harley at a stoplight. I didn't care who saw. This was my guy, and I wasn't letting go, not until I had to.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Alden

“I’m not sure that I’m ideal pillow material,” I mused to Conrad as we finished up our lunch, which consisted of the typical overpriced convention food of lukewarm fries and bland burgers. All the available tables, chairs, and benches had been packed, but we’d found seats on the carpet in one of the less populated hallways leading to the food court. Somewhat out of foot traffic, but hardly private. However, after he finished eating, Conrad had stretched out, head in my lap, long legs sprawling, apparently not caring who saw him adopt me as his human pillow. He looked content enough to drift off, face slack, and my heart seemed to swell with each breath. He was right where I wanted him.

“I’ve got two nights now that say you are,” Conrad countered. And okay, maybe he wasn’t *exactly* where I wanted him, but as neither of us had time to race back to the room for a make-out session between rounds, this would have to do. “You’re way better than boring cotton and stuffing.”

“Gee, such a compliment.” Unable to resist, I let my fingers filter through his hair.

“Mmm. Think I could pay you to do that before my next match? Scalp massage as preround warm-up. It could be the next big thing.”

“Should I want to help you?” I laughed nervously. The tips we’d been trading were fun, but also made me feel weirdly wobbly inside.

“Plenty of players here work together like we’re doing.” As usual, he managed to read my mind. “The ‘Ready To Lose’ contingent even shares decks. And several pro players have more formal alliances, working together to try to dominate. There’s no rule against it. And it’s fun, right?”

“It is,” I admitted. His texts had been the highlight of my morning.

“For what it’s worth, it’s not simply because we’re sleeping together either.” He said that part so casually, even as my skin heated, with prickles of both awareness and embarrassment. “We’re friends now. I’d do the same with Jasper or Payton, just not with the fringe benefits.” He winked at me, making heat along with some softer emotion I still couldn’t name unfurl in my gut.

“What about Payton?”

At the sound of their familiar voice, I almost dumped Conrad onto the carpet, but he stayed put, shoulders digging into my thigh, apparently unconcerned about our rather obvious PDA.

And crap, how much had they overheard? I was hardly ashamed of what I’d been doing with Conrad, but I also wasn’t ready for the inevitable teasing. The last thing I wanted was anyone—Payton included—to diminish this fragile thing we’d found, like having some rare flower and not wanting it stomped on before I had a chance to properly enjoy it.

From the way Payton smiled—a slow, feline grin—the teasing seemed imminent, and my back muscles tightened.

“So, Conrad, dude, is this what you meant by the trip being ‘okay’? Anything else you’d like to share?”

“Nah.” He stayed put, smile far more impish than Payton’s. I hadn’t known that they’d already run into each other. And that Conrad had apparently minimized the trip. Not that I wanted him shouting an announcement from the rafters, but I also didn’t like the idea that maybe he had wanted to keep this secret and was now simply blustering, doing that thing he did where he acted like he didn’t care.

“You know, all that advice about keeping enemies close is bunk, right?” Payton plopped down next to us.

“We’re not enemies,” I snapped, even though I wasn’t so sure. Was that what we’d been? Were we still? Enemies who slept together and made each other laugh and...

Heck. I just didn’t know, and that made me vaguely nauseated. Payton diminishing what we had would be awful, but Conrad doing so was just untenable.

“Well, not *now*.” Payton had a knowing laugh. “Clearly. And now I want to hear *all* about this trip. I might hate road trips myself, but yours sounds plenty intriguing and possibly worth the waste of all that time sitting.”

“Not sure I’d call it *wasted* time.” Conrad’s voice was almost bored-sounding, and it grated, making my skin itch with the uncertainty of not knowing what he was thinking.

“I need to get back over to the tournament space.” My tone was far too pissy, but I was having a hard time reining it in.

“Okay.” Conrad sat up. “You want me to walk over with you?”

“I’m fine. You guys catch up.” I tried to sound casual, but it probably came out too stiff and formal. “I’ll take your trash.”

“Thanks.” Conrad gave me a look I couldn’t quite make out, concern maybe, but he didn’t follow me when I hurried away with our paper lunch baskets.

Because I’d fudged how quickly I needed to check in for my next round, I had a few minutes to kill, so I ended up browsing the vendors closest to the tournament room and listening in on a panel of popular vloggers and streamers.

“I’m not really like that,” one guy was saying. “I’m nothing like my stream, actually. It’s just a persona. But the viewers love it, so I keep it up.”

Huh. Conrad around other people was like that—a persona. The fun-loving, care-about-nothing joker. Life of the party. But that wasn’t really him. The him I’d gotten to know was different. Deeper. More complicated. Cared far more than I ever would have given him credit for. But was that a persona too? One he’d adopted to get along with me on the trip, but no closer to his true self? I didn’t want to think that. I wanted to believe I knew the real Conrad, that I knew parts of him Payton and others would never see.

Feeling slightly guilty for how I’d left things, I pulled out my phone, but he’d already beat me to a message.

Good luck this afternoon! I begged off going out with Payton tonight. Sorry if they made you uncomfortable. Would rather get food with you anyway. Play for our dinner again? Meet you in our room after your last round?

I was unreasonably pleased that he’d turned down partying with Payton. And even though he wasn’t wrong—I was uncomfortable and doubting everything—he was still the person I most wanted to see at the end of the day.

Will see you there, I typed. And sorry for leaving fast. No playing for our dinner—we’re not likely to get lucky twice.

His response was quick. Oh, I think *someone* is bound to get lucky tonight...

Even with no one around me, I could still feel myself blushing, fingers clumsy as I replied. Accurate. But still no playing the slots. Save your luck for the tournament floor.

Then it really was time for me to play, time for me to block everything out, including the promise of alone time with Conrad later and my earlier discomfort too.

“Do you want headphones?” asked an older woman in a red MOC West Volunteer shirt as I checked in for the round. Her gray braid and slight British accent didn’t quite fit in the glitzy Vegas surroundings or with the younger demographics of the con. “Your next round has been chosen for streaming. The commentators will try to be unobtrusive, but a lot of players like the noise-canceling headphones to block out the camerapeople and such.”

“Do I have a choice not to be broadcast?” I’d been filmed hundreds of times but not with so much on the line.

“The release you signed gives us permission to stream any of the rounds.” Her voice stayed polite, but she frowned at me. “If you’re worried about distraction, the headphones can help. And you’re an *Odyssey* celebrity, it’s natural they’d want you on one of the streams.”

“Okay, I’ll try the headphones. And I’m not that well known.”

“Sure you are.” She was back to smiling now. “My son’s been a fan of your online play for years and then *Gamer Grandpa* too. Maybe I can get an autograph for him?”

“Uh. Sure.” I’d never been asked for an autograph before, and pride warred with embarrassment, shoulder muscles not

knowing whether to lift or hunch in. “What do I sign?”

“Got a spare token? I’m collecting them for him. He was in a car accident a few weeks back, or he’d be here now.”

Painfully aware that I was holding up the line, I fished out the first token card I could find in my bag, one of the new ones I’d opened with Conrad. It was of no real use to me, but I’d stuck it my bag because it reminded me of how he’d looked sitting on the bed that morning, all giddy and happy. Distracted by the return of thoughts about whether I knew the real Conrad or not, I signed the card and handed it over.

I wanted to believe the little-kid happiness Conrad had exuded that morning had been real and that the way he’d used me as a pillow all night long had been real too. I wanted so badly to believe that I could make him happy, that I could be enough for him, that he wouldn’t eventually get bored and ditch me to go party with Payton—find someone more fun, more his speed.

The volunteer walked me over to one the streaming stations. Unlike the rows and rows of tables on the main tournament floor, a few tables were set up on raised daises for streaming, with camera equipment in place, and a commenting crew in its own little booth as well. I felt far more exposed than I had earlier, and I gratefully put on the headphones she gave me. She wished me luck, but I was already too deep in my own head to do much more than nod.

My opponent was a crafty player, a young woman with elfin features offset by the large headphones and a killer instinct that led to her attacking almost every turn, relentless even when her attacks were ill-advised. It took all my wits to hold my own, and I had a brief moment where I wished I’d claimed the rare card that Conrad had opened. The ability to generate

more scrolls would have greatly helped in this game, but while not nearly as cash-strapped as Conrad, I still couldn't go out and drop that kind of money to pump up my decks, even if it might help with this tougher competition.

I'd heard the rumors—with this many entrants, players would need to be close to perfect to make the cut for the elimination rounds. I couldn't afford to drop this match, couldn't afford—

Wait. *Afford*. I needed to make her pay more scrolls for her moves, make it more expensive and odious for her to attack. I shifted my strategy, playing a series of cards that effectively taxed her for making certain moves, and narrowly pulled out the win.

My adrenaline surged like the last mile of a long run, heart rate speeding up, lungs burning, and there was only one person I wanted to talk to.

Those tax cards of mine you hate? The ones you call the vise? They won me this round. Stay on your toes and stay aggressive if you meet another aggro deck. This one didn't stop attacking.

I didn't expect a response as he was probably midround himself, and indeed, it was two more games before I got a chance to check my phone again.

Whatever wins you the game. Almost lost to a reaper deck, but remembered how we stomped Bart and Danny. Still think we make a great team. Few more rounds, and then I can show you ;)

The memory made me smile too. Get *that* out of your head, I lectured via text.

Sex, Alden. Sex. You can type the word. And too bad. It's always on my brain, especially when I think about you.

Overwhelmed by good feelings from nothing more than a text, I melted like an ice cream sundae on the Fourth of July, a useless bowl of soupy contents. I couldn't even manage a

reply, only grinning at my phone like an idiot, rereading the message until it was time to play again.

I was still feeling good after another win, still feeling like maybe I mattered to Conrad, even if for purely physical reasons. As I packed away my stuff, I actually spotted him, setting up at one of the filming tables, frowning at a pair of headphones. My heart did this little dance, looking forward to later when he'd be mine again. But right then he was the property of the tournament and his opponent—

Oh crap. I recognized his competition, a bushy-haired middle-aged man in his trademark neon orange T-shirt. He was a popular streamer whom I'd played a number of times online, especially before he got big. And I knew that Conrad didn't play as much online as me, wouldn't know this guy's weaknesses. But I did. Before I could overthink it, I headed over there. It was still between rounds, so chatter filled the space, but I had no time to spare.

"Hey." His eyes went wide as he spotted me.

"Hey. Do you have a spare token? There's this woman collecting signed ones for her injured son." I did care about the volunteer's quest for her son, but I also needed an excuse for Conrad to come closer.

"Sure." Conrad got a spare one from his endless supply of frog soldier tokens, and I held out a pen, which as I'd hoped, brought him into whispering range.

"That's Arresting Aaron, the big-time streamer." I spoke fast but super low. "He's good. But he plays decks with lower total scrolls than most. Get him screwed on scroll counts, and you'll have a good chance. And he plays fast—easy to goad into attacking too soon."

“Oh wow. That helps.” Conrad’s face stayed neutral, but I recognized his pleased tone. “Thanks, man. I owe you... *something*.”

“Later.” I took the signed token from him. “Good luck.”

Surprisingly, I meant it. Helping him felt good, and I found that curiously, I didn’t want to make the break to the elimination rounds if he didn’t as well. Maybe he was right and there was something to having a coalition or alliance, someone on my side. Heart lighter, I didn’t rush to find the British volunteer right away, instead hanging back with some others watching the streamed matches on giant monitors outside the tournament space.

I’d watched Conrad play hundreds of times before, but never with such a sense of... Well, *ownership* certainly was a reach, but there was a possessive sort of pride in me that had never been there before. That was my guy, making the deft moves, destroying Arresting Aaron’s scrolls, matching the fast pace easily, and jumping out to an early lead that led to a comfortable win. Funny thing was that maybe he hadn’t needed my advice. He’d handled each challenge with an ease I hadn’t noticed in him before, his natural confidence even more pronounced than usual.

My earlier worries about whether this was real, whether I got to see the real guy, receded under the force of so much pride. This was real. It had to be. I’d do anything to make it so.

Wandering away from the monitors, I found the British volunteer over by the tournament check-in station. She was bent over a stack of printouts.

“I brought you another token. From one of the other *Gamer Grandpa* guys.” I held out the card.

“Thank you, dear.” Accepting the card, she dropped her pen, and we both bent to retrieve it at the same time, which jostled the table and sent some of the pages raining to the floor.

“Oops. Sorry!” I scrambled to help her gather them up.

“Thanks. I need these for tomorrow. We’re working out the brackets now for the early elimination rounds.”

“Oh.” I couldn’t help glancing down, but I instantly regretted the impulse because what I saw there made every muscle in my body stiffen, panic gathering low in my gut. *No. No. No.*

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Conrad

I was riding a serious high after winning out over Arresting Aaron. Alden's tips had enabled me to win easily, something I still wasn't sure I liked. On the one hand, I wanted to stand on my own feet, win entirely due to my superior play. But on the other hand, a win was a win, and I'd met my goal of going undefeated in the qualifying rounds. Making the elimination rounds was a given, with the real wait being for the schedule and seeding. Seeding would be determined mainly by the strength of the opponents I'd beaten and other complex algorithms.

But right then, I wasn't worried about math. No, my main concern was getting back to the hotel and thanking Alden properly for the tips. After a long day of competition, our brief interlude at lunch hadn't been nearly enough time together, especially not since Payton had brought an awkward end to that. And who would have thought that I would come to crave Alden's company? Need him even? The me of just a week ago was laughing hysterically at this turn of events.

But the me of right now spotted Alden in line for the hotel elevator, and screw past me and all my assumptions and biases, because this joy was too good to deny. I hadn't been

this happy in a long, long time, even with all the worries about the tournament looming.

“Hey.”

“Hi.” He nodded at me, a strange expression on his face. His eyes flashed with pleasure, but the tight lines around them spoke to the sort of exhaustion that had me worrying.

“You doing okay?”

“Yeah. Just...I’ll be better when we’re back in the room.”

“Me too.” I leered, mainly to get a rise out of him in the crowded lobby. No one was paying us any attention as we squeezed into the elevator with a herd of other convention-goers. I took advantage of the opportunity to hook my fingers in his belt loops and pull him against me in the back of the elevator.

He made a startled sound but didn’t pull away until it was our floor. Body thrumming with anticipation, I followed him to our room with every intention of pouncing on him the second the door closed, but I hadn’t counted on him beating me to the punch, pushing me against the door even before I had a chance to turn on the light and smashing our mouths together with a desperation I’d never seen from him before.

His kiss was a wild creature, untamed and unfed, hungry and aggressive, and I was along for the ride, clinging to his shoulders as he stretched to plunder my mouth. He devoured me like the place could burn down around us and we’d still be here kissing, still clutching each other, still needing with a force I hadn’t experienced before. He’d never seized control quite like this, but I sure wasn’t complaining. Instead, I matched him needy moan for needy moan, trying to tell him

with my lips and tongue that I was here, not going anywhere, and that I could take whatever he needed to give me.

And that ended up being long, frantic moments of more of those wild kisses until he pulled away, breathing hard. My own breath wasn't doing much better, especially not when he sank to his knees on the carpet in front of me.

“Don't stop me.” Eyes glassy and voice unsteady, his hands trembled against my waist before reaching for my fly.

“Not gonna do that.” My head fell back against the door. I wasn't enough of a saint to stop him, but I could also tell something was up with Alden. Something had pushed him out of his comfort zone, made him into this desperate creature, who was sexy as hell but also majorly out of character for the guy I lo—*liked* so much. Threading my fingers through his silky hair, I took a shaky breath. “Not gonna stop you, but I am going to ask if you're sure about this? I'm totally fine with a rewind of the last two nights, and if something's happened to make you think you need—”

My words died on a guttural moan as he pulled me loose from my jeans, tongue connecting with the one part of my body that was completely on board with whatever Alden had planned. However, while I still had two operating brain cells, I drew in some much-needed oxygen and tried again. “You okay? I don't want you doing this if you're upset about something. We can talk—”

“Later,” he all but growled at me, and okay, there went the last of my nobility, right out the big window at the opposite end of the room. The city lights were twinkling, sending enough light into the room for me to see the need and desire in his eyes. For whatever reason, he wanted this. Badly.

Later was good. Later I'd make him talk. Later I'd figure out what had gotten into him. But right then, he wanted this, and I sure as hell wasn't going to deny him. Not when he attacked me with the same single-mindedness he'd kissed me with, a primal hunger behind each movement of his full lips and devilish tongue.

"Tell me if I get this wrong," he pulled back long enough to say.

"No such thing as wrong. No teeth, but no other rules. Trust me, you're doing plenty *right* already." I managed an uneven laugh. It seriously wasn't going to take much. Not only had it been a long time since I'd done this, but this was Alden. Alden, who I liked and respected so very much, on his knees for *me*. It was heady stuff, and whatever he lacked in practiced technique, he made up in sheer enthusiasm and my control rapidly evaporated.

"Yeah, that's it." I whispered encouragement that made him redouble his efforts. He was pretty darn intuitive at combining mouth and hand in ways that had me moaning. Eyes falling shut, my body seemed to narrow in on just this, everything tensing and coiling. But for all that laser focus, my heart expanded, the emotions I'd tried so hard not to label all day flooding back with new urgency—joy at being here with him, mingling with something deeper, a level of connection I'd never felt before. And it was that connection that ultimately was my undoing, tipping me over the edge.

I tried to shove at his shoulder, give him warning, but he stayed right with me as my whole body shuddered and soared. The twinkling lights of Vegas had nothing on the stars I saw behind my eyes as my knees finally gave out. Eventually,

though, the stars receded, and I opened my eyes to find myself slumped on the floor next to Alden.

“Holy hell. That was...” I scrubbed at my hair. “You were... Damn. Can’t talk.”

“If I robbed you of the power of speech, I suppose I’ll consider that a win.” His tone was light, but something about the way he said *win* reminded me of all my concerns before he’d stolen all my brain power.

“Not that I’m complaining—*at all*—but what got into you? That was...unexpected.”

“But good unexpected, right?” The uncertainty in his smile made my chest pinch.

“The best. Wasn’t it obvious?” Arm wrapping around his torso, I pulled him close to me. “But, seriously, Alden, what’s wrong?”

“We probably shouldn’t roll around on this carpet.” He gave me a hand up, but I wasn’t letting him escape, instead tumbling us both onto the closest bed and holding him tight.

“Tell me. Now.”

He took a deep breath and looked away, out at the glittering city beneath us. “I saw the brackets. For tomorrow. I wasn’t supposed to see them, but I did.”

“Oh.” My hand fell away from his stomach, my mouth going slack. “We both made the cut, right?”

“Yeah.” His voice was pained. “But we’re on the same side of the bracket. We’re on track to meet in the semifinals if either of us gets there. And if we *do* get there, only one of us can go to the finals. We’ll have to go through each other if we want in the championship round.”

“Fuck.” I knew he didn’t care for that word, but nothing else fit. Trying to settle us both down, I went for a pragmatic tone. “But it was inevitable, right? If we keep winning, it’s bound to happen sometime.”

“I wanted it to be the championship round,” he whispered, voice still tight. “If at all. I don’t want either of us to knock the other out.”

“You’d prefer a stranger dismembering me to having to do it yourself?” I sounded far lighter than I felt. Sacks of wet cement bore down on my chest, replacing all the earlier good feelings with nothing other than dread. “And hey, no guarantee either of us will make it to the semifinals. Maybe you’ll get your wish, and someone will take me out first.”

“You could have to face Bart in the quarterfinals.” Misery etched fine lines around his mouth. “And I want you to beat him. I don’t *want* you to lose. I don’t.”

I got it then, why he was so upset, so desperate. I tugged him back into my arms. “If it helps, I don’t want you to lose either.”

“But you need this. We both do.”

“Yup. I wish that weren’t true, but it is. Trust me, I’ve spent a lot of the last year trying to wish reality away.”

“Me too,” he sighed.

“So you get it. This is just what we have to deal with. No sense in wishing it away. It doesn’t *have* to change anything between us.”

“But it will.” His voice was small and faint, but it hit me like a slap. He wasn’t being cruel, just logical, as always. Because it would. We’d known all along that only one of us could win, but now that we were here, it felt almost insurmountable.

Things were going to change. *We* were going to change. There was no denying it, and like I'd said, we couldn't run from reality.

But I could kiss him, follow the same impulse he'd had earlier to drown myself in his body until we were both gasping for air.

"Promise me," I panted, cupping his face, the one that had come to mean so much to me, with my hands. "Promise me, you won't throw the match. No matter what."

"I promise." His eyes were wide, pupils large, and hair all messed up. He looked every bit as out of control as I felt. "But you have to promise too. No lying like in Utah."

"I promise. We'll let the universe decide. Like a slot machine. We each give it our best shot."

"Okay." He nodded solemnly. My heart desperately wanted to believe him, but my head wasn't so sure. He was right. Everything was about to change, and there was nothing we could do to stop it. Nothing except kiss again and cling to each other, mouths and bodies saying what our voices couldn't. As our lips met again and again, I tried to tell him that I wasn't giving him up without a fight, that we'd have the return trip together no matter what...but I was having a hard time believing myself, or trusting that this special thing we'd found would survive the next day, let alone a return to Gracehaven.

* * *

In the morning, Alden and I were tense, back to too polite and formal, eating our oatmeal and drinking our coffee. One would never have guessed that we'd spent most of the night avoiding talking about the tournament, lost in each other's bodies, barely even taking a break for dinner, falling asleep curled

together. But when the alarm went off, it was back to the real world—no more magical place we made together, no more avoiding reality.

We dressed and collected our stuff, heading to the door together, but also oh-so-separate. Unable to stand the silence another second, I grabbed his hand right as he reached for the doorknob.

“Wait. I want to tell you good luck.” I pulled him in for a hard, fast kiss. “Forget dreading this. I *want* to meet you in the semifinals tomorrow morning. I want you to kick ass today.”

He gave me a nervous-looking half smile, eyes darting away from mine. “I don’t want you to lose either. Kick butt. Especially Bart’s.”

“Alden?” I still wasn’t ready to release him.

“Yeah?”

“Tell me we’ll deal. No matter what happens.”

He took a moment, breathing hard. “I want to believe we can get through this and still be... friends.”

We were so very much more than friends, but it was a start.

“We’ll find a way,” I promised, no more sure than I’d been the night before, but needing to say the words aloud, needing to will them into existence. One more quick kiss, and we were on our way over to the convention center.

Once there, a large leader board outside the tournament revealed Alden had been right. We were on the same half of the bracket, him the number three seed for his quarter, and me an eye-popping number one for mine.

“Guess that win over Arresting Aaron really helped your point total. You were his only defeat. He still squeaked into the

elimination rounds.” Alden’s tone was his usual pragmatism, but his expression was harder to read. No one would have predicted me coming out with a higher seed than him. I wasn’t concerned about jealousy as much as the seeding shaking his confidence in his playing.

“Well, look at this. Representing well.” Payton came striding up in a unicorn hoodie with rainbow mane and purple skinny jeans. Messy hair and sunglasses said that they probably hadn’t slept much and had probably been out partying late. I didn’t have even a momentary pang that I hadn’t been with them. I’d been exactly where I most wanted to be, and I wasn’t regretting any time I spent with Alden. “And my grand plan to not advance didn’t fare as well.”

“Oh?” I studied the board again. “Well, crap. You’re playing Alden in Round One this morning.”

“May God have mercy on my soul.” Payton gave Alden a lopsided grin he didn’t return. “Dude, please go easy on me. Pretend I’m a newbie or something. I was out till four a.m. at this club... Don’t even remember the name. You should have come, Con. So many pretty people.”

“Eh. I had a pretty good evening.” I winked at Alden, trying to remind him of everything wonderful between us.

“So you guys are like seriously a thing now? An exclusive thing?” Mouth twisting like the word *exclusive* was physically painful, Payton studied us before pointing at the board. “How’s that going to work tonight if you’re both in the top four heading into tomorrow’s finals? Or only one of you? Someone’s not getting any.”

“We’ll deal.” My promise to Alden was still fresh on my lips, but I was no closer to believing it. And I didn’t get a further chance to consider it because the PA system announced

the start of the first round, sending Payton and Alden off to battle with Payton still complaining about their hangover and Alden looking like he'd rather have an appendectomy.

Most of the elimination rounds would be streamed, and they were spaced further apart than the qualifying rounds, so I wasn't too surprised when my first match was picked to be one of the ones up on the raised stage. *Just make it to tomorrow. One more turn.* My mantra of the last year came back to me. I didn't want to get too ahead of myself. I'd worry about playing Alden when it was time. What I needed to focus on was making it that far, one turn at a time, trusting my cards.

I didn't even need the headphones to find my zone that round, as I tuned everything out—all the clutter in my brain and the noise in the room, and even my opponent, an older man with graying dreadlocks and a methodical playing style. Ordinarily, that sort of well-organized player was the hardest for me to beat, but I'd both played against and watched Alden play enough that I quickly caught on to his strategy and was able to disrupt it, throw him off his flow, and come in for the win. Damn. That was a fun one.

“Good game.” The guy had a hearty handshake for me as we packed up. “You're going to win it all.”

“You think?” I grinned at him.

“You play the right way.” He nodded at my deck. “Reminds me of how I'd play as a kid. Haven't played against someone with your kind of spirit in *years*. Good luck, young man. Keep playing your game.”

My game. I just needed to play the way I relished playing, quit worrying about the semifinals, and enjoy the fact that I was actually here, in this place, playing in the elimination rounds. I kept that advice as the field kept shrinking. Watched

it get whittled down to sixty-four. Then thirty-two. I didn't connect with Alden at lunch. One of his rounds went long, so no lunchtime cuddling that day. But it was okay. I watched the tail end of his match on the monitors while eating a sandwich and got to see him in an epic battle against a woman cosplaying as a Reaper Bride—black wedding dress and garish makeup and all.

“And he said he can't play against cosplayers,” I crowed to Payton, who gave me a high five. “Look at him dismantle her defenses. He's going to win!”

“I note you have no sympathy for *me*. Your boy took me apart in under fifteen minutes. I think I was still on turn six.”

“Yeah. He's good at that. And you did ask him to be nice. He probably thought he was being kind, letting you get to your coffee.”

“That or he doesn't like to play with his food.” Payton rolled their eyes. “He actually seemed unsettled the first two turns—not like his usual cranky self. Didn't even tell me to remove the hoodie or my shades. But then he settled in and found his ruthless gene again. Which you seem only too happy about. Do you *want* to play him tomorrow?”

In between rocking out at my matches and trying to remember why I loved this game so much, I'd thought about that some. “Yeah, I do,” I said, surprising myself in how firm I sounded. “I want him to go as far as he can. He needs this win.”

“And so do you.”

“As if I needed reminding.” And Payton didn't know the half of it. They knew I wanted it, sure, but I'd never confessed the entirety of my circumstances to them.

“Dinner’s on me tonight.” Payton nodded at the screen. “Bring your dude. He just won. Can’t wait to watch you guys bicker over who’s taking the L tomorrow.”

“No one’s throwing the match.”

“Ha.” Payton’s raised eyebrow said they weren’t so sure. And honestly, a few hours later, faced with Bart from Denver in my last match of the day, I too wasn’t sure about any of this. A win against Bart and I’d be through to the semifinals. Due to a prior match going long, Bart and I were the last match of the night. Alden was already in the semifinals. I hadn’t watched, but Payton had brought me word right as I was setting up. I very purposely didn’t check my phone either. I didn’t want to know if Alden was watching, if he wished me luck or if he’d stayed radio silent all day. And I didn’t need the stress of more messages from Professor Tuttle and Jasper, who had been watching the live streams. This was going to be hard enough without added pressure.

Bart played a reaper deck, just as he had back in Colorado. And without Alden’s big expensive stuff to bail me out, I fell behind early. And maybe that was for the best. I could lose here. Go cheer for Alden tomorrow. I’d be screwed as far as *life* went—money, job, place to live. But I’d have him, and maybe that would be enough. Alden had beaten Bart once. He could beat him again and—

Wait.

Right as I’d talked myself into accepting defeat, I top decked my Transforming Scroll Scribe. I knew the cameras would have caught me drawing it. If he was watching, Alden would know I didn’t play the card. He’d know that I threw the game, and I’d shatter his trust in me. We’d both promised not to

throw this thing. To play our best game. And so far that round? I was doing anything but my best.

Newly determined, I slapped down the card and prepared to use it to summon enough scrolls to create a new army of frog soldiers.

“Hold up.” Eyes narrowing, Bart held up a hand. His lips curved into a sneer as he waved a judge over. “Card legality challenge. No way is that a genuine card.”

Hell. Sweat broke out on my lower back and my hands turned clammy as I handed the card over to a judge. What if the packs from that store had been counterfeit? What if they didn't believe the card was real? All of a sudden, I wanted to win in the worst way, wanted to wipe that sneer from Bart's face.

The judge, a small man with big horned-rim glasses, turned the card this way and that, even took it out of my card sleeve and ran a blunt nail along the edge. Finally, he nodded and my stomach sank.

“Card is legal.”

“Thank fuck,” I muttered before I could remember not to curse where the streamers could catch it. I finished my turn with shaking hands, waiting for Bart to try another trick, maybe try to remove the card or steal it for his side of the board. But he had nothing, and I went on to win by the narrowest of margins, down to my last two lives when I wiped him out.

I didn't get a “good game” from Bart, and I was sure he only shook my hand because cameras were rolling, but elation filled me nonetheless, making my soul float around the rafters of the cavernous space.

“Dude! Way to go!” Payton was waiting for me near the monitors when I finished packing up. “Now, where do you want to eat? You deserve whatever you want after wiping the floor with him like that.”

“Thanks. I just need to find—”

“Good game.”

I whirled around to find the thing I wanted most right there behind me. *Alden*. He had been watching. My insides wobbled, not sure whether this was a good thing or not, but I knew in my bones that I’d done the right thing, going for the win, not just letting Bart walk all over me.

“Thanks.” I wanted to reach for him, but the wariness in his eyes held me back.

“Proud of you. You did it.”

“Yeah.” My shoulders lifted, his pride almost better than my own. “Now, where are we going to eat? Payton’s already said they’re paying.”

“You guys go on. I’ve got a headache after all the noise today. Think I’ll go back to the room, rest my brain. But you have fun.”

“Are you sure?” I touched his arm. “I can find you some tea or something? I don’t have to go—”

“Yes, you do. You earned it,” he said firmly. Firmer than a guy with a killer headache should be able to manage. Hell. He was usually honest to the point of bluntness, but apparently he’d added lying to his skill set. And I had no idea how to call him on it, not in public, and not without a huge argument.

“I don’t want to go without you. Especially not if you’re sick.”

“Just let me rest.” He managed a crooked smile that was at least half grimace. “Introvert, remember? I’ll be fine. I need to recharge, that’s all.”

“Okay.” I reluctantly let him go off and headed out with Payton, but I worried about him the whole time we ate. The restaurant was an upscale fusion place, and Alden would have hated it—orange chicken tacos and Greek nachos and Thai pizza. I thought about texting him a pic of the menu, but didn’t want to bother him if he really was ill and needing to rest. After, I begged off of postdinner clubbing.

“Oh, I see how it is.” Payton gave me a pointed look but didn’t try too hard to convince me to party. As a result, it wasn’t that late when I let myself back into the hotel room, but the place was dark. The light from the bathroom revealed the barest hint of an Alden-sized lump in the far bed.

“Alden?” I whispered. No response. I wanted to slide into bed next to him, pull him close, but that seemed pretty selfish if he was headachy and already asleep. Reluctantly, moving slowly with plenty of time for him to wake up and call me over, I undressed, not caring where my clothes landed.

Still nothing, not even a whisper. I crept over to the other bed. Nothing from Alden, not even the sort of tossing and turning I’d come to expect from him. I lay there, not six feet from him and still missing him terribly. Should I say something? Do something? Hell. I just didn’t know. I might have won big that day, but thoughts of all I might have lost kept me wide awake.

Chapter Thirty

Alden

I heard Conrad come in. Because of course I did. I'd heard him in the hall, too, and that's when I'd stopped fooling around on my phone and dove under the covers like the coward I was. I didn't want to talk to him, didn't want to talk about tomorrow, the looming match between us, mere hours away, about all the ways things might change. I'd watched him play Bart, and he was nothing short of brilliant, making my chest ache with how good he was.

"That's how the game is meant to be played," someone had said behind me, and it was true. Conrad was the epitome of everything that was awesome about *Odyssey*. Other than the rares he'd scored by opening packs the old-fashioned way, he didn't have the high-dollar cards or the showy, complicated play style, but what he had was an understanding of the heart of the game. And he deserved to win.

Far, far more than me. And that depressed me on so many levels. So, I'd given a tissue-paper thin excuse to get out of dinner, gone and wallowed in feelings I didn't know what to do with.

But now I was here, and he was over there, almost close enough to touch, and I wanted him so badly. Not his body. *Him*. He snuffled around, tossing and turning, clearly awake

and not doing a terribly good job of hiding it. It was beyond illogical that we both were lying there miserable, not sleeping, screwing us both up for the next day. Forget who deserved to win when we played. Neither of us was going to play our best if we didn't sleep. I waited for him to say my name again, to try for conversation, or for him to come to me.

Nothing. The silence stretched and stretched until my skin itched with wanting something. Anything.

But maybe he'd made the first move too much. Maybe I'd come to rely on that. With few exceptions, he was the first to text, first to kiss, first to suggest fooling around, first to try to calm me down. And now I'd shut him out, and he probably thought he was being noble, not bugging me. If anyone was going to end this inertia, it was going to have to be me.

My heart beat faster as my hands gripped the comforter. I didn't know if I could cope if he paid back my silent treatment with rejection, if he was done dealing with me. But I also knew I wasn't sleeping until I'd tried.

Throwing back the covers, I crept over to his bed. Still nothing, not a word. Legs unsteady, I climbed in behind him. Logic said that it would be harder for him to tell me to go to hell if I was right there versus calling his name from across the room.

"Alden?" His surprised tone as he finally broke the silence wasn't angry, and I exhaled hard. "You okay?"

"Can't sleep."

"Me either." Rolling, he gathered me close, arranging us so that I was his pillow, the way he seemed to prefer, draping himself over me. "Missed you."

"Missed you too."

“Good.” He stretched so that our faces were level. Then we were kissing, and maybe the answer to not wanting to talk was simply this. Not talking. Just doing. But as our lips met, my heart wrote volumes of words I’d never say. And as our bodies connected, movements urgent, hands needy and grasping, they too wrote a story. But for all the unsaid words exchanged, I couldn’t guarantee our story would be one with a happy ending.

* * *

It all came down to this. In so many ways, it felt like we’d been building to this moment the whole trip. Maybe ever since the professor had produced those tickets. I’d known somewhere deep inside that I’d have to battle Conrad at some point. And it didn’t matter how much I’d clung to the night, to him, to our time together—dawn still came.

I had no appetite that morning, and Conrad seemed in a similar boat, turning down both oatmeal and coffee. As we dressed, we were silent by some unspoken agreement, a holdover from the previous night. That was fine by me. Words would be bad. Words could ruin everything.

Instead, I checked my phone. Professor Tuttle wished us both good luck. But it was yet another message from my mom that had my stomach churning.

Call me.

I checked the clock. It was early here in the West, but back East, Mom and Mimi would undoubtedly be mid-Sunday brunch. Reluctantly, I hit Dial.

She answered on the first ring, exactly as I’d expected. “Alden. So glad you called. It’s been days.”

“I’ve texted,” I protested.

“That’s something. But you’ve also been dodging my messages. I saw your department head the other day. He wanted to know if you’d be back. Said you still haven’t registered for fall classes. And I’m seeing other deadlines ticking away. If you’re switching programs, you’re running out of time.”

“I’ll figure it out.” I rubbed the bridge of my nose, knowing that Conrad was likely hearing every word. Needing space, I moved to the bathroom. “This really isn’t the time.”

“Not the time? Alden, when *are* you going to make up your mind?”

“Soon.” My voice came out sharp, but I couldn’t regret my tone. “I’ve got kind of a big day here. I’m in the semifinal—”

“I saw.”

“You watched?” Despite my irritation with her, satisfaction still surged through me.

“Part of it. Mimi had the live streaming on.” Her tone was just this side of dismissive. “And you’re very talented, but chasing this dream about a *game*... I’m just not sure this is healthy. Or realistic. Is there really a future in it for you, even if you win?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted, drumming my fingers on the bathroom vanity. All my worries and reservations rushed to the front of my brain. “Not even sure I *want* to win.”

“See—”

“But that doesn’t mean I need one of your plans.” I might not know much, but I knew that whatever came next for me would be my own idea, my own direction. The time away had been good for me, firmed up my resolution to go my own way.

And being around Conrad had helped, too, given me new confidence and perspective.

“Be reasonable. You know we only want what is best for you.”

“And so do I,” I said firmly. “Listen, I really do need to go.”

“We’re not done,” Mom warned.

“Fine.” Great. One more thing to dread later. But as I ended the call, my thoughts shifted back to the match with Conrad. I still had no clue what I wanted to happen. Winning just didn’t seem as vital as it had even a few days earlier. I meant what I’d told Mom—I’d figure something out. What mattered more was figuring out how to keep Conrad.

But he greeted me with stony silence as I emerged from the bathroom and didn’t bother with small talk on the short walk to the convention center. *Crap*. How much had he heard of my conversation with Mom?

I wanted to ask, but also was loath to start an argument moments before we had to battle.

The way the tournament was structured, the two semifinals would be played back-to-back, then a break before the finals, all three matches streamed with professional commentators. Without looking over at Conrad, I accepted the noise-canceling headphones. I still lacked a clear plan, the sort of strategy I was known for. I honestly didn’t know what I was going to do, all the thoughts that I’d been wrestling with still ricocheting around my brain.

We rolled dice to see who went first. Him. Good. My opening hand was good—not great, but not poor either. I’d won my quarterfinal match with a worse deal. The universe certainly wasn’t making it easy for me to know what to do. His

first few plays were no help either—pretty standard stuff for him, the sort of setup I'd expect. So I mirrored him, neither aggressive nor passive, focused on creating a typical board state for me.

We each give it our best shot. His voice rang in my head as we came to the turn where I really needed to set up an attack. I surveyed the board. He had good cards out. Not his best, but I simply couldn't tell whether he was holding back or not. However, I'd promised. He knew me well enough to know if I skipped this attack step purposefully. So, I attacked, and he countered with a devious defense. Great card. Either he'd been holding back or he'd only recently drawn the card, but whichever the case, he'd revealed himself as willing to battle in earnest.

Him playing well actually relaxed me in a weird way, made it easier for me to play my best stuff each turn. I was first to strike at his life total, but he quickly evened things up, and back and forth we went. I went from reluctant opponent to wanting to impress him with my play. If I was going down, I was going down swinging, the way he always did. Maybe later we'd dissect the game, and he'd be as proud of my moves as I was of his.

Then the worst happened. I drew a card that could win me the game. The sort of massive creature that Conrad never had an answer for. Hell. Forget analyzing the game later. He'd know as soon as he saw the stream if I didn't play it. *Promise me we'll deal.* I had to believe. Had to trust.

But he deserves to win. He needs it. I held the card, inner war making my palms sweat. Conrad had been wrong. This was nothing like a slot machine. I didn't *want* to win, had so much I wanted more than the win. I'd been searching for

validation this whole time, direction, but I'd found far more purpose than I'd ever thought possible.

So I did the only thing that made any sense.

I played the card.

My eyes squished shut, brain roaring like a jet engine, and when I opened them again, he was frowning, his mouth a thin, hard line. He'd forgive me. He had to. He—

Oh. *Fuck.*

He'd been right all along. There were times that only that word would do. Still glowering at me, Conrad slapped down his Transforming Scroll Scribe.

If I *had* been playing to lose, I'd just played right into his hands. I, the guy who knew every opponent's strengths and weaknesses, who knew all the decks, all the moves, all the rules, had totally forgotten he owned that card. I'd used all available scrolls to cast the ogre, so I had nothing left to counter his card and no answer when he paid the required scrolls to transform it. Next turn, he'd win for sure.

He passed to me, his face an unreadable mask. This was it. My last stand. I looked down at the board, looked at the card I'd drawn to start my turn. He was either going to hate me or love me, no middle ground.

"Unblockable Quest." I moved to attack, knowing I'd just rendered his card and board state worthless for the turn.

He blinked, then blinked again. His sturdy fingers, the ones I loved so much, came to his collection of scrolls. *Crap.* He'd left one unused. And I hadn't picked up on it. Still, what could he do with a single scroll? Nothing good was that cheap.

"Library Fire."

It was an old card, an instant board wipe that almost no one played because it resulted in him sacrificing his own board in order to burn mine away, and I waited to see if the judge would allow it. The judge nodded. It was a reckless, brilliant play.

Both my giant ogre and his Transforming Scroll Scribe went in the trash heap. I could no longer attack to win, but he'd just sacrificed his best card. How did he plan to rebuild? *Did* he plan to rebuild? As the turn passed to him, I waited.

He put out two Frog Archers. Little soldiers. Little, cheap soldiers with lethal arrows. The judge looked at me, waiting to see if I was going to counter before he attacked with them. I studied my cards, not believing what I was seeing. I had no answer. None.

He'd won.

"Good game." I stuck out my hand. I tried not to grin, but I was simply so stupidly proud of him. But weirdly, he didn't smile back. In fact, he kept right on scowling as we packed up. I couldn't say anything with the cameras still rolling, so I tried to hurry. He beat me to it, though, throwing his stuff in his bag instead of worrying about what went in each slot like me, stomping off while I was still zipping up.

"Conrad!" I rushed after him, catching up to him by the judges' tables. "What's wrong?"

"Not here," he growled, steering me away from the tournament space altogether, not stopping until we were down a small side hallway, one that housed shuttered meeting rooms.

"What's wrong?" I asked again. "You won!"

"I *know*." His eyes, always so free and friendly, spit sparks, his mouth as lethal-looking as those frog arrows. "You threw

the game.”

“What?” I had to take a literal step back. In all my calculations about the right course of action, I’d never considered him not believing that I’d played fair, him doubting me that much. And it *hurt*. “I did not. You won. Fair and square.”

He shook his head. “You knew I had the Transforming Scroll Scribe. And you had an answer to the Frog Archers. I just know it.”

“No! You can look at the stream later. I had no answer. You were just that good.”

Making a scoffing noise, he paced away from me. Back down the hall, I could hear the crowd around the monitors murmuring as the second semifinal started. “You always win. Always. I’ve never seen you lose with that deck.”

“Well, congrats. You did it. And not simply because you had the scroll scribe. You played brilliantly. You *deserved* to win.”

Turning on his heel, he stared me down for what felt like an eternity. I tried not to squirm, not sure what else I could say.

“I heard you. On the phone with your mom. You said you weren’t sure you *wanted* to win. Which was stupid, but I still tried to hope that you wouldn’t throw the match. Except you did.” He had the sort of “gotcha” tone of a prosecutor cross-examining a witness.

“I meant what I said to her—I wasn’t sure that I wanted to win. But I still tried to beat you. Tried to play my best game.” I willed him to understand, but he simply shook his head.

“Why? Why not just throw it? If you didn’t want to win, I mean?”

“Because I wanted to make you proud,” I whispered, watching as his eyes went wide and some of the tension left his body. He didn’t say anything, so I continued, “I promised you I wouldn’t throw the match. I don’t know how to make you believe me, but I didn’t. And I had a plan. A strategy. If I won, I’d take care of you.”

“You’d *take care* of me?” He looked so utterly horrified that I regretted the words instantly. “What? Like out of pity? Poor Conrad, folks disowned him, can’t keep a job, but at least he’s cute and good in bed.”

My skin stung like I’d been slapped. “I don’t pity you. And this is not just about...the physical.”

“What is it then?”

That same feeling from that morning returned, the dread of knowing that the wrong word could ruin everything. But I also knew all the way down to my neurons that I owed him my truth. And maybe I didn’t have the right words, the pretty words, but at least I had that.

“Love. I’m falling in love with you, Con. And I wanted you to win. Which you did. And I figured you’d be *happy* about that, not doubting my every move.”

“You don’t love me. You can’t.”

“Because you don’t think I’m capable of it?” Now it was my turn to be horrified. This. This was why I’d given up on the chance of finding something like what we had. I’d worried that what I had to offer might not be enough, and apparently, it wasn’t. Bile rose in my throat. “Because of who I am?”

“No, because of who *I* am.” He studied hopelessly scuffed and worn sneakers. “I’m not worth it, Alden.”

Through my own hurt, I looked at him, really looked at him. I'd worried once that maybe I wasn't getting the real Conrad, but in his eyes I saw the sensitive, caring guy I'd come to know. And I also saw for the first time what he hadn't let me see before, how behind all his swagger and cockiness was this deep insecurity, a lack of faith in himself. And that same lack of faith was keeping him from believing in me, believing in us.

"You are." I grabbed his hand. Squeezed. He didn't squeeze back. "Why won't you believe me?" Frustrated, I dropped his limp hand. "You told me we'd deal, no matter what. You *told* me to play my best game."

"That was before it actually happened. I thought you'd win. Figured you'd win, see what a loser I really am, and be done with me. I said all those things hoping you might let me stick around some after *you* won."

"Well, too bad. That's not what happened. I'm not done with you. I told you. I think I lo—"

"Don't." He held up a hand, voice a pained whisper. "I wish I could believe you."

"Conrad—" I reached for him, but he sidestepped me.

"Don't. Just don't. I need... Hell, I don't know what I need. To think."

"You have to play in that final." It hadn't escaped my notice that he hadn't said he loved me back, but my more pressing concern was making sure he didn't throw away his chance out of fear. It didn't matter what he thought about me. What mattered to me was that he win—that he prove to himself that it had been him all along doing the winning. Not the card he'd scored. Not my tips. Him. I needed him to reach his goals, even if that meant losing him for good.

But before I could tell him any of that, he did the worst thing he could.

He walked away.

Chapter Thirty-One

Conrad

Even as I raced away from the tournament part of the convention center, I didn't know why I was freaking out. In fact, if anyone were to ask me which of the two of us was more likely to panic following the semifinal, I would have put all the money on Alden. I'd figured he'd win, freak out, I'd reassure him, then fall apart myself privately and never need to let him know what a mess I really was. I hadn't thrown the game both because I'd promised him I wouldn't, but also—and more importantly—I hadn't thought I'd need to. He'd answer my every move. It had been almost fun, putting out stuff, seeing how he'd defeat it. He always did. Always just that one card ahead of me.

I passed a bank of displays that showed the second semifinal was still ongoing. But I didn't slow down, passing several panels, the food court, winding through the vendor and artist areas, not taking the time to notice any of the merch, everything and everyone blurring together as I flashed through the game again in my head.

I'd given him a good game, getting caught up in it, getting more competitive than I'd meant to, but I'd still expected him to win right up until the very last move. And then I'd freaked out. Because I'd *wanted* him to win. I couldn't even pinpoint

the exact moment that had changed over the last few days, when I'd gone from desperately wanting myself to win at all costs, to wanting to win if it didn't mean hurting him in the process, to wanting him to win because I knew it would make him happy and making him happy was the most important thing in the world to me.

But then he'd *smiled*. Alden, who'd smiled more in the last few days but who was still hardly what one would call jolly, had grinned. Like a lottery winner almost. He'd lost the game and been downright *giddy* about that fact. And I'd lost whatever cool I'd managed to cling to. How could he be so happy to lose?

He had to have thrown it. No other possible conclusion, except he'd seemed genuinely gutted when I'd accused him of losing on purpose.

I'm falling in love with you, Con. His voice had been so sincere, but I still couldn't let myself trust it. Love came with conditions. Requirements. Obligations. And love could be yanked away without warning. Love *hurt*.

A lot like my next breath, actually, sharp and painful, a struggle to get enough air in. Hell. Not again. Did I even have my—

Wait. Of course I did. Ever since I'd needed it outside Denver, Alden had made sure I had my inhaler every morning before we'd left the hotel. Fishing it out, I headed to a quieter corner to use it. Was that love? Wanting to take care of someone? Like the way he'd figured out that I only could stomach coffee super sweet and made it that way for me or the way he let me use him as a pillow whenever I wanted?

But I did that for him too. Made sure he didn't have to eat weird flavor combos. Let him have more of the hot water.

Wanted him to win. Would I have smiled for him?

Oh hell. The only thing worse than Alden loving me might be *me* loving *him*. And I maybe did. If I was honest, it had started to happen before we even kissed. It was the way he'd bailed out Jasper. The way he'd listened, really *listened* to me talk about my family and everything that had gone down with them. The way he'd shown me what was inside him, too, his vulnerabilities and fears. *That* was why I'd wanted him to win.

I'm falling in love with you, Con. And I wanted you to win.

If he felt what I felt then... I had to sit down. Right on the carpet, and I could almost hear him getting fussy about it. God, how was he so in my head already? In my head, in my heart. In fact, slumped here like this, I could admit that even while his words terrified me, it had been my own impulse to say them back that had truly sent me running. But I couldn't. I couldn't let myself feel like that. Except I did, no way to outrace these unwanted but oh-so-real emotions.

Down the hall from me, two bored-looking dads were on their phones while a group of kids were playing casual *Odyssey*. Slapped together, unsleeved decks, mishmash of different sets, and from the sound of it, varying interpretations of the official rules. Their giggles had me flashing back to when I'd first discovered the game—when I'd learned that cracking packs was magical, a surprise every time, every game a fresh opportunity to learn something new or try something out.

I remembered when every game had been fun. Not this all-consuming desire to show that I was a success at something, that I wasn't a total loser, this need to stick it to my dad, show him that the game wasn't worthless after all. That *I* wasn't worthless.

But I hadn't felt worthless in Alden's arms, hadn't felt worthless on the trip, and when I'd played here at the tournament, it had been fun again.

Keep playing your game, that opponent yesterday had said. And that was what I'd done the whole tournament, including the match with Alden. Just played my game, the way I liked to play. And I'd won. *I'd won*. For the first time, I let myself hold that fact, believe it.

Alden had given me that game back, taken away the dark, clawing need inside me and replaced it with so much happiness, reminded me why I'd started playing in the first place. And I'd freaked out and treated him like crap.

Intending to text him, I pulled out my phone and took it off silent. There was already a message from him. My chest ached like it had last night when he'd crawled in bed with me. I knew making the first move didn't come easily to him, and it meant something to me that he'd tried.

Con, be safe. Come back and play your game.

Play my game. I'd treated him horribly, and he was worried about my *game*. But maybe that was the answer, too—I had to trust that my game would be enough. That *I* would be enough.

While I tried to figure out a reply, I thumbed through my other messages—good luck wishes from friends and even some acquaintances I hadn't heard from in months. The ones who hadn't been there when everything had blown up but who were happy to hang around when there was something to celebrate. Alden had seen me at my worst, and improbably, *illogically*, he still wanted me. My breath hitched. Not another asthma attack, but more like my lungs weren't up to the job of holding all this emotion inside.

There were tips from Jasper and Professor Tuttle. You're both winners, the professor had written. Huh. Maybe it was that simple. Maybe that was why we would have both been happy for the other to win. Because we had both already won.

I had a new sneak-text from Cassie wishing me luck, and then the most improbable text of all. My mom. On her actual number, not a different phone like Cassie.

Your sister showed me the live stream of your matches yesterday. I'm proud of you. I'm sorry the past year has been so difficult for all of us.

Ha. All of us. *All of us* hadn't had to deal with no health insurance, tax nightmares, financial aid disasters, begging for a place to live, choosing ramen to afford medicine. I had no doubt that it had been a difficult year for her, but she didn't get to pretend it was the same as mine. It wasn't. I was surprised at the depth of my anger. I'd been hurt and guilty so long that I wasn't even sure when it had shifted to this white-hot rage, but I think Alden had something to do with it, the way he'd patiently told me over and over that none of it was my fault. And it wasn't. It was Dad's. And Mom's for standing by him, and I was *angry*. So angry.

Her message continued, I love you. I can't promise to change anything with your father, but I can do better myself. I'm sorry. But I am proud of you. Go out and win.

It was what I'd most wanted—acknowledgment and validation from my parents, one of them at least—but it rang hollow. She was proud of me, but where had she been when I'd needed her most? Their love had been conditional, and that was no love at all.

Holy wow. I let that thought ping around my head, knocking over long-held pillars of assumptions. Maybe it wasn't *love* that hurt. It wasn't love that screwed me over. Real love didn't

have conditions and limitations. *People* had failed me, let me down, hurt me. But not everyone was like that. Hadn't Alden shown me compassion over and over? Was what we felt for each other the real deal?

I still wasn't entirely sure, but for the first time, I wanted to see. I wanted to believe his words so badly. I paged back to his message, ready to reply.

"Our final round will begin in fifteen minutes. Players please check in at the judging station as soon as possible," the PA system blared.

Hell. No time for a big, long message thread to Alden. Instead, I texted him a highly inadequate I'm coming. I'm sorry and I'm coming. Going to play my game.

And I was. I was going to play my game—on all levels. I was going to make my move and trust that it would be enough. That I would be enough. Trust that maybe, just maybe, I'd already won.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Alden

Conrad walking away was one of the worst moments of my life. And I didn't chase after him. Couldn't make my legs work. Instead, I sank onto a bench outside one of the closed meeting rooms. What had I done wrong? Why couldn't I make Conrad believe me? To me, it was so simple—I loved him, I wanted him to win, and all he needed to do was believe me. But I also understood that I couldn't make another person do or feel anything. I couldn't make him love me back, couldn't make him trust this, trust me, trust *us*.

But oh how I wanted to. And because I did love him—something I would have thought impossible even a few days earlier—I just wanted him to come back, play the final, get the win he deserved. Maybe he couldn't love me back, but he could have that. I never would have thought I could be as happy for another person as for myself, but he'd proved me wrong, showed me that I had a capacity for caring that I'd honestly thought I might lack. I'd listened to the voices of others for so long, telling me how different I was, that I'd started to believe that maybe I couldn't love.

Conrad had shown me otherwise, shown me what it meant to truly put someone else first, and if nothing else, I was grateful to him for that.

I pulled out my phone. I might not be able to chase after him, make myself any more vulnerable than I already had, but I could let him know that. I deliberated over wording far longer than I needed to, typing and erasing a dozen messages before finally settling on one.

Con, be safe. Come back and play your game. There. I wasn't asking him to come back to *me*. Which obviously I wanted, but I was almost too scared to hope for.

Right as I hit Send, the door to the meeting room opened a crack, and two people slithered out—two women, one in Reaper Bride cosplay and the other in one of the pink “Ready to Lose?” shirts, holding hands and so into each other that they didn't notice me before they were kissing passionately. From the way their clothes were askew, I gathered they'd been doing more than kissing in the empty room.

A week ago, I would have judged them negatively for breaking the rules to hookup on the sly. But now, all they made me was wistful. They didn't care about anything except each other. I'd probably always be focused on rules, but Conrad had taught me to look beyond rules. To have fun. And now that was all I wanted for him. I wanted him to come back, have fun playing, remind everyone, myself included, why we'd gotten into this silly game in the first place. It wasn't always about the winning, the point totals and online rankings, collecting the expensive decks, or coming up with superhard strategies.

Once it had been *fun*. And he'd given me that back. So yeah, even after all that had happened, I still couldn't regret losing the match. Losing to him had been more fun than winning ever was.

The couple kept whispering goodbye to each other, kissing again, laughing softly, and starting the goodbye cycle again.

“Don’t forget about me,” the blond in the T-shirt said.

“As if I could,” the other replied. “Text me.”

“As if I could resist.” More laughing. More kissing. They simply couldn’t seem to let go of—

Oh. Maybe I was letting Conrad go too easily. Doing it again, assuming that what I could offer wouldn’t be enough, wouldn’t stack up against others. By not chasing after him, I was protecting myself from more rejection, but I was also shutting out the possibility of getting through to him.

Be brave. Mimi’s voice echoed back to me from my past, her trying to coax me into relaxing enough to be able to fly. Funny how a few weeks ago flying had been the scariest thing in the world to me, but now it was losing Conrad, the possibility of never getting to kiss him or tell him how I felt again.

Resolved, I stood up, startling the women who gasped before racing away, holding hands still and laughing. I hadn’t always been brave in my life, but I was going to try here, push past my fears.

Buzz. My phone vibrated in my hand with a message. I’m coming. I’m sorry and I’m coming. Going to play my game.

Relief coursed through me, quickly followed by confusion. The message was rather cryptic. Did he mean he was sorry we’d fought? Sorry he’d run away? Sorry he couldn’t feel the same way I did? The possibilities were almost enough to make my stomach rebel. But he was coming.

And I was going to meet him halfway.

I sped up, wanting to catch him before he checked in for the round. Spotting him cutting through the maze of vendors, I intercepted him by a large display of *Odyssey* backpacks and stuffed animals.

“Alden!” His eyes went wide as he skidded to a stop in front of me. Biting his lip, he gave me a searching look. “I messaged you.”

“I saw.”

“Will final competitors please check in at the judging table?” The PA system bleated.

“Crap.” Conrad’s eyes darted between me and the entrance to the tournament space.

“Go,” I ordered him.

“But I need to tell you—”

“Go. Talk later. Win now.” No way was I letting him miss his chance. We could sort out everything else afterward—or at least I hoped we could. Not knowing what it was he wanted to say was already making me want to jump out of my skin. But even if it was going to be a let-you-down-easy-Alden sort of conversation, I wanted to have it knowing he’d given his dream his best shot.

“Okay.” He turned on his heel, but I stopped him with a hand on his arm.

“Play your game, your way,” I said in a rush, knowing time was of the essence. “Have fun. Don’t overthink it, okay?”

“Okay.” He nodded at me. “Find me after. If I don’t win—”

“You will.” I tried to believe enough for both of us. “And if you don’t, we’ll deal. Promise.”

The *we* part was more hopeful thinking, especially since I had no clue whether there was even an *us* anymore, but I wanted him to know that he had me, win or lose. As he hurried away, I made my way to the crowd of people gathered around the displays that would broadcast the final round.

“Here we go.” Payton strode toward me. They were wearing a baggy black sweatshirt with one of the *Odyssey* angels on the front, looking fierce in contrast to Payton’s messy hair and hangover shades. “Saw you run after Con.”

“So?” I refused to be embarrassed. Near us, a group of kids were playing a round of the game, oblivious to the commentators droning on the monitors.

“Are you going to keep chasing after him if he loses?”

“Of course.” I bristled. “I’m not...with him just because he’s good at the game.”

“And if he wins?”

My stomach flopped. These were the questions I didn’t want to think about, not yet. Not with everything still so unsettled. “We’ll deal.”

“Him as a big-time pro player isn’t going to leave much time for us plebeians back in Gracehaven.” Payton sounded genuinely sad about that truth. “Might want to hope he loses.”

The quick retort I’d planned got stuck in my suddenly clogged throat. Did I want to hope that? Even privately? Conrad would never have to know if I watched the match hoping... *No*. I would know and that was bad enough. I wanted him to win, even if that might mean losing everything I truly wanted.

“I’m going to root for him,” I said firmly. “And you better too.”

“Aye, aye, Captain.” Payton laughed. “Glad to see your bossy side back. I was starting to worry you’d been replaced by a lovesick pod person.”

“No replacement.” I wasn’t sad about that either. After years of wanting to be someone else, I was plenty happy being myself, being Alden in all my facets. I might have missed out on the med school dream, but what I’d gained this summer was even better. At long last, I finally believed that I was enough, exactly as I was. And even if Conrad and I weren’t meant to be, he’d given me that gift.

“No, that’s not how you attack!” One of the kids in the game near us—a shortish boy with dark hair—stood up, clearly ready to do battle over the rules.

“Is too. It’s a creature. It attacks. And you lose,” a girl with frizzy blond hair insisted.

Despite everything, I couldn’t help but drift closer. “Can I see the card?” I asked, holding out my hand.

“Sure. But he still loses.” The girl scoffed as I studied the card. It was an older one, the sort Conrad always favored, but I’d seen it enough to know how it worked.

“Actually, if you read the card, you can see that this one only attacks with three or more other creatures,” I pointed out gently, crouching down to their level, keeping my voice even.

“Darn.” Deflated, the girl slumped back down. “I need a few more turns.”

You and me both, kid. I nodded. “Yeah, you just need to be patient. You’ll get there.”

Patience. I needed that too. Needed to believe that eventually Conrad and I could figure things out. I took a deep breath as I returned to Payton, trying to embrace patience and

a certainty I still didn't quite have, trying to make sense of everything.

"How are you always so good with kids?" Payton shook their head. "I mean, you barely tolerate the rest of humanity..."

"Kids are easy."

"You saying I'm not?" A smile tugged at Payton's mouth. "Just kidding. Arthur should hire you to teach newbie classes back at the store or something."

Teach. For the first time in years and years, my old dream didn't seem so silly. Maybe...

"It's starting!" The kids pointed at the monitors. Knowing how much Conrad had given me, knowing how I felt about him, it was easy to cheer for him as the competitors took their seats. The commentators started hyping the match, talking about how Conrad had come from nowhere to blast through the competition. I frowned. That wasn't technically accurate. He was made for this moment, and I could admit now that he'd been great for years on the show. He might be a relative unknown, but he wasn't riding some random winning streak.

Continuing, the commentators seemed biased toward his competition, a dour-faced man in a suit who had narrowly missed qualifying at the last few pro qualifying tournaments and who had a string of regional wins and online records behind him. His suit looked designer, and I had no doubt his decks were full of the sort of expensive, rare cards that often gave Conrad fits to play against. But I had faith in him, tried to beam that confidence toward him. It didn't matter what the other guy put out. Conrad could win this thing.

However, he lost the initial dice roll, which meant the other guy went first. And of course, he had a turn-one super play, dinging Conrad's life total right away and establishing himself in superior position to get the scrolls out that he'd need to win. Conrad put out an okay card, not great, and not answering the threat the other guy posed.

"Does he look nervous?" I asked Payton.

"A little." Head tilting, they frowned. "That wasn't his smartest move either. He had the ability to go after the other side's scroll. He should have taken it."

"Yeah." Dread started to snake down my spine, making me sweat. Had our argument distracted him too much? A few more turns passed, and on each, Conrad made a move, but not the decisive, inventive play I'd come to expect from him. And not nearly aggressive enough if he wanted to win.

"Come on, Conrad," I whispered to myself. "Fight back. Believe in yourself." *Because I do*, I thought, watching him. *But I need you to believe too.*

Chapter Thirty-Three

Conrad

I was losing. And I knew why—the other guy had an expensive tinkering deck, the sort of complicated strategy that Alden was probably taking notes on. And just thinking about Alden made me grip my cards that much tighter. He was watching me lose. He had such faith in me, but I was going to let him down.

Not even my Transforming Scroll Scribe was enough to dig me out of my early hole. I got a single turn with extra scrolls before my opponent removed it with a targeted spell. Damn. Not enough. Not—

Enough. Enough. My mom's text lurked in the corner of my brain, anger still simmering there. Screw best wishes from people who had hurt me in the past. I got to decide whether I was enough, exactly as I was, not anyone else. I'd told Alden that he was enough, that he didn't need to be anything for me or anyone else. We were each enough. And I got to determine whether I was a success, not my mom, not my dad, not even Alden. Me.

I sat up straighter, loosening my death grip on my cards. I was the one who would decide whether I played a good game, not the commentators, not the viewers, and definitely not the guy sitting across the table from me.

Have fun, Alden had said. And right then, I was most definitely not having fun, nor was I playing my normal game. I'd put out the scroll scribe because I figured I needed to get my most expensive cards out first, try to keep pace with the other dude. But if this last year had taught me anything, it was that I couldn't live to others' expectations. I wasn't going to let someone else's arbitrary rules define me. I wasn't a loser just because I'd had to drop out, thanks to my dad's awfulness, any more than I was a loser because my deck was cheaper. I'd chosen these cards, each one for a reason, could tell the story of how each was acquired, valued them all, and it was time to put them to work for me.

Play your game. I slapped down two frog soldiers, and the other guy sneered, a subtle shake of his head, like he was bored with me, bored with this game. And as I'd hoped, he didn't bother countering them, deeming them beneath his notice. All good. I spent the next few turns amassing an army of tiny creatures and equipping them with deadly weapons. The other guy kept coming, but all I needed was one more turn.

He attacked. I defended, killing the more formidable of his creatures. One more turn.

I attacked, finally registering damage to his life total. Now he was noticing me plenty, eyes narrowing as he came after my army, but I was ready, countering the combo play he tried to unleash. *No complicated stuff on my watch, dude*. One more turn.

Again I attacked, small bits of damage that added up, turn after turn. I wasn't sure how long we'd played, only that I needed one more turn. My life total was down to one, but I paid it no mind. *Just one more turn*. I was devious in my

defenses, using every crafty trick I'd learned over years spent playing, taking little bits of inspiration from the kids I'd watched earlier, the people I'd played before, the wisdom of Professor Tuttle and others like the store owner I'd grown up with. But along with all that advice bopping around in my brain, I used my instincts. The instincts that knew when I was screwed and when to retreat and when to go in for the kill.

And above all else, I had *fun*. Each turn was fun. Evading certain doom was fun. And creeping past his defenses with nothing other than a turtle was the most fun at all. His look of irritation at having to deal with so minor a threat was priceless, as was the way his mouth gaped when I turned that turtle into a cannon and blew him and the rest of his life total away.

The guy sat there breathing hard, studying his cards, shaking his head. He peeked to see what he would have drawn next. Shook his head some more. Finally, he stuck out his hand. "Good game."

I'd done it. All of the adrenaline I'd been riding for the match swamped me, a giant wave of feelings and surging heart rate that had me shuddering like a leaf as I took his hand.

Everything happened fast after that, camera crew coming in closer, still photos being taken, flashes hurting my eyes.

"How do you feel?" One of the commentators came over holding a large microphone. Her platinum hair didn't move as she walked to our table, high heels making her tower above where I was sitting. She motioned for me to stand, and knees still rubbery, I tried to comply.

"I bet your head is spinning. How do you feel?" she prompted again when I didn't have an answer other than opening and closing my mouth a bunch.

“Okay,” I said, still studying the cards in my hand.

“Just okay? You won MOC West!”

“Yeah.” My head felt too full, that sort of too-heavy, cottony feeling, like the morning after drinking. “I guess I did.” I scanned the room, looking for Alden or even Payton. Someone I knew. Someone who would help me make sense of this. “Wow.”

“Wow is right. That was one impressive come-from-behind victory. Tell us how you did it?”

“I...uh...I took it one turn at a time.” I stammered my way through a few more questions, gradually calming down enough to talk about strategy and my friends from *Gamer Grandpa*, but it still felt surreal, especially when a trophy was wheeled in on a little cart followed by the inventor of *Odyssey* herself, Imelda Sanchez—a stately woman in her sixties who had stunned the gaming world thirty years prior before going on to build a massive empire. The present CEO and the head of the game play division accompanied her, a veritable court of *Odyssey* royalty, important people I’d followed for years in interviews and articles, and now they were in front me, smiling and nodding as the commentator made introductions.

All I really wanted was to get to Alden, to tell him that I’d done it, to see his reaction. Maybe later we could watch the match together, go through it play by play, and it would all seem more real than this. In so many ways, the trophy felt like ours, not simply mine alone, the culmination of our journey together and all I’d figured out along the way.

But even in my foggy state, I knew I couldn’t get out of all these formalities. And indeed, the next interminable stretch of time was filled with speeches and the presentation of one of those oversize ceremonial checks. The guy presenting it to me

gave me a whispered assurance that the real check was coming later. Then came the trophy, huge and heavy, and pictures with all the various luminaries. And more interviews. Endless interviews—both for *Odyssey*'s own streaming channel and the more mainstream media present.

Finally, everything seemed to be winding down, and I had a second to pull out my phone. Two hundred and twelve new messages. Holy wow. Congrats from people I didn't even know had my number. Only one message I cared about though.

You did it! So proud of you. I beamed down at my phone, practically feeling the warmth of Alden's pride. Another message was timestamped later than that first one. You look busy. Don't worry about us. Payton is making me get food, and we'll probably head back to the hotel afterward. Text when you can.

"Have you eaten?" Imelda Sanchez came striding back over to me, elegant in a pink suit, but kind, asking as if she really cared about the answer.

"I...uh..." Quickly pocketing my phone, I had to stop and think. "Dinner?"

"Yesterday?" She blinked. "We're getting a late lunch here in our private suite. You'll join us." Her tone didn't brook a lot of room for objection.

Thankfully, it sounded like Alden was willing to wait because I didn't know how one said no to an offer like that. I nodded slowly. "Okay."

"Good. We've got your future to discuss."

"Future?" My pulse sped up on a fresh wave of adrenaline. Oh yeah. I'd almost forgotten. The chance for a seat on the pro

tour. Traveling. Weeks on end. Different cities. No more bumming around Gracehaven. No more Alden.

How patient could I expect him to be if I was gone all the time? The only future I truly wanted was the one waiting for me back at the hotel. “I’m not sure—”

“Shhh.” She held up a long, aristocratic finger. “Hear us out. I’ve got a proposition I think you might be very interested in.”

Chapter Thirty-Four

Alden

Watching Conrad win was easily one of the highlights of my life—the way he came back from the brink of elimination multiple times, finally winning on a trick that was so utterly classic Conrad that I couldn't help but grin. Payton and I high-fived as pandemonium broke out, people rushing into the tournament space to watch the trophy presentation, other people bickering about the outcome, Conrad lost to a sea of cameras and media before his image appeared back on the display, answering questions.

“I couldn't have done it without *Gamer Grandpa* and my friends from the show,” he was saying in response to some question I'd missed. *His friends*. I supposed I was one now, and that made a little frisson of happiness wiggle up my back, but tempered by the reality that whatever I'd been, whatever I wanted from the future, all of that was changed now that he'd won. I loved him, and not only was there no guarantee that he felt the same way, but now love might have to mean letting him go.

“Come on. Food.” Payton steered me away from the row of displays. “He's going to be hours probably, and you don't want to make yourself miserable waiting.”

Actually, I kind of *did*, but I also didn't want to be rude. "He'll be looking for us," I hedged.

"So, text him. Tell him I'm kidnapping you so you don't wear a hole pacing on the carpet here. I know how these things go—the press is going to need him, and then the bigwigs. We'd be in the way even if we managed to fight through the throng in there."

"You don't like me," I pointed out, tone factual, not accusing. "Why do you suddenly want to eat with me?"

"Conrad seems to think you're pretty cool." Payton shrugged. "And I trust Conrad. Maybe the rest of us never gave you enough of a fair chance away from the game. We can do better."

"I...uh...thanks."

"Listen. I know what it's like to be not included. So, let me buy you lunch?"

"I could have a sandwich." I sent Conrad a fast text before following Payton out of the convention center to a hipster sort of joint with twelve varieties of toast, three types of kale, and outrageous prices. Conrad texted while we were waiting for a table that he was having lunch with *the* Imelda Sanchez. I was less jealous and more freaking out on his behalf. And I had to admit, it was nice, not eating alone, stewing over how Conrad was holding up. Payton and I watched the match over again, dissecting everything that happened, and conversing far easier than I would have thought possible a few weeks ago.

After we parted, I made two impulsive side trips. Still no second text from Conrad, so I headed back to our too-quiet hotel room. One more night. Then the trip home. Then...

Who knew.

The uncertainty had me pacing again, and even the distraction of TV didn't help. I'd just landed on a creepy documentary about bees when my phone buzzed. I grabbed for it, but it was Mom calling back as she'd threatened, not Conrad.

"Hi, Mom," I said as I turned the volume down.

"Hello, yourself. I'm hoping you're in a better mood after your match."

"Sort of." I didn't want to get into all the uncertainties clogging up my brain right then. "You saw?"

"We did. And it was no surprise that you did so good in your semifinal. And your friend won! What a testament to the work of Professor Tuttle."

"What a testament to Conrad, you mean. He didn't win because of any of the *Gamer Grandpa* strategies. He won because he's brilliant. All on his own."

"Ah." There was world of understanding in that syllable, and I could almost see her blinking. "He's...uh...a good friend?"

"He's..." *The best*. I scrubbed at my hair. On the TV, a swarm of bees spread out over an apple orchard, not confused in the slightest about *their* futures despite the alarming commentary from the narrator. Inside, my head kept buzzing, the not knowing what would happen with Conrad almost enough to do me in. "I don't know."

"I see. Well, you survived the trip together, right?"

Survived was such a ridiculously inadequate word for the single most significant week of my entire twenty-three years that I had to laugh. "You could say that, yeah."

“You being out there, with more people, doing social things...that makes Mimi and I so happy for you. And all I was getting at earlier was that hopefully you can come back with a fresh mindset. I’ve got a good feeling about a health administration master’s for you. The deadline is soon, but I’ve got some internship possibilities all—”

“I’m not getting a master’s in health administration. I don’t want to be a hospital administrator.” The bees on the TV looked as agitated as I felt. She didn’t seem to have listened to a word I’d said earlier. I loved my moms dearly, but I was done letting them decide my future.

“You don’t?” A lot of her chipper tone faded away, replaced by exasperation. “Well, what *do* you want to do?”

“Professional gambler.” I tried some of the humor that had been coming easier to me, but she didn’t laugh at all. “Sorry. Not that. I *have* been thinking about my future, like I told you I would. But it has to be my plan, not yours. And I think I want to teach.”

“Oh, excellent. I know you worry about publishing, but the writing—”

“Not college,” I interrupted before she could wax poetic about academia and call Mimi over and make this a *thing*. “I’m going to teach kids. I’m going to take a year and get a postbachelor’s teaching certificate. They don’t have one at Gracehaven, but the state university—”

“You want to teach *elementary*? But you’re so smart. And the pay... Maybe a master’s in educational admin? Like teach a few years, then work on being a principal or something important—”

“Being a teacher is plenty important.” My voice was as firm as I’d ever been with her. “I’m not in it for the big bucks either. Enough to get a few *Odyssey* cards—”

“Alden...”

“And enough to stop living at home. Obviously. Cards. Rent. I don’t need some complicated, prestigious lifestyle. That was always more about you guys than me. I just wanted to help kids. And now I still can. Someone has to teach them to think logically. And I think I might be good at it.” I flashed back to the kid I’d helped at breakfast at the Kansas motel. His mom had seemed plenty willing to believe I was a teacher. There had been other moments this last week too, little reminders of the dreams I’d once had, the kid I’d been, and the future I could still have if only I was brave enough to try. Trying to shut down more back-and-forth, I hardened my tone, adding, “This is the direction I’m going to take.”

She was quiet a long moment, and I could almost hear her considering and discarding ways to get me to reconsider or to reshape my plans.

“If that’s what you truly want...” She sighed, then gentled her tone. “And you’re not going to keep chasing the professional *Odyssey* player dream? I suppose teaching is more realistic than spending your days with the game, even if you are impressive at it.”

“Oh, I’m still going to play. But going pro was always more of a long-shot thing, and besides, Professor Tuttle’s going to need me to stick around, break in some new players for his group, now that Conrad’s leaving—” My voice wobbled a bit on that word right as I heard the sound of the door lock.

“Honey, are you okay? Do you need—”

“No. I’m fine,” I said hurriedly as a weary-looking Conrad let himself into the room, carrying a giant trophy along with his usual bag, which was bulging with papers. I flipped off the bee documentary and rushed toward him. To Mom, I said, “Can I call you back later?”

“Of course.” While not as chipper as earlier in the conversation, there was something to her resigned tone that reassured me. I’d stood up to them and the world hadn’t ended. For the first time, my future was my own, and that victory was worth a lot, even if it meant letting her down. I had to trust in myself.

Ending the call with her, I turned to Conrad. “Sorry. My mom. She and Mimi watched the live streams.”

I left out the gist of our argument, not wanting to unload on him with so much still uncertain between us. Hopefully, there would be time later to tell him all about my epiphany, tell him how I’d finally managed to free myself from their expectations and plans, determine my own path. But right then, the only path I cared about was the one forward with him.

Setting his stuff down, Conrad stood in front of me, eyes darting around like he wasn’t quite sure where to look. “My mom watched too. Weird as heck, but apparently Cassie got her to watch the live streams. She said congrats.”

I tried to school my expression, but my eyes flew wide open at that. I knew how complicated his family situation was, all his tangled emotions, and while I had considerable ire of my own toward them, the only reaction that really mattered was his.

“That’s... How do you feel about that?”

“Angry.” He shrugged before rubbing the back of his neck. “Which I know is stupid, but it’s how I feel. It’s too little too late. Where was she all year? I *needed* someone.”

“I know.” Moving slowly, I reached out and rubbed his arm, relieved when he didn’t flinch away. “It’s okay to be angry. I’d be angry too. And for what it’s worth, I’m sorry you were so alone. I wish I’d realized. Wish I could have helped. Wish we’d...”

I couldn’t finish the thought, couldn’t give voice to the longing inside me. It felt like we’d wasted so much time, and now seconds were ticking away. We could have connected so much sooner.

“Maybe it took the trip.” Conrad had apparently added mind reading to his bag of new tricks. “And that’s okay. We got here, you know?”

“Yeah.” It didn’t feel like so much of a victory to me, not with him slipping away before I’d ever had a chance to really enjoy having him.

“I’m sorry.” Matching my gesture, he rubbed my upper arm. “For earlier. I was a jerk. And I said a lot of stuff. I was scared and confused, but that’s not an excuse. I was mean to you, and I don’t ever want to be mean to you.”

“It’s okay,” I said even though it wasn’t, not entirely.

“I shouldn’t have run. I’m sorry for that. And for thinking you threw the game. I just couldn’t believe I’d actually done it, but I wasn’t fair to you.”

“You weren’t.” I had to agree from a purely factual level. “I thought you trusted me. We promised. I’m not ever going to break a promise I made you.”

“I do trust you. I do. I just...I let my fear get the better of me.” He rubbed circles on my biceps, a warm touch that went a long way toward melting my confused jumble of emotions.

“And I did kind of...blindsided you.” I didn’t know how else to apologize for blurting out the l-word.

“Maybe a little. But that’s not such a bad thing. I had some time to think, and perhaps that’s what scared me the most. Knowing that I really did want you to win and then believing that you wanted that for me too. Realizing what that meant, what’s between us. I didn’t want to feel that way. I don’t want to l—” His voice trailed off abruptly, as if the word itself was painful, as if he couldn’t let himself say it, let alone believe in it. “I don’t want to *feel* for you.”

“It’s okay if you don’t.” I tried to sound firm, not defensive. The last thing I wanted was to guilt him into some sort of declaration.

“I do though. I...care for you. So much.” Pulling me closer, he claimed my mouth in a tender kiss. As usual with us, what started as soft and slow quickly ramped up until we both were breathing hard. “Sorry,” he whispered between kisses. “So sorry.”

“Not mad. I forgive you,” I said against his lips, surprised at how true it was, but I couldn’t carry a grudge against him. I knew I maybe should have made him work harder at an apology, but I just didn’t have it in me. Maybe he couldn’t say the words, but I believed him that he cared. Believed him that he’d been scared, and I couldn’t fault him for that. No matter where we went from here, I didn’t want to stay angry at him. “And it all worked out. You won.”

Frowning, he stepped back. “That is *not* all that matters. Not to me. Knowing you were there, cheering for me, that meant

everything, but I'd rather have you than that trophy over there."

"You've got me." My voice was thick. He might never know how completely I meant those words. "And you would have had me if you'd lost too. I meant more... You came back. You didn't let the fear beat you. You came back to play. Came back to *me*."

I had to look away in order to get all that out, and he cupped my face, brought our lips together. "Always."

If all our earlier kisses had been little peeks at how good things could be between us, this one was an oracle, a glimpse of a less-than-certain future, but one I wanted desperately. It was the sort of kiss that made everything else fade away—food, water, shelter, nothing else mattered except that kiss. There was little I wouldn't give up to be able to keep kissing him. Wrapping my arms around his strong shoulders, I clung to him, let the kiss burn past all the doubt and uncertainty of the last few hours until there was only heat and need.

"Need..." he panted against my lips. "We need to talk."

"We did." I tried to pull him down for another kiss.

"More, I mean. I need to tell you—"

"Later." I had a feeling he was going to tell me about winning a spot on the pro tour, and that was a conversation I just wasn't ready for, not when we'd just made up, not when my heart was so full of his tender words. I wasn't ready to have that all snatched away from me or to get bogged down in depressing logistics. No. There was a moment here, and I was going to seize it.

I claimed his mouth again, swallowing his protest until he was groaning. "Okay, okay. You win."

“Maybe we both do.” God, I hoped I was right, and I had to kiss him again before the doubts rose up.

Eventually, we staggered toward the closest bed, still kissing, losing clothing in the process, until we were lying together, and it felt like it had been years, not hours since I’d felt his skin like this.

“Wait,” I managed to gasp as his hands got the sort of adventurous I dearly loved.

“Wait?” He frowned down at me, balanced on his forearm. “This isn’t good?”

“This is awesome,” I assured him. Crap. He wasn’t making this easy. “I...uh...earlier... I bought...*stuff*. If you want to... *you know*.”

He blinked. “Getting you to say the words might be even more fun than the doing.” Laughing, he lightly tickled me before sobering. “But we don’t have to. Plenty of people don’t go there, even when they’ve been together a long time. And not everyone likes it.”

“But you do, right?” I wasn’t giving up on this so easily.

“Yeah. I’ll be honest though... I’ve done other stuff a lot more. I like it, but it’s the sort of thing you need to be sure about. It’s...intimate. Hard to explain, but it’s...personal, no matter which side you’re on. Helps to be sure about who you’re with too.”

“I’m sure about you,” I persisted, tugging him back closer. “And if this is my one chance, I really want it to be you.”

“This is *not* your one chance. There will be plenty of other chances.”

I didn't want to think about that right then. Other chances might come my way, but there was only one him. "I want it to be you. And if all we have is this night—"

"We do *not* only have tonight." He gave me a stern look. "Don't talk like we're on the *Titanic*, man. We have plenty of other nights coming our way. Tomorrow night for one, and the one after that too. There's no rush. It doesn't have to be tonight."

"Well, yeah, we've got the trip back to Gracehaven. But..." I swallowed hard, trying to not let emotions overwhelm me and failing miserably. "We should make the most of the time we've got, you know? Not waste any."

"Alden." He cupped my face again, made me look at him. "When I say we've got time, I mean, *we've got time*. I'm not going anywhere. I'm sorry I was a jerk earlier. But you've got me. Tonight and tomorrow and all the nights after that too."

It was a sweet thing to say, maybe the sweetest ever. I wasn't entirely sure I believed him, but I loved him all the more for saying that, for wanting to be here with me.

"You've got me too. But I'm serious. I want to try. Here. Now."

"Can you be more specific about what you want to try?" His eyes were twinkling enough that I could tell any reluctance he had was more about making me talk dirty to him than serious reservations. "How will I know what to do if you won't say the words?"

"You know." Scampering off the bed, probably looking rather undignified, I got the supplies I'd purchased earlier. Safety first and all that. I'd failed at every outdoor and survival activity the moms had tried to push me toward, but I

did get a healthy appreciation for being prepared. I threw the small paper bag at the bed and missed, which made Conrad laugh all the harder.

“Oh, just come off it and fuck me already, Con.” I retrieved the stuff from the floor and flopped back down next to him. “I want to know what it’s like. I’ve waited *years* for this, and if you need me to chant—”

“No chanting required.” He was still laughing as he pulled me into his embrace. “I mean, appreciated sure—”

“Shut up and kiss me.”

“You’re lucky I love you bossy.” He gave me an affectionate grin right before he claimed my mouth, and I supposed it was almost as good as him saying the actual three words. I was lucky. So lucky. And I wasn’t going to take this moment for granted.

We kissed and touched, and there was a fair bit of laughing—not all his—as we got back to the heated place we’d been before my request had derailed the proceedings. I’d seen porn. I’d read dirty *Odyssey* fanfic. I wasn’t completely unfamiliar with the mechanics of what we were going to do, but it was Conrad and it was me and it was us, and that made it new and wonderful. And awkward. Plenty of that too. Bumped knees and too-ticklish ribs and not-warm-enough hands, but there was also magic.

So much magic.

“Want you. So much,” he gasped somewhere between kissing my neck and uncovering unexplored nerve endings along my sternum. The desire in his silvery-blue eyes was everything I’d ever wanted, more than I’d dared hope for.

“Need you.” *Want* wasn’t enough for what I felt. *I needed.*

And maybe he did too because we were kissing again, mouths hungry and feverish. His hand skimmed up and down my sides, then he shifted, using his fingers to skirt all the parts that were straining for attention, dipping lower. There. Yes, there.

The lube bottle made an embarrassing noise, but I was too turned on to echo his unsteady laughter. Then there was no room for laughter anymore, him kissing me while his talented fingers explored and teased. Magic.

“Now.” It was a good thing he liked bossy because my tone was rather commanding.

“Yeah.” His breath was warm on my cheek as he whispered near my ear. “Tell me how you want it. What’s your favorite fantasy?”

“You.” I wasn’t playing coy—it was him. This moment. It was everything. I wasn’t the type for detailed fantasies to start with, but he’d starred in more than a few of the ones I did have over the years, filthy bits of self-indulgence that always embarrassed me afterward and that I tried to forget. As if I could. And I didn’t have to be embarrassed anymore. He was here, and we were really going to do this. “You. Just like this.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

Conrad

For all his bossiness, Alden wasn't giving me a ton of direction. But when he said, "You," and our eyes met, my body vibrated, as if there were more feelings than my skin could contain, so many emotions coursing through me. His trust in me was almost overwhelming. But I believed him, completely.

"Me too," I admitted. "Didn't want to let myself, but yeah... Wanted you so much."

"Same." He moved restlessly against the mattress. "Now. Please. No more waiting."

"No more waiting. Can't believe we're here." I peppered his face with kisses before sitting enough to take care of the condom. "Can't believe this is real life."

"Oh, it's real." His voice was tight as he arched up toward me, his eagerness making me the impatient one. But I knew enough to go slow. Super slow. As slow as—

"Killing me. Come on." And then his back bowed again, body meeting mine, and we were moving together in earnest, all ancient rhythm and brand-new sensations, mingling together. My mouth found his again, swallowing his moans. Despite wanting it to last forever, it was too good to draw out,

impossible to keep control. There was no holding back with him, not anymore. He had all of me, everything I had to give.

And I finally believed that was enough, that I could be enough for him. Exactly as he was to me. He was everything to me. Center of my universe, and not simply in that moment. I felt so, so much for him. More than I could ever put in words, so I tried to show him with my body, telling him over and over how much he meant to me.

Even without me directing him, he wiggled a hand between us, and him knowing what he wanted and going for it cracked whatever was left of my resolve.

“There. Don’t stop.” His voice broke.

As if I could, as if I’d want to, as if...

All thought ceased as everything peaked at once. Him. Me. Us. Emotions. Bodies. Futures. Pasts. Nothing made any sense, and yet there was a stark clarity that had never been there before. Pleasure shoved every doubt from my brain, pushed past logic and reason until there was only him.

“Never moving again,” I panted, collapsing next to him, gathering him close. We were both a mess, but I was too boneless to care.

“I’m inclined to agree.” His eyes were closed, his face relaxed, speech dreamy.

“You okay?” I kissed his forehead.

“So okay.” Sighing happily, he snuggled into my side. “I mean, eventually, I’m going to want a shower, but right now... Pretty perfect.”

“Perfect is right. Shower sounds good.” Eyelids heavy, I yawned.

My next conscious thought was a warm washcloth brushing over my skin, shower-damp Alden leaning over me on the bed, wet hair sprinkling little droplets onto my stomach.

“Crap,” I said, slowly rousing. “How long did I nap?”

“Not that long. I dozed off a little too. You looked too peaceful to drag into the shower.”

“Are you still doing ok—”

“Conrad.” He silenced me with a firm kiss. “I’m not made of tissue paper. I’m fine. Promise. I wanted that. It was... everything.”

“Yeah it was.” I tugged him back down to me, wet head and towels and all. “We probably need dinner, but I’m still good with the whole never-leaving-bed-again plan.”

“You’ll have to move. Eventually.” There was sadness in his eyes that hadn’t been there earlier. The conversation he’d bailed on came rushing back, all the things we’d left unsaid, but this time I wasn’t going to let him squirm away from some real talk.

“Hey.” I kissed his temple. “I meant what I said. You’ve got me. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Except the pro tour.” He sighed before painting a patently fake smile on his face. “Which you deserve. And I’m happy for you—”

“Liar.”

“No, I *am*. I want you to have that dream. You worked hard for it. You earned your shot. If I’m sounding reluctant, it’s not because I don’t want it for you. More that I’m sad about letting you go.”

“Maybe my dream’s changed. Maybe you don’t have to let me go.”

“Don’t be silly.” He propped himself up on an elbow to stare down at me. “The check from this win won’t last forever. If they offered you a slot on the pro tour, you’ve got to take it. And maybe we could make long distance work or something, but you can’t turn it down because of me.”

“No, but I could turn it down because of me.” I held up a hand before he could open his mouth to protest. “Cutthroat competition was never my big thing. I wanted recognition and validation and financial stability. And as it turns out, I didn’t need *Odyssey* to tell me that I’m a success and a good person. That was up to me all along.”

“I get that,” he said softly. “I thought I needed this win for direction, validation like you said, a reward for this last year of awful. Which wasn’t as bad as yours—”

“Not a competition,” I reminded him, ruffling his damp hair. “The whole not-getting-into-medical-school thing sucked for you. I get it.”

“Anyway, I thought the game could be my new direction, but as it turned out, what I really needed was the courage to stand up for myself, to go after my own dreams.”

“Like us?” I couldn’t resist fishing a little.

“Like us.” He gave me an indulgent smile. “But not just that. I told the moms this afternoon that I’m not going on to the master’s in health administration program. Or doing a PhD. I want to get my teaching certificate. Work with kids.”

“Hold that thought. I mean, that’s a great plan. And a fabulous goal because you really are awesome with kids, but maybe I’ve got a better offer. For both of us.”

“Oh?” He frowned. “I don’t think I could go with you on tour—”

“Not that.” I smiled at him. “Working at Odyssey headquarters in NYC. That’s what my lunch with Imelda Sanchez was about. Turns out she’s a big fan of *Gamer Grandpa*. And apparently she’s been watching me play the whole tournament. They say I can do the pro tour if I want, but they’ve got a job for me in game development if I’d rather work with them directly.”

“Even without your degree?”

“Even without my degree.” I’d had to ask, of course, but they hadn’t seem to care at all, waving those concerns off, saying they were more interested in how I played the game than any credentials. “And they have tuition assistance. I could probably finish my last two years part-time. Might take a while, but I’ll get there. And they have health insurance, which the pro tour doesn’t. I could stop paying out-of-pocket for my meds.”

“Oh, that would be awesome.” He bit his lip. “And it’s what? An hour-and-a-half train ride? Hour drive? I could maybe come visit you sometimes...”

“Sometimes.” I shoved his arm. “More like you could come too. They’ve got job offers for all four of us. And they want to bring Professor Tuttle on as a consultant. They’re developing a new top-secret product—introductory decks and game play packages aimed at younger players. Kids. So you’d still be working with kids, just maybe more indirectly than a classroom. But they’re going to have play test groups and stuff. They’ll need someone to teach the kids the rules.”

“Wow.” He swallowed hard, fingers twisting the bed covers. “Is it an all-or-nothing offer? Like you need all of us to say yes

so you get the job?”

Some of my giddiness fled. He wasn't as over-the-moon as I'd hoped. “No. I'm going to accept, and not just because of health insurance. Not gonna lie, the proximity to you and Gracehaven helps, but also it's *Odyssey*. And I remember playing as a kid, first falling in love with the game. It would be awesome to get more kids into the game. And yeah, I want to work with you, but if you want to do the teaching certificate, you're right, it's not that far. I'd still see you—way more than *sometimes* too.”

“Good.” He nodded, and I could almost see all the gears whirring in his impressive brain, weighing all the variables and possibilities. “Jasper's probably going to want to wait for graduation. Payton...who knows.”

“But you?” I tried to tell him with my eyes how important this was to me. To us. “I don't care as much about them and what they decide, but you...you matter.”

“Really? You'd really want to work with me every day? You don't think you'd get tired of me?”

“Never.” I got what he was really asking, and I pulled him in for a fast kiss. “Like I said, teach if you want to, but I think that playing *Odyssey* together all day and then doing that-which-Alden-can't-name all night sounds pretty perfect. I'm not going to get sick of you.”

“Hmm.” He licked his lips.

“Just think about it?” I wasn't above begging. I had a vision of a tiny place in the city, bigger bed than kitchen, him in it, endless string of days and nights together, and I wanted it so bad it hurt.

“Yeah.” He nodded solemnly. “I can do that. I can think.”

“And you’re good at thinking.” I gave him another quick kiss. “The Odyssey folks want to have breakfast with us in the morning before we hit the road. And I might have already promised to bring you. Keep an open mind, okay?”

His eyes went adorably wide. “We’re having breakfast with Imelda Sanchez? For real?”

“For real. They’ve been watching you too. All the bigwigs had great things to say about us. My enthusiasm. Your strategy. We’d be an unstoppable team.”

“Well, we haven’t killed each other yet. I suppose that’s a good sign. And if we make it back to Gracehaven in one piece, maybe that’s a good sign too.”

“We will. And surviving two weeks on the road together, that’s got to be like four months in regular relationship time.”

“Ha. Let’s see if you survive a brunch with the moms.” He laughed before his expression turned more vulnerable. “If you still want to, I mean. And you don’t have to crash with Jasper or Payton either. I’ve got room.”

“Enough for me and the goat?” I gestured at the other bed where the goat had been that morning. “And hey! You got the goat a friend!”

A frog soldier plush toy now sat next to the goat. Alden looked away, blushing. “I thought he needed a friend. You said he can’t be an only *kid*. And you needed a prize for winning.”

“We can always use one more mascot. So, me, the goat, and the frog? You sure you want us to sleep over?”

“It’s not a *huge* place, but yeah, if you want, there’s room.”

“I totally want. And I’m more concerned with whether you’ve got a big bed than the rest of your place.” I winked at

him. Funny how I'd gone from near homeless twenty-four hours ago to having all sorts of options today, but there was only one option that I truly wanted, and that was more time with Alden.

His blush said he was still unsure about believing me, but his kiss said he wanted to, and that was enough for me. I'd just dedicate myself to proving to us both that we were worth trusting in, that we'd make it, and that our future was nothing but bright.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Alden

“Is it wrong that I’m really happy to see this car?” Conrad asked as he carefully arranged the goat, the frog, and his giant trophy in the back seat.

“Me too,” I had to admit. We hadn’t even visited the car in the parking garage since our arrival on Thursday, and now, late morning on Monday, I was beyond excited to be nearing the end of our Las Vegas stay. I was ready to hit the road again, and yeah, Black Jack had totally grown on me, to the point that I gave the door a fond pat as I closed it.

“And I’m running out of shirts.” He grinned as he tossed his bulging backpack into the trunk. “I’m finding us a place near a laundromat tonight.”

“You are?” I held up my now-dog-eared folder of papers. “I thought I was in charge of navigation?”

“Yeah, but I’m the one with the cash burning a hole in my pocket.” He grinned as he headed for the driver’s side.

“You are the winner,” I conceded. “But you need to save—”

“And I will. Promise. But don’t you want to take our time getting back? Have a little fun? Remember Colorado?”

“How could I forget?” Despite the empty parking garage, I still blushed at the memory of all those kisses.

“See?” He made a pleading face as I slid into the passenger seat. “Admit it. You’re in no hurry to get back to our real lives.”

Real lives. I wasn’t even sure I knew what that was anymore. I felt more real right here and now, about to head out on another road trip with Conrad, than I had in the twenty-three years leading up to this moment. Was my real life back home? All the expectations and pressures? The feeling left out? The anxiety and worries?

And was real life for Conrad his friends and parties? The life he’d had before everything went down with his parents. Or was it the dead-end jobs and borrowed room? I wasn’t sure I liked either of those scenarios. I wanted to believe in *this* Conrad, the one I’d come so far with.

Something of my indecision must have shown on my face because Conrad frowned. “Or are you? You miss your moms? Your *Odyssey* online friends? Whatever else you had planned for your summer?”

I couldn’t lie to him, but my voice still came out as little more than a whisper. “You. You’re the only plan I’ve got for my summer. The only one that matters at least.”

His face softened. “Ditto. And I know we’ve got to get the car back to Professor Tuttle eventually, but he said last night to take our time. So let’s do that. There will be plenty of time for all manner of boring adult stuff waiting for us.”

“Adulting might be overrated.” I could say that after a morning spent having fancy breakfast with the *Odyssey* bigwigs and listening to their pitch to us for jobs. Conrad had

proven to be a surprisingly shrewd negotiator, not leaping at their first salary-and-benefits offer and working out a flexible start date.

For myself, I'd left things more open-ended. I was tempted by the idea of working for the game I loved, but I also had a vision of myself in a classroom surrounded by kids, using the game to teach logic and reasoning, sharing some of my favorite books, being the sort of teacher I'd loved in school. The past week had given me that dream back, and I was reluctant to let it go, even for an opportunity this good.

Conrad seemed to get that, not pressuring me to accept the offer and asking supportive questions while we'd treated ourselves to pizza delivery the night before. But we hadn't been able to totally escape the convention and stay in a blissed-out cocoon of good feelings. There had been more interview requests for Conrad, more friends to talk to, and congratulations to receive.

This, right here and now, the two of us alone, felt *right*, and I couldn't deny either of us the sort of fun that had brought us together in the first place. "Okay. Let's do it. Let's take the long way home."

"You've got it." He beamed at me as he put the car in reverse. "Set a course for somewhere with a pool and laundry facilities."

"And stars," I added, getting into his plan.

"Definitely stars." His wink promised far more than just astronomy lessons, and warmth spread throughout my body.

"We could film some content for the professor by the pool. He needs a reaction video to you winning."

“What’s the opposite of a death scene?” He laughed. “Our audience won’t know what to make of me as a winner.”

“You’ve always been a winner,” I said firmly. “And you didn’t need the tournament to prove it either.”

“Easy for *you* to say. I’m not as up on the rules as you, but I’m pretty sure it’s like a boyfriend requirement or something to say nice stuff like that.”

I liked being called his boyfriend far more than I should have, practically preening in my seat as we headed out of downtown Vegas.

“I mean it,” I insisted. “You don’t need this job either. You don’t have to prove anything. Not to me at least.”

“Thanks.” His voice was thick, and his mouth opened and closed a few times, as though there was something more he wanted to say but couldn’t. He still hadn’t said the words back to me. Not that I was pining for them or anything, but I wanted him to trust me with his heart, trust that this thing between us wasn’t going to end up hurting either of us in the long run.

“Maybe I had to prove something to *me*,” he said at last. “And I did. And you’re right that it wasn’t winning that did it. Or landing the job. Or at least not only those things. I had to learn to believe in myself again. And that’s on you and the trip more than the tournament. You mainly. You’ve...taught me a lot.”

“Thanks. And you too.” My voice was rough. I wanted to say the words again, but I didn’t want him to feel obligated to say them back. But then the car stopped at a red light right before the interstate on-ramp, and our eyes met. Held. And maybe he wasn’t able to say it yet, but I *felt* it, down to my dusty shoes.

And when he grinned at me, I grinned back.

“Here’s to another adventure,” he said as the light turned green, and I knew, deep inside, in that place where my most secret desires lived, that I would follow this guy anywhere.

* * *

“It’s so big. Even the second time seeing it, I can’t get over it.”

“That’s what he said.” Conrad cackled next to me as we waited in line for our turn to take one of the little pods up to the top of the Arch. We were still taking our time getting home, and he’d promised me a trip to the top of the Arch, so here we were. Dusk was starting to fall, and hopefully we’d get a good view of both the setting sun and the city lights.

I wanted to grab his hand but settled for standing close enough to brush shoulders. We had kissed our way through Utah and Colorado again, but most of that was in remote scenic vistas and national parks, with no audience. Here, I wasn’t so sure about the PDA, so I’d save it for our hotel room later.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Mr. Mind Reader said. “You’re making me regret signing up for the riverboat dinner cruise thing.”

“Hey, that was your idea.” I bumped my shoulder into his, both to protest and because touching him even casually felt so good. I hadn’t let Conrad try gambling with his tournament winnings, but I had let him have more of a say in where we’d stopped for nights, like the downtown St. Louis hotel we nabbed on one of the deal sites.

“I know. I generally have good ones.” He gave me a goofy grin, which I couldn’t help but return.

“You do.”

“Including—”

“Now boarding the tram,” an announcement cut Conrad off, but I knew what he’d been about to say, bringing up the idea of us working together again. We’d been on something of a big decision moratorium the past few days, enjoying the trip like he’d wanted, and not talking too much about our futures and what was waiting for us back home.

I still worried he’d regret passing on the pro tour, missing out on the chance for big money, fame, and travel. But then, I worried about a lot of things more than he did. Which was okay, and part of how we balanced each other out. I was slow and cautious, and he was already floating around the deep end. I made sure we didn’t drown, and he made sure we actually got in the water and had fun.

And he did have good ideas—posing the goat and frog on everything from the red rocks of Utah to pine tree stumps in Colorado to make Professor Tuttle smile and collecting silly souvenirs for the professors and my moms from places like an old-time mine in Colorado. Notably, we did not have anything from Kansas to bring back, not even good news. We’d sped through Kansas because Conrad still wasn’t up for dealing with his family. His mom hadn’t shown much willingness to truly reconcile other than her congratulatory texts. And it wasn’t hard to see why they hurt so badly for Conrad.

We boarded the tram, which was actually little pods with flat white seats and room for three or four people each. As luck would have it, we were alone in ours.

“Nervous?” he asked me as the doors slid shut behind us.

“A little.” It was far easier to admit things to him now, to not try to hold it together all the time around him. And weirdly

enough, knowing that I didn't have to do that, didn't have to be perfect, actually helped me be less anxious overall.

Sliding over from opposite me to right beside me instead, he took my hand and squeezed it. "Too bad there are probably security cameras..."

"We are not making out here." I didn't pull away, though, instead leaning in toward him, my earlier worries about PDA lessening.

"Let the security guard see us cuddling. If it keeps you from freaking out in this tiny space—" There was a waver behind Conrad's bravado that made me cut him off with a snort.

"Me, huh? You're not the least bit anxious yourself?"

"Okay. Maybe a little. This is a little weird, and if I think too hard about how high—"

"How about we don't think about that," I said sternly, as much to help me as him. Without warning, the tram shuddered to a halt. "Are we at the top?"

"Don't think so." Conrad worried his lower lip with his teeth.

"The tram is experiencing a momentary delay. Please stay calm," an announcement crackled through tinny speakers.

"Easy for them to say." Taking a shuddery breath, I tried to quiet my rising adrenaline. The tram rocked slightly, an unwelcome reminder of how far up we were, how trapped we could be. Suddenly, it seemed even smaller and more rickety.

Pressing a kiss to my temple, Conrad wrapped an arm around my shoulders. "So this would probably be a bad place to have a serious discussion about our future, right?"

“The worst,” I managed through tight lips. “How about we live through this first?”

“We have not come this far to meet our demise before we even reach the top.” His tone was rather philosophical, as if he was talking about more than just the Arch.

“I know. I just don’t want to crash.” Like him, I didn’t simply mean this ride. “I’d rather do things slowly. Cautiously. Make sure we’ve got a safety net. Plan B. The last thing I want to do is choose something that ends up being the thing that tears us apart.”

“I get you. And I don’t want that either. I want to stay together. Whatever it takes. And if that means going slowly for you, then we go slowly. Investigate your teaching certificate options. You’re going to be an amazing teacher, and I’m pretty sure the job opportunity will still be there later, and if it’s not, we’ll deal with that too. You being comfortable is a big deal to me.”

“Thanks.” His words meant more to me than I could ever properly express. “You know, there are teaching certificate programs in the city, too, I’m sure. Maybe it wouldn’t have to mean me back in Gracehaven and you alone in the city.”

“Yeah?” His smile was so cautious that it made my insides tremble with how very sweet he was, how incredibly lucky *I* was. The tram rocked again, but this time, I didn’t panic, the small space more than filled by good feelings as he continued, “I *am* going to need a roommate, one way or another. And you’ve already vetted me. Plus, you as a roommate versus a stranger means one less bed.”

“I would hope so.” I gave him a stern look before turning more thoughtful again, rolling with his idea. “One bed. Room

for our mascots and our card collections. Not living with the moms. It could maybe work.”

“Lose the ‘maybe.’ It would work.”

“You don’t think I’m being difficult, not wanting to do it all at once—live together and work together and play together?”

“Is ‘play’ your euphemism for—”

“*Conrad*. I’m being serious here.”

“I know. And I appreciate that. No, you’re not being difficult. You’re being pragmatic. And you’ve got your own future to worry about, your own dreams. The way I see it, as long as that future includes me in some way—”

“It will,” I hurried to assure him, no longer able to picture a time without him.

“See? Then we’re both already winners.”

Our lips met right as the tram lurched back to life, and we pulled apart with a start, both laughing. “Let’s hope we’re going up.”

“We are.” His mouth twisted back and forth a few times. “And even if we’re not...I love you.”

“Wow.” I breathed his admission in, let it ground me. Other than me blurting it out at the tournament, I hadn’t said the words again. We’d come close in bed, but I didn’t really count sex talk. Or—*Crap*. “Wait. Is this some sort of near-death confession?”

“No. I keep wanting to tell you, but the moment keeps being not perfect.”

“I don’t need perfect. Just you.”

“I know.” He gave me a tender smile. “Finally decided to stop waiting for perfect. I wanted to say it back at the tournament too. I was just...”

“Freaked out?”

“Yeah. That. Scared to let myself feel that. Scared at what it meant. Because loving you means maybe losing you, and I’m not sure I could deal with that.”

“You’re not going to lose me.” I squeezed his hand.

“And it means we could hurt each other too,” he whispered. “Love...it’s big. Real. Tends to mean someone gets screwed over—”

“Wrong kind of screwing.” Teasing, I took a page from his book before sobering. “I get that. But I’m not going to hurt you, Con. At least not on purpose. And if one of us gets hurt by accident, I really want to think we can deal. No matter what. Not stop loving each other just because it gets hard sometimes.”

“We can deal.” He leaned in right as the doors opened. Reluctantly, Conrad pulled away. “And look, we made it.”

“We did.” Heart full, I gave him the world’s fastest kiss, possible onlookers and all. “We made it to the top.”

And we had, coming so much further than I would have thought possible even a week or two earlier—more than I would have let myself dream, even in my most private of wishes. I never would have thought we’d make it *here*. But here we were, rubbing shoulders and taking selfies on the observation deck, city sprawled beneath us. And when I looked at the pictures, in his eyes, I saw the future, too, vast and wide open, full of twinkling lights and discoveries yet to

come. And us together for all of it, perched on top of the world, ready to take it on, one mile marker at a time.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Conrad

Six Months Later

“I trusted you, man.” I frowned.

“As you should.” Alden bumped feet with me as the train chugged and swayed. “I followed a recipe.”

“I’m still nervous.”

“About what I did to the pie?” His forehead creased adorably as he balanced the bag with all the food on his lap. The train heading into New Jersey was packed with holiday revelers, everyone rushing to make it home for Thanksgiving. We weren’t the only ones with food, and the car was full of cinnamon and other spices, warm homey scents that should have calmed me but didn’t.

“Not that.”

“About my moms?” He nudged my foot again. My boots were new, still stiff, far better quality than my old kicks, which hadn’t survived the summer. “They love you, and you know it. It’s entirely possible they may renounce me and adopt you instead. And we’re back in the carriage house again tonight. You like it there.”

“I do.” I tried to tell him with my eyes just how fond those memories were. We’d spent a good chunk of the summer tangled up on the bed in his little house behind his moms’ place, waiting for my job to finalize and all the details—so many details—to fall into place. Luckily, Alden was good at logistics and strategy because without him, I’m not sure I would have coped with all the minutiae that went into starting a new life.

Of course, he was also largely responsible for that new life, since without him, none of this would have been possible. Oh, he liked to tell me that I’d done it all on my own, winning the tournament, getting the job at Odyssey, but I knew better. I never would have made it to Vegas, much less to here without him. Beneath the bags, I grabbed his gloved hand. Outside, a light dusting of snow was coming down.

“It’s supposed to snow heavier this weekend.” I sucked in a deep breath. “And I don’t know whether to hope it grounds planes or not.”

“Ah.” Alden’s eyes were full of understanding. “You’re not worried about the pie at all. This is about your mom coming.”

“Yeah.” I looked out the window as the city gave way to more suburbs and smaller towns as we approached Gracehaven. My mom and sisters were coming to the city to see the seasonal decorations, take in a few holiday Broadway shows, and oh yeah, see me. It would be my first time seeing them in a year and half or so, and *worried* was a vast understatement.

We’d gone from tentative, occasional text messages to a few emails to strained phone conversations. She hadn’t entirely apologized for going along with my dad for so many months, but it was clear she at least wanted something of a relationship

with me, even if he was insisting on still being a jerkwad. I took petty solace in the news that his team had a dismal record this season. If it wasn't for my sisters, I'd hope the school fired his ass. I might be able to rebuild something with my mom, but it would take a lot more than some grunted greeting to make me forgive him.

“Do you want me to skip—”

“No.” I gripped his hand tighter. “You are not skipping dinner with them. You're a part of my life now. A big part. I love you. And they're just going to have to deal with that if they want to see me.”

“Good. And if it's too awful, we just leave early. Head home.”

“I like the sound of that.” I still wasn't tired of saying *home* and it meaning him. We had a little studio walk-up in Brooklyn, near the subway for my commute into the city and his to his classes. He was deep into his first semester of the teaching certificate, pulling all A's, because of course he was. As of a few weeks ago, he was also working part-time at Odyssey with some play test groups. Imelda and her team had finally worn him down. It wasn't my group or my project, but it was still nice having him along for my commute and lunch break a couple of days a week. He was hedging his bets, still deciding whether he'd teach at the end of his program or work full-time for Odyssey.

My money was on teaching, as he did seem to really love it, already looking ahead to his student-teaching rotations. And that was okay. He could have his thing and I had mine, and I really did love the project I was on at Odyssey. The work was long and hard, and not the same as playing cards all day at all, with endless decisions and details to sort out, but I loved it.

Chances were good that Jasper would be joining me in the spring after graduation, and I got to see Professor Tuttle occasionally too.

“Now arriving at Gracehaven,” the train announced, and we gathered up our stuff. Speaking of our friends, they were all waiting for us after the short walk from the train station to Arthur’s game store. He’d closed early for a Wednesday night, but stayed open for his best customers for a sort of “friendsgiving” potluck, breaking his no-food rules for the one night. Tomorrow, we’d have Thanksgiving with Alden’s moms and his sisters and then the weekend gauntlet with my family, but tonight was all about friends, food, and playing cards.

“You think you’d be sick of the game by now,” Jasper joked as we made our way into the store. His sister had made a full recovery, and it would be a happy holiday at his house too.

“Never,” I assured him. “And you’ll see—there’s almost no time to actually play. I’ve been looking forward to this for weeks.”

“The *Gamer Grandpa* audience is going to love seeing you back.” Payton slapped my shoulder. They were being cagey about whether they wanted to work for Odyssey or not. Rumor was that they too were going to finally graduate in the spring, but of course they refused to confirm.

“They’re right.” Walking slowly with a cane, Professor Tuttle made his way to us. “Now, the audience has missed you both. But you don’t want to play each other, right?”

Alden and I exchanged a glance. Over the months, we’d progressed from not being able to play each other at all, to playing for silly little favors, to actually sitting down and having real matches on the rare occasions when we were both free. In fact, it was almost something of a treat, finishing off a

long week of work with a few rounds with him at our tiny table before a few more rounds in the bed that took up most of the floor space in the studio.

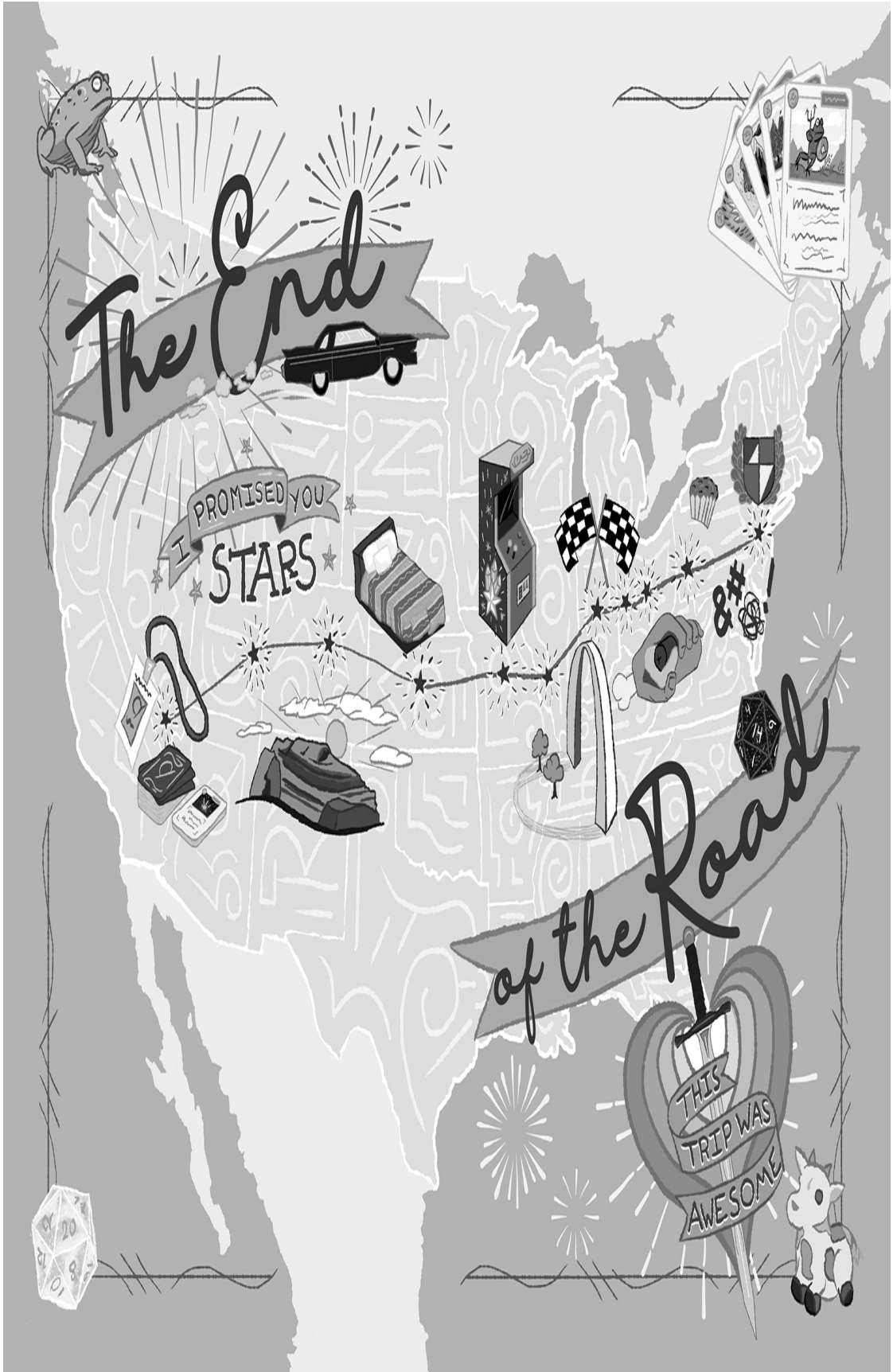
“Bring it on,” he said with a slow smile as he added our food offerings to the overflowing table filled with pies and casseroles. “I’ve got a new deck he’s going to *hate*.”

“Oh, we’ll see about that.” I grinned back. “I’ve got more than a few tricks up my sleeve.”

“Looking forward to it.” He nodded firmly, and I believed him. We’d play for the cameras, play with our friends, and no one would keep track of who won and who lost. At the end of the night, we’d hold hands, racing through a snowy, sleepy town to the warm bed waiting for us. I’d tease him about how he never saw my new frog mage coming, and he’d point out that his tinkering strategy had paid off. Still laughing, we’d crawl under the covers and forget about everything other than each other. We’d both already won the biggest prize of all, and no game could ever take that from us.

My old mantra of *one more turn* had become an infinite number of turns, both mundane and earth-shattering, all adding up to a life I wouldn’t trade for anything.





Bonus Content

Behind-the-scenes sketches

Resources

Sneak Peek

Character Sketches



First
rough
sketches
of Conrad -
too similar
to Alden?



Alden





KEY POINT

DIMPLE!!

Alden

ALDEN

Sharp cheekbones
Narrow-ish face
pointed chin/jaw
Stiff posture

Sharp eyes
RBF^{im}

Naturally
arched brows

Overly conscious-
carries himself
like he's standing
at attention.





Kind of a "default"
haircut
Angular face
Thick, naturally
arched brows
Full lips
when smiling,
dimple on the
right
cheekbones

Alden



A little shaggy



Kind of a young Leonard Nimoy!



At the con





☆unicorn hoodie☆



PAYTON
(hangover)



bleh

Resources

Game Shops & Comic Book Shops

Game shops and comic book shops are a great way to meet new people and explore new fandoms. Many host board game nights, roleplaying campaigns, and other cool ways to connect with like-minded people. Don't know where your nearest game shop is? Check out [Comic Shop Locator](#) to find stores near you.

Board Games

Want to know more about board games in particular? [I Need Diverse Games](#) is a nonprofit designed to highlight, boost, and advocate for marginalized groups across the gaming space. [Tabletop Gaymers](#) is also a terrific resource. There are countless YouTube shows and podcasts dedicated to board gaming, including [Girls' Game Shelf](#)—a WOC-run resource for inclusive tabletop gaming—and [Board Game Blitz](#).

geekandsundry.com/shows/tabletop

geekandsundry.com/shows/game-the-game

Roleplaying Games

There are countless resources out there for anyone interested in roleplaying games—from [Dungeons and Dragons](#) to [Pathfinder](#) to [FATE](#) and more! If you want to watch an adventure unfold before you

gather your own party, there are also wildly popular streams of epic, ongoing games to enjoy. [RPG Casts](#) is a great way to find games run by diverse players.

dnd.wizards.com

critrole.com

Card Games

And then of course there are the card games. [Magic: The Gathering](#) is only one of the many, many games you can lose yourself in—both in-person and online. There are many awesome YouTube shows and blogs designed to maximize your card playing enjoyment. Some of our favorites include the [Command Zone](#) and [Tolarian Community College](#). The comedy channel [Loading Ready Run](#) has many skits with broad gamer appeal, including some devoted to card games.

COMING 2021

It's Jasper's turn!



Jasper would do anything for his little sister and the other kids at the children's hospital... including convince a cute but off-limits frenemy to cosplay as their favorite knight. But sometimes make-believe can feel all too real...

Author's Note

As with all my projects, I tried very hard to be accurate and true to the journey Conrad and Alden undertook on multiple levels—the road trip itself but also their personal journey of self discovery. For the road trip, I tried to be accurate with drive times and based most of their stops on actual places with a few notable exceptions. Gracehaven, the college and the town, is my own creation. Marshall, Missouri does indeed have a Wonder Dog museum, but sadly, no longer has an arcade in town. Mary and Blue's Garage is also my own creation. All the game stores and game store owners are fictional—no resemblance to actual stores or their respective owners is intended. I researched extensively, including multiple visits to a variety of stores, and made sure that the towns in question did have game stores, but all the owners are 100 percent fictional characters. Obviously, the book was influenced by multiple trading card games and my experiences playing those games, but *Odyssey* is my own creation for purposes of this book. Massive Odyssey Con is based on multiple different fan and gaming conventions, but no resemblance to actual convention organizers or tournament workers is intended. In my personal experiences, all game store owners, players, convention volunteers and organizers, and content creators have been engaging, helpful, and kind people, and I'm particularly grateful to those who spoke with

me for purposes of the book. Likewise, *Gamer Grandpa* is an entirely fictional creation. I'm so grateful for all the tabletop vloggers out there, but no resemblance to existing shows or creators is intended. Some of my favorite creators include Tolarian Community College, The Command Zone, and Load, Ready, Run along with many other podcasts and vlogs. I'm so grateful to the vibrant gaming community. Finally, I think it's important to note that each neurodiverse individual has their own experiences, mannerisms, background, feelings, medical history, anxieties, and more. In addition to my own experiences, I spoke with a number of individuals as well as health care professionals. And like every character, Alden is a multidimensional, fallible person whose views may not always reflect those of every single other neurodiverse person. Likewise, Conrad's experiences with his parents are his own. But far too many LGBTQIA+ teens and young adults do end up on their own, cut off from family. I am a passionate supporter of things like the Trevor Project designed to help these most vulnerable young people.

Acknowledgments

This book would not be possible without the help and support of so many people. First, thank you to my agent, Deidre Knight, for believing in this project. Next, thank you to Mary Altman and the entire Sourcebooks team for giving this book a home and giving me the freedom to bring this story to life. I am especially appreciative of the art and publicity departments for their tireless efforts on behalf of their authors. Each book is a journey, and that journey is never complete with the first draft. I'm exceptionally grateful for Mary and the rest of the editing team for pushing me to go deeper with the story, really hone in on the core elements of their journey, and helping me to make this something I'm very proud to share. Edie Danford, Wendy Qualls, Karen Stivali, and Melinda Reuter all read early drafts and had fabulous insights for me that enriched the final product. I'm also grateful to those who spoke with me anonymously about neurodiversity and who helped with Alden's journey in particular. My family put up with a lot of late nights and harried interactions during the writing and editing of this book, and I am eternally grateful for their support and enthusiasm for this project. The whole family helped with brainstorming game-play details, and I'm so glad the book brought us together in that way. Finally, thank you to all the booksellers and librarians out there who help us to bring our stories to readers. To all the readers who share our work—

every comment, share, like, review, mention and other support makes all the difference in the world. A special thank-you to the book bloggers, reviewers, and instagrammers who participate in tours, tirelessly review, artfully photograph and otherwise make our book community such a vibrant place. And thank you for reading—without readers, there could be no books, and I am grateful for each and every reader.

About the Author

Annabeth Albert is a multi-published Pacific Northwest writer of critically acclaimed and fan-favorite LGBTQIA+ stories, including the #FrozenHearts, #OutOfUniform, #Gaymers, #PortlandHeat and #PerfectHarmony series. To find out what she's working on next—as well as other fun extras—find her online.

Connect online:

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About the Illustrator

Lauren Dombrowski is a production editor by day, illustrator and comic artist by night. Their previous artistic publications include *Dates! Volume 3* (2019) and *A Survey of Queer Looks 1890–2018* (2018) with Margins Publishing, as well as *Tabula Idem: A Queer Tarot Comic Anthology* (2017) with Fortuna Media. Lauren works to promote and create positive, queer-friendly stories, is easily excited, and is determined to be friends with every animal. Except for that one prairie dog in South Dakota. He knows what he did.

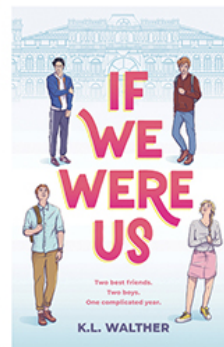


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Books. Change. Lives.

*"Why is there
only one bed?!"*

Two infamous rivals.

One epic road trip.

Some uncomfortably tight quarters.

And a journey neither will ever forget.

Charming, charismatic, and effortlessly popular, Conrad Stewart seems to have it all...but in reality, he's scrambling to keep his life from falling apart.

Brilliant, guarded, and endlessly driven, Alden Roth is the poster boy for perfection...but even he can't help but feel a little broken inside.

When these mortal enemies are stuck together on a cross-country road trip to the biggest fan convention of their lives, their infamous rivalry takes a backseat as an unexpected connection grows. Yet each has a reason they have to win the upcoming gaming tournament and neither is willing to let emotion get in the way—even if it means giving up their one chance at something truly magical.

"You will ship this couple."

—USA Today bestselling author Sarina Bowen



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