



**DOUBLE
PLAY**

a Hit and Run novel

E.M. LINDSEY

DOUBLE PLAY

HIT AND RUN

BOOK 3

E.M. LINDSEY

Double Play
E.M. Lindsey
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*Content Warnings: This book contains mentions of past toxic relationships, gun
violence resulting in permanent injury, drug abuse, and addiction. This book also
contains the on-page death of a side character as well as the process of grief, some
ableist language, and implications of homophobia in sports. Please take care if any
of these issues are triggering for you.*

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Also by E.M. Lindsey.

About the Author

FOREWORD

I wanted to stop and say a quick thanks to you readers for going on this MLB journey with me. While I have adjusted and changed some aspects to the sport and its portrayal, I tried my best to keep the heart of the MLB alive.

I wanted to give a quick shout-out to this book's sensitivity readers who have worked diligently in helping me keep Hervé's narcolepsy and cataplexy as realistic as I can. For more information, please visit the [Narcolepsy Network](#). They are not affiliated in any way with this book, but are an invaluable resource for information.

For Ben. Your life was short, but your love and legacy are endless.

Grief never gets smaller, but the container we keep it in gets larger. And one day, we just learned to live without you.

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“SO, WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS NOW? BESIDES FUCKING YOUR way through the rest of Europe?”

Orion did his best not to sigh or to punch his brother-in-law, who probably would have laughed while the rest of the family would have his ass thrown in jail for punching a man with ALS. Well, his sister likely wouldn't. Carey was a smart-ass who probably earned every knock to the jaw he'd ever been given.

But the circumstances were unusual at best. Carey had been his best friend since they were in elementary school and the only person he trusted to love his sister the way she deserved to be loved. They'd gone their separate ways in college—Orion being drafted into the MLB, Carey signing up for the military. And Orion could count on both hands the number of times he'd stood waiting to step up to bat, his mind halfway across the world, worried that he'd be getting one of those calls soon.

The call to tell him that up was now down and left was right and nothing would ever be the same again.

And eventually, it did come, but not in the way he was expecting.

It came from his sister, from their little DC apartment, with words like *terminal*, *not sure how long he has left*, and *preparing for end of life*.

Orion hadn't known what the fuck to do with any of that, so he told Weber he was skipping the next practice due to a

family emergency and spent the afternoon in bed, reading every Google article known to man about what Carey was facing. That sent him down an emotional spiral that turned him into an asshole so bitter and so afraid, he'd almost lost every single one of his friends over it.

Of course, James and Pietro had no intention of giving up on him, and they eventually managed to help him extract his head from his ass long enough to ask for leave. It meant skipping the last few games of the season—which was fine, considering they were nowhere near making it to playoffs that year—and it meant uncertainty for the upcoming season.

He didn't know what his sister would need or what Carey would want. All he knew was that he needed to get on a plane, fly to DC, and sit around until one or all of them snapped.

It happened on his third week there, after reality set in and Orion finally accepted that there was no miracle treatment and nothing he could do. And being that he wasn't a man of prayer or faith of any kind, the only option left was to accept the inevitable.

At some point—who the fuck knew when—Carey was going to die, and Orion would have to learn how to live without him.

When that moment hit was when Carey decided to drop the bomb that Orion was no longer welcome in their house. “It's not that I don't want you here. It's that you've spent the last three weeks changing diapers and feeding my kid when you could be doing something so much more fun. You need to leave, man. You've got time off, so why not actually use it?”

Orion knew Carey well enough to understand it wasn't about him. Not really. It was about the fact that he'd already dropped a good fifteen pounds and that his fine motor skills were almost nonexistent, and he was reaching that stage where he was choking on his own spit if he wasn't swallowing carefully enough.

In truth, Carey just didn't want Orion to see him that way. Not until he'd come to terms with what the rest of his shortened life was going to look like.

Thanks to the current step up in medical science, people with ALS were living longer...but not forever. And not comfortably.

Carey had been frank and almost clinical when he told Orion that he had, at best, five years. "I'm not sure I want more than that," he'd confessed that first night quietly over a glass of the very rich, very good German beer he'd immediately ordered when Orion showed up. Orion tried not to hear the new slurring to Carey's speech, but he couldn't ignore it. "I'd never knock people who fight to live as long as that scientist guy—"

Stephen Hawking.

"—but that's not for me, you know. It just...I don't know. It looks like hell." He took a long drink, then sighed and lay back. Orion noticed how weak Carey's grip was. And how thin he'd gotten over the span of weeks. Everything he'd read said it was different for everyone else, and he wouldn't say it aloud, but he was pretty damn sure at Carey's rate, he wouldn't get the chance to be that scientist guy.

"Maybe I'll change my mind and fight harder. Who the fuck knows."

Orion wanted to say that Nova and Callie were worth changing his mind for because they'd love him until the end of time—and then longer. But it wasn't his place. He had no idea what Carey and Nova had discussed, and her grief was on another plane of existence from how Orion was feeling.

He was losing his best friend.

She was losing her other half.

Callie was losing her dad before she was old enough to remember him.

Orion was a profoundly lucky man who had only ever lost distant great-grandparents. This sort of thing was new to him and wholly terrifying.

But Carey and Nova had finally been given the discharge date—which was three days away—and Orion knew for damn sure he wasn't ready to go back to work. He didn't know how

he was supposed to just go on with his day like shit in his world hadn't just shattered to pieces with no hope of ever putting them back together.

“Listen,” Carey said, interrupting Orion’s thoughts, “I have an idea.”

Orion kicked his foot up on the low coffee table—cheap IKEA furniture he’d come to love in the years he’d been visiting his sister and Carey on whatever base they were stationed at. He was already reclined, his daughter asleep on his chest, and he had one hand protectively on her back. Orion had a moment to realize that Carey probably wouldn’t be able to hold her like that for long.

“That’s a terrifying thought.”

Carey snorted a laugh and elbowed him. “Shut up, fuckface. This is important. I was going to surprise Nova with a month in France, send Callie off with my parents. I booked this cottage up in the northern part of the country. The real deal shit, you know? It’s this little cottage owned by some family who’d been living in the area for hundreds of years. There’s a little village in walking distance, and the neighbors have sheep.”

“I’m not sure if you’re really selling it here,” Orion said with a small laugh.

Carey smiled, but he looked somber as he lifted his hand and extended it. They weren’t really touchy-feely guys, but Orion couldn’t help himself from linking fingers and letting Carey squeeze him as tightly as he could manage.

“If I had my way, I’d disappear into the collective crowd and let people remember me like this. Especially Nova and Callie,” he added, then squeezed Orion’s fingers harder when Orion opened his mouth to threaten him. “I won’t, because I owe them more than that. And there’s not a goddamn thing in the world that would make me walk away from my family.”

Orion bowed his head. “Yeah.”

“But if you want to do anything at all for me—then take this fucking vacation I paid for and get your shit together, then

go home and get at least three more rings so you can bury me with one and not miss it.”

Orion’s throat was tight, and his eyes were hot, and he kind of wanted to hit Carey again because fuck this man for making him feel his feelings. “You’re a fuckin’ asshole.”

Carey laughed and let him go. “Oh, I know. Your sister reminds me at least nine times a day.”

Orion looked up at him, and he hated that he could see the toll the disease was taking on Carey. “If I ever meet God, I’m going to punch him in the fucking testicle before he boots my ass to hell.”

Carey grinned. “Get him in the other testicle for me.”

Orion nodded, then blew out a puff of air. “Bro, what the fuck am I supposed to do in the middle of nowhere France for a month?”

“Jerk off,” Carey said. “Go to the village and have a couple of one-night stands with a cougar your mom’s age who smokes those long cigarettes and drinks nothing but cheap red wine. Eat whatever the fuck you want,” he said, then winked. “Gorge on cheese and bread, man. Let it go right to that ass everyone on the internet loves so much.”

Orion flipped him off, and Carey laughed.

“Figure your shit out so your friends stop hating you. You don’t get to use my impending death as a reason to be a bigger dick than you already are.”

Ouch. But touché.

“And then what?”

“Then remember all the dumb shit we did together, and let that be the thing you think about every time someone talks about me. Not this whole mess. Not me like this.” He waved his hand at his legs, which were thin and trembling just slightly. “If you let yourself spiral,” Carey warned, and it was a tone Orion took seriously, “I will haunt your ass until the day you die.”

“And if I don’t?”

“I’ll still haunt you,” Carey said with a small grin. “But instead of flushing your toilet in the middle of a long shit, I’ll be your wingman from the other side. Help you get laid. Help you find the man you can spend the rest of your life with.”

Orion didn’t say that he’d be willing to give up that idea for just a few more years of Carey being here. Instead, he bowed his head. “You better find me a fucking good one, bro.”

Carey snorted. “The best. Trust me. It’ll be some weird romance-movie shit where you’re on the mound and you look across the crowd and he’s just there, watching you. And I’ll be floating my incorporeal ass over the plate and send the ball falling into his lap like it’s goddamn destiny. It’ll be some real meet-cute shit.”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” Orion said roughly, because if he said anything else, he’d lose control of the tears threatening his eyes, and he owed Carey more than that.



ORION SHOULD HAVE KNOWN BETTER than to assume that the place was going to be any different than what Carey described. It was small—two bedrooms, stone walls, wood floors, and definitely in the middle of nowhere.

There was an actual claw-foot tub in the bathroom when he finally got around to inspecting the place, and the smallest water closet that barely fit his broad shoulders as he hunched in to take a piss.

He was surprised when he found a running fridge and a stove in the kitchen, but even they were relics, though the kitchen had charm to it. There was a little breakfast alcove next to a window that had the perfect view of the small cherry orchard running along the property’s back wall, and he could easily picture himself living in a place like this.

It was nothing like his home back in Denver.

He hadn't splurged like some of the guys on his team, but his place was fucking opulent compared to this. Four rooms, a den, a gym, and an indoor, heated lap pool had seemed like so little until he stared around this cozy space. Everything was so small it made him feel like a freaky American giant.

Still, something about it settled the hot, ugly fear in the pit of his stomach knowing that the conversation he'd had with Carey was one of a handful he had left before the guy...yeah. Orion couldn't even bring himself to think about it just yet.

Carey wasn't just his brother. They'd been best friends for what felt like forever, and he wasn't sure how he was supposed to exist in a world where he couldn't call him up and shoot the shit, knowing that Carey was one of the few people who could make him laugh when everything felt like it was falling apart.

Carey was the one he'd have run to when something like this was happening.

And now, he had to take a back seat because his own pain of losing his friend was nothing compared to what his sister would be going through.

Rubbing his hands down his face, he swallowed against the hot lump in his throat, then went to the furthest bedroom to drop his bags. The only saving grace about the cottage was that it didn't remind him of his sister or Carey.

Or, hell, anyone he knew.

It was something completely new and unlike him, and maybe that's what he needed to get over this first wave of grief. He wasn't quite sure how to mourn someone who was still alive or if he was even allowed to. Nothing seemed fair anymore, and it left him feeling impotent and so angry he wanted to put his fist through the wall.

Which was not the person he wanted to become.

Shaking himself out of his thoughts, Orion took a few minutes to scope everything out, then moved to the kitchen and wasn't surprised to find that the cabinets and the fridge were entirely empty. There was a bottle of wine left from the

owners and a little note in French that he'd attempted to translate with his app.

It said something along the lines of *please enjoy your stay* and then directions to the shop where the wine was sold if he wanted more. Which, yeah, he absolutely did. He found a rolling shopping cart and some reusable bags in the bottom cabinet near the stove, and he felt a little bit like a village centenarian trundling down the narrow street toward the center of town, which made him smile.

There were only a few cars here and there, and he passed by several older people sitting on porches with drinks and cigars who gave him suspicious looks. Not that he blamed them, of course. He looked entirely out of place in his Gucci jeans and his Henley, but he wasn't there to charm some little French town.

He was there to figure out how to live in the world now that this one tiny thing had changed.

It didn't take him long to find the shops he needed. A little cheese place that had massive wheels covered in wax and was pungent enough he could smell it past the closed doors and heavy windows. The young woman behind the counter found his attempts at French adorable and hooked him up with a couple of mild wedges of something creamy that she promised would go good on a baguette. Then she pointed him in the direction of the bakery and told him he had to get bread with every meal if he wanted the proper experience.

The baker, who spoke no English against Orion's piss-poor French, managed to get across that he should come back every day instead of stocking up because—and he had to guess on that one—the bread would be stale if he tried to buy it in bulk. He decided to take the guy's word on it and bought a loaf for dinner and one for breakfast, then swore to come back for more.

He was feeling pretty damn proud of himself as he found the little supermarket, which felt odd because the inside was modern and bright. It was like stepping from the past into present day, and he quickly loaded up his cart with fruit,

vegetables, meat, and some boxed pasta because he could at least manage that on his own.

He wasn't the world's worst cook, but he was no Ezra or Thierry. And Jesus, he was missing those two delivering meals right then. Mostly he was just feeling lonely, but maybe that was a good thing.

He spent the better part of his life surrounded by his family, his teammates, his fans—if he walked into the wrong sports bar—or paid professionals that were forcing him to strip down and oil up for photos and commercials. And it was halfway through bagging his groceries that he realized how much he needed some space from all that chaos and how it would have been impossible to get it if he had gone home instead.

He wanted to call Carey and thank him for the suggestion because of fucking course his best friend knew what he needed.

And the thought made the grief well up on him so quickly and so profoundly his eyes got hot as he was shoving his apples into his bag. He managed to get control enough to finish paying, and he didn't miss the look he got from the cashier, but she was polite enough not to say anything.

Taking a few deep breaths, Orion headed to the edge of the street, and he spotted a café with a few tables and chairs. The spring afternoon was cool and a little muggy, and there was the promise of rain off in the distance. His emotions, plus the jet lag and the fact that he hadn't been sleeping since his visit, was starting to catch up with him, and he knew a little caffeine would probably make a world of difference.

He could smell the rich scent of coffee brewing as he got close, and he eyed the one man who was seated at a table, debating whether or not it was safe to leave his things. The guy didn't look much like a thief—for all that he knew what a thief looked like.

He had to be close to Orion's age, and he was fairly thin, with just a hint of muscle around his biceps, and his sunglasses looked expensive.

When the guy's gaze snapped up, Orion realized he'd been staring too long and flushed. "Sorry, I... I mean..." He dug deep for the few lessons he'd taken on the plane. "*Deso... Desolé?*"

The guy scoffed. "American."

Orion bristled but decided that picking a fight with a local in front of the café was not the wisest decision he could make, so he just tightened his grip on the cart and went inside. He was startled at how dark everything was, the only natural light from the shaded window, and there were a handful of tables, but only two were occupied by a couple of men who looked at least a century old.

The man behind the counter was young though, and he eyed Orion and his cart with a small grin as he approached. Clearing his throat, Orion pulled out his phone and fired up the app as the man spoke in rapid French.

"Uhh," Orion said, trying to buy time as he typed. "*Je... voudrais... umm.*" He glanced up at the board, panicked, trying to settle on something he recognized that was not a cappuccino.

"Do you want to order in English?" the guy asked.

Orion blinked at him in surprise. "I shouldn't. I should..." He typed the word "practice" into the app. "*Pratique?*"

The guy laughed softly and shook his head. "I don't mind. Unless you're moving here."

"No," Orion said with a sheepish smile. "Just visiting for a few weeks."

"Then this can be easy for you. Not everyone around here speaks English, and I wouldn't mind if you came back more than once."

Shit, he's flirting, Orion thought. He bit his lip and gave the guy a once-over. He wasn't necessarily Orion's type, but then again, he didn't have much of an aesthetic type. His relationships in the past—the four of them he'd had—were all short and pointless and all ended before he finished his stint in the minors.

But he didn't want to discount the idea of a vacation fling. If anything, maybe a date or two would get him out of his head. It didn't need to mean anything, and he knew at the very least, he'd make Carey proud.

"Thanks," he finally told the guy, tucking his phone away. "I'm Orion."

"Cécil."

There was no handshake offered, but Orion didn't think it was personal. "Will you forgive me if I butcher the pronunciation?"

Cécil leaned in and winked. "You can say my name however you like. But for now, what can I get you?"

Orion managed to keep his blush in check as he scanned the menu again and finally landed on something he'd had before—even if he normally preferred something iced and very sweet. "Café au lait?"

"Of course," Cécil said, smiling even softer now. When Orion started to dig his wallet out, the guy reached across the counter and laid warm fingers on his wrist. "Consider it a welcome to Brittany gift from me."

Orion shifted, but he wasn't sure if he was going to make some major cultural faux pas if he told the guy no, so he just nodded and considered a tip before remembering they didn't really do that, either. "Thank you."

Cécil's grin widened. "If you want to have a seat, I can bring it to you in a few minutes."

Orion nodded, then glanced down at his cart. "I'll be outside."

"Good choice. Enjoy the day."

Turning on his heel, Orion headed for the door again, feeling some type of way, though words couldn't really describe it. It was flattering and kind of sweet, but it was obvious his head and heart couldn't get on board. Not now. Every time he even considered feeling happy, Carey and Nova's images popped up behind his eyelids.

His sister would be googling frantically and emailing specialists and talking to people she met online who were living with ALS. She'd be giving him pep talks and figuring out how to take care of him and her baby, all the while knowing she had to get their will in order and plan a funeral, and...

“Tu me fixe.”

Orion blinked and realized the man with the shades on was talking to him—probably calling him out for staring. “Sorry,” he blurted again. “I was just...” He stopped, sighing, and he quickly took a table a few spaces away from the stranger so he didn't look like a creep just standing there.

Everything was so goddamn messy, and he just wanted to shut it off. He wanted God—or whoever—to come down from the heavens and give him literally anything else to think about.

He wanted—

His thoughts cut off abruptly when the stranger suddenly toppled over in his chair. His body was floppy and lax as he hit the ground, and Orion was on his feet, rushing over in seconds.

“Not what I meant,” he muttered to himself as he dropped to his knees. The concrete was unforgiving against his knees, but the pain was grounding as he carefully pressed two fingers to the man's throat as he pulled off his sunglasses. His heart was beating—steady and a little fast—and his eyes were closed. Orion was seconds away from calling out for help when the guy's eyes started to move behind his lids.

A second later and he began to twitch his limbs, and shortly after that, he opened his mouth and let out a slow string of French that didn't sound worried at all. No, the guy sounded pissed. Orion wasn't quite sure what to do, but the stranger was coming back to himself at least enough to shove Orion away as he climbed to his feet.

“Whoa,” he said, hopping up as the guy bent over and reached for his shades. “You should probably call someone and—”

The guy cut him off with more angry French words, and before Orion could retort, he was storming off.

Orion had half a mind to go after him. He wasn't sure he could live with himself if he woke up and saw the morning news that some guy had collapsed in the street and died, but he also reminded himself it wasn't his problem.

The guy seemed more angry than he was anything else. Maybe he was a drunk, or maybe he was just having a bad day. Hell, maybe he was sick. He knew there were plenty of fainting disorders that people had to deal with on the regular. He had no business trying to judge.

With a sigh of resignation, he walked back to his table and sat just seconds before the door opened and Cécil appeared. He was holding a small tray with the coffee, a spoon, a single sugar cube, and a biscotti. He was smiling, but he looked a little concerned as he set everything down in front of Orion.

“Is everything okay?”

Orion's gaze darted toward the road again, and he found himself listening for a commotion. But there was just the quiet buzz of a village awake. “Yeah, yes. Um. There was a guy sitting here...”

Cécil's brows lifted. “Did you know him?”

“No,” Orion said quickly, though he couldn't lie, there was almost something familiar about him now that he was thinking about it. “I don't think so. He just seemed, uh...unwell?”

Cécil let out a small breath. “Sometimes people come here for...” He hesitated like he was searching for the word. “Respite? Is the right way to say it?”

“Yeah,” Orion said.

Cécil shrugged. “I try to let people have their moment. Sometimes they need to just be here without anyone asking why.”

He licked his lips, then curled his fingers around the handle of his coffee. “Trust me, I get that.”

Cécil gave him a nod and another long look, and then he backed up. “Please enjoy your coffee. I hope I’ll see you soon.”

Orion realized he couldn’t make him any kind of promise, so he just nodded and waited for Cécil to leave before he took a sip. The coffee was thick and rich and bitter—and not at all what he wanted. But considering his afternoon, it was fitting.

He pulled out his phone to text Carey.

Orion: Fuck the barista?

Carey: Don’t fuck the people responsible for your coffee. Fuck the neighbor.

Orion: He’s like ninety-five.

Carey: Could be worse.

Orion: I hate you.

Carey: You don’t.

And yeah. No. He didn’t.

“I WANT TO TALK A LITTLE BIT MORE ABOUT WHAT YOU SAID last week. About forgiveness.”

Hervé did his best to appear unfazed, but it wasn't easy. He'd spent an entire lifetime not just running from his problems but doing his best to create chaos so no one would notice he had them. After all, he had an image to uphold.

Icy, distant, untouchable, and perfect.

It was the façade he'd built his entire career on—and with a single misstep, that had all come tumbling to the ground.

He was not just at rock bottom now—he was at least a thousand feet below the rocky earth, a little too close to the searing-hot core.

There was nothing more humbling than taking a stimulant pill so he didn't fall asleep in his afternoon salad while also talking to his therapist on Skype, who had been court-ordered to treat him after his long stint in rehab after admitting he was an addict.

The whole thing had been a spiral after he'd come back from Denver. He'd gone deeper into self-medicating, showed up to set wasted, and that's when his disease decided that it was time to stop playing in the shadows.

One second, he was laughing on the red carpet in front of the press—the next second, he was tumbling toward the ground. The pain was overwhelming, and all he wanted to do

was scream, but he couldn't make himself move. He was trapped, paralyzed, wondering if maybe that was it.

Maybe that was how he died young.

And then he came to in an ambulance with his head bleeding and the world spinning and judgment dripping from the paramedic's tone when Hervé confessed to exactly what he had in his system. And from that moment, everything went flying off the rails.

It was a flurry of neurologists asking him invasive questions, and nurses who weren't impressed with who he was, and then... and then there was his mother, who showed up for exactly one hour with the pinched look on her face and the words that seared into his head.

“If you want to prove you're worthy of being my son, you'll do everything you can to clean up your disgusting mess. You made a public spectacle of yourself in front of the entire world, and that is not the person I raised. You humiliated me, and I'm not sure I'll ever forgive you for it.”

Two days later, his doctor told him what was wrong. A disorder with some treatments but no cure. Rehab, then meds to help him stay awake, and meds to help him fall asleep, and action plans for when his body suddenly quit working and left him a heap of skin and bones on the ground with no way to help himself.

It was a waterfall of vivid nightmares he couldn't wake up from, and there were still days he wasn't sure he could tell fantasy from reality, but he knew that was more than just his disorder. That was just dealing with the fact that everything had changed, and there was no coming back from it.

Ever.

“Hervé? Are you with me? Are you having an episode?”

“No,” he snapped, then took a breath. “Sorry, no. I'm okay.”

There was no point in taking this out on Lucie since she was just there to help him. Because it turned out that a lifetime of having a stage mother forcing him to perform from the

tender age of two, while also making it clear that if he didn't perform at the top of his game, she'd be unable to love him, wasn't good for anyone's mental health.

After hearing about his childhood, Lucie made it very clear that while Hervé would always have to hold himself accountable for his past actions, sometimes people did have a reason for falling apart at the seams and embracing cruelty. And she didn't hesitate to remind him that while his past was ugly, there was no reason he couldn't be better in the future.

He was okay with that. It was just a matter of coming to terms with what he'd done. And admitting all of it. And trying not to drown in the guilt when he realized the gravity of what he'd set into motion.

He couldn't even say the names Pietro or Thierry without feeling sick to his stomach, but he was working on it.

"If you need to take a break—"

"I had an attack at a café earlier," he said swiftly, wanting to get that part over with. "I'm still a little shaken up."

Attack, in this case, meant cataplexy. It meant a total loss of control over his entire body. He was aware and cognizant and forced to endure the total mortification of just lying there while spectators watched him. There was nothing more humbling—more *humiliating*—than that.

Lucie stared at him for a few more seconds, then nodded. "Well, if you're alright, we can pick up where we left off."

Hervé groaned internally, but he nodded all the same because this was the point of therapy. It wasn't supposed to be easy. No one was going to sit in front of him and tell him that there was nothing wrong with the person he'd been for all these years.

"I know one of your major goals has been to work through your need to avoid any sort of conflict or accountability. And at our last session, you told me you were focused on being a man worth forgiving."

Hervé nodded. He *had* said that. It sounded ridiculous now, even if he still meant it. But checking his pride to admit it

a second time? “Is that wrong?”

Lucie gave a small laugh, and her look was full of affection. “Of course not. It’s a worthy goal. I’m just a little concerned, and I want to address something that might upset you.”

Might as well, he thought to himself. He was already willingly dragging himself through the mud. “Okay.”

“You want to be a man worth forgiving—so does that mean you want to be forgiven by the people you’ve hurt?”

He scoffed. “Obviously. Why wouldn’t I want that?”

She nodded, and he saw her writing something down at the edge of his screen before she looked up and met his gaze. “So, how would it make you feel to be sorry—to be truly sorry and willing to take responsibility for the things you did that hurt people—and have them tell you they won’t ever forgive you.”

A hot lump formed in the back of his throat. “Isn’t that the point of being better though? To seek forgiveness from the people you hurt?”

Her expression didn’t change, but something in her eyes did. “Is it?”

Hervé squirmed uncomfortably in his seat. “I...yes?”

“Is it?” she asked again.

He felt his frustration rising, and he tried to calm himself because he didn’t want to collapse again—and emotions seemed to be his worst trigger. He took a breath and waited for the weak feeling in his hands to pass. “I don’t understand what you’re saying. I know you’re leading me to a point, but it’s not working.”

“Okay, and I appreciate you communicating that,” she told him.

He hated how much that little bit of praise got to him. It was like being touch-starved and someone finally brushed his hand with theirs. He craved it like nothing else. Fuck, he wanted to be good, and he wanted to be *told* he was good.

“Forgiveness from the people you’ve wronged isn’t something you’re owed. It might be a consequence of making amends, but that’s all it’ll ever be,” she said. “Forgiveness is a bonus. An extra. So you need to decide something. Are you changing those parts about yourself to assuage your guilt? Or do you want to be a better person regardless of how people feel about you?”

That was the last thing he wanted to think about right then. He’d spent a lot of his life telling himself that he was owed all the things that happened to him—good and bad. That he could just confess his sins and be forgiven, and all would be well.

But the hardest part was that Hervé knew the truth. He knew he couldn’t keep going like this—and not because he now understood now what it was like to be abandoned by everyone he thought was in his corner.

He was willing to accept the agony of living with the feeling of guilt hot in the pit of his stomach because it was the least he deserved.

Really, he just wanted to know that the things he’d done hadn’t ruined Pietro and Thierry. That they really had moved on and found happiness.

He’d deal with everything else.

“Do you want some time to think about it?”

Hervé stifled a yawn and nodded, though that was a lie. In truth, he had minutes before sleep took over, and he didn’t want to spend the rest of the evening with a neckache because he crashed at the kitchen counter.

“Tomorrow,” he said. He clicked off the meeting without saying goodbye and just managed to stumble into the bed before the lights in his eyes went out.



HERVÉ'S present life was now one of both strict routine and experimentation. His diagnosis was threefold—the narcolepsy, cataplexy, and the seemingly endless recovery from his addictions. He didn't like thinking of the fall, mostly because he didn't remember it. The bits that lived in his head felt foggy and odd, like he'd been dreaming, so he wasn't sure what was real and what wasn't.

Of course, he'd been at the Cannes Film Festival, so the whole thing had been captured on camera, which meant there was no escaping what happened or the humiliation that came with it. Most of the internet was sympathetic, but his publicist—right before he was let go—had cautioned him not to dig too deep.

He had a reputation that had only grown since he'd made a spectacle of himself chasing after Thierry in Denver. Hervé had been foolish enough to think none of the Americans had recognized him, but he was wrong. And Pietro was a beloved sports icon—which meant that the world also went into fierce protective mode of Thierry.

It didn't take long for them to figure out that Hervé had all but abandoned his friend after he was shot. He'd gone directly against his publicist's advice and started looking. There were entire Twitter accounts dedicated to pointing out every time he'd stepped out of the house with someone who wasn't Pietro and how he'd gone on a cruise right after Thierry had been injured.

And then there was the incident in the club. With the punch.

The godforsaken internet sleuths had managed to figure out who was behind Thierry's actions there too.

Hervé decided quietly disappearing was a better option than trying to face it head-on, but part of that had everything to do with the fact that he wouldn't be able to stay upright on camera. His neurologists told him that with delicate care, strict routine, and practice, he'd be able to handle emotions without falling on his face.

But it would take time.

And the press had no respect for that sort of thing.

Not that he deserved it, considering the moment anyone had ever become an inconvenience to him, he'd walked away. It was easier to deal with abandonment than it was to deal with reality. He couldn't ever tell Thierry that staring at him knowing he was responsible for the fact that Thierry would probably never walk again was more than his brain could handle.

Drinking made more sense. Drugs made more sense.

Torpedoing his life made more sense.

Until now. Until he was completely alone in Brittany in some cottage, hoping that he wouldn't fall hard enough to knock his head again.

His phone lit up, and he glanced over at the nightstand before picking it up. It was his mother, and he did his best not to sigh as he answered. "*Ouais, Maman?*"

"Is that how you talk to me when I answer?"

He cringed and covered his eyes with his free hand. "I just woke up from a nap."

"You do know that you're never going to get anything back if you spend half your day sleeping—"

"I don't have a choice," he spit at her, forcing himself to sit up. He took a breath when he felt his hands get weak, and he begged his heart to slow down. "This isn't something that I can push through with hard work."

"I think you need a better opinion than some British doctor," she said.

He closed his eyes and leaned against the headboard, flexing his fingers. "My doctor is perfectly fine, and I'm doing as he says. And before you ask," he said sharply, "I don't know when I'll be back to work. I need to deal with one problem at a time."

"Your way of dealing with problems is to run away," she snapped, "instead of facing them. You made a fool of yourself at the Cannes after everything you did in the States..."

Hervé laughed hard in spite of knowing what would come after letting his emotions get the better of him. “And where do you think I got that from?”

Then he slid sideways and hit the bed, the phone falling from his hand. He had no idea how long he was locked in his body, only that time was ticking by as he listened to the breeze outside and watched the afternoon glow of light behind his closed lids.

By the time he could move again, his mother had ended the call, and he didn't bother getting her back on the line. She was a surefire way to have an attack, so it wasn't worth it. She wasn't ever going to be a better person to him. She was never going to love him the way a mother should love a child. He'd never been anything more than a meal ticket, and her only fear was him losing his fame, leaving her as inconsequential as he would eventually become.

Every single failing he had, she took personally, like he was trying to spite her.

And ruining his career was the ultimate insult.

He didn't have space in his life to deal with her beyond working through his childhood in his therapy sessions though. He wasn't ready to hear in blunt, almost cruel words that she had been a terrible parent and that there was nothing he could ever do to change the way she saw him.

In a sick, sorry way, he still loved her with whatever was left of his fractured heart. And to make matters worse, Lucie made it a habit of telling him that loving his mother in spite of the way she treated him was normal for people like him.

It felt like a wasted session every time she came up, so he just stopped talking about her as much as Lucie would let him get away with.

With a sigh, Hervé ran himself a bath and washed up, trying to ease some of the tension from his muscles. For the amount of time he spent either sleeping or immobile, his body was a constant mess of knots. His doctor told him it was

normal and that it would get easier as he learned to manage his condition better, but he was starting to doubt his words.

His routine had become medications, sleeping, eating in positions that allowed him to have a cataplexy attack without choking, and trying to find the courage to take walks without worrying about falls.

Being in the country made the second part easier though. He loved the little village, and hardly anyone recognized him. The place was full of retired ancients living in old family homes that had been standing since the dark ages. It was a world away from what Hervé had been used to, and while he thought he'd go crazy outside of the city, instead, he felt calm.

In fact, his guard had dropped so far that when the American asshole from the café had started staring at him, he panicked.

The guy had looked distractingly familiar, which was what caused his attack in the first place. He wasn't ready to face down another actor, especially one from Hollywood. There was every chance they knew Pietro—every chance they knew what Hervé had done to his former best friend. He wasn't strong enough to face that kind of hate and scrutiny. Online was one thing—he could escape that world by turning off his phone and avoiding his laptop.

But here? Crossing the borders of his little sanctuary?

He wasn't prepared.

He shuddered and shoved the thought out of his head as he ducked a few low-hanging branches and headed for the patisserie. For the first time in his life, he could indulge without worrying about how long it would take him to work off all the calories, and he was far enough away from his mother that he didn't have to see her judgmental eyes.

It was nearing the time when everything was about to close, so he dipped inside and let out a breath when only the younger grandson of the owner was behind the counter. He couldn't have been older than twenty, and Hervé knew the kid recognized him, but he was kind where so many hadn't been.

He offered an apologetic smile the moment he set eyes on Hervé and waved his hand at the few items left behind the glass. “Sorry. We had a busy day.”

Hervé waved him off and pointed at a couple of the tarts. “Just those will be fine. Thank you.”

The kid’s smile was beaming, and Hervé realized he missed being free to express and feel heightened emotions without it collapsing him. He was on medications to help temper how deeply he felt things, but he was starting to feel kind of dull and soft around the edges.

He’d lived most of his life seeking thrill, and now he was nothing more than a shadow.

He blinked when he realized the kid had been trying to get his attention, and he flushed. “Sorry.” He dug a handful of Euro from his pocket and slid them across the counter.

“Not sleeping well?” the kid asked.

Hervé felt a rush of anger hit him, but he quickly reminded himself that this kid didn’t know. No one knew. Everyone in the world thought he’d finally gone on some drug spiral and ended up in rehab.

It was better that way.

God forbid he ever had to tell some grasping journalist what was really going on.

“It’s something like that,” he said, taking the change and slipping it into his pocket before reaching for the neatly packed pastry box. He gave the kid a nod, then let himself out and paused by the shop wall. The sun was low on the horizon, and it wouldn’t be long before the only places left open were the few restaurants that lined the streets.

The village was old and falling apart, and Hervé knew places like this were a dying breed. Soon enough, Starbucks and McDonald’s would start creeping in. Old castles—relics with doddering old men leading sparse tours—would become flush with long lines of foreigners trying to touch everything that had once been held sacred.

The little stores and small homes that had been here for centuries would become gift shops run by investment companies. And one day, no one would remember what it was like before the modern world got its claws in the cobbled streets. There would only be stones and thatched roofs remaining.

And no one would care.

The old generation who had done their best to preserve this place would be dead, and only echoes would be left behind.

His heart ached, and he turned, coming to an abrupt halt when he saw the American again. He was still familiar in a strange way. Tall, broad, with sand-colored hair and one of the most gorgeous faces Hervé had ever seen. He was the all-American sort of man that Hervé had spent most of his life avoiding.

He also looked tired—but Hervé had a feeling there was more to it than that. There had been something in his eyes that spoke of grief or loss, and Hervé understood more than he wanted to. It was the look of a man who wasn't letting himself mourn.

Not wanting to be seen again, Hervé quickly ducked into the alley as the guy passed, and from what he could tell, the stranger hadn't noticed him at all. It was slightly painful but more of a relief, and he waited until the guy had turned the corner before he hurried off down the street.

He was exhausted and ready for yet another sleep when he got back to his cottage, but he forced himself to sit and eat cheese and bread, then half the tart, before he called it a night. There would be no rest for him—not really. He'd be up and down, not getting the sleep he so desperately wanted because his brain would no longer allow it.

He'd combat horrific hallucinations, and it was in those dark hours that his nightmares would feel real.

And that's when he felt the most alone.

ORION NEVER IN A MILLION YEARS THOUGHT HE COULD HAVE such a goddamn amazing afternoon in a small cabin with a man nearly older than dirt who only spoke about twelve phrases in English. And yet, somehow, it was the best day he'd had in months.

Hell, maybe even years.

He'd stumbled on Roger, the crotchety, tiny old man hobbling through the vegetable garden, and quickly discovered the man had fashioned a hole in the property fence so he could raid the harvest. Considering Orion had no stock in the stuff growing—and considering most of it looked pretty wild instead of cultivated—he just watched until the old man looked up at him.

Instead of running scared—not that he could on his little matchstick legs—the guy just pointed the end of his cane at Orion and let loose a French tirade until Orion held up his hands in surrender.

“I don't care,” Orion said slowly, then sighed when he saw that familiar look of confusion in the man's eyes. He didn't have his phone, so he couldn't pull up his translation app, so he dug around his vocabulary. “*Je ne...*” He bit his lip. “Care? *Pas?*”

The guy stared another minute, then laughed, hanging the basket on his shoulder and shuffling over to stick out his hand. Orion shook it, unable to help his own smile at the man's toothless grin.

“Roger,” he said, not pronouncing the last *R*, which Orion didn’t mind at all since he was terrible at the French *R*.

“Orion.”

“Ahh. *Comme ça*,” he said, jabbing his cane at the sky.

Orion figured he meant the constellation, so he nodded. “Weird parents,” he said, then shrugged. “Mama, papa.”

Roger just huffed a laugh, and somehow in the midst of the total communication barrier, he managed to bully Orion through the hole in the fence—which nearly ripped his shirt in half—and across the small field that held a large collection of sheep. They gave them both wary looks as they crossed, but none of them attacked, and only one came to inspect what Roger was carrying.

He offered the little thing a handful of snap peas before shuffling his way to the front door of his very small, very quaint stone cottage.

It was even less put together than the one Orion was staying in. The pipes in the kitchen were all exposed, and the fridge looked like it had come straight from the fifties. There was a gas stove and a box of matches off to the side and a massive basin where water ran through a very rusted pipe.

If Orion felt like he’d stepped back in time before, this was a totally different world, and he loved it.

The house was basically one big room with a small wall blocking off the bedroom from the kitchen, and there was no living room, which Orion didn’t mind. Roger offered him a seat at the table, and he listened intently as the guy yammered on in French like he didn’t give a shit that Orion didn’t understand him at all.

He watched his thin arms struggle under the weight of a cast iron pan, but when Orion jumped up to help, Roger waved him off. “No. I cook.”

Orion grinned and held up his hands in surrender. “Suit yourself, old man.”

“Old man,” he repeated, then pointed to himself.

Orion nodded. “Old-ass man.”

The guy mimed a beard, and Orion laughed, even as he felt a small ache in his chest. Roger reminded him a little of his great-grandpa, who had died when he was sixteen. He’d been sickly but jolly as hell, and his death was the first and last time Orion had ever cried so hard he’d made himself sick.

For now, a vicious little voice inside his head whispered.

He quickly told it to shut the fuck up as he turned his attention back to Roger. The man was now at a hand-crank meat grinder, and he was shoving what Orion hoped to God were steaks inside, and he was pointing at things and saying French words.

Orion quickly caught on that it was an impromptu French lesson, so he caught up and offered the English equivalent.

“Quid pro quo,” he said when Roger raised a brow at him.

“Latin!” Then Roger went into a long string of what Orion knew was Latin, which made him feel like an even bigger idiot because he’d barely finished high school before he was dragged into the world of the MLB. He’d been a prodigy of sorts, and instead of letting him take risks in college like so many ballplayers did, they’d shoved him in the minors to hone his skills.

And yes, okay, it worked.

But there were times he felt lacking because all the guys around him had a foundation that he’d missed out on. They’d been to frat parties and learned a second language and found some sort of passion that stuck with them so when age caught up with them and they were forced to retire, they wouldn’t have nothing.

Unlike him.

Shaking his head, he held up his hands. “No. No... school?”

“Ah.” Roger reached out and gave him a pat on the shoulder, then thumbed behind him at a massive wall of books.

“I...read book? The war,” he added, waving his hand. “After? No school. Read many book.”

Orion felt slightly less terrible, though not by much. He could have been doing the same thing instead of just throwing himself into the game and trying to pretend like everything else didn't exist. But now that Carey was dying—now that the world was about to change entirely—he couldn't ignore the rest of the emptiness he felt inside his chest.

Rising from the table, he walked over as he heard Roger light the stove, and he perused the titles. He couldn't read a single one of them. There were a few in Greek, several in Latin, and the rest in French. They all looked well-worn and almost ancient, and he brushed his thumb along the spines and wondered what it would be like to settle in a little home like this and exist.

Roger had his sheep, obviously, and he must do something with them in order to pay his bills—assuming he had them. But it was clear nothing about his life was traditional. At least not according to the modern idea of it.

But Jesus, what would it be like if he abandoned everything and bought the property next door? He could cultivate that little garden and live off his money and start exploring life around him to see if there was anything more to him than baseball. But then he thought about never setting foot on the field again, and his body broke out into a cold sweat.

Moving away from the shelves, he stepped over to a table covered in old photos. Some were very dated—black, white, and sepia, shots of some people in military uniform and some in period clothes. Everyone looked old, and they looked happy.

Orion had seen photos like that of his family. His mother kept meticulous care of everything that had been handed down to her from his grandparents and the generations before that. He didn't know much about his family tree, of course. His father's side had a little Greek and a lot of second-generation French Canadian, his mother's side mostly various bits of

Scandinavian that had come over to Canada generations before he was born, which was where she'd met his father.

But he'd never actually bothered to ask about his family tree. The photos and relics of the long-dead had just been there—hanging on the walls and sitting on shelves. He wondered what kind of person that made him that he never cared where he came from.

Blowing out a breath, he turned back toward the kitchen and saw Roger plating a burger with no bun alongside some macaroni-shaped pasta. He smiled when he caught Orion looking, then gestured for him to take the plate as they sat, and he passed over a jar of spicy mustard for Orion to use.

Once he had his burger coated, he glanced at Roger's plate and saw that his own was well dressed...and raw.

Completely raw.

"Oh, dude," he breathed out as Roger took a bite.

After a beat, the old man seemed to notice his expression, and he laughed, shaking his head before opening his mouth and gesturing to the lack of teeth with the prongs of his fork.

"They make dentures, my man," Orion said, but all of that clearly went over Roger's head.

To each their own, he decided, and he finished his meal with gusto. The pasta had looked plain, but it was salty and cheesy, and the burger had never tasted better. Everything here had so much life to it. Everyone took their time and put care into even the simplest meals, and Orion was starting to realize he needed more of that.

He was sick of living in the moment and rushing from one day to the next.

Every second that ticked by was one more closer to when his best friend was gone—and even though he wasn't with Carey now, it was the first time he didn't feel like he needed to hurry.

He smiled at Roger and thanked him, then let the old man walk him to the street.

“You come back,” Roger said, holding his hand tight.

“*Oui*,” Orion promised him, squeezing his frail fingers. “I’ll bring you peas next time so you don’t have to sneak in.” When Roger frowned, Orion pointed at the gate, shaking his head, then pointed to himself. “*Petits pois*,” he said, hoping he remembered from Roger’s lesson earlier.

The old man’s eyes glowed, and he gave Orion a pat on the shoulder before letting go.

The gate to his front yard closed with a loud clang, and Orion breathed out and dragged his fingers through his hair before he turned and headed down the path. He didn’t go home this time though. It was late afternoon, and the weather was gorgeous, and the only thing he wanted to do was walk. There was a small path that cut through a field not far from his cottage, and he took the sharp right, ducking under low-hanging branches.

The path wove through the little forest, and he was lost in his head when his gaze caught something, and his heart began to race in his chest. There was a person lying in the path, and they looked unconscious.

Or maybe even dead, which would be just his goddamn luck.

He started running before he was even aware of it, and he was falling to his knees in the dirt. He immediately recognized the man from the café earlier, only this time, the guy was completely limp, and his head was bleeding from a vicious gash just above his right eyebrow.

“Fucking hell,” Orion said.

He held the man’s chin in his hand, then gently tapped his cheek. His first aid training he’d done years back reminded him not to jostle the guy’s body, but he let out a breath of relief when the stranger’s eyelids began to flutter.

Then, after a beat, they opened.

“*Putain*,” the guy said.

Orion knew that word. Or he knew it wasn't a polite word, anyway. He swiped his hand over his brow. "Okay, I know you probably don't speak much English like everyone else around here, but I gotta get you up, my man. That wound doesn't look great."

The guy muttered something else in French Orion couldn't follow, but he didn't put up a fight when Orion got him sitting up. He checked the guy's pupils, which were luckily normal, and he did his best not to get lost in them because fuck, they were beautiful. They were a sort of grey-green like the stormy sea, and Orion felt himself get warm all over.

His hand lifted as he tested the area around the cut, and the stranger sucked in a breath.

"Sorry, sorry," Orion told him, trying to make himself look nonthreatening. He was well aware he was much larger than this guy, and the last thing he wanted was him to be afraid after everything else. "Look, can you come with me?" he said, trying to mime along. "To my place? I'm not far, and I can help you with your head."

The guy started to shake his head, but he listed to the right, and Orion just managed to catch him. When the guy touched his head, he hissed again, his face falling when he saw the blood on his fingers.

Orion decided not to try talking to him, but he did help him to his feet, and the stranger didn't put up any sort of argument as Orion got an arm around him and carefully led him back down the path and toward the street.

The short distance to his cottage felt like a thousand miles with the guy leaning against him, but it wasn't long before Orion stopped at the gate and fumbled with the code.

"*Non*," the guy started, but Orion gave him a sharp look.

"Listen, man, I promise I'm not a serial killer, okay? I'm just a guy who doesn't want you to bleed out or some shit. You can come in and use my phone, and I'll make sure you're not gonna pass out on me. And yeah, I know you can't understand me, and I'm just rambling on like some dickhead." With that,

he punched the code into the keypad, then hip-checked the gate open when the lock slid back.

The stranger kept pace with him, and he seemed to be regaining his strength as they reached the door. Orion got it open, and the guy stepped over the threshold without holding Orion's arm.

So. Progress, he supposed.

He quickly took him into the kitchen and pointed to the chair at the little breakfast nook, then ran to his bedroom and pulled out his travel kit. It had some very basic first aid—a few butterfly bandages, some Neosporin packets, and some gauze.

It would do in a pinch, and if the guy was really fucked, he was pretty sure there was some sort of ER somewhere within driving distance. There had to be.

Tucking his kit under his arm, he snagged his phone from the bedroom, then made his way back to the kitchen and saw the guy sitting at the table with his gaze down. Orion set everything down, then quickly pulled up his app and typed in the translator.

The sentence was fucking long, and he was totally going to butcher it, but whatever. "*Je vais t'aider.*"

The guy blinked at him, and the corner of his mouth twitched.

"*Je m'appelle Orion.*"

The guy blinked at that, almost like he was startled, and then his eyes narrowed like maybe he recognized him. And shit, wouldn't that be just his luck? Some French guy who didn't speak a word of English but loved baseball. He wouldn't know what the fuck to do with that.

"Hervé," the guy muttered after a second.

It took Orion a moment to realize that was his name. It sounded familiar as hell, but he couldn't put his finger on it, and he was way too stressed to go digging around for it. He smiled and quickly pulled out some gauze.

“Is it okay if I...”

“*Oui*,” Hervé said.

Orion nodded, then began to dab at the wound. “Please don’t hate me for being totally shit at French, okay? I wasn’t even supposed to be here, but everything in my life just went straight into the toilet. Do you guys have that phrase here? Everything going into the shitter? Anyway, yeah. It was either this or hole myself up in my house for a month and make sure my trainer hates my guts before season starts with all the carbs I will have definitely eaten by then.”

Orion reached for the antibacterial ointment, and he caught Hervé’s curious gaze.

“Yeah, sorry. I’m not past the translation app, like some kind of giant dumbass.”

“It’s not your fault. America is shit at teaching second languages.”

Orion started to laugh before it caught up with him that the guy wasn’t just speaking English—he was speaking perfect fucking English. He took a step back. “You asshole.”

Hervé glared at him. “What?”

“You know English!”

Hervé scoffed. “Yes. I do.”

“You said you didn’t!”

Hervé blinked. “No. You assumed that everyone in this village is some sort of...I forget what they call them in America? Mountain person with no education.”

Orion’s mouth dropped open, prepared to tell this little shit exactly where he could shove his opinion, but he realized in that second that Hervé was right. He had assumed. He hadn’t even asked the guy if he spoke English.

With a breath, he glanced off to the left, then finally met Hervé’s gaze. “You’re right.”

Hervé looked startled, and his hands, which had closed into fists on the table, spread out. “I...yes. I am.”

Orion laughed quietly, then picked up the Neosporin packet again. “Glad we could establish that. It’s...I’m really sorry for assuming. It’s been a really rough couple of weeks, and when I saw you at the café—”

“That was you,” Hervé blurted, then flushed, and he rubbed his temple, flinching a little when Orion dabbed on some of the ointment.

“Yeah. You, uh...you fainted there too.”

Hervé’s cheek hollowed like he was biting it, and then he sighed. “It happens sometimes.”

“Do you really think you should be out walking by yourself if you’re going to pass out all the time?” Orion asked as he peeled back the wrapping on one of the bandages.

Hervé’s look could have melted a glacier. “Do you think that’s your business?”

“Well, this is the second time I pulled you up off the ground, and this time, you busted your forehead open. So it might not be my business, but I’m probably not wrong.”

Hervé looked furious, but Orion could see his lips moving, and he was pretty sure the guy was counting. “It wasn’t fainting.”

Orion’s fingers curled back away from where they were smoothing the bandage over Hervé’s forehead. “Um...”

“I have this disorder,” Hervé said, his voice hesitant and almost sheepish. “I’m fully aware. I just can’t move.”

Orion backed up into a chair, then sat down. “That sucks.”

Hervé’s lip twitched, and then he burst into laughter. But before Orion could even smile, Hervé’s face went slack, and he slumped forward. Luckily, Orion’s reflexes were quick because he managed to catch the guy before he face-planted on the table, and he gave him a gentle shake.

“Shit. Is this it? Are you awake? Can you hear me right now? Can you—”

“*Ouais*,” Hervé muttered. He came back to himself the way he had when he was on the ground—slow at first, and then his awareness settled in almost sharply. “I’m sorry.”

“Bro. Don’t apologize. Jesus,” Orion said, passing a hand down his face as he sat back again. “Does it just randomly happen like that?”

Hervé shrugged and bit his lip as he stared down at his hands. “There are...I forget the word in English.” He muttered to himself for a second. “Causes.”

“Triggers?”

Hervé nodded and glanced up. “Eating sweets—eating anything that tastes very good,” he clarified. “Strong emotions. Stress. I can’t speak to my mother without collapse.”

Orion snorted. “I’ve got one of those too.”

Hervé’s mouth twitched into a very small smile. “I have treatment, but it’s not all the time effective.”

Orion had no idea what the hell to say to this man. He looked out the window, then back at this veritable stranger at his kitchen table. “Could I tempt you to stay for dinner? I’m not a great cook, so it won’t taste great—and just in case it does, I can catch you before you pass out in your pasta.”

ORION HADN'T EXPECTED HERVÉ TO SAY YES, BUT HE DID. IT was odd because he still couldn't shake the feeling that he knew this guy from somewhere, but he was determined not to let it bother him. Apart from the hottie at the café and his random new neighbor, this was the first person Orion found himself at ease with.

The guy was intimidatingly gorgeous—like one of those Parisian models on all the billboards, but there was something humble about him too. Like he was cloaked in shadows and holding something close to his chest. Orion had a feeling it was more than just his diagnosis, but he didn't want to give the guy the third degree.

Instead, he threw together a little lemon butter sauce, boiled some pasta, and served it with some toasted baguette. Hervé eyed the plate a little warily, but he nodded his thanks, and they sat together at the table close enough that Orion would be able to catch him if he fell.

“I appreciate this,” Hervé said after his first bite, and Orion breathed out when the guy didn't immediately collapse. “Eating has gotten a bit frightening.”

Orion raised a brow. “Like drowning in soup?”

“Like choking to death,” Hervé said, and it was very clear he wasn't joking. “The first time it happened, my head fell backward.”

Orion's whole core heated up with horror. “Holy shit.”

Hervé huffed a small laugh and shrugged as he swallowed another bite. “After that, I became very careful how I handle my food. I can’t eat on the sofa because I slump backward. And I try to cut everything into very small bites. It makes the meals take forever, but that’s not how I want to go out.”

Orion cocked his head to the side as he bit into his baguette. “How do you want to go out?”

Hervé looked a little startled at the question, but he smiled as he took a sip of the wine Orion had poured. “Like one of the classics. Young. Still beautiful. Living in a way people can forget all the mistakes I made because how tragic my death was.”

Orion might have laughed at that once, or he might have joined in. Instead, his throat went hot, and to his extreme horror, a couple of tears leaked from his eyes.

Hervé immediately looked alarmed. “I’m sorry. I didn’t—”

“My brother’s dying,” Orion blurted, not wanting this poor man to feel like he’d done something wrong. “My brother-in-law. We were best friends, and he married my sister.” It felt odd just spilling all of this to a total stranger, but he hadn’t been able to say any of this shit aloud since he’d seen Carey, and he’d only been able to tell Pietro and James the one time before he put the rest of his focus into the season and ignored reality. “He’s got this disease which is terminal, and there’s no treatment and no cure. He’s so fucking young, and they have this little baby, and I just—” He cut himself off before he really embarrassed that poor man.

Hervé was looking at him carefully, almost like he was trying to measure his response. “I’m sorry for what I said.”

Orion quickly waved him off. “Please don’t. I’m a fucking mess right now, and I have no idea how to deal with these emotions. I feel like some hormonal thirteen-year-old.”

Hervé’s mouth twitched again, and Orion wondered what it would be like to live a life where he had to try and temper his emotions so he didn’t fall on his face. “I don’t think anyone would blame you.”

“Some people might,” Orion muttered. “I don’t know how much you know about American sports—”

“Some,” Hervé cut in.

Orion nodded. “Well, that’s what I do. I’m a pro ballplayer, and I need to get my shit in check before I go home because I can’t walk into the season crying every time someone looks at me funny, you know?”

He noticed Hervé was staring at him again with that look on his face like he knew Orion, but it faded after a few seconds. “You could always go into acting. I hear French cinema is losing one of its major stars, and they could use a man with a strong emotional range.”

Orion laughed for a second, but then he registered that there was real pain in Hervé’s voice. “You?”

Hervé rubbed the back of his neck and shrugged, looking a little sheepish. “It’s hard to call on the emotions I need to do my job when they make me collapse.” He muttered a string of French, then dropped his hands in his lap and sat back in the chair. “My therapist suggested some time to figure out what I want to do next.”

That didn’t sound terrible, Orion thought. In fact, it sounded like a good idea for him. Not that he was ready to speak a single word about Carey, and God only knew when he would be. But it would happen eventually. And he couldn’t let his team down.

Glancing at the clock, he saw it was nearing eight, and then he looked back at Hervé, who was rubbing at his eyes. “You need to take off?”

Hervé huffed a quiet laugh. “I used to spend every weekend in the city—dancing in clubs, drinking, not caring about anything. Now I need to be in bed by nine.”

Orion felt a pulse of sympathy, so he offered his hand, and he was startled when Hervé took it. In the shadows of the kitchen’s low lights, Orion could see the wrinkles forming at the edges of Hervé’s eyes, and the dark circles, and the look of a man who’d recently lost a lot of weight. He was obviously

run-down and showing his age, and Orion couldn't begin to imagine what that was doing to a person like him.

“Let me walk you back to your place.”

Hervé hesitated, then nodded, and his fingers spasmed gently on Orion's. “If you don't mind. It might be safer that way, and I'm...I'm trying to learn how to take help.”

Orion smiled, but he said nothing. He figured it would be easier for Hervé to digest it better if there was only silence between them. Grabbing his phone, he snagged his jacket on the way out, and he let Hervé take the lead as they passed over the soft grass, then through the wrought-iron gate door.

The streets had only a couple of lamps, which looked like they'd been converted from gas to electric in a hurry, and they did very little to light the road, but Orion kind of liked it. The moon was full and only partially obscured by a handful of clouds, and the air was cool and slightly humid.

There was a light breeze, which played with the ends of his hair, and he looked over to see an almost peaceful expression hovering on Hervé's face.

“Do you like it here?” Orion asked.

Hervé took a breath. “I thought I would hate it. Places like this are...too quiet. *Toujours la même.*” When Orion frowned at him, he smiled. “Always the same. It's this place trapped in time, and my mother always loved it. That's why she—” He stopped abruptly and shook his head. “But...my head is too loud. Too...chaos?”

“Chaotic?” Orion offered.

Hervé nodded, but before he could say anything, his body started to sag. Orion's arms darted out and caught him before he fell over, and Hervé let out a tired, frustrated grunt.

“Sorry. I'm not going to fall. But I'm going to need to sleep very soon.”

Orion grimaced as he kept his arm tight around Hervé's waist. “I should have driven you.”

“The walk is nice,” Hervé said softly.

Silence settled down again, and luckily, Hervé wasn't staying very far. Three streets down at the very end. It was a cottage nestled in between a couple of larger, newer homes. It was better maintained than his own, but only just. Orion walked him to the door, then hesitated on the top step as Hervé got the door open with a set of keys.

"I'd like to see you again," Orion told him as Hervé stepped inside. "I had a nice night, and I kind of need a friend right now."

There was a long pause, and then Hervé looked at him with sleepy eyes. "I know. I enjoyed dinner and your company."

"But?" Orion pressed.

Hervé's lips twitched, and then he smiled. It was the first genuine smile Orion had seen on him, and his entire face transformed for the second it lingered. "But it would be a bad idea. You have very good friends, Orion. Trust them to help you. You don't need me."

Orion stood there blinking as the door shut, and he realized he'd been dismissed without an answer from Hervé. It burned hotly in his chest, but he wasn't about to demand more from the man who was seconds away from losing himself to unconsciousness.

Instead, he turned on his heel and headed back.

Hervé continued to plague him all along the walk, and it was seconds before he reached the gate to his rental that something struck him. The face he knew. The voice he knew.

The name.

His fingers trembled as he pulled his phone out of his pocket, and he leaned against the stone wall as he opened up Pietro's Instagram and immediately started to scroll. He knew he could count on Pietro to never have deleted anything only because his ADHD made it difficult to remember, and Thierry wouldn't have given a single shit how Pietro ran his social media.

It took a good ten minutes, and his finger was starting to cramp, but eventually, he found it.

It was a small, unobtrusive little selfie with bright lights in the background. Pietro was smiling, but he looked tired, and the man he was holding close had a smirk that looked out of place on the man Orion had met tonight.

But there was no mistaking him.

There was not a damn chance in hell.

Hervé Truffaut. His handle was The_Real_Hervé, and when Orion clicked on it, he saw Hervé hadn't updated for over a year. The last post was a photo of him lounging on the bow of a boat, his head tipped up toward the sun, his body glistening. He was the picture of everything couture and beautiful and the absolute opposite of the man Hervé had met that night.

His heart thumped in his chest because this was the man who had been so fucking cruel to Pietro. This was the man who had been ugly and terrible. This was the man who had fired Thierry after taking a bullet for Hervé.

This was the man who they all hated on principle.

And Orion's chest felt like it was about to crack open.

With no idea what the hell to do, he tucked his phone back into his pocket, ignored the numbness in his veins, and went inside. The gate slammed behind him, almost like it was shouting at him for being such a fool, and his head hurt because all he wanted in the world was to go back a few hours before he knew.

When there was just a little pity and a lot of warmth in his veins for this man who was clearly suffering.

But maybe it was karma. Maybe Hervé deserved it.

His behavior during their goodbye made perfect sense, though, because as Orion sat down at the table and stared at their empty plates, he realized Hervé must have known the entire time.



ORION'S PATIENCE lasted until midafternoon.

He woke from shitty sleep, rolled over, and picked up his phone with a small prayer that it wasn't ass o'clock in Denver since it was the off-season and Pietro would most definitely be sleeping in. The call rang three times before Pietro answered, and he didn't sound very awake, but not like he'd been unconscious, either.

“Are you back?”

Orion rolled over to stare at the ceiling, then dropped his hand over his face. “Nope. I'm in France.”

“The fuck for?” Pietro grumbled. “Tell me you're not stuck. Bro, I do not have the energy to fly to Europe right now.”

“I met Hervé.” The words just kind of rushed out of his mouth before he could stop himself, but he had no control. His chaotic sleep had been filled with dreams about Hervé, Pietro, and the baseball field, and he couldn't hold it in. He rubbed at his eyes when Pietro met him with total silence. “I think I met him before at a club years back, but...but I met him here. Last night.”

“Okay,” Pietro said slowly. “Did he ask you to call me?”

“God no,” Orion said. “And trust me, if he had, I would have told him to fuck himself.”

Pietro let out a long, slow breath. “Did he recognize you?”

“I think so, but he didn't say anything. It took me all night to realize who he was though.”

Pietro made a soft grunt like he was sitting up, and then he cleared his throat. “So you went on a date, or...?”

Orion opened his mouth to tell Pietro he'd found Hervé lying on the side of the road, unconscious and bleeding, but he stopped himself. Hervé had told him the condition was new,

which meant it was likely Pietro didn't know, and Orion wasn't going to try for the pity card. He wasn't sure what exactly he even wanted from Pietro except to know his friend didn't hate him for having dinner with the guy.

Their relationship was slowly mending as it was since Orion's attitude had been monstrous after learning about Carey's ALS. He hadn't burnt bridges yet, but he sure as shit lit a few matches over the last several months.

"We, uh... had dinner, but it wasn't a date," Orion said after way too long. "I'm in this tiny-ass village, and we ran into each other. I don't think he knew who I was right away, either. But he definitely figured it out before I did."

"How do you know?"

Orion hated that he couldn't get a read on Pietro's tone. "When we were getting ready to take off, he reminded me of how good you fuckers are and that I should rely on you a little more right now."

Pietro sighed again. "It's bad, yeah?"

Orion hated himself for his eyes getting hot again, but at least there was no one around to see the handful of tears that leaked out. "It's not great, man. I'm staying in this little lover's cottage that Carey had booked for him and Nova. And they're never going to get to use it now, and he's...fuck." *He's deteriorating fast*, Orion meant to say, because he was. Carey hadn't said it outright, but with all the research Orion had done since leaving, it was clear Carey's case was aggressive.

"Hey," Pietro said, "Hervé's right, you know? I mean, I hate that little fucker, but he's good at pointing out the obvious. We *are* here."

Orion tried to sniffle as quietly as he could, and he swiped his hand over his face before taking a deep breath. "I know. I think I just need some time to get my shit together before I have to come home and smile like nothing's wrong."

"I get it," Pietro said softly. "And I know what I said about flying over there, but if you need us..."

“I swear I’m okay,” Orion promised. “I just, uh...I didn’t want you to get pissed at me for talking to him.”

Pietro was quiet for a bit longer. “Look, he’s a pretty fucked-up guy. And I don’t mean what he did—though it was fucked-up the way he left Thierry in the hospital. I’d happily punch him in the dick just once for that. But I don’t hate him. I don’t feel anything about him, really. He was mostly a shitty boyfriend, but sometimes he wasn’t. Sometimes he was the fucking best person in the world—so long as he wasn’t thinking about how feelings made him weak.”

Orion winced. “I promised to hate him for what he did.”

Pietro laughed. “You can, but even Thierry’s moved on. He got into that bodyguard job because he was afraid the world would eat Hervé alive, but it wasn’t what he wanted to do. He’s got a good life, and he’s got me and an amazing career.”

“He got shot,” Orion pressed.

Pietro scoffed. “You know him well enough to know he’d take a bullet for anyone—bodyguard or not. It was a fucked-up situation, and Hervé should have been a decent fucking human being about it, but Thierry doesn’t regret what he did.”

“So you forgive him?”

“No,” Pietro said immediately. “Or...I don’t know. I don’t feel like I need to. I’ve moved on, and I’m so fucking happy whatever Hervé has going on doesn’t even matter to me.”

It was a little harsh, but it was totally fair.

“Look, if you’re asking for permission to see him again—” Pietro began.

“Whoa, no.” Orion cut his friend off quickly. “I wouldn’t put that shit on you. I’m a big boy, and I can make my own decisions about who I socialize with. I just...I don’t know. I feel like I’ve been a really bad fucking friend lately, and I couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t tell you that I met the guy and talked to him.”

“And you enjoyed it?”

“He helped me not to think so damn much for a few hours, and that was nice,” Orion admitted.

Pietro was quiet for another long beat. “Like I said, sometimes he was the best fucking guy in the world. And I always knew that if he could get past whatever hell his parents and his childhood put him through, maybe that guy could be the one the world got to know.”

Orion wished he was more like Pietro. The guy saw good far too easily. And it felt like he was giving Orion a pass, which he wasn’t sure he deserved.

“Thierry’s grumbling at me about being on the phone, but promise me you’ll call at any time if you need me. If shit goes sour or whatever—”

“Yeah,” Orion said, not wanting Pietro to finish that sentence. “Tell James I said hey. And Ridley. And if you see Luke.”

“I will. We miss you.”

Orion closed his eyes and just let himself feel the connection between his present and what he had waiting for him when he was finally brave enough to go home. He said a quick goodbye, then rolled over and decided that he wasn’t sure what he was going to do about Hervé, but he was determined to enjoy the few weeks he had left without sinking too far into his head.

“GO. GO, YOU STUPID SHIT, JUST...” HERVÉ DRAGGED FINGERS through his hair as he stared at his haggard reflection in the mirror. He’d never looked less like himself. The meticulous color he made sure to apply every four weeks was now growing out. His roots were darker, with streaks of grey betraying not just his age but the genetics of going white early.

He found a few extra wrinkles by his eyes, too, and a stress line between his brows from his lack of Botox since he’d started his new treatment.

He felt like he was falling apart, which was absurd considering that the rest of the world didn’t tug and pull and pinch and stretch themselves to keep their youth like Peter Pan kept his shadow. Of course, aging was a death sentence to the roles Hervé liked to play, and he wasn’t ready to relinquish himself to the middle-age, cradle-robber, post-divorce rom-coms that awaited him.

But then again, no one wanted him at all anymore, so what the hell did it matter?

He hadn’t exactly kept up on his emails over the last few months, but he still wasn’t in a place with his treatment where he’d be able to function on a set.

He took in a breath, feeling it shudder in his lungs as the pain of his situation crept up on him, and he felt the familiar loose-noodle sensation hit his knees first. He managed to slump over the side of the tub as his body hit the floor, and he had no choice but to wait it out.

His eyes were closed, and surrounded in the dark, fear gripped him. Anyone could do anything to him like this. He wouldn't be able to lift a finger to save himself. He was dependent and weak and...

His arm twitched, then his jaw. His eyelids fluttered and eventually opened, and he glanced around, not quite sure how long he'd been on the floor.

He knew most of his mood was due to the evening with Orion. Not just the humiliation of being found on the side of the road with a bleeding head but also realizing who he was. Hervé did not deserve kindness from one of Pietro's teammates, who was also likely one of Thierry's good friends by now.

What he really needed to do was apologize to Orion and promise that he'd leave him alone. They didn't need to talk if they ran into each other in town again, and Orion most definitely didn't need to help him if he found him collapsed.

Hervé almost laughed when he realized that it wasn't self-pity talking. It was just stark reality. He would live with the sort of person he'd been, and he wasn't looking to turn back the clock so he could undo his mistakes. He just wanted to believe in himself that he could be better.

The one thing Hervé had never been afraid of was working hard, so he had that on his side.

Knowing that there was nothing he could do to make himself look put together, he chose a pair of skinny jeans and a sweater, then threw a beanie on to cover his roots. He paused in the kitchen to finish his coffee, then popped two of his morning pills and assessed himself.

He was a little way away from his first scheduled nap, and it wouldn't take long before the medication set in and tempered his emotions. He would be calm and cool and collected if it fucking killed him.

He'd get through his little speech, then maybe head into town and find a couple of pastries to indulge in. He'd come back to the cottage and watch some American eighties films in

his bed and pretend like he had some sort of life plan. Hell, maybe he'd forget for five minutes that this was his current reality.

The thought made him smile with just a trace of bitterness as he slipped into his shoes, grabbed his phone, then said a small prayer at the door that he could make it on the short walk without another attack. His nerves felt a little jumpy, but the sun through patchy clouds felt good on his skin, and the breeze from an overnight storm was cool.

It would have been the perfect day to lie on the bow of his boat and cruise down the Riviera.

His heart ached a bit as he set off down the road and followed the narrow path to the little cottage Orion was renting. Most of the street was lined with old wooden fences, and his fingers tapped on the posts as he started whistling to himself, an old song his mother used to sing back when he thought she gave a shit about parenting. He only had bits and pieces of memory from that time in his life, but he treasured all of them.

She used to hug him once, when he was very young. She'd wrap her arms around his tiny body and stand out on the terrace so he could watch the birds. She'd sing, and then she'd whisper all the great things he'd do when he grew up.

And in a way, he had done them. Just...he hadn't realized all of those things would turn him into a living, breathing, laughing monster. He never thought he'd be the man capable of doing things that made people hate him.

But he was. And nothing ever did impress his mother much.

Shoving that thought aside, Hervé came to a stop in front of the little gate that led to Orion's cottage. He tested the gate, and it swung open, so he said a small prayer before passing through the arch and making his way up to the door. It was heavy and freshly painted, though the place itself was old.

It had charm Americans loved—sort of Old World and ancient, made of stone and brick that had seen centuries.

Growing up in Paris, that sort of thing never impressed him, but he remembered hiking with Pietro one summer and staring up at the trees that seemed to go on for miles. He had a profound moment there, surrounded by things that began to grow long before he was born and would outlive him by millennia.

It made him feel small and unimportant.

Now, oddly, that feeling brought him comfort, but at the time, it had triggered a rush of insecurity. He'd picked a fight with Pietro that afternoon and went out with his entourage while Pietro stayed at home waiting for him.

God, he was such a *shit*.

He swallowed against the lump in his throat and lifted his hand to knock. The sound echoed through the house, but there was no answer. He waited a full minute, then tried again, but the only sound was the birds in the trees and his own breath in his chest.

Either Orion knew he was there and didn't want to answer, or the universe was reminding him he wasn't done being punished.

Whatever the case, he wasn't going to stick around and make an ass of himself. Turning, he stepped down but missed the ledge and began to topple forward. His heart seized in his chest as his limbs went limp, unable to brace himself for impact.

He waited for the pain.

Except it never came.

Instead, there were strong, warm arms cradling him as he was lowered to the ground in a patch of grass right off the side of the stone walkway. He was frozen in his body, but he could hear Orion murmuring as the man's thick hand gently began to shake his chin.

Hervé fought until he had some control, and after a second, his eyes opened. Orion was kneeling beside him on one knee, his brows furrowed, his light hair shining in the sun like it was

on fire. His mouth worked like he was searching for words, and then he cleared his throat.

“You’re going to kill yourself one of these days.”

Hervé almost laughed as he shook out his hands, then pressed them to the ground so he could sit up. His body ached from the tension of the fall, but he didn’t know how to express his thanks because it could have been so much worse.

“I’m still getting used to this,” he said.

Orion’s eyes filled with pity for a second, and Hervé hated it. “Yeah. Seems like it. Were, uh...were you looking for me?”

Suddenly, Hervé’s resolve started losing strength, and biting, acidic words formed on his tongue. He wanted to tell him no, that he wasn’t so pathetic. That he was just in the neighborhood. That Orion shouldn’t think he was important.

But he swallowed them back because that was the man Hervé *was*—not the one he was becoming.

He took a breath and stood, trying to save some of his pride. “I came to apologize.”

Orion looked vaguely amused. “For swooning in my arms like a duchess?”

Hervé’s lips thinned as Orion laughed, and he waited for a beat. “For being...me.”

Orion sobered immediately, and he took a step back, rubbing his fingers through his hair. “Oh. Yeah, I figured you recognized me last night.”

Hervé’s cheeks darkened with heat. “I should have said something, but I was in shock.”

“To be fair, I didn’t really recognize you until I looked up your Instagram,” Orion told him. “I mean, it wasn’t like we were friends back then.”

No, they weren’t. And Hervé had been such a shithead that he probably wouldn’t have given Orion the time of day unless he’d wanted to make Pietro jealous. Shame curled through him as he shrugged. “I just want you to know that I won’t be

bothering you again. I...well. I can't make up for what I did, but I'm trying to be better. And please let Pietro know that I ___”

“Look, man,” Orion said, holding up a hand, “not to hurt your feelings, but Pietro and Thierry don't give much of a shit about you. They don't really talk about you at all, and I have no plans to pass along any messages.”

And oh, yes. It stung. But there was a sudden and almost profound relief to know that their lives weren't miserable because he'd been awful. The last time he'd seen Thierry, his former friend was still in pain, and Hervé was on a spiral, and he knew he'd only made it worse.

“I didn't mean to be cruel,” Orion said quietly.

Hervé looked up and realized that his eyes were wet. He quickly swiped his hand over them and shook his head, taking careful breaths so he didn't trigger another attack. “No,” he said, and his voice cracked, so he cleared his throat and tried again. “No, that's...good. That's good, right? That they don't care?”

Orion laughed slightly, looking confused. “It's good for them.”

“And me,” Hervé insisted. He licked his lips and glanced around him. “Maybe people don't realize that I know what kind of person I was, but I do. *Et je m'en veux.*” He tapped his chest. “I was a shit.”

Orion blinked, then looked like he was trying to fight back a grin, but he failed. “Yeah. You were an epic shit, man.”

Hervé huffed a soft laugh and shrugged. “I know it. The last time I was there, I was at my worst. I don't have any excuses, and I'm not going to bother either of them for forgiveness. That's not what I want.”

Orion's head tilted to the side as he regarded Hervé long enough it made him squirm. “So...what do you want, then? Or are you fine with how it all ended?”

Hervé scoffed. “Would you be fine with it?”

“No, but I like to think I wouldn’t have pulled the shit you did, either,” Orion said plainly.

Hervé flinched and took a step backward. The shame was burning through him now, like hot coals.

“I’m sorry. Hey, look—”

“No,” Hervé said, forcing himself to meet Orion’s gaze. It felt like climbing a goddamn mountain, but he wasn’t going to back down now. His therapist said these moments would be hard. That admitting what he’d done and accepting the judgment of others would make him want to crawl back into the indifferent asshole he was before. But he’d made himself a promise, and he intended on keeping it. “Don’t be sorry. I deserve that and worse, but I don’t say that because I want pity. I just want to be better.”

Orion was quiet for a long while, and then he stuck out his hand. His fingers were so thick, and when Hervé touched Orion’s palm with his own, he felt the callouses on his skin. They were rough and rugged—just like Pietro had—and it sent a shiver down his spine.

“Not a lot of people would do the work, you know.” Orion squeezed his fingers.

Hervé hunched his shoulders. “It’s hard some days, but I can’t keep living like this. I tried for so many years, and it ruined me. It’s either fix myself or give up. And I’ve never given up before.”

Orion’s face softened as he pulled his hand away and shoved it into the pocket of his jeans. “So that’s that, huh?”

Hervé shrugged. He didn’t know what that phrase meant entirely, but he understood the tone it was spoken in. “Thank you for not punching me in the face when you realized who I was.”

Orion’s eyes went wide. “Do I look like the kind of man who goes around punching people?”

Hervé smiled, but it faltered as he felt a wave of fatigue hit him. His blinks were getting slower and longer. Shit. “I would have deserved it.” His tongue felt thick, and his chin started to

dip. Sleep was about to claim him, and he had no control.
“Listen, I should...I should go.”

“You gonna pass out on me again?”

Hervé started to shake his head, but he realized he was. He dropped to his knees and patted the grass around him for sharp rocks. “Feel free to judge me all you want. But...I’m...” He curled onto his side. Words were too hard. And he was too far gone.

HERVÉ WOKE WITH A VAGUE MEMORY OF BEING CARRIED INSIDE a house, but he'd recently started having vivid hallucinations in place of his dreams as his narcolepsy got worse. He'd also taken to sleepwalking when it was particularly bad, and he'd woken up in a few strange places over the last few weeks.

With a ball of panic in his chest, Hervé glanced around him and realized that no, he hadn't been hallucinating. He had come all the way to Orion's cottage, attempted to explain himself, then passed out in his garden.

Fantastic.

He scrubbed his hands down his face, then stared down at the duvet he was on. It was a thick quilt with tiny flowers all over it like his mamé used to have. But instead of smelling like dried roses, it smelled like cheap laundry powder. He shifted to the edge of the bed, then glanced around and didn't see any of Orion's things, which meant he was in the guest room.

His cheeks started burning again, and he swallowed back a lump of frustration as he made his way out of the room. He briefly considered trying to sneak out, but as he passed the sofa, Orion stuck his head through the kitchen doorway and pinned him with a gaze.

"Is that how you say thanks? Creeping out?"

Hervé huffed and rolled his eyes. "It is when I humiliate myself by passing out on your lawn."

Orion scoffed and jerked his head toward the kitchen. “I’ve got that fucking amazing dried sausage and cheese...and some fresh bread because that barista kid all but ripped me a new asshole for trying to eat old baguette.”

Hervé laughed softly, but as much as he wanted to escape, the fact that Orion invited him to stay meant something else. He wasn’t used to that. He was used to imposing himself on people and ignoring the obvious signs of wearing out his welcome.

His socked feet tapped on the bare floors, and he wondered if Orion had taken his shoes off before he brought him inside. The thought made his chest a little tingly, but he shoved that aside as he joined Orion at the little counter.

There was a charcuterie board laid out with a few wedges of soft cheese and a saucisson that had been hacked up by a serrated knife. Hervé fought the urge to flinch, but Orion looked so damn pleased with himself that he couldn’t. Instead, he glanced at the baguette, which he’d clearly torn into with his hands—so at least he’d gotten that part right.

“Here,” Orion said as he pushed a stool closer. “You can sit. Let me—” He grabbed the baguette and tore it down the middle, and Hervé flinched. “What?” Orion asked with a frown.

“You don’t eat that part,” he scolded, pointing to the center.

Orion looked adorably lost. “Why the hell not? It’s bread.”

“You want to eat your armpit sweat, be my guest.”

Orion blinked rapidly. “It...*what?*”

Hervé quickly realized that Orion probably hadn’t tucked it under his arm to carry it home. He’d probably tucked it into a little market cart and treated it with the delicacy of a fine foreign food. God, he wanted to...

Kiss him?

Hug him?

He'd never been so confused. Yes, Orion was unbearably attractive, but he was also so different than anyone Hervé had ever known. When he was with Pietro, the guy was very much a professional player, but he was also a professional playboy. Pietro had changed the longer they were together, but when they first met, he was like every other flakey, arrogant asshole Hervé kept in his inner circle.

Orion was nothing like that.

“When we buy the bread, we carry it like this.” Hervé mimed putting the bread under his arm. “So you don't eat the middle.”

Orion pulled a face, which made Hervé laugh—which then made his arms weaken. He gripped the counter, and when Orion moved close, he shook him off.

“I'm okay.” And he was, in more ways than one. Reaching over, he tore a piece of the baguette, then snatched up the cheese knife and spread a thick layer. It was hard to remember the days when he didn't let himself have carbs or dairy or anything that made him feel good. He took a bite and sighed at the taste. “I couldn't do this before.”

Orion lifted a brow. “Do what? Eat lunch with a friend?”

“Eat anything like this,” Hervé admitted. “Anything that tasted good was off-limits. I couldn't risk my figure.”

With a sigh, Orion sawed off more of the meat, and Hervé hid his laugh as the guy shoved it toward him, then gestured at the small pot of spicy mustard. “If it helps, my nutritionist is going to murder me when I get home, but this is worth it.”

Hervé grinned, delicately picking up some of the meat, and he dipped the edge in the mustard. Flavor exploded across his tongue, and he chewed until suddenly he couldn't. He tried to brace himself, but he started to fall, and his throat let out an involuntary grunt as Orion's arms went around him to catch him before he fell face-first.

Hervé struggled to regain control, and as Orion gently rubbed a hand over his arm, he started to come back to

himself. Anger rushed through him, and he clenched his jaw as he wrenched away from Orion's touch. "Don't."

Orion gave him a pointed stare. "You wanted a face full of mustard?"

"I want to eat a fucking piece of bread without losing control!" Hervé's head was swimming, and he stood up, stumbling into the living room before he collapsed on the sofa. His body was fine, but his frustration was building in the back of his throat like a stone threatening to choke him.

Covering his hot, wet eyes, he ignored the sound of Orion's feet as he walked into the room.

"I forgot you said you had to be careful where you ate." The words sounded like an apology. "I didn't think."

"Why should you?" Hervé asked, his tone laced with bitterness. "It's not something you have to think about."

"No." There was a quiet whump of air as Orion dropped down beside him, and Hervé heard the quiet thunk of the cheese board hitting the coffee table. "I guess I don't, but I should have. I'm not the kind of guy who ignores things my friends need. I don't invite Pietro places where it gets loud, and I don't invite Thierry to clubs that have stairs. I can do this too."

Hervé knew those words weren't meant to be salt in his wounds, and he also knew he had no right to feel sorry for himself because none of his friends would ever be so considerate. The truth was he had cultivated his social group with selfish assholes just like him so he could feel a little less bad about himself. He couldn't let himself be surprised now that they were all gone.

"It's supposed to get better," he said eventually. He dropped his hands and sat up a little bit, but when Orion offered him more, he shook his head. His appetite was shot. "My doctor says it'll get better once we work out the treatment that my brain likes."

Orion hummed as he chewed. "What's it feel like?"

Hervé shrugged and rolled his eyes up toward the ceiling. He traced an old crack in the plaster with his gaze. “I have this...rush, in my body,” he said, trying to find the words. “When it’s triggered by emotions. It’s like adrenaline, then this sensation like a string snaps. That’s when I know it’s gone too far. Everything feels weak, and it’s so awful because I can hear everything going on around me, but I’m stuck. I can’t...I can’t scream, I can’t shout for help, I can’t brace my fall. I just have to lie there.”

Orion swallowed thickly. “Is there a cure?”

“No,” Hervé said, more defeated than sad about it anymore. “Mine was made worse by stress and my...my drug addiction. I was so fucked-up, but my doctor said it would have happened no matter what I did. The only difference is I might have caught it earlier and started treatment before it got this bad.” Hervé rubbed the side of his head where he could feel lumps of scar tissue from the stitches. “Sometimes I think it’s my punishment.”

“If you believe in that sort of thing,” Orion said softly.

Hervé wasn’t really sure if he did or not. Those were thoughts he had in his lowest moments, when he struggled to accept that this was his new reality, but good things happened to bad people. And bad things happened to good ones. There didn’t seem to be any rhyme or reason to life.

Picking at his thumbnail, he glanced at Orion out of his periphery. “I hate that everything you know about me is...this. It’s either a terrible asshole who hurt your friends or some pathetic little creature who needs to have someone wipe his face because he fell asleep in soup.”

“Mustard,” Orion corrected.

In spite of himself, Hervé fought back a smile. “You know what I mean.”

Orion’s lip twitched, hiding his own grin. “We could try to do something else, you know? Instead of sitting at home eating sausage and cheese. We could go check out the sites.”

Hervé met his gaze. “If you’re going to ask me to go to some tourist trap, the answer is no.”

Orion laughed and shook his head. “I was thinking that... place over the bridge. Mont...saint something?”

“Mont-Saint-Michel,” Hervé said absently.

Orion grinned. “That’s the one. I heard it’s cardio as fuck.”

“I don’t know what that phrase means,” Hervé said primly.

Orion laughed harder, and Hervé had the sudden urge to keep him making that sound because it was fucking beautiful. “It means it’s gonna work your body hard. It’s all uphill, right?”

“I’ve never been,” Hervé admitted. “The only reason I ever came to Brittany was to visit my grandparents when I was very little, and they were too old for something like that.”

Orion’s expression went a little soft. “Well, maybe we can change that. Just because you’re French doesn’t mean you can’t be a tourist.”

Hervé desperately wanted to say yes. He wanted to lean in and take everything Orion was offering, but he couldn’t. “That sounds like a good way for me to get another crack in my skull. And—” Hervé hesitated, fighting the words that were railing against his chest, but he had to say them. He couldn’t let this continue. “And I meant what I said before. I don’t think we should keep seeing each other.”

Orion’s eyes went wide, and Hervé saw pain reflected in them. “My company’s that bad, huh?”

Hervé bit his lip and shook his head. “It’s not fair to either of us. I can’t—I’ll never be able to undo what I did to people that you love. And I know this doesn’t mean anything, but I don’t want you to live with the weight of a burden I created.”

“You do know that I’m allowed to make my own decisions about who I hang out with, right?” Orion fired back. He dropped the piece of bread he was holding and ran his fingers around his mouth. “And I actually called Pietro and told him we met.”

Hervé sucked in a breath. “That’s why you know they don’t...that I’m not...”

“Yes,” Orion said, stopping him before he had to repeat the words that had stung so badly. “That’s how I know. Pietro is happy. He’s in love. He’s moved on, and he doesn’t hate you, Hervé. He doesn’t...”

“Think about me. You did say that already,” Hervé answered.

Orion looked sorry, but he didn’t apologize. “You can’t move forward if you’re going to keep holding yourself back. I can never, ever forgive you on behalf of the people you hurt. I won’t even try, and if Pietro ever asked me to make a choice, I wouldn’t side against him.”

Hervé swallowed with a tight throat. “Of course not.”

“But he’s not asking me to do that.”

Hervé’s heart was beating against his ribs so hard he wondered if he’d actually be able to see it if he looked down. But he wasn’t brave enough. Instead, he stood up and steadied himself. “I should go.”

Orion sighed, but it was one of resignation. “Fine. But look, I’m going to head over there on Monday. Nine in the morning. So, if you change your mind—”

“I won’t,” Hervé said, more harshly than he meant to. He took a breath, but he had his mind made up. “I’m sorry, but I won’t.”

“Okay.” Orion brushed his hands off on his jeans, then rose and took a single step closer. “Can I walk you home?”

Hervé shook his head, regretting it and yet...not. “It would be best if you don’t.” He met Orion’s gaze for another moment, then turned and headed for the door. His shoes were waiting for him there, so he slipped them on, feeling Orion’s presence lurking behind him. Without looking back, he rested his hand on the doorknob, then bowed his head and let himself linger in the first moment of acceptance and peace he’d had since he was young.

Then he opened the door and stepped out. For his own sake, and for Orion's, he was determined not to see him again.

ORION WAS UNFAMILIAR WITH THE FEELING OF REJECTION. NOT because he was some arrogant asshole who believed he was God's gift and only dated superfans but because he never had time for casual relationships. His entire life since his sophomore year of high school had been baseball. It had been staring down a long road with the MLB as his destination, and everything else sat by the wayside.

He lost his virginity to a pretty girl named Selina on prom night—he'd gone alone, and she'd been dumped by her date. He had an old condom in his wallet his dad had given him his junior year, and they lasted a minute and twenty-six seconds. He was pretty sure, now that he thought back on it, she hadn't come.

But it had been a moment he realized he could scratch his itch without taking away focus on the game by not having girlfriends—or, as he later discovered in the minors, boyfriends. He could go out and hook up and even make them breakfast in the morning so long as they didn't get any ideas about staying.

The media outlets loved his perpetual bachelor status. It made him a sort of icon for the grasping fans that thought they might have a chance with him if they just managed to talk to him for long enough.

But Orion had never wanted to bother before. He'd never felt a pressing need to be in the company of one person longer

than a night or two apart from his friends and family. That need just...didn't live in him the way it did with other people.

He didn't really know what that meant or if it defined his sexuality in some way, and he honestly didn't care.

Except...now he did. Strangely.

He cared about this man—this person who had hurt people Orion loved, who had proved himself to be a raging borderline narcissist—and it made him feel uncomfortable that he just left and promised that Orion wouldn't see him again.

Mostly, Orion felt like a jackass for not chasing him down and telling him that Hervé needed to get his head out of his ass and actually move on from his past. He wasn't a believer in universal second chances, but he was a believer that there were some people who genuinely wanted to be better. Who worked at it.

Who did all the right things.

And the fact that Hervé wasn't trying to get back into Pietro and Thierry's good graces felt like it meant something. It felt like maybe his change was genuine. It might have been because of his newly diagnosed disorder and all the shit that came with it, but Orion had spent the night googling Hervé's spiral, and it had happened long before he was sick.

His antics were things Orion had seen before. They were the actions of a desperate man who wanted to change his life but had already started falling. The only thing left to do with people like that was to let them crash.

The truth was there were people who were bad, and there were people who did bad things. What mattered was how those people defined themselves. Orion had been in the public spotlight, surrounded by celebrities and the megarich, for a damn long time, and he'd learned how to spot the difference.

And hell, maybe he was foolish. Maybe he was being taken for a goddamn ride, but even Pietro still believed there was something redeemable about Hervé. And Thierry hadn't said anything other than Hervé was broken inside, and he couldn't be the one to fix him.

No, people like that had to start healing themselves, and maybe that's why Orion couldn't let it go. Hervé wasn't looking for a savior. He was just looking for someone who believed he could be someone else.

Of course, Orion also had no intention of spending his entire trip thinking about Hervé. It was a nice distraction from the aching well of grief sitting in his chest, but he still owed it to his best friend to think about him.

He'd gotten a single message from his sister the day after Hervé had come to his place. It was a voicemail left at two a.m.

"I just wanted to let you know Carey seems to have taken a downturn, and we've got about a dozen appointments with the doctor to figure out why—"

"Nova! Don't tell him that. He'll get all up in his head, and he's busy trying to fuck his ninety-five-year-old neighbor!"

"Will you please shut up. That's disgusting, and I'm trying to be serious."

"Come over here and I'll show you serious."

"You're so embarrassing. Anyway, we both love you, and everything's fine. Just wanted to keep you posted. Please be having fun."

"Get your dick sucked at least once, or I'll never speak to you again!"

And then the call ended.

Orion listened to it twice, then saved the audio on his phone, laughing until he cried. Then crying until he was screaming into his pillow because his body didn't know what to do with all that grief and pain.

Orion: I miss you, shithead.

Carey: I miss you more. Wrap it up, bud. I don't want calls about STIs. Also Nova has to text for me now so

we should save all the juicy details for when you call me next. Maybe next weekend?

Orion: You bet.

Orion spent the rest of that afternoon trying not to think about the fact that Carey couldn't use his hands enough to text anymore. He wallowed, eating terrible food and watching old rom-coms on his laptop, because if he did anything else, he'd start thinking.

And if he started thinking, he'd start panicking, and he knew Carey would never forgive him if he did that.

By morning, things were different, and when the weekend ended and the sun rose on Monday morning, Orion was feeling more like himself. He'd fought the urge to call Nova and Carey and demand details about his prognosis and instead put on his running shoes and jogged the length of the village and back just as the sun rose over the horizon.

A small part of him hoped he might find Hervé sitting at a café somewhere and he'd get some sort of second chance to plead his case, but he figured that one was best left for the universe. Instead, he showered, dressed, then hopped in his rental and hit the address on the GPS. It was a forty-minute drive, which was gorgeous and peaceful in spite of the traffic, and he tapped his fingers along to the music as he made his way over the bridge and to the low-tide parking.

It was still early enough that there weren't very many people milling around, and he could see patches of water glowing along the sand in the morning light. They reflected the sky and gave the sand an otherworldly look—like he could jump down and enter the portal to another realm.

The temptation to give it a try was almost overwhelming. Maybe there was a mirror universe where someone he loved wasn't dying, and that Hervé wasn't working through shit, and everyone he knew was happy and content.

But he wasn't sure if that sounded like paradise, in the end.

If Hervé had been a better person, Pietro wouldn't have found the strength to leave him and stumble into the love of his life. And Orion wouldn't have come to Brittany to escape the pain he was feeling, and he would have never met a Hervé who was willing to give him a second look.

Would that be worth it to know Carey would live? Yes. But he wasn't sure happiness was attached to that timeline.

With a breath, he squared his shoulders and began the trek toward the little village at the base of the island. It seemed like it had been pulled straight out of time with the way it cascaded almost like a spiral up a hill to where he could see spires at the top. They were dark against the blue backdrop of the morning sky, and just before he reached the walkway, he stopped to just look up at the spires scraping the sky.

The wind whipped across his face, stinging his ears a little, but he wanted to indulge. He spent so much of his life focused on getting from one game to the next, one playoff to the next, one year to the next, he rarely did this. He didn't pause and just take in the living, breathing world around him.

And maybe—*God*—maybe that's what Carey was trying to remind him to do.

He took in a shuddering breath and started forward when a hand landed on his arm. Orion's heart gave a heavy thud against his chest as he spun, preparing a polite kiss-off for the total stranger who had the nerve to grab him. It happened more than he cared to think about, and he was a pro at handling it, but the words fizzled to ash on his tongue when he realized who it was.

Hervé was there, looking windswept and sweet in his beanie, which was an odd contrast to his T-shirt and jeans. He looked a little gaunt and tired, bruises under his eyes visible just below the shades he wore, and he was holding his arms around his middle like he was expecting something cruel thrown his way.

"I thought you weren't coming," Orion blurted.

Hervé's lip twitched. "My therapist told me that I'm working against her orders."

Orion's brow shot up. "Her orders?"

With a scoff, Hervé turned his gaze out toward the sea. "Something about how if I'm going to tell myself that I'm a better person than I was, I have to let other people agree with me. And she pointed out that you inviting me today might be your way of doing that." He paused and glanced back, gnawing at his lower lip for a second. "Unless you planned to throw me off a turret."

"That hadn't crossed my mind," Orion said wryly. He gave Hervé a once-over, then stepped closer. "Are you okay to make this walk?"

Hervé let out a bone-deep sigh and glanced up the path. "I don't know, but I think it's worth a try. If I fall behind, it's okay to leave me."

"I'm not going to leave you, asshole." Orion rolled his eyes and took a risk, stepping in to thread his arm through Hervé's. The shorter man startled and stiffened, but Orion stood stock-still, allowing him the chance to pull away.

He didn't.

"If you need to stop and take a nap or rest or whatever, let me know."

Hervé looked at him curiously, his eyes just barely visible through the brown tint of his lenses. "You want to stand there and wait for me to nap on a bench?"

Orion laughed as he tugged him, and they began to make their way forward, heading toward a small collection of shops. He could see signs hanging from doorways—most of them closed because it was still so early—but he wasn't there to buy crap he didn't need.

"I read up on your condition. At least, whatever I could find on WebMD. It said that there's a few different types of narcolepsy, but most of them came with sometimes having to just stop and sleep, no matter what you're doing."

Hervé's cheeks flushed slightly, but Orion reasoned that away as the wind. "It's not always like that. I have a strict schedule which helps. It's stress that tends to make it worse."

"And laughing. And eating," Orion said with a tiny smile.

Hervé huffed, but he couldn't quite hide the smile lurking in the corners of his mouth. "Something like that." He went silent, and for the first time in a long time, Orion didn't feel compelled to fill an empty space with words.

ORION HATED EVERYTHING. HE HATED THE BASTARD WHO invented stairs and concrete and the fucking assholes who discovered how to carve stone. He was in the best shape of his life, but he was heaving by the time they finally reached the lookout, and his calves were on fire.

Hervé, for his part, was staring at him with something like amusement as he leaned against the railing, and in spite of Orion's heart trying to beat out of his chest, all he could see was how damn beautiful the man was.

And he could remember thinking that before—the few times they'd been in the same place when he was dating Pietro—but back then, Orion hadn't given him a second glance. Hervé was like every single one of the celebrities that tended to hang around James' club. He was perfectly arranged and formed for the public eye, and Orion had never been into that.

He didn't judge people who were, but it just wasn't something that piqued his interest.

And he wasn't foolish enough to think that part of Hervé wasn't still alive in him. He knew once he had better control over his disorder, and once he felt confident in himself, he'd go back to primping and fussing. But knowing he could be this too—sort of rugged and messy—it did something for Orion.

“Do I have something on my face?” Hervé asked.

Orion shook his head, and he walked closer now that he'd caught his breath. He rested his arms on the railing and looked out over the sea. “You're very good-looking.”

Hervé scoffed. “You should have seen me two years ago.”

“I did see you two years ago,” Orion reminded him. “Or, well, longer than that. I saw peak princess Hervé, and he’s not more beautiful than you are now.”

Hervé’s lips thinned, and his jaw hardened. “Is that your line? To convince men to sleep with you?”

Orion felt the sting, but he knew he was coming on strong. He didn’t even know what the fuck his feelings meant, and he had invited Hervé here as a friend. So he deserved that. “I don’t need to convince anyone to sleep with me. Normally, I just tell them what I do for a living.”

Hervé hummed, then turned back toward the horizon and sighed. “So did I. It was nice when I was younger. After a while, it just became a chore. They were so...”

“Fake,” Orion said quietly.

Hervé hummed in agreement. “I could never tell if they were performing, and I hated it.”

Orion had had his fair share of nights trying to tell if his partner was just putting on a show, and it always left him feeling a little bit dirty. He never wanted it acrobatic or intense or wild. He just wanted it to be real.

“I think that’s why I never dated. I mean, I never really felt the urge to date,” he added with a shrug, and he shifted so his elbow brushed against Hervé’s. “But I’m also just...odd.”

Hervé lifted a brow at him. “Odd?”

“That’s what people tell me,” Orion said with a small grin. He blew out a puff of air, then shrugged and pushed away from the railing. “Anyway, we should eat.”

Hervé hesitated, and Orion understood, but he waited for Hervé to decide. “Promise not to let me drown in soup?”

Orion stuck out his hand, and when Hervé tried to shake it, he twisted his wrist and linked their fingers together. He heard the quiet intake of Hervé’s breath, and while he knew he was playing with fire, he found it hard to care. “Trust me?”

Hervé licked his lips, then gave him a short nod. It wasn't everything, but it was something.



IT WAS CROWDED as they made their way back down, the walk a lot easier, but Orion could see that Hervé was starting to falter. His steps were slowing, and every now and again, his chin would fall forward. As they reached the row of shops with restaurants, the crowd got heavier, and Orion knew it would be torture to force Hervé to try and sit through that.

“Do you think you could make it to my car?”

Hervé blinked slowly at him. “Your...car?”

“I drove here.”

“But...” Hervé licked his lips, then shook his head like he was trying to shake himself out of his fatigue. “Food. Lunch.”

Orion scoffed and let go of Hervé's hand, looping his arm around his waist. “You're not going to last, and while I can save you from soup, I can't save you from snoring in your lunch.”

Hervé's cheeks pinked, and he took a breath. “*Non.*”

“To the car or to sleeping at a table?” Orion knew the answer was probably both, and he frantically glanced around before he spotted a hotel sign in the distance. There was every chance the place was full, but if he was lucky—and if he had the money, which he did—they might be able to snag a room.

“I have an idea. Come with me.” Orion started to pull Hervé down the crowded, impossibly narrow street, and he followed, but his feet were dragging. Orion was debating about picking him up and carrying him, but Hervé managed to hang on as he grabbed the door and hurried inside.

“*Bonjour,*” a woman at a small counter said.

Orion grimaced and glanced at Hervé. “Want to help me out here?”

Hervé smiled sleepily at him, and then his chin tipped forward, and Orion just managed to catch him. He wasn't out yet, but Orion could see him losing his battle.

"I'm sorry," he said to the woman. "Uh, I mean, *je...uh... je suis...*"

"I speak English," she said, eyeing Hervé suspiciously.

Orion breathed out a sigh of relief as he helped Hervé plant his feet. "We need a room if you have one. Or a lounge where he can sit." At the look on her face, he realized what she was thinking. "He's not drunk, I promise. It's a medical condition."

She didn't quite look like she believed him, but she typed into her computer anyway. "We have one suite left for seven thousand Euro."

She said it with a tone that told him she expected him to go running, but he just propped Hervé against one arm while he dug out his wallet for his black card. "I don't care how much it is. We just need it for a few hours until he can get some rest and some food in him."

Her brows flew up, and her demeanor changed as she quickly took his ID with it and got them checked in. By the time Orion had the key in hand, Hervé was white-knuckling it, and Orion had enough. With a sigh, he scooped Hervé into his arms and ignored his weak, flailing protest.

"Just let go," Orion murmured softly. "I've got you."

Hervé shuddered just once, and then Orion felt him go dead weight in his arms. He told himself to send his trainer the biggest, most expensive Gucci gift basket he could find for how hard he worked him. He offered the woman an apologetic smile as he reached for his credit card with a curled arm.

"Seriously, thank you."

She nodded. "Does he need anything else?"

Orion shook his head. "I don't know if you have room service here, or..."

She gave him a flat look, and he wasn't sure if he was making some sort of cultural faux pas by assuming they did or

insulting them for assuming they didn't. "Everything you need should be in your room. Please don't hesitate to phone the desk if you need assistance."

There were only six suites in the place, so it was easy enough to find theirs—up a set of stairs cushioned by a narrow hallway. Orion grimaced as his elbows bumped the walls, but he was hyperfocused on making sure he got to the door without knocking Hervé's head.

The man was dead weight in his arms, and he was starting to feel the strain by the time he came to a halt. He was grateful it was upgraded enough for a swipe key, and he used his elbow to pull down on the handle, and he hip-checked it open.

The room was more spacious than he was expecting it to be, considering even the luxury suites in Europe seemed to all be very...*petite*. There was only one bed, but he didn't think Hervé would mind that much, and honestly, he wasn't planning on making this a long stay. Walking over, he gently laid Hervé down, and the man didn't budge, which set Orion's nerves on edge. He wasn't sure what was okay and what was a warning sign.

He'd done research, but that was all just words on a web page.

Rubbing his hands down his face, Orion began to walk the length of the room, and he found a small folder on the desk with a menu and a booklet of numbers. All of it was in French, but he knew enough to be able to order, so he hit the number four on a guess and waited for the person to pick up.

The person spoke too quickly for him to follow, so he took a breath. "Ah. *Bonjour*," he said without any idea if that was proper phone etiquette. "*Je suis dans*...um. Room six?"

"*Oui, monsieur*," the person said. "You want to order something to be brought up?"

Orion let out a heavy breath and felt bad about it because the least he could do was try, but his head was a mess with Hervé's collapse and...well, everything else along with it. "Yes, thank you. Two orders of steak frites and some water."

“Flat or sparkling?”

“One of each?” Orion said, not sure what Hervé would prefer, but he’d seen damn near everyone with glass bottles of sparkling shit that tasted both bitter and salty. But to each their own.

“We will bring it promptly. Would you like to charge the room?”

“Yes, that would be great,” he said. “Thank you.”

The person hung up without ceremony—something else he’d noticed since being there. His Midwest upbringing had him bristling at the thought of not saying at least you’re welcome or thank you, but he was starting to realize it was just their own form of manners.

Where he’d come from, it had been far more about appearance than sincerity. It was why the Southerners had so many sweet, polite phrases to mean go fuck yourself. The thought made him smile a little as he glanced over his shoulder at Hervé. He had turned on his back, his mouth hanging open.

He looked like a total mess. His beanie had slipped off, and his hair, which was dark at the roots and badly in need of a trim, was wild from the wind. Orion felt a deep, hot compulsion to kiss him the moment Hervé was awake and coherent.

Drumming his fingers on the table, he used his other hand to fish his phone out of his pocket, and after a short, internal debate, he tapped his finger on Pietro’s name. It rang long enough Orion thought maybe he was busy, but then the guy picked up.

Orion could hear splashing behind him, which told him he was probably in James’ pool.

“If it’s not my international traveler.”

Orion rolled his eyes but couldn’t stop his smile. He missed his friends. “Hey. I, uh...” He looked at Hervé again, then stood up and swiped the key from where he’d dropped it on the bed and stepped into the hallway. The door closed with

a soft click, and he pressed his back to the wall. “I have a random question.”

“Is this about Hervé?”

Orion winced. “Yeah. This might actually be a better question for Thierry. It’s a health thing, if that helps.”

Pietro was silent for a long beat. “Is he sick?”

“Sort of? I mean, it’s not catching.”

“That’s not what I was thinking,” Pietro said, sounding a little tense. “It’s been years, man.”

“Right. Sorry. I just feel guilty as fuck for still talking to him,” Orion admitted.

“And that sounds like a you problem. Thierry’s right here though,” Pietro said. Instead of handing the phone off though, Pietro took another breath. “I know we talked about it, but if you need me to say it again, I’m okay with it. I don’t want to be his friend. Ever. But I’m way too fucking happy to wish anyone misery for the rest of their lives. Especially if he makes you happy.”

Orion nodded in spite of the fact that his friend couldn’t see him. He knew that. He understood it. Pietro wasn’t the one who’d suffered the most because of Hervé, but the man he loved was, and that’s why Orion’s stomach felt sour with anxiety.

“I don’t really know what this is,” he told him. “I’m just worried right now.”

“Then let me pass you over,” Pietro said.

Orion could hear a small, muffled conversation, and he knew Thierry was probably putting up a fight, but he let out a relieved breath when the man’s gruff voice sounded over the line.

“I don’t want to talk about him.”

“Yeah, no. I know,” Orion said. “But you knew his family.”

Thierry cleared his throat. “I did. They’re not great people, if you’re asking for some kind of endorsement. Nothing will excuse Hervé’s behavior over the last few years, but if you’re looking for what probably started it, you can look at his mother.”

Orion squeezed his eyes shut. He figured as much, but that wasn’t what it was about. “He’s just, um...he’s sick, I guess. He’s probably going to kill me for telling you, and I’m not saying this because I think you should feel sorry for him—”

“He left me in a hospital, paralyzed,” Thierry snapped. “Then he stalked me. I don’t even know if I’d feel sorry for him if he were dying.”

That was...harsh. But fair. “Yeah. Well, it’s not that serious. He’s got a new disorder that’s neurological, I guess.”

“Is it a sex thing?” Thierry asked.

Orion slapped a hand over his face. “Jesus. No. It’s...a sleeping disorder, I guess? He falls asleep randomly, and sometimes he loses control over his body. Like if he laughs too hard or if he’s really angry. He’s aware of everything going on around him, but he’s kind of trapped in his body.”

Thierry sucked in a breath. “And you want my help?”

“I was just wondering if it ran in his family or anything. I don’t—I’m with him right now. We were at Mont-Saint-Michel, and I had to carry him to this hotel because he just passed out on me. And I don’t know if it’s serious, or—”

“You do know I’m a chef, yes? Not a doctor?”

Orion scoffed. “Yes. I’m asking if this was a thing in his family. I don’t want to act like I’m some Google MD.”

“I don’t know what that means either,” Thierry said, but he sounded a little more patient now. “I can tell you that I don’t think anyone he knew had that problem. If they did, they hid it very well.” Thierry cleared his throat again, then asked, “Is it fatal?”

“Not that I know of,” Orion said. “Do you care?”

Thierry sighed very softly. “I care enough to want him to live up to the person I knew he could be when I first met him. The person his mother tried to kill. I just can’t be part of it.”

“For what it’s worth, he knows that,” Orion said. “Again, he’ll probably kill me if he ever finds out that I told you this, but it’s worth the risk. I don’t think he’s trying to be better so he can undo his mistakes. I think he’s trying to be better because he was miserable.”

“I’m sorry I can’t help,” Thierry said after a moment.

Orion closed his eyes, then nodded again. “Yeah. I knew it was a long shot. Anyway, I should go check on him. But if you think of anything, just...text me?”

Thierry grunted his assent, though Orion knew that was an empty promise. But he’d take it. He was still searching for absolution for his feelings—and maybe a little bit of faith from the people Hervé hurt the most that there was something in him worth knowing. Worth forgiveness—even if it didn’t come directly from them.

HERVÉ CAME TO IN THE MIDDLE OF A DREAM. HE WAS RUNNING on the beach in shin-deep water, and there was something behind him. It was big, and it was mean, and it had Thierry's voice. The sand and ocean made it impossible for him to move, and with every footfall, his body felt heavier.

A scream lodged in his throat, and reality rushed up to meet him when his body fell off the bed and he smacked his face on the floor. He immediately tasted a rush of blood, realizing that he'd bit into his lower lip, but before he could pull himself up, strong arms had him.

He was groggy and weak from sleeping too long—a familiar feeling now—and he had no way to fight as Orion righted him and helped him to the side of the bed.

“Shit. You busted your lip.”

Hervé ran his tongue along the cut. He'd had a lot worse in recent days. “I'll be fine. Um. How long was I out?” He glanced up at Orion, who was standing a foot away, looking a little sheepish and awkward.

“Long enough that I had to order you a new lunch,” he said with a crooked smile that made Hervé's heart thud in his chest. “It should be here in a couple minutes. Are you hungry?”

Hervé didn't feel hungry, but that was the side effect of the stimulants he took, and he knew he had to get something in his stomach. “Ah, *ouais*. I'll eat something, thank you.” He pushed to his feet and tested his balance before glancing

around and realizing he had no idea where the hell he was.
“What is this place?”

“L’hôtel...saint something,” Orion said with another adorable shrug. He rubbed the back of his neck, then gestured to the table, where Hervé could make out a medieval-style logo with laurel leaves and a giant T.

His gaze roamed around the room, and he realized the place was nice.

Very nice.

“Did you pay for a suite so I could take a *nap*?” He couldn’t hide the incredulity from his tone, but the very thought of throwing that much cash away on him so he could sleep was...

“It was the only room they had left, and before you start with me, I’d do it again, okay?” Orion said, his voice tense. “You pushed yourself for this dumb date.”

Hervé blinked. “Date?”

Orion’s cheeks immediately pinked, but he didn’t drop Hervé’s gaze, though he said nothing.

After a beat, Hervé couldn’t ignore his bladder anymore, so he brushed past Orion and headed in to use the toilet. With the door shut behind him, he stood over the bowl and pressed his arm to the wall. Emptying his bladder felt like a small pulse of relief amidst the tension in his bones because he knew damn well he was close to crossing a line he told himself he wasn’t going to cross.

The night before, he’d been so goddamn sure he wasn’t going to go there with Orion. He was just going to let the man and his intense gaze and his almost painful kindness drift away. But his therapist’s words wouldn’t leave him alone, nor would the sinking feeling that he was sabotaging himself.

Yes, this was obviously temporary. There was no place for himself in Orion’s life, and Orion wasn’t about to give up everything he’d built for Hervé. But for the moment? For now?

Maybe he could have a little something that was kind.

With a deep breath, Hervé did his best to chase off the lingering fatigue, but he knew he was in for a rough night. He slept when he needed to be awake, and he had insomnia when he was meant to be sleeping, and when he napped for too long, it threw off his fucked-up internal clock worse than it already was.

Turning away from the sink, he stared at the closed door and jumped when he heard knocking. There was a low rumbling voice, then Orion's, which he couldn't hear clearly, but he recognized the cadence of his words. His neck was a little hot around his collar, and it took a few breaths to calm himself down as he reached for the door handle.

Stepping into the room, he let out a small sigh of relief when he noticed that whoever it was had gone, and there was only Orion standing there with a small tray in his hands, looking a little unsure. Hervé met his gaze and lifted a brow, and Orion laughed.

“Do I look like a server?”

Hervé snorted as he walked to the little table and sat. “You look like one of those sexy ones they always hire at the celebrity restaurants. I spoke to one a few years ago in LA, and he said they all had to submit headshots before they were hired. And all of them were trying to be actors.”

Orion's eyes widened as he set the tray down, then backed up and dropped to the edge of the bed. “Headshots? Like they were at an audition?”

Hervé pulled the cover off the plate, and his stomach rumbled at the sight of the perfectly cooked steak and the pile of fries beside it. He loved French cooking. Maybe not every bit of the cuisine but that he didn't have to make decisions about his meal the way he did when he was in the US. There was no customizing or adjusting or fussing.

There was just the chef and his food, and it wasn't complicated.

“Hervé?”

His gaze snapped up, and Orion was looking at him with some concern. “Sorry. I drifted. What were you saying?”

“Nothing important. Do you want to sit on the bed in case you...uh...you know?”

Hervé’s cheeks went hot, and he shook his head. “I think I’m okay, as long as you don’t judge me for cutting up my food like I’m a toddler. I don’t want to stab myself in the eye.”

It was humiliating to admit, but the way Orion laughed—the way his eyes lit up and there was joy on his face instead of mocking—made Hervé feel like he could actually get from this one moment to the next.

He stuck his fork in the steak and carefully cut it up into pieces before sitting back and taking a single bite. Food didn’t always cause him to collapse. It was usually sugary things—things he’d denied himself for a long time, so they felt like indulgences. But he was so tired and so afraid of the constant collapse that he just couldn’t relax.

“I was thinking,” Orion said, and Hervé was aware he was being watched, but it didn’t feel as awful as it usually did. “Maybe we can go for a walk near the beach or something later. I don’t know how wild this place gets at night, but I thought it might be fun to check some stuff out before we head to the car.”

Hervé tried not to feel the punch of disappointment in his chest. Of course they couldn’t stay. He hadn’t anticipated needing to stop at all. He’d planned a few hours at most, and he didn’t have his medication with him or a change of clothes. But God, it might have been nice to do more. To treat this like it was something more than just a strange accident.

“A redo on the date?” he chanced, then stuffed his mouth full to keep himself from saying anything else.

Orion made a surprised noise, but he was grinning. “So you agree with me, then?”

Hervé swallowed, then grabbed the bottle of sparkling water that was sitting on the table, and he chased his food down with a bubbly sip. “Was it up for debate?”

Orion gave him a flat look. “You totally ran and hid a few minutes ago when I said it. And it doesn’t have to be that, you know? We can just go be tourists. As friends.”

As friends. Those two words sat in Hervé’s gut like a stone, and he decided fuck it. Fuck it. Fuck trying to deny or hide what he wanted. Fuck trying to avoid future pain all because he knew the present, with Orion, couldn’t last.

He had no idea if he’d ever be able to find a partner who would stick with him for all the hard work he still had ahead of him, but he was trying. And Orion was looking at him like he wanted Hervé to say yes.

“I don’t think I want to be friends.”

Orion looked uncertain. “I don’t think I want that, either.”

Hervé’s heart thudded in his chest, and he felt a little woozy as he stood, but he moved with purpose. His feet shuffled across the floor and stumbled a little as he came to a halt in front of where Orion was sitting. He wavered, but Orion’s powerful, perfect hands gripped him by the hips and held him. His long fingers dug into Hervé’s sides—not quite painful, but close.

The feeling was overwhelming as much as it was grounding, and Hervé looked down at the man and wondered if this was a test or a hallucination or maybe a fever dream.

Then Orion rose, and his big hands moved to cradle Hervé’s face. His thumbs were calloused and rough and caught on the fine hair that Hervé hadn’t shaved in a while. “You’re so beautiful. And I know you’re probably used to people telling you that—”

“Not like this,” Hervé whispered. He cupped one hand around Orion’s and pressed it against his face harder—*harder*, so he could feel the weight of it. “It’s never like this.”

Orion made a soft noise of protest, but instead of giving some flowery declaration about what a shame it was or what Hervé deserved—because that would be a lie—he just leaned in and brushed their lips together.

It wasn't world-shattering. It wasn't intense. It wasn't powerful.

It was nothing like anyone Hervé had ever kissed before in his life. Kissing was always just the short prologue leading right to the epilogue where he'd come quickly and then run off because the idea of having to speak to someone after being so vulnerable scared the shit out of him.

Even with Pietro—who he had really loved in his own way and had been open with more than anyone—Hervé couldn't stand it. He couldn't stand the way Pietro looked at him because Pietro knew that Hervé was capable of being better but had chosen to not even try.

Orion was nothing like him. He was like a tide—pushing in, pulling out, consuming all of what Hervé was willing to give. One arm came around Hervé's waist and tugged him so there wasn't a centimeter of space between them. He rocked his hips, and Hervé could feel Orion's thick, hard cock telling him that he was wanted. That Orion wasn't lying about finding Hervé beautiful in his grand fucking mess.

Parting his lips, he let Orion's tongue dip in to taste him—warm and wet and messy. He groaned, but before he could sink too far into it, Orion gentled his movements and eventually pulled away with a series of soft pecks.

Hervé's breath was heaving in his chest, and he couldn't bring himself to let go, but Orion's grip on him said that he didn't really want to put space between them. Slowing down didn't mean it was ending.

“I don't think I've ever been kissed like that,” he admitted right into Orion's chest.

He felt the rumble of his would-be lover's laugh, and then thick fingers brushed through his tangles of hair. “I want to do a lot more than kiss you, but I'm not that kind of guy. I need to...”

“Be wined and dined?” Hervé asked, pulling back to look up at him.

Orion's cheeks were flushed, and his eyes were bright, and he dragged his bottom lip between his teeth before he answered. "I think we've done that. But I wouldn't mind buying a few useless trinkets and holding your hand while we walk. If you're up for it."

Hervé had wanted to curl up and sleep, and now he wanted to run a marathon if doing that meant he could keep Orion for the night. "I think I can handle that."

Orion grinned, then bent down and stole a last kiss before he pulled away. "I'm going to go tell the front desk we're checking out. Unless..."

Hervé shook his head. "I don't have my medication. I...it's not that I want to go, but—"

Orion reached out and traced a finger over Hervé's lower lip. "What we just had is enough. I'll be right back. Finish your food."

Hervé would have given some snappy, sarcastic comeback if he could have, but his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth, and silence followed on Orion's heels as he left. When the door shut, Hervé backed into the chair, then stared at the rest of his plate.

A beat passed, then another, and then he stuck his fork into a tender piece of steak and realized that following someone's orders had never felt so damn good.



HERVÉ WAS STANDING off to the side of the building as Orion rummaged through a bunch of cheap figurines when he realized he'd never done anything like this before. He'd never just strolled through the streets and shopped for things he didn't need. He'd never taken the time to soak in his partner's joy at such a simple, small act.

He'd never lingered in someone's laughter or indulged in bad jokes. He'd been so consumed with making sure that his

façade never slipped—that anyone who might have recognized him wouldn't catch him off guard. He was always prim and proper and perfect, and he didn't care what it did to the people around him.

Flipping the off switch hadn't been a conscious decision, so much so he hadn't realized he'd done it until Orion started making faces at a gargoyle statue and Hervé snorted with his laugh. It was loud—like some sort of goose honk—and Orion looked at him like he'd just said Christmas had come early.

“Did you just...”

“No.”

“But you *did*,” Orion crowed. He grabbed Hervé by his belt loops and backed him up against a brick wall. “You did.”

Hervé swallowed thickly. “Careful. They will arrest you for being indecent.”

“Wouldn't be the worst thing I've been sent to jail for,” Orion murmured, but he backed up and tucked his fingers between Hervé's, pulling him along.

Hervé blinked, then yanked on his arm. “That sounds like a story.”

Orion groaned, but he was clearly fighting back a laugh as they started toward the edge of the island where Orion had parked. Hervé knew the date was almost over, but the fact that Orion was still holding him—and the fact that nothing had to break just because they got back to the village—kept him from a rising panic.

“I was sixteen,” he said. “I wasn't really a rebellious kid or anything. I really wanted to play for the MLB, and my dad spent a lot of time reminding me that guys who fuck up when they're younger never go that far.”

“Is that true?” Hervé asked, stepping closer as the crowd started to thin. The sun was still up, though it was low on the horizon now, and the chill on the breeze was getting colder.

Orion shrugged. “Nah. I mean, look at James. The guy has a literal rap sheet. Honestly, considering what some of the

assholes in professional sports get away with, they should probably be more careful about what we do after we get drafted. But I was too afraid to lose my shot, so most of the time, I was a damn saint. I wasn't a prodigy like Pietro and Gabriel, you know? Like, I didn't have scouts at my Little League games.”

Hervé felt a pang because he didn't know that about Pietro. He knew vaguely about his brother—and his career and the injury that ended it. He knew Pietro was good, but he'd never paid enough attention to what made him that way.

“Anyway, the pressure was getting to me, and I started hanging out with some kids that, uh...let's just say they cared about school a lot less than I did.”

Hervé let out a small laugh. “Rebels?”

“Punks. Like honest-to-God punks. Big boots and spiked collars and Mohawks and shit.” He grinned when Hervé looked incredulous. “I didn't go too crazy. I dyed my hair blue for a little bit, and my mom was so embarrassed she told everyone in my family that I did it for a school play.”

Hervé huffed a soft laugh. “My mother would have literally beat me.”

Orion swallowed thickly and looked like he wanted to say something but changed his mind. “There was this school in my town where all the artsy kids went to. They had, like, music and theater and sculpting and stuff. I think they had traditional classes too, but everyone called those kids freaks.”

Hervé's brow dipped. “I was one of those freaks. I went to a performing art school. I didn't go to college or university or anything.”

Orion squeezed his hand. “Believe me, I'm not judging. The kids there seemed so happy. There wasn't all this...this pressure, you know, to be amazing. You just showed up and did what made you feel good. I asked my parents if they'd take a look at it, and they said they would if I got expelled and it was my only option.”

“Expelled?” Hervé asked with a frown, not sure he was understanding right. They slowed their pace, and both of them turned to face the sea.

“Kicked out.” Orion huffed a laugh and let Hervé’s hand go, spearing his fingers through his hair. “One of my friends told me to cuss out the teachers and stop worrying about getting detentions. So I did. I spent a week mouthing off, and I even laughed in my coach’s face when he benched me.”

Hervé crossed his arms over his chest and tilted his head to the side. “Did it feel good?”

“Saying fuck the man?” Orion asked with a grin, then shook his head. “It felt terrible. I’m a tragic rule-follower.”

“I would never imagine,” Hervé teased.

Orion grinned, nudging him with his elbow. “*Anyway*, I got a little too heated when the principal dragged me into a meeting, and he told me to leave, so I stormed off campus. He had me arrested for skipping class.”

“Arrested?” Hervé asked, his brows flying up. “They arrest you for that in the States?”

Orion shrugged. “I think he was just trying to teach me a lesson. And it worked. My parents made my ass sit in juvie for seven hours before they picked me up, and the next week, my hair was back to normal, and I never spoke to those friends again.”

Hervé wasn’t sure if that was a tragic story or not. “Did you ever resent them for taking your choice away?”

Orion stepped closer, then wrapped his arm around Hervé and pulled him close. “Yes and no. Sometimes I wonder if I’d love baseball as much as I do without my dad’s obsession. Like, who would I be, you know? Some corporate cog? Or maybe military?”

Hervé turned slightly and ran the tips of his fingers up Orion’s arm. “I think I like the uniform you wear now. Not that I’ve seen you in it much.”

Orion's grin was almost predatory, and he glanced around them before grabbing Hervé by the chin and kissing him—deep and filthy. “You can see me in uniform anytime, sweetheart. All you have to do is ask.”

“*Putain,*” Hervé breathed out, his knees wobbling.

Orion grinned and eased back. “Come on. Let's get to the car so I don't have to carry you again.”

Where Hervé might have felt a hard rush of humiliation, something about the way Orion said it just made him laugh, and he smacked his shoulder as they got to the car. The breeze was slight and almost cold, and Hervé took a deep, cleansing breath before he opened the door and climbed inside.

It was odd, but he couldn't ignore the way it made him feel like he was exactly where he belonged.

HERVÉ KNEW HE WASN'T GOING TO BE ABLE TO STAY AWAKE during the drive, and he gave Orion a quick warning before he nodded off. He'd been like that since he was a kid, and it wasn't the first time he'd wondered whether or not that was one of the early signs.

The only difference now was the strange, overly realistic dreams he had. He was no longer in the car. No, he was floating in the ocean, and his hands were stretched out, and Orion's fingers were brushing his own. Warmth cascaded through his skin, and he felt himself get hard.

He ran his hand over his erection and groaned as Orion floated closer and pressed his lips against Hervé's ear. "More. Harder."

Hervé was helpless to do anything but obey.

"You like that, don't you, sweetheart? You like it. Hervé... Hervé. Stop. Hey."

His eyes flew open, and mortification raced through his entire body in hot waves when he realized that he was leaning back in Orion's car with his hand over his crotch. He was only half-hard, but there was a groan lodged in the back of his throat, and there was no way to deny what had happened.

He looked around, feeling frantic, and his heart sank when he saw they were at Orion's cottage instead of his own.

"Take me home," he snapped.

Orion shook his head. "Just a second. Let's—"

“Take me home!” Hervé’s voice rose into a shout just before his cataplexy took over like a rushing wave. He fought it as hard as he could, but there was nothing he could do. His chin hit his chest with a painful tug, but it only lasted for a second.

Orion’s warm hand cupped around his jaw and lifted his head, giving him a gentle shake. “Come on, sweetheart. Come back to me.”

He wondered if he was hallucinating again, but the grip on him was far too real.

“I know you’re upset, but I don’t want you to leave, okay? I want to cook you dinner and watch the stars with you. And we can do it at your place or mine, I don’t care. But please don’t push me away.” Orion’s thumbs rubbed along his cheeks as Hervé slowly regained control over his body. “Please don’t be embarrassed.”

His lips parted first, then his fingers twitched, then his eyelids fluttered. When he was able to see again, his gaze locked on Orion’s soft ocean blues, and he couldn’t tear himself away. “*Tu piges pas.*”

“I don’t understand.”

Hervé laughed and nodded. “Yes, exactly. You don’t understand.” He gently pulled away and took a breath. “I have no control. The dreams feel real, like I’m right there. Sometimes they’re terrifying. Sometimes they’re everyone I’ve ever known telling me they’re leaving me and that I’m going to spend the rest of my life alone. And sometimes it’s people forgiving me—and then I wake up and realize I’m in my bed and none of it actually happened. All of them—*all of them,*” he stressed, feeling his heart ache, “are devastating.”

And they were penance.

“And today? When you were whispering my name and touching yourself?” Orion asked.

Hervé swallowed thickly. “Torture.”

Orion leaned back, but there was heat in his eyes that Hervé couldn’t ignore, and he couldn’t pretend like he didn’t

understand because he was no naïve fool. He was no blushing virgin. “It doesn’t have to be.”

Hervé dug deep for the rejection he needed to give. He had to stop this once and for all because in spite of thinking that maybe he could have this for a little while, it would kill him to lose it. “It’s not a good idea.”

“No. It’s an amazing idea,” Orion countered.

Hervé huffed and sat up straight. “Is this what you always do? Push and push until you have your way?”

“No,” Orion said, his voice going soft again. “I know how to take no for an answer. I just want to know that you believe me first.”

“About what?” Hervé asked. Misery was rising in his chest because the longer they sat there, the harder it was getting to turn away.

Orion sighed. “That I want you. That you deserve to have this—have me. Us.”

Hervé started to shake his head, but Orion caught his chin again.

“I understand that you hurt people. I understand that you hurt yourself, too, and that you’re afraid if you give in to any sort of indulgence ever again, you’ll make the same mistake. And hell, maybe you haven’t even admitted that to yourself yet, but I can see it in your face.”

Hervé tried not to wince, but the way Orion’s fingers gentled against him, he knew he’d failed. Orion was ripping words straight from his soul—from all those dark places Hervé was still too afraid to look. He didn’t want to see what was reflected back at him because he didn’t want to know if there really was nothing left but a monstrous bastard who had not only maimed others but had taken those same claws to himself.

It was too painful to think about.

“I’m not asking for the world. I’m just asking to get to know this man you’re becoming. And from what I’ve already

seen,” Orion said, his voice dropping as he let his hands fall to Hervé’s shoulders, “I like him. I want him. And I think he wants me too.”

“He does,” Hervé whispered.

In truth, he hadn’t been touched—hadn’t let anyone touch him—since he left Colorado after finding Thierry. The last night he set eyes on Thierry, he’d seen the pain he’d caused. His inability to admit he was the one at fault had reared up and made him mean and cruel—and the drugs in his system only exacerbated it.

But he’d gone back to his room after that, totally alone, and stared at himself in the mirror. He saw nothing he recognized. No one he wanted to know. Just a mass of shapes in the figure of a human who was losing his soul.

He didn’t know how to deserve what Orion was offering.

But he didn’t know how to say no, either.

“My house,” he finally whispered, and Orion nodded.

Instead of pulling away, he leaned in and raised his thumb until it was touching the edge of his jaw. “Kiss me.”

Hervé started to shake his head because he wasn’t sure he was ready for that, but something in his body took over. It was the touch-starved, affection-deprived, shattered pieces of the man he should have been that were clawing to the surface, trying to cling to the one good person he’d ever let close to him.

Licking his lips, he turned his head to the side, and then Orion’s mouth met his own. It was chaste for what he was used to. A wet press of warm skin, a hint of tongue, a rush of breath.

And then it was gone. Their noses brushed together as Orion pulled back, and Hervé breathed in his scent of forest and ocean and soap. He sat back with a dull thud against the seat of the car and said nothing as Orion started the engine again, then backed out of the driveway and into the street.

His heart was beating a slow, staccato rhythm of carefully measured fear and anxiety, but it wasn't enough to change his mind. In the end, when push came to shove, he was a selfish man, and he wanted this.

Orion stole a few glances at him as he made his way to Hervé's cottage, and Hervé hoarded those moments to keep for himself when things inevitably fell apart. Even Pietro—who had loved Hervé as best as he was able in those circumstances—had never looked at Hervé that way.

Pietro had stared at him like he wanted to fix him, like he wanted to dig deep in his chest and find the little cogs and screws that had come loose and put him back together. Pietro had seen him as a broken man with very little hope of being anything else.

But Orion looked at him like he was worthy of these small, careful moments without having to twist himself into the shape someone else thought he should take.

And fuck, he didn't know what to do with that.

The car hit a small bump as Orion took the turn into the cottage driveway, and Hervé gripped the handle as it rolled to a stop. His front door looked odd—almost surreal. Like stepping through it would lead them to some alternate universe where he was a man who hadn't done all those terrible things and hurt good people.

“Do you consider yourself one of those good people?”

Hervé blinked. He hadn't realized he had said all of that aloud, and he took in a shaking breath. “No.”

“Hmm.”

Hervé was expecting Orion to argue with him. His therapist sure as hell would have. But Orion wasn't his therapist, and thank God for that. “Do you believe everyone deserves forgiveness?”

Orion laughed as he put the car in park and turned it off. The last rays of the sun were coming through the window, but it was spring, so dusk would last for a little while. “No. I

definitely don't believe that everyone deserves forgiveness. There are some really bad people out there."

Hervé realized what a self-centered prick he was being *again* because it was absurd that he'd compare his selfish behavior to true human monsters. But he was still in that cycle of seeking validation because he didn't know where he was going to settle on the scale of worthy once all was said and done.

"I believe that average people like you and me," Orion said slowly, turning to look at him, "deserve forgiveness. They might not get it, but those two things aren't mutually exclusive."

Hervé had to dig deep in his well of English to make all those words make sense, but he got the gist of it. They were heavy, and he was tired, so instead of answering, he opened his car door and stepped out. He heard Orion follow suit, and he didn't pause on his way up to unlock the cottage and step inside.

He'd left a window open somewhere because the air was cool, and it felt nice against his overheated skin. He paused in the foyer to the sound of Orion's footsteps, and he let out a bone-deep sigh when warm arms curled around his waist and pressed his back against a broad chest.

"Let me cook for you?" Orion asked against his ear.

It was so much like the dream, Hervé's body gave a single, long shudder. "What do you want to cook?"

"Something you'll probably hate because my entire palate is American. But I'm a growing boy who doesn't want to feel the wrath of his trainer when he finally gets back home."

Gets back home.

Right.

Because no matter what happened, this had an expiry date.

He shoved that thought aside as he leaned back and tilted his head so Orion could kiss along his neck. Hervé let himself melt into it, wondering if anyone had ever touched him

tenderly before. He wasn't sure. As a child, his mother's hands had been cruel and demanding. As he worked through his sexuality, there was a self-deprecating anger that lived just beneath the surface of his skin, and he always wanted intimacy to hurt a little.

He wanted to walk away with marks and bruises.

Whenever his lovers tried to be soft, he'd provoke them until they weren't anymore.

And he'd liked it.

Mostly because he hadn't known how to enjoy this.

Orion's fingers brushed up and down his sides as he kissed along the column of Hervé's neck, then toward his ear. "You are so goddamn beautiful. You'd better find something to do, or I'm never going to get dinner cooked."

Hervé laughed quietly and didn't make a move to step away. "Not very good incentive."

Orion sighed, which turned into a groan as he gripped Hervé by the hips and spun him. He walked him into the wall, then slipped his knee between Hervé's thighs and kissed him without any kind of real finesse.

And somehow, it was the best kiss of his life.

"Do you need a nap?" Orion asked, right up against Hervé's lips.

He shook his head. "No. But I think I might lie down for a little while if you really mean to romance me with bad American dinner."

Orion nipped his jaw. "That's just me setting the bar low so I can impress you with other things later."

Hervé's breath left him in a rush, and he let go of whatever was holding him back, surging in for another kiss. Orion gave as good as he got, framing Hervé's face with his massive, calloused hands as he devoured his mouth.

"Go," he finally said, pulling back.

Hervé almost wanted to push it. Food seemed so unnecessary when they could feast on each other, but he could tell Orion wanted to do this. Orion wanted to make this more than just skin on skin, mouth on mouth—and everything else that would come with their growing passion. Hervé had never been the sort of man to wait and deny himself immediate satisfaction, but maybe there was something to it.

The look on Orion's face begged Hervé to trust him.

So he would.

He let Orion slip away, and he made his way into the living room, dropping onto the sofa with his phone in his hand. He scrolled through his messages, finding nothing new—a few old friends sending texts asking about him. He knew they weren't concerned for his well-being as much as they were concerned whether or not he'd get back to work and back to throwing money around like he had an endless well of it.

He couldn't even be bitter about it since he'd carefully selected people for his personal life that were too greedy to pry beyond the surface of his wallet. He didn't want people to know that beneath the designer clothes and thick shades, he was just a broken child who had never learned to take care of things that were precious to him.

He left those messages on read because he knew now that even if he did get back to acting and to the few pieces of his life he missed, it wasn't going to be the same. He wasn't going to pretend to be that man anymore. For too long, he'd acted the role until it started to become him, and he wasn't taking that risk now.

Not after all this.

Letting Orion go might just mortally wound him, but maybe it wouldn't. Maybe it would leave a big, lasting scar that would forever remind him of the good moments he allowed himself to have.

ONCE AGAIN, ORION REGRETTED HIS INABILITY TO DO MORE than cook eggs and basic barbeque. He had a nice white fish in front of him and some chopped vegetables, and he had no idea how to put them together so they'd taste good.

Hervé's kitchen was fairly sparse, but Orion had come to learn that was just the French way. They didn't shop at Costco and stock their kitchen with enough food to last through the apocalypse. It did make surprise dinners a little more difficult since he was a simple sort of man, but he wanted to try.

He wanted to give Hervé a few moments that he could look back on and remember that he was worth so much more than he'd ever let himself believe.

Counting the time difference on his fingers, Orion stuck his head out of the kitchen and saw that in spite of Hervé's protests, he was asleep on the sofa. He stared at him a moment, making sure his chest was rising and falling evenly, then he went back to the kitchen and dialed up Ezra.

Orion had gotten closer to the high school teacher over the last few years as his friendship with Pietro strengthened. Ezra was a small, anxious little thing who was a little too eager to please some days, but Orion liked him. And he enjoyed watching Ezra develop his backbone and ability to tell people to fuck off now that he had a husband like Gabriel.

“Orion?”

He grinned at the sound of his friend's voice. “Yeah. Hey, I hope I'm not interrupting.”

“Nah. I’m just putting together some lesson plans and trying to convince myself that I want to keep teaching instead of letting Gabriel buy me a restaurant.”

Orion snorted a laugh as he leaned against the counter and stared at his deconstructed dish. “Want to play teacher tonight?”

“Um...”

“Wow, okay. Yeah, that sounded like a sex thing, but it’s more of an ‘I’m trying to impress my date, and I don’t know how to cook’ thing,” he clarified.

Ezra let out a long peal of laughter. “Jesus, okay. I just never know with you guys.”

That was fair. Since sports had a massive coming out—the proverbial closet walls tumbling down—many different relationships had gone public. Several of the hockey teams had throuples that were no longer hiding each other on their social media pages, and while Orion knew everyone was scrambling, it made him feel good.

He’d started out in a world where he didn’t think he’d ever be able to hold a male partner’s hand in public, and now he was leaving comments on the Denver Huskies’ goalie page while he held one boyfriend and kissed another. Life felt a little surreal sometimes, but he wasn’t going to look that gift horse in the mouth.

“No,” he finally said. “That probably won’t ever be me. I’m a one-person kind of guy.”

“Fair enough,” Ezra said, and Orion could hear the grin in his voice. “What can I help you with?”

“Uh...so, I’m in France right now with some very limited ingredients, and I want to show this poor man that I can be trained in the kitchen.”

“Is this like housewife role play? Or is he one of those tragically under-fed millennials?”

Orion chuckled. “Neither. He’s...” He stopped because he realized he was with Ezra’s brother-in-law’s ex. His terrible

ex. He licked his lips. “I met Hervé.”

“Oh?” Ezra said, then made a noise of surprise. “*Oh*. Pietro’s ex? He’s...he’s your date?”

“I know. And feel free to tell me to fuck off, but in my defense, Pietro does know who I’m with,” Orion said in a rush.

“Breathe,” Ezra instructed, and Orion realized that his chest was kind of tight. “I’m not judging.”

Orion doubted that Ezra was telling the truth, but even the little white lie helped him relax a bit. “Sorry. I just know it’s not an ideal situation.”

Ezra hummed softly. “I guess. I mean, I know about what happened, obviously, but I also know there’s two sides to every story.”

“Yeah. But Pietro’s side is the truth,” Orion admitted. “Hervé was...not great.”

“Can I ask why you’re there, then?” Ezra said, his voice a little hard.

“Because he’s the kind of person who’s working toward deserving a second chance without asking for one,” Orion told him honestly. “And I kind of get it. If I started going through this shit with my brother-in-law when I was younger?” Orion let out a tense laugh. “I could have easily turned into some heartless bastard to run from the pain. And it wouldn’t have excused what I did, but I like to think people can be better. Do better.”

“I think they can,” Ezra said softly. “I just don’t know that everyone here will see it that way.”

“I don’t think he’ll ask them to,” Orion told him. “He’s barely willing to let me in. And I don’t know if I’m distracting myself from the pain of...everything”—he couldn’t bring himself to say the actual words—“or what, but there’s something in me that doesn’t want to let him go right now.”

“So you want to woo him with food?”

“Some white fish and potatoes,” Orion said, frowning down at his cutting board. “And string beans?”

Ezra laughed. “Okay, hon. I can work with that. Do me a favor and look around for a nice stainless steel pan, a roasting dish, and a bottle of EVOO.”



BY THE TIME Orion finished cooking, he was off the phone with Ezra, and Hervé was hovering in the doorway. Orion could feel his presence, but he didn't look away from the pan, where he was giving the string beans a nice roast. Ezra's recipe had been simple and took just a few minutes once he got all the cooking pans searing hot, and now there was a serving plate filled with seasoned potatoes, perfectly browned cod, some fresh herbs, and the beans, which he tipped into a neat little pile beside the rest.

It was hardly a five-star meal, but it would do the trick.

“It smells good,” Hervé said quietly.

Orion grinned as he poured the white-wine sauce that had some fancy French name he'd forgotten over the fish. He got a sharp whiff of the fresh lemon juice he'd squeezed over the top, and he stared at his work proudly before finally turning his head.

Hervé looked soft and sleepy with his mussed hair and sweater sleeves he'd pulled over his hands. He had one arm wrapped around his middle, and his feet were bare and oddly sweet-looking with his chubby toes.

Orion wanted to abandon the dinner all over again and just kiss Hervé until he was a pliant, needy mess in his arms.

And maybe he would. Once he fed him.

“Are you hungry?” he asked as he pulled two plates from the cabinet.

Hervé laughed softly. “I wasn’t until I saw this. I thought you couldn’t cook a French dish.”

“I had help,” Orion admitted. “My friend is a chef. Well, he was a chef, but he teaches cooking now at a high school.”

Hervé’s brows shot up as he walked into the kitchen and pulled a wineglass from the hanging rack. “They teach cooking in high school.”

“Some schools, I guess,” Orion said with a shrug. “I grew up in a small town, and the most exotic elective we had was ceramics.”

“I don’t know that word,” Hervé said as he pulled a bottle of wine from the counter. “Ceramics?”

Orion loved the way he pronounced it, and he tasted the *R* at the back of his tongue where the sound came from. “It’s like...making pottery and sculptures and shit,” he said with a shrug.

Hervé rummaged through a drawer until he came up with the wine key, and Orion couldn’t stop staring at his delicate fingers as he twisted the corkscrew in and pulled the cork out with the smallest hissing pop.

“It was something you liked?”

“Yes,” Orion said absently, then blinked and realized what Hervé was asking. He laughed and shook his head. “Oh. I mean, it was fine, I guess? I was really awful at it. My teacher had us making these lantern things out of clay, and they looked so simple, but I could never get mine to sit right. I’m pretty sure she thought I was hopeless.”

Hervé smiled softly at him, the expression lighting up his entire face, and Orion’s heart gave a massive thud against his chest. “I think maybe God gave you talents elsewhere. Your hands are rough—meant for harder things.”

Orion’s breath left him in a rush as he abandoned the dinner to crowd himself up against Hervé. He kissed him with long, pushing-pulls of wet tongue and warm lips. Hervé tasted rich, almost like the wine he’d poured, so distinctly *him*.

“You’re not going to make a dirty joke about harder things?” Hervé breathed against his mouth.

Orion laughed and pressed a few gentle pecks against Hervé’s flush-warmed skin before pulling back and shaking his head. “I’m going to take the high road and feed you. We can talk about harder things after dinner.”

Hervé muttered something in French under his breath, his cheeks pink, but he didn’t look embarrassed this time. No, he looked needy. Orion had to take a few extra breaths to regain his composure, but it didn’t take long before he had the plates and serving tray in his hands.

“To the sofa?”

Hervé hesitated, his perfectly sculpted brows dipped in a frown. “It’s so...uncouth.”

“And yet,” Orion said, “it’s easier for me to keep you safe. You’ll eventually eat at the table again, but it’s not like I’m going to sit here and judge your French manners if you plop your ass on the floor and eat at the coffee table.”

Hervé scoffed, but he was still smiling as he gestured for Orion to go ahead of him. Hervé followed along with the wine and a bottle of water for himself, and Orion set everything out on the small table, laying two cushions on the floor so they could get comfy.

He slid his larger body down and waited for Hervé to join him, then served the plates before taking his glass and gulping down a mouthful of the dry white. It stung the back of his throat a little bit, and the heat of the alcohol warmed him as he became profoundly aware of Hervé’s shoulder pressed against his own.

He cleared his throat, then picked up his fork. “Y’all pray before meals here?”

“Catholics do,” Hervé said with a shrug. He pushed some of the string beans around his plate. “We don’t have a relationship to God the same way Americans do. With that sort of...” His brows dipped again like he was searching for the word. “Hysteria? Or maybe that’s too offensive of a word.”

Orion barked a laugh. “Yeah. Yeah, that sounds about right. My parents were Baptists, and it got really intense on Sundays. A lot of dancing in the aisles and hands up to God, and yes Lords, and praise Jesus. I used to feel it when I was little, but when I got older, I realized I had that same feeling when I was standing on the mound getting ready to pitch a perfect game.”

Hervé was slowly chewing on a bite of the fish, his eyes fixed hard on Orion’s face. “The game is like worship to you, no?”

Orion nodded. “Yeah. It tugs at you right here.” He tapped the center of his chest before picking his fork back up and taking a bite. “It touches that same, nameless, invisible force that exists beyond our reality. Praying for your nanna’s healing after she takes a bad fall comes from the same place as some guy not changing his jock all season because if he does, it’ll ruin his streak.”

Hervé hummed as he ate a few more bites, and then he nodded. “I think I understand. I’ve always been raised with God, but I’ve never considered how much I believe in all of that. The only thing that ever made sense to me was what I could control.”

“And I’m betting you didn’t have a lot of that,” Orion said.

Hervé swallowed and shrugged, looking away as he lifted his water and took a drink. “I was wild.” He stopped and shook his head. “No. My mother told me I was wild. That I needed a firm hand to stop me from destroying my life. I believed if I didn’t do as she said, I would fall apart. I didn’t realize what that was doing to me—to be desperate for affection? Desperate to hear one word of love or praise to prove that I was doing it right?” Hervé pushed his plate away—barely touched, but Orion didn’t take offense. Hervé ran his thumb around the rim of the bottle. “I love her, and I don’t know how to stop being angry at her. She raised me the only way she knew how, but it broke something in me so long ago I don’t know if I can fix it.”

Orion set his glass down and turned, reaching for Hervé. He drew fingers over the shell of his ear, pushing them into his hair, which was soft and heavy and thicker at the roots now that he wasn't dying it. "Have you ever confronted her?"

Hervé laughed. "More than once, but I've come to realize it's pointless. She doesn't hear me, and even if she did, her apology would mean nothing. It wouldn't change what she did. It wouldn't let me rewind time so I could go back and... and be better. I'm trying to learn how to live with this feeling." He tapped his chest. "That I can't change anything behind me. Just in front."

"Yeah," Orion breathed out. He knew the feeling, in a profoundly different way. "My best friend is dying, and every day is one inch closer to when we have to put him in the ground. I'm trying to figure out how to live in the future because the present sucks, and there's nothing I can do about the past."

Hervé's eyes went soft. "There's no medication, or..."

Orion shook his head. "It's ALS. I don't know if you know that, but—"

"I know it," Hervé said, his voice tight. "Stephen Hawking? I've done a few benefits for different foundations. Those people were hard to meet."

Orion winced. "They're not monsters."

"No, of course not. They're trapped by their circumstances, and they have to live in a body that's slowly shutting down," Hervé said bluntly. "I met a woman a few years ago who was in a... chair. I don't know what you call it—with the buttons to make it go forward and backward?"

Orion tried not to think about how Carey was probably using one of those now. "Yeah."

Hervé shrugged. "She was smiling the whole time. We started talking, and she asked me to get her drunk, so I did. She told me about her pain and her anger, and how she had to keep smiling even though she wanted to scream because worse

than pity was the way the rest of the world was afraid of being like her.”

Orion licked his lips and wrapped his arms around his middle. “Carey doesn’t want me to see him like that. It’s why he sent me away. I left to see him right before the season ended when my sister called and said he was starting on a rapid decline. I was there for three weeks before he shoved these tickets at me and told me to go figure my shit out. I don’t think he’s going to let me say goodbye to him.”

“Do you hate him for it?” Hervé asked.

Orion met Hervé’s eyes, and he nodded. “With all my heart. As much as I love him. But it’s what he wants, and the end of his life isn’t about me. I have all the rest of my life to remember the years we had together where he wasn’t in pain. He’s only got this.”

Hervé shifted and reached for Orion, touching his face before drawing him in for a kiss. “Is it wrong to do this now?”

Orion laughed and shook his head as he dug his fingers into Hervé’s hair a little further, holding tighter. “Nah. I’m pretty sure this was what he had in mind when he kicked me out. When I tell him about you, he’s going to be proud.”

Hervé made a noise, and the next thing Orion knew, the table was shoved back, and the smaller man was in his lap. Their mouths collided with a ferocity Orion wasn’t expecting, but he drank it in in deep pulls of tongue and plush lips. Hervé’s thighs were thick and strong as they boxed Orion in, and Orion wasted no time digging his fingers into Hervé’s hips.

“I need,” Hervé panted against Orion’s mouth. He mumbled something in French, then shook his head. “Sorry. My head—”

“It’s okay,” Orion said between kisses. His fingers danced up and down Hervé’s spine, almost trying to soothe him while also working him up further. “Baby, whatever you want.”

“I want you,” Hervé said on the edge of a growl, and he let out a soft, muffled grunt between closed lips when Orion

shoved his shirt up and touched bare skin. “I haven’t done this since I got sick.”

Orion nodded. He couldn’t remember right in that moment if Hervé had said that or if it was just painfully obvious. Or both. But it was clear Hervé was starving for all the same things he was. He pulled back slightly, holding Hervé by the jaw with one hand as the other cupped his pert ass cheek.

“Tonight isn’t about what you think you deserve—or what you think you don’t. Tonight is just this, okay? It’s how much I want to touch you and kiss you. It’s how I want to strip you down and stroke your cock and make you come all over me.” Orion swallowed heavily against his need to just flip Hervé over and take command. “All you need to do is give me the word that’s what you want.”

“*Ouais*,” Hervé said, nodding and looking so flushed Orion knew he had to be dizzy. “Yes. Everything. All of it.”

“Say it in French,” Orion said.

Hervé did, and Orion surged up to kiss the words from his lips as he pulled the shirt from Hervé’s body and tossed it to the side. Instead of going further though, he stood, taking Hervé with him.

“As fun as this is,” he said, thumbing along Hervé’s jawline, “I don’t think either of us will appreciate doing this on the floor.”

Hervé let out a small laugh, turning his face so he could lay a kiss to Orion’s palm. It was slow and warm and wet, and Orion nearly lost his resolve right there. “Come to my bed.”

Orion shuddered, then gave Hervé a small push and followed him down the short corridor and into the first bedroom. It was small and quaint—and might have been claustrophobic had it not been for the fact that the only furniture in there was a bed and Hervé’s suitcases piled against the far corner.

The bed was barely big enough for the both of them, but the covers were mussed, and the sheets looked soft, and Orion had no problem imagining Hervé there curled up against the

pillows. His heart ached for something he didn't quite understand, but he shoved that aside as he grabbed Hervé by the hips and spun him.

His fingers went right for the button and zipper, getting his pants down around his knees. Hervé kicked them to the side, but when his trembling fingers went for Orion's clothes, Orion grabbed him by the wrists and shook his head.

“Lie down.”

Hervé licked his lips, almost nervous, but he nodded and backed up until his knees hit the bed. His gaze never left Orion as he sank down, first onto his sweet, naked ass, and then he collapsed.

Orion watched his eyes—entranced by the focus in them. It was no wonder people had been obsessed with him for so long. He was tender as much as he was cruel. He was beautiful in ways that were almost painful to look at. He had weapons in his grin that could bring men to their knees, and in a jagged, careless man with nothing to lose?

Of course he tore men apart.

But Hervé's gift had obviously come at a cost—and with a price. He had been tormented and abused, creating the monster he'd become. And every time he hurt others, he tore himself apart too. Orion damn well knew he was in over his head, and yet he couldn't walk away.

There was something in Hervé that felt so inherently worth it, and that terrified him because he was one of the first people to tell Pietro that people like Hervé were never worth it. That they never changed. That they would always stay the same heartless bastard.

He still believed that, but there were always exceptions to any rule, and Hervé felt like one of them.

“Orion?”

He realized he'd been quiet for a long time, and he shook his head before pulling his shirt off and tossing it over to where Hervé's had landed. His jeans were next, but he left his

boxer-briefs on as he slid one knee to the bed and stared down at his would-be lover.

“Sorry. I got lost in my head.”

Hervé blinked at him. “Regrets?”

“None,” Orion said, allowing every ounce of truth to color his tone. He reached down and gripped the back of Hervé’s knee, lifting it into a bend. He dipped his shoulders low, letting his lips trail soft kisses along the inside of his thigh.

“*Putain*,” Hervé breathed.

Orion chuckled and bit down lightly before pulling back. “Is there anything you don’t want, sweetheart?”

Hervé startled at the term of endearment, but when Orion met his gaze, he couldn’t get a read on his expression. “I don’t think so.”

“You like to bottom?”

“*Ouais*.”

“You like to top?”

Hervé huffed a laugh through his nose as he pressed his lips together. “Sometimes.”

Orion grinned and dragged the backs of his nails where his lips had been, only he didn’t stop. He traced the touch all the way to the rough hair surrounding Hervé’s hard cock. It was uncut, and the head was just starting to poke out of his foreskin, so Orion curled his hand around it and gave him a gentle stroke.

Hervé hissed, his chest arching up, but Orion laid a firm hand against his sternum and held him to the bed.

“Just feel,” Orion said.

Hervé squirmed for a second, looking uneasy before his body relaxed. “I’m not,” he started, then frowned the way he did when he was searching for words in English. Orion wished he was better at French to give the man a break. “Sex was always a performance for me. Before,” he said. “I didn’t want there to be rumors that I was lazy or bad.”

Orion breathed out a small sigh and shook his head, but he understood. It made sense. He wasn't a celebrity—not in the acting world—but everything he did was still put under a microscope. He knew he was heading back into a world of rumors after he disappeared at the end of the season and then skipping spring training, and everyone would be watching and wondering why.

It was a heavy weight he didn't want to think about right then.

“You don't need to do that with me.” He lifted his gaze and met Hervé's eyes. “As much as I want to scream from the rooftops about the fact that I got a gorgeous, sweet man in my bed—”

“In *my* bed,” Hervé countered.

Orion nipped at his knee until Hervé hissed, and then he licked it with his tongue. “In any bed,” he conceded, “I wouldn't do that. This is between us.”

“It would save you from all of them judging you because it's me,” Hervé told him.

Something in Orion snapped. He dropped Hervé's knee and pressed his weight along the smaller man, pinning him to the bed with his whole body. He gripped Hervé's chin with damn near bruising fingers and kissed him almost cruelly.

“No.”

Hervé let out a choking noise. “You must admit—”

“No,” Orion repeated. “I'm not ashamed of you. I'm not worried what other people might think. I spoke to Pietro and Thierry because they are my friends and I love them, and it was only fair. But whatever this is between us—it's between us. Your past is yours.”

Hervé closed his eyes in a long, slow blink, and when he opened them, they were red-rimmed. “I'm trying.”

Orion softened, lifting himself up a little. His cock had lost some of the hardness, but he shifted his hips and let it drag along Hervé's, and he let out a small groan because the man

felt so fucking good beneath him. “I know you are. And like I said before, tonight is just this. Just us.”

Hervé nodded, and this time, Orion saw Hervé give in to this thing Orion knew he wanted. His eyes went hard, and then his body went soft, and his arms came around Orion.

One hand trailed down his back, then cupped his ass and squeezed. “I want you. *Je suis chaud.*”

“Hot?” Orion asked with a frown, starting to pull back.

Hervé snorted a soft laugh and tugged him back down. “Horny.”

“Fuck. I think I should try to remember that one,” Orion said with a grin. The expression quickly morphed into something a little more wanton, though, as Hervé’s fingers pulled his ass cheek aside, then brushed over his hole. He gave a sharp twitch, then thrust his hips as he captured Hervé’s mouth once more. “Is that a request?” he asked when he pulled back.

Hervé huffed and shook his head, smiling softly. “No. I just wanted to touch.”

“Well, you have my permission to touch me anywhere at any time, sweetheart,” Orion said, then eased back a little and propped up fully on his arms. “Do you have anything here?”

Hervé frowned.

“Condoms? Lube?”

Hervé flushed hard and shook his head. “No. I didn’t...I didn’t think we would go this far.”

Orion nodded and glanced down to where their cocks lay together on Hervé’s stomach, and he leaned on his left arm, curling the fingers of his right hand over both. Hervé groaned, his hips thrusting forward, and Orion grinned.

“There are plenty of ways for me to fuck you—to make you beg and scream—without that,” Orion promised. He leaned in and nipped along Hervé’s collarbone with sharp teeth. “And I’m going to be here for the rest of the month.”

That timeline was ticking down fast, but Orion knew he could make the best of it. He would make the best of it. He pulled away, lifting his hand and holding his palm to Hervé's face.

“Lick me, sweetheart.”

Hervé moaned, but he stuck his tongue out and got Orion's hand sloppy and wet. With soaked fingers, Orion brought his hand back down and began to stroke them in earnest, his fingers barely closing, but he kept a tight grip and did a little twist at the head.

Hervé was swearing in French, softly and under his breath, and his body squirmed like he didn't know how to react to what he was feeling. Orion couldn't help but wonder if anyone had ever paid him this kind of attention before.

Wanting this to be more than just a hand job that Hervé could have gotten anywhere, Orion rose to his knees without letting go. He thrust his own cock into his hand as he leaned in, dragging his tongue over Hervé's left nipple, then his right. Hervé groaned softly, but it wasn't the reaction Orion wanted, so he moved on.

He kissed, nipped, and licked across his body until he found the spot in the join of Hervé's neck that made his chest rumble with a groan. Orion dug his teeth in, and Hervé began to fuck his hips hard into the circle of Orion's fingers.

He was babbling now, a mix of French and English, and none of it made any sense, which was what Orion wanted. He looked down at the man beneath him—red in the face and glassy-eyed. His fingers were scrambling against the sheets, so Orion used his free hand and lifted one of Hervé's hands by the wrist.

“Touch me, sweetheart. Please.”

Hervé did. He was sluggish and uncertain, but he ran his fingers all over Orion's back, his sides, his ass. He gripped the back of his thigh with sharp nails when Orion tightened his grip on them, and when Orion leaned in to kiss him, his hand spasmed.

“Close,” Hervé eventually panted.

Orion nodded, then pulled back, trailing a touch down Hervé’s sternum, past his belly button, and beneath his cock. His balls were heavy and hot, and Orion pulled them into his palm and held them, jerking them even harder.

Hervé was shifting now, restless, chasing that feeling almost like he didn’t know how to find it, and when he finally came, he cried out almost like it was a shock. His eyes were wide and unseeing as his body arched, and then he collapsed down and went entirely limp.

Panic rushed through Orion on the heels of his own orgasm, muting the feeling even as his balls emptied. He let out a short grunt as he fell to his hands, his hips thrusting mindlessly as he searched Hervé’s face.

His lover’s eyes were closed, and his mouth was slack, and it took Orion a second to realize what had happened.

“Baby,” he murmured. He nosed against Hervé’s cheek, kissing him all over. He laid soft lips to his chin, his ears, his eyelids, and eventually, Hervé began to twitch.

He came back to himself slowly, his hands flexing first, then his hips shifting. His eyes were the last things to respond, but they opened and showed off the gorgeous, endless color that Orion was too close to getting lost in.

“With me?” he asked.

“*Ouais.*”

Orion kissed the word off Hervé’s lips before rolling over. “Let me clean us up.” He ignored the slight noise of protest from the bed as he walked into the water closet, and he found a sink with a used washcloth. There were worse things to wipe come off with, and he ran it under the cold tap, hissing as he swiped it over his dick and balls, and then he rinsed it a second time and walked back into the room.

Hervé was up, his eyes still a little heavy as he watched Orion cross the room, and he didn’t move much when Orion laid the cool cloth to his heated skin. He just looked down as

the rough fabric passed over his limp dick, sweeping up the pools of come tangled in his dark curls.

When he was done, Orion dropped the cloth to the floor beside the bed, laughing when Hervé pulled a face. “I’ll clean up in the morning.”

Hervé blinked in surprise. “You’re staying?”

Uncertainty hit him suddenly because Orion had been the one to cross this line first with them, and he’d foolishly assumed Hervé had wanted all the rest that came with it. Not just the lust and the passion but the softness after.

“I can go if you—”

His words were cut off by Hervé wrapping hands around the back of his neck and pulling him in for a hard, messy kiss. He gave in the moment their mouths touched, and he rolled to his side, taking Hervé into his arms and holding him.

“I’m sorry. I’m not good at all the after parts,” Hervé admitted when he finally broke apart.

Orion shook his head. “I’m not used to it either. But I want to stay. I want to sleep here and make you breakfast in the morning.”

Hervé nodded, and he carefully shifted his legs off the side of the bed. “I need to take something. Medication,” he clarified.

Orion wasn’t sure if he was lying or just needed a moment to himself, but he just settled back against the flat pillow and pulled the sheets around him. When Hervé returned, he had a glass of water, which he handed off, and a shuttered look on his face.

Orion swallowed the cool liquid against his dry, rough throat, then set it down on the nightstand. “Second thoughts?”

Hervé shook his head, hesitating before he climbed between the sheets. He flicked off the light, leaving the room in the pale light coming from the street. He shuffled down, their hips brushing, and then Hervé turned onto his side and traced his fingers over Orion’s profile.

“If you change your mind...”

“I won’t,” Orion interrupted.

Hervé huffed. “*Tu es trop bien pour moi.*”

“I only know a few of those words,” Orion said.

Hervé shuffled closer and then kissed him on the shoulder. “If you change your mind,” he said again, “and you come to realize that this is a terrible idea, I won’t blame you. Tonight was the best night I’ve ever had, and however tomorrow goes, I’ll never regret it.”

Orion wasn’t sure what to say. He wanted to promise that tomorrow would just be another moment like this—and then another after that. And on and on until life crept back in to force them apart. But he couldn’t bring himself to do it. He had gotten up close and personal with just how quickly and how profoundly things could move out of his control.

So instead, with his heart beating hard against his ribs, he pulled Hervé into his arms, closed his eyes, and let sleep take him.

HERVÉ WOKE UP IN THE MORNING. IT SHOULDN'T HAVE BEEN some revolutionary thing except that he hadn't slept through the night in a long, long while. His doctor assured him that eventually he'd get something of a normal sleep cycle back, but he was starting to wonder if maybe Orion had a magic dick. Or maybe magic hands.

Or maybe Hervé just really needed to get fucked to sleep a long time ago.

Especially because what he'd done with Orion had been different. There had been no performance. He hadn't been caught up in how he looked or the way he sounded. He hadn't treated fucking like it was a runway show. He just let himself feel it.

He let himself get carried away by rough, calloused hands on his dick and sharp teeth that found the spot on his neck no one ever had before. He let himself sink into real, actual pleasure that had him damn near terrified because he didn't know it could feel like that.

And when he collapsed after into a cataplexy attack, Orion had just kissed him over and over until his body released him from his neurological prison. When it was over, he didn't leave. Orion held him and kissed him and *stayed*.

Reaching over to Orion's side of the bed, Hervé noted that it was still slightly warm, so he hopped out of bed and had a quick piss before shuffling into the living room. He found

Orion there, bent over the now-clean coffee table, scribbling something on a piece of paper.

His heart sank to his feet. “Is that a...what do you call it? The letter you send. It’s not you, it’s me?”

Orion jumped, spinning around, but the look on his face wasn’t guilt, and it wasn’t fear. It was horror, and it was grief. His eyes were red-rimmed, and his mouth was slack. “I’m sorry.” His voice was thick with tears, and Hervé took a few steps closer.

“*Mon chéri,*” he murmured.

Orion shook his head, but his lip wobbled, and when Hervé opened his arms, Orion curled into them, making himself fit. They tumbled to the side, and Hervé managed to get them to the sofa as his fingers quickly brushed through Orion’s hair.

“What is it?”

“My...it. Carey,” he murmured. “My brother.”

The sick one. Hervé swallowed. “Tell me.”

“He had a stroke. He...I don’t know what the fuck happened. My sister said he was feeling under the weather, so they took him to the hospital and...” His voice broke, and he stopped, taking a trembling breath. “He’s not there anymore. He’s on life support, but there’s nothing...he can’t come back.” Orion pulled back and took a steadying breath. “I have to go.”

“*Bien sûr.* Of course,” Hervé said in a rush.

Orion pulled back and dragged both hands down his face. “I need to go pack, and I need to book a flight, and I...I need to—”

“Let me help,” Hervé said quickly.

Orion blinked like he was trying to clear fog from his head. “I don’t think there’s anything you can do.”

“I can get you a flight. Private,” Hervé said, and when Orion’s brows flew up, Hervé huffed a soft laugh. “I have a

friend. I have a lot of friends. I have favors I can call in.”

“Don’t waste them on me,” Orion told him quietly.

Hervé gave him a dark look. “They’d never be wasted on you. Please. It’s the least I can do. I’m a total mess, and I’d offer to come with you just for the support, but...”

“Would you?” Orion said.

There was a note of hope in his voice that made Hervé’s heart want to crack in half, and he quickly took his lover’s hand. “You don’t want me there. You want your friends there.”

“I do,” Orion said, squeezing back. “And I know it’s probably nuts, but if you’re not...I mean, if you can fly.” He stopped and shook his head. “I know it’s crazy. We just met, but...I think I need you.”

Hervé wanted to run. He wanted to tell Orion no because this was no place for him. They weren’t anything to each other, even if right now it felt like everything. And the idea that he might have to face Pietro and Thierry and all their friends who surely hated the very fiber of his being was a lot.

But then he met Orion’s gaze, and he saw the pain in them and the need. He realized that maybe for the first time in his life, he didn’t care what other people thought. Or, at the very least, he would weather it because he was falling hard and falling fast, and there was very little Orion could ask him to do that he’d turn down.

“Okay.”

Orion blinked. “You’re serious?”

“*Ouais*. I know it might be tense and awkward if Pietro and Thierry come, but anything you need from me, I’ll give it.”

Orion bit his lip, and then he nodded. “Can you pack quickly?”

Hervé stood up, and his world felt a little heavy. “Yes. But I might be more of a burden than a help, you realize?”

Orion shook his head as he rose to his feet and pulled him close. “I need you. I’ll run back to the cottage and pack. You do what you need to do here, okay? And I’ll be back for you.”

Hervé nodded, and he reached up, touching Orion’s face. “If you change your mind—”

He was silenced with a kiss, the taste a little salty from leftover tears. When Orion pulled back, he knocked their foreheads together. “Enough. I’ll be back for you. And I’m not going to change my mind.”

Hervé stood in the middle of the room, and after the door shut and Orion’s car left the drive, he stood a few more minutes after that. He wasn’t sure he wanted to believe Orion would be back for him. He wasn’t sure how he was going to cope with what was coming next.

The only thing that really mattered was that he wasn’t just willing—he was determined. And for the first time in his life, he trusted himself.



IN WHAT FELT like a blink of an eye, Hervé packed, made a phone call to beg a favor from an old friend who sounded oddly pleased to hear from him, took his meds, contacted the rental agency to let them know he was vacating, and then sent a message to his doctor. Time seemed to be moving at a different speed, and his limbs felt a little weak from the stress of knowing what was coming the moment Orion got back to his place, but it was the first time he’d moved with any real hustle in a long time.

It felt good—until it didn’t.

The fear of what loomed over the horizon, coupled with the other fear that Orion would change his mind and just leave him hanging, had him slumping over into a fitful, strange sleep. The dreams were just as real and powerful as usual, and

he woke to a hand on his cheek he didn't quite believe was real.

“...baby. If this is too much for you, just say the word. I know I asked you to come, but if it's too much—”

Hervé forced himself to sit, trying to shake the grogginess from his limbs. “Staying here won't change my body,” he told Orion, searching his face and wondering if maybe Orion was just looking for an excuse to leave him behind. But all he saw in his ocean blues was worry. He lifted his hand and touched Orion's cheek. “As long as you don't mind that I'm messy.”

Orion growled, surging in for a kiss. It was a little harsh, and Orion's lips were cold, but it still felt wanted. “You're not messy. And I want you with me. I just wish we could do this trip under better circumstances.”

Right. Because his brother-in-law was dying. His best friend was, for all intents and purposes, no longer there. He was just a body being kept around so the living could process before they turned off machines and let him rest.

The thought was terrifying—being trapped in a body, in pain, exhausted, desperate to leave and trapped by those who loved him. Though, Hervé thought with a bitter smile as he stood up from the sofa, he wasn't really sure he had anyone who'd want to keep him around for long.

The only one who might was his mother, and only because she'd want to make a big, public show of her grief. It would never be about him.

He swallowed back a throat full of bitter bile and tried to find his center as he grabbed his medication bag from the counter and threw it on top of his suitcase. The house was fairly tidy, and the owners assured him they had a cleaning service coming by so all he had to do was leave the keys.

It felt odd saying goodbye to this little sanctuary. It had felt like a prison at first, and then Orion had come along, and suddenly, it was paradise.

But life and everything that came with it would not be held on pause for long, and Hervé's luck only stretched so far. He

laid the key on the table, then smiled when Orion took his free hand.

“Is this okay?”

“You can touch me anywhere, anytime,” Hervé said, parroting the man’s words back to him.

Orion snorted, though his smile didn’t reach his eyes, but he did squeeze Hervé’s fingers as they made his way to his hired car, and he threw the bags inside. Slipping into the passenger seat, Hervé loaded up the GPS on his phone to the private airfield where the jet was waiting.

Michel was an old friend—a stunt actor who had worked on a few films with Hervé before he shattered his hips in a bad fall. He’d recovered enough to walk but not to go back to his job, so he took his passion to flying. He had been wild even after the accident, and Hervé vaguely recalled sleeping with him once or twice on a long binge of booze and some sort of white powder that made him feel like he was flying without the plane.

Hervé had been younger then—long before he’d even heard Pietro’s name. Thierry had always hated Michel though. But then again, he hated anyone who made Hervé reckless, and Hervé always assumed it was jealousy.

He hadn’t realized that he had a true friend who didn’t want to keep him around for what he might get. And what a fool he’d been to ruin that in such a glorious blaze.

“Baby?”

Hervé startled, still not used to the sweet names Orion used for him, and he turned his head. “I’m sorry. The car makes me sleepy.”

“I know.” Orion took his hand off the gear shift for a second to brush fingers through Hervé’s hair. “You can doze off if you need to.”

Hervé didn’t at the moment. His meds were working well, and his nerves were combatting his usual driving fatigue. His eyes felt a little heavy, but he realized he didn’t want to miss the last of the countryside as it flew by.

It really was beautiful. It was green and so old—so much lived history on the streets. He'd never been the sort of man who could give it the proper respect it deserved. At least, not until now. Not until he was forced to realize, on bended knee, just how fragile and desperate a man could become with no way to stop it or regain control.

Hervé would always be ruled by his disorder now, even if he found his feet. He would never be able to be carefree or thoughtless ever again. Everything he did would require second thoughts and third considerations, and he could never, ever let his guard down.

His throat ached as he shoved those thoughts away because now wasn't the time to sink into his own self-pity. Orion needed him, and there was every chance that the moment Hervé set foot in the States and faced off with his ex and his former best friend, he'd be sent away because Orion didn't need the tension.

And Hervé was more than willing to sacrifice himself for Orion.

He had to find the strength in himself to endure, and that had been his problem for most of his life. He hadn't known where to look, so he just let others catch him every time he fell, and now, he was learning how to brace himself too damn many years late.

Tipping his head back, Hervé reached over and played with the short hairs on the edge of Orion's sharp undercut and lost himself in the sensation as the GPS counted down the time to their destination.

Twenty minutes.

Twelve.

Nine.

Six.

He could see the airfield in the distance—the hangar and a few smaller planes that were on the runway. Most of them were little puddle jumpers that cruised over the beaches, but he

could see a long, sleek jet far off, and he recognized it from the few trips he'd taken with Michel.

His heart thumped a little hard at the memories that were pressing against the inside of his head, but he didn't lose himself to them. That was another life—another person—and as much as he missed when his body wasn't collapsing every time he so much as chuckled, he didn't miss the man he was.

“Is that it?” Orion asked.

Hervé startled, realizing that they hadn't spoken almost the entire drive. But more than that, he realized the silence hadn't just been comfortable. It had been kind. “That's it. That jet back there. There's a security guard, and he'll let us through.”

Orion nodded, his grip on the wheel tight as he downshifted to make the turn. The road was long to the gate, but soon enough, they were rolling to a stop, and Hervé leaned over Orion, smiling at the guy in the black uniform.

“Do you have a pass?”

Hervé shook his head, but he dug into his wallet for his ID. “We're here for Michel Aubert. He put us on the list.”

The guard spoke into his intercom, then nodded and handed the ID back, taking three steps away. The gate opened, and Orion let out a short breath as they drove through.

“Why was that terrifying?”

Hervé grinned at him as he settled back into his seat. “Do you get stopped a lot at borders?”

“Looking like this?” Orion asked with his brows up, then scoffed. “Not where I come from. Well, sometimes Pietro would, because you know how that fucker likes to push buttons, but—” He stopped abruptly, and Hervé knew why.

“You can talk about him. Unless he asked you not to,” he said gently.

Orion sighed as he followed the signs to the parking area, then he paled. “What about the car? Shit. How do I get this back? I didn't even think—”

Hervé reached for him and touched his wrist. “*Arête, mon chéri*. We can have someone here do it. Do you not understand the perks of being very rich?”

Orion’s mouth opened, then snapped shut, and he rolled his eyes, shaking his head as he pulled the car into a spot and turned it off. “I’m still kind of a small Midwestern town boy at heart, I think. Two years ago, I wanted to get the floors redone on my house, but I didn’t have time to do it, and when Pietro told me to just hire someone, I wanted to slap myself because I forgot I could do that.”

Hervé snorted a soft laugh through his nose to avoid letting out the big chuckle that was building in his chest. He was retraining himself to temper all of his emotions, but he missed being able to belly-laugh more than anything. It had been so long, and with Orion, it was the first time he actually wanted to in what felt like years.

“Well, there will be someone here who can take care of it for you. Or you can call the company and have them send someone to pick it up,” Hervé told him, reaching for the door handle.

He was starting to feel a little tired now, but it wouldn’t be long before they were on the plane, and then he could rest. The jet had a bed in the back that would be just large enough for the pair of them. He knew those sheets a little too well, but he wasn’t going to bring that up to Orion.

And frankly, even if Orion had been in the mood for something like that, it wasn’t a place for it. Orion was far too precious to taint with his ugly past.

With a breath, Hervé retrieved his case and waited for Orion to get his. He was already on the phone with the car company, so Hervé took the lead and headed toward the hangar, where he could already see Michel waiting.

Even from as far off as he was, Hervé could see he looked the same. Tall, thin, with an arrogant lift of his pointed chin. He had short, curly dark hair and olive skin from his Spanish mother and the Parisian attitude from his father, who descended from the long-dead royal line. At least, that’s what

Michel had liked to tell everyone, and Hervé didn't ever care enough to look into it.

The only thing that mattered was that Michel hung around and worshipped Hervé enough to help him stay in a fog so he didn't have to think about anything except the present.

As they got closer and he could see Michel's brows lift, he felt a sudden pulse of self-consciousness. He'd never, ever let anyone see him like this. He was dressed too casually, his hair a mess, his face unkempt. He had dark circles under his eyes from his shit sleep, and he knew his lips were probably chapped. He didn't have a drop of makeup on, and he knew he was missing his swagger.

"Hervé," Michel said with his arms out, taking a few steps closer to close the distance.

Hervé kissed him on his cheeks. "Michel. It's good to see you. Thank you for doing this."

"You know I have a soft spot for attractive Americans in need," Michel said, glancing over Hervé's shoulder to where Orion was still talking on the phone. "Is he for sharing?"

Hervé's gaze hardened. "No. In fact, it's best if you stay in the cockpit."

Michel looked surprised but not upset. His head tilted to the side. "You like him."

Hervé let out a quiet sigh and shrugged. "Yes."

"So, is everything true, then? Everyone said you had a breakdown and quit the business. I saw the footage from the Cannes, and Toni said you went to rehab. But a couple of the guys argued and said that you have a terminal illness."

Hervé passed a hand down his face and shook his head. "I was in rehab," he admitted, not ashamed of that bit. "And it's not terminal, but I am sick. It's not catching," he added as Michel took a step back.

Michel, for his part, had the grace to look embarrassed as he shook his head and put up his hands. "Hervé, no. I didn't mean it like that, I *swear*. I just didn't know."

Hervé waved him off. “It’s fine. By this point, I’m used to it.”

“Can I ask—”

“It’s complicated,” Hervé snapped, interrupting him. He was tired of talking about it, and he knew Michel would run his mouth. The moment he said it, the word would spread, and Hervé would lose control of the narrative. He wasn’t ready for that. “Are we able to board?”

Michel stared at him for a second, then shrugged. “Be my guest. Inspections are done, and we’re just refueling. I’m taking Matis with me as a co-pilot.”

Hervé didn’t recognize the name, but he did recognize the look on Michel’s face. “Boyfriend?”

Michel scoffed, but there was a softness in his smile Hervé wasn’t used to seeing. “Something like that. Oh, and look, it seems your guest is ready to join us,” he added, switching to English.

Orion shoved his phone into his pocket, then extended his hand before curling it back toward his body and shooting Hervé a helpless look. “Sorry. You don’t shake hands here, right?”

“Oh. He is sweet,” Michel said. He put his hands on Orion’s shoulders, and his kisses lingered so long Hervé wanted to hit him.

He might have if his knees hadn’t threatened to give out. He fought the attack, and Orion noticed after a second and quickly slung an arm around his back, knocking Michel away.

“Baby?”

Hervé shook his head. “We can board. I’ll speak with you in a moment,” he told Michel, and then Orion led the way to the stairs.

They felt like climbing a mountain, and by the time they got to the top, Hervé lost his battle. He went limp, and Orion managed to get him over to a plush chair. It sank beneath his

weight as he succumbed to the weakness, his chest rising and falling, his sight trapped behind his closed lids.

His only comfort was Orion's fingers on him, drawing lines over his arm, along his jaw, over his lips. He could smell Orion's soap and feel his breath as the man leaned down to kiss him just below the ear.

"Come back to me, baby."

"Ah, *merde*. Did he faint?" Michel must have followed them directly in.

Hervé felt panic pulse in his chest, but Orion immediately soothed him with his next words. "Don't worry. He'll be fine in a second."

And he was. Hervé came back to himself after what felt like an eternity, but it was likely just a few seconds. He forced his eyes open faster than they wanted to cooperate, and he took a few breaths before glancing over to see Michel holding a bottle of sparkling water.

Hervé took it without a word, cracking the top and taking a long drink, letting the bubbles burn the back of his throat. He breathed a little easier and turned his face so Michel couldn't see his mouth. '*Merçi,*' he said without a sound.

Orion just nodded and took the water, putting the cap back on. "How long until we can take off?"

Hervé looked over in time to see Michel checking his phone. "About twenty minutes. I understand you're in a hurry, and I promise I'll get you to where you need to in DC as quickly as I can. But I won't take risks."

"No, I...no. That's fine. I don't know how to thank you," Orion admitted.

Pain for his lover rushed through his limbs, and Hervé reached for Orion. They stood up together from the chair as Michel wandered into the cockpit, and Hervé took him by the hand, leading him to the bedroom.

It was as he remembered—small and more claustrophobic than cozy, but it would do. They could strap in for takeoff,

then spend time getting as much rest as Orion could handle before they landed.

“I sent a message to my sister, and she said they’re waiting for me before...um.” Orion swallowed heavily. “Before.”

Hervé didn’t need him to elaborate. He just stepped into his arms and let Orion squeeze the breath out of him. “Whatever you need from me, okay, just let me know.”

Orion nodded, then pulled back to lay a fierce kiss to Hervé’s lips. He pulled back, and there was more worry in his eyes. “The guys are coming. They know you’re with me, and all of them said it’s okay. But I want to make sure you’re okay with being there too.”

“My feelings don’t matter right now,” Hervé said, and when Orion opened his mouth to argue, he pressed two fingers to his soft lips. “No. Just let this be about your brother. We can work out the rest after.”

“Okay,” Orion breathed out and dropped his forehead to Hervé’s shoulder. “How do you say okay in French?”

“Okay,” Hervé said, then laughed shortly when Orion smacked his side. “I mean it, *chéri*. Most of the time, we just say okay. If you’re old, there are other slang ways. If you want to speak French like a local, you do as I do.”

“Okay,” Orion parroted in an ill attempt to use Hervé’s accent, and it made him laugh harder.

“Don’t get me started. I don’t want Michel to see me collapse again,” Hervé said with a grin.

Orion sobered a little, and he pulled Hervé to sit on the edge of the bed. The mattress was harder than he remembered, which meant it was new, and that brought him some comfort as he waited for Orion to speak.

“You and him. Were you ever...?”

“No,” Hervé said in a rush. “We were colleagues and sort of friends. He was a stunt actor who got hurt and became a pilot after. It was a bad time when I knew him,” Hervé admitted. “I was using a lot of drugs, drinking a lot. I think we

slept together, but I don't remember much. It's not something I like to think about."

"Is he...when you were with Pietro, is he one of the ones ___"

"No," Hervé said firmly, meeting Orion's gaze. "Anyone I made that mistake with is long gone from my life. And so is the man who made those mistakes."

Orion looked at him for a good, long while before cupping his cheek and kissing him. "I think we're going to have to work a lot of shit out, but I know right now that I don't think I could do this without you. And that tells me you're worth it. When I have to go back to work, I need to know this isn't over."

Hervé swallowed thickly and leaned into Orion's touch. "It's a conversation we can have after. Just know that there's nothing in the world that could make me want to walk away from you. Okay?"

Orion smiled and mimicked his accent again. "Okay."

ORION'S FINGERS BRUSHED OVER HERVÉ'S HAIR GENTLY before he threw his legs over the bed and stood up. His back was aching from all the tension he'd been carrying, and he felt half-numb and half-overwhelmed by what he was heading toward.

He knew this day was coming—he just thought he was going to have time. Years, he expected. He figured at some point, Carey would crack in his resolve to not be seen and let Orion come spend time with him. They'd watch bad movies and do ridiculous fundraising races and make inappropriate wheelchair jokes.

He didn't think he'd be heading in to say goodbye to a man who was already gone just weeks after leaving him laughing on his living room sofa.

Part of him wanted to tell his sister to just end it because seeing Carey in a bed with his heart still beating and chest rising and falling would be too much. He'd be too stuck on the idea that there was hope—a Hail Mary out there waiting for him. That he'd wake up, and it would all be a bad dream.

But he didn't want to put that on her, either. He didn't want her to think he didn't need a goodbye.

With a rough sigh, he watched Hervé's steady breathing for a bit longer before wandering out of the bedroom. He jolted when he saw Michel, the captain, standing at the little kitchenette, fixing himself a cup of coffee.

“Don’t worry,” Michel said, his accent a lot thicker than Hervé’s. “My co-pilot is a genius.”

Orion nodded. He’d flown enough he didn’t really think twice about it anymore, but he’d never been on anything as posh as this. The Hervé Orion had known about before belonged on a jet like this. In his designer jeans and shoes more expensive than Orion’s mortgage, and a meal that could have paid his childhood grocery bill for a month.

Orion struggled with his own wealth now, but Hervé’s life seemed to be far beyond that.

And he couldn’t help but wonder if Hervé missed it.

“I want to apologize,” Michel said after a long beat of silence, and Orion’s gaze snapped up to him. “I was rude before. I didn’t expect Hervé to have fallen in love with anyone, and I made an inappropriate joke about you.”

“Oh. Uh. Well, we’re not...I mean, we’re...it’s complicated.”

“Love is always complicated,” Michel said with a laugh. “And I can see how complicated he’d feel with the rumors going around about him. Everyone was talking—everyone was so worried.” He stopped and shook his head. “Some people,” he amended, “were worried when he disappeared.”

“You?” Orion asked.

He felt a sudden pulse of anger toward the people who had not just enabled Hervé in his self-destruction but the people who seemed to revel in it. The people who didn’t care when he was spiraling. And maybe, considering Hervé hadn’t done much better when Thierry was injured, he deserved it. But he couldn’t look at the man he was falling for and let himself think that.

Michel sighed. “I always knew Hervé was stronger than he looked. Everyone thought he was so fragile. They thought he’d be the next Marilyn Monroe. Burn bright and die young.”

Orion closed his hands into fists when those words echoed what Hervé had said to him when they first met. “That’s not fucking glamorous.”

“*Oui, je sais,*” Michel said, waving a hand at him. “I don’t think it’s beautiful or anything. When I was hurt, I saw my whole life flash before my eyes. I let people think what they want to because it’s easier, but I know that fear.”

“He’s not dying,” Orion said quietly.

Michel hummed. “No. Maybe not from whatever it is that makes him fall down like that, but he was dying before. Until he met you, I think.” Then he just turned and walked back to the cockpit, and Orion collapsed in the nearest chair.

It was too much weight to put on him right then. It was too much responsibility and feeling when he was about to lose someone he wasn’t ready to let go of.

Because the world would go on. The sun would rise and it would set, and he would go back to work and he’d win games, and he’d lose them. And would be forced to make his way forward and maybe even meet the love of his life, and his best friend wasn’t there to see it.

“Why did you do this now?” he whispered to the echo of Carey’s presence.

His throat went hot, and for the first time since Nova called, he started to cry. The plane was loud enough to drown out his sobs, especially as he buried his face in the pillow, but it left him aching and hollow inside.

Hervé still hadn’t woken by the time it was over, so he grabbed a bottle of water and crawled back into the bed beside him, pulling him close. Hervé murmured and nuzzled against him, and Orion wondered how the hell he was going to survive all this the moment he had to let Hervé go.



ORION WAS SHAKING SO HARD his teeth were chattering, so he kept his jaw clenched so tightly he could feel a headache building. There were no words for the emotions he had raging

inside of him because the moment the car rolled to a stop in front of the hospital, it would be over.

He felt like a small child, when he believed that the world disappeared if he closed his eyes. Now, if he didn't go in—if he didn't greet his sister and see Carey there in that bed—none of it would be real. It wouldn't exist.

Life would just...go on.

“...here, *mon chéri*.”

Orion blinked and realized their Uber was sitting in under the parking awning and probably had been for a short while. He took a breath, hearing it rattle around in his chest, and he offered the driver an apologetic smile. “Sorry.”

The guy looked at him in the mirror. “It's no trouble. Do you want me to stay?”

One of the perks of being an Uber black user, he supposed. They were willing to put up with a lot more. Shaking his head, Orion reached for the door handle and pulled. “No, but thanks.”

The guy just nodded, and Orion stepped out, walking to the trunk to grab their things. They'd packed light, and he was grateful for it now because he hadn't even bothered booking a room, and he knew that Hervé would be sitting around with their shit for a good, long while.

Feeling a touch on his wrist, he looked over at Hervé, who seemed a little unsure about what to do with himself. “What can I do?”

Orion let go of his grip on the suitcase handle and cupped Hervé's cheek. “I don't know. I feel like I'm going crazy.”

Hervé bowed his head and put his hand over Orion's. “I don't know how this feels. I've never lost anyone like this, and when Thierry was hurt...” His words trailed off, but Orion didn't need him to finish. He knew what had happened. Thierry had been shot, Hervé had fled, and the end of their friendship was sealed.

Before Hervé could speak again, the sliding doors opened, and Orion's gaze locked on his sister. She was in sweats, and her hair was falling out of a bun, and she looked like she hadn't slept in days. Likely because she hadn't. Orion knew she'd been coming to grips with the idea of losing her husband, but like this?

Orion began to sweat, from his scalp down to the arches of his feet, but he managed to get his arms out and around her as she barreled into him and started to sob. His own emotions were clawing at his chest to be freed, but he locked them down tight. He could fall apart later—on his own time when Nova didn't need him.

For now, he just tightened his grip around her and kissed her hair and murmured bullshit words of encouragement that he didn't believe. They rocked from side to side until Nova's body relaxed, and then she pulled back.

“How was your flight?”

Orion blinked at her. “No. I'm...I can't talk about that right now.”

“Okay.” Nova swiped the back of her hand under her eyes to clear up the drying tears, then slipped her fingers through his. She glanced over at Hervé and blinked, then offered a smile. “What a fucked-up first date, huh?”

“More like a fourth date,” Hervé said with a small smile, then leaned in and pressed a kiss to her cheek. “But I can take it, *chérie*. I'm just here to guard the suitcases.”

Nova glanced up at Orion. “I like him.”

He wasn't sure she'd continue to feel that way once she knew his past, but Nova was also a big believer in second chances. And third. And fourth. She'd always had a bleeding heart—was always the girl who wanted redemption arcs for every villain in the superhero movies he made her watch.

So maybe it would be okay.

Orion let her tug on his hand, leading him through the doors, and his panic started to increase as they came to a stop by the elevators. He hadn't realized he was breathing too fast

until the room began to sway and his vision went white, and he came to himself with both Hervé and Nova on either side of him.

“I know,” Nova said roughly. “I know, but you just have to get through it.”

Orion swallowed against a dry throat as the doors opened and they stepped inside. “Where’s Callie?”

Nova breathed quietly. “With his parents. They’re in town. They already, uh...they already came to see him with her.”

“How, um...how long until...”

“Tonight,” she said softly as the doors dinged closed. “His vitals are pretty unstable, and he has a DNR, so it might be sooner, but...” She trailed off with a shrug. “I’ve already said everything I need to say to him. I just didn’t want you to miss saying whatever it is he needs to hear.”

Orion didn’t tell her that Carey had already heard it all. That Orion had never held back with his friend. That he had bared his soul, and the only thing he would miss telling him was about Hervé, but it was too late for that anyway.

The doors opened to the ICU floor, which was far quieter than the lobby had been. It was just a pale hallway lit with uncomfortable fluorescents and was decorated with faded, framed snapshots of succulents and cacti.

As they walked toward a large set of double doors, Orion glanced into a waiting room to find a single, older man who was slumped over in a chair, asleep.

“Just call on the phone there,” Nova said, jerking her chin toward an old landline on the wall. “I’m going to use the bathroom. I’ll meet you inside.” She offered Hervé an apologetic look. “They only let in two guests at a time.”

He shook his head. “I’m not here for that. I’m just here to wait and get you anything you need.”

“Keeper,” Nova whispered as she squeezed Orion’s hand one last time, then walked off.

Orion took a deep breath, then turned to Hervé. “It’s real.”

Hervé nodded and stepped closer. “It is.”

Orion glanced over at the phone on the wall, and his throat felt thick. “I don’t know if I can.”

Reaching for him, Hervé took Orion by the sides of the neck and pulled him down until their foreheads met. “You’re strong, and you’re brave. And you love him.”

Orion nodded. “I don’t know if I want to say goodbye like this. He’s not...he’s not even there, baby. He’s already gone.”

“You don’t have to.”

But he did. Maybe not for his sake, but for Nova’s. He didn’t know how to explain to her that this somehow felt worse. So he’d do it this way. Taking a step back, he watched Hervé’s delicate, beautiful hands drop to his sides, and he turned so he didn’t give in to the urge to bury himself in Hervé’s embrace and let himself waste away there.

He squared his shoulders as he reached the phone, then picked it up with a heavy lead ball sitting where his heart should be. He swore he wasn’t breathing, but he managed to speak when the nurse picked up.

“I’m here for Carey Scott. I’m not sure what room he’s in. My name is Orion Coulter.”

There was a long pause, and then the nurse cleared her throat. “Are you family, Mr. Coulter?”

Orion looked over his shoulder for any sign of Nova, but she wasn’t there. “Um. Yeah. Yes. I’m his brother-in-law. I’m here with his wife.”

Another long pause, and then the nurse sighed heavily. She started to speak again, but all he heard were her first few words. “I’m so sorry, sir, but he’s already...”

The rest was white noise, and the only sound after that was his sister’s devastated scream.

MAYBE IT WAS A MIRACLE, AND MAYBE IT WAS JUST SOME SORT of adrenaline willpower, but Hervé managed to keep it together as Nova came running out screaming and Orion fell to his knees. Hervé didn't need to hear the other end of the phone to know what happened. He knew that sound.

Not from his own experience, but he'd lived enough life. He'd seen that kind of pain on someone's face before.

A few nurses came out to help the siblings back through the doors, and Hervé was left in the waiting room with the suitcases and the man who still hadn't moved from his slumber. He'd never felt so out of place before and so unsure about what he should do, so he just sat in the chair and kept their cases close to his knee.

He could be out there for hours—for days, he supposed. He didn't know what came next after someone died. He supposed the body would be moved, and Nova would have to handle paperwork, and eventually, she'd need to go home and sleep.

Mostly, Hervé didn't know if he should stay. He wouldn't go anywhere until Orion asked him to, but he also didn't want Orion to have to make any decisions while he was in that much pain. With a shaking sigh, he quickly pulled out his phone and dialed up the vacation rental company he'd used back when he'd traveled to the States.

Charlie, a bright-voiced woman he'd never met in person, picked up immediately. "I wasn't expecting to hear from you

for a long while.”

Hervé managed something like a smile. “Family emergency. I’m in...” He paused, not quite sure what hospital he was in? He glanced around the lobby like it might have the answers, and his gaze fell onto a magazine with the hospital address. “One of the DC memorial hospitals. Do you know it?”

She laughed before sobering when she realized he was serious. “Oh. That’s...are you okay?”

“It’s not for me,” he said shortly. “But it was last-minute, and I need a place to stay for the week.”

“Of course. Just hang tight for me?” She had a sweet, small Southern accent, which he’d always enjoyed, but right now, it was grating. But then again, any voice besides Orion’s was grating. “I can get you a house, sugar. Three bedrooms, pool, a weight—”

“Whatever you have,” he interrupted. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be rude. It’s just not a good time, and it’s not for vacation.”

“Of course,” she said, her voice going somber. “I’ll use your card on file and email you the entry code for the door. Do you need a car?”

“Ye—no,” he said, forgetting for just that moment he couldn’t drive at the moment. “A ride service?”

“I’ll put in a booking and email you the app link to download. You can order the car just like an Uber, alright?”

He breathed a sigh of relief that at the very least, he could do this. He didn’t know if Orion would want to go back to Nova’s house, but he could offer them a soft place to land as an alternative. “Can you have them stock the home? Food, drink. A lot of alcohol.” He grimaced as he said it, and honestly, it was testing his resolve because right now, he wanted nothing more than a drink to numb the way this was making him feel. But he reminded himself once more this wasn’t about him.

They finished everything up, and before he even ended the call, he felt his phone buzzing with the emails. He didn't bother checking yet. His eyes started to feel heavy, and he knew what was coming.

He began to slump in his chair a bit, the overwhelming need to sleep eclipsing everything else in his body. He'd held on for long enough, and he could only hope that by the time Orion was out, he wasn't completely unconscious.



“...*RAS le cul! T'es sérieux? Cette quiche. Il est toujours la même!*”

“Thierry, stop.”

“*Non!*”

“Thierry, we're in a goddamn hospital. Stop yelling.”

“It's not like they can understand me anyway!”

“I don't care. You knew he was here, and Orion doesn't need this shit right now, so *stop.*”

Hervé managed to pull himself together and opened his eyes to see Pietro staring down at Thierry, who had his dark eyes locked on Hervé. It took him probably far too long to realize this wasn't one of his dreams. No, he was still in the waiting room of the ICU with no idea how long he'd been out, and his ex and his ex-best friend across the room, staring at him.

Hervé swallowed thickly and pushed himself to sit forward, trying to shake the fog from his head. “I'm sorry—” he started.

Thierry scoffed loudly and spun his wheelchair. “Save it,” he spat, then disappeared around the corner.

Hervé's fingers were shaking from the sudden wake-up, and he curled them into fists as he tried to force himself to meet Pietro's eyes. He hadn't seen him in so long, and he

wasn't sure what the hell he was supposed to say to break the tension.

“Are you high?”

Well, that would do it. He almost laughed, but he managed to control himself. “No. I didn't mean to—” He stopped himself because he *had* meant to fall asleep. He couldn't help it anymore. “I'm sick.”

Pietro took a step back, and Hervé tried not to feel a pang in his chest because people always, always did that. “Sick?”

“It's not catching,” he said a little bitterly. He stood up, hoping to get the blood flowing back to his limbs, and his gaze fell on the wall clock. If he was remembering right, he'd only been out half an hour. “I have narcolepsy.”

“You're shitting me,” Pietro said quietly.

Hervé shook his head. “No. It's recent. Well, learning about it was recent. I think I might have had it for a while.” He shrugged and blew out a puff of air. “It doesn't matter right now.”

“No,” Pietro said, his voice a little hard, “it doesn't.” Awkward silence filled the space between them, and then Pietro cleared his throat, making Hervé jump. “He's, um. He's back there?”

Hervé swallowed heavily, remembering the agony in Nova's scream and the way Orion had just collapsed to his knees like all his strings had been cut. “Yes. Since the nurses told him.”

Pietro's eyes widened. “Shit. Wait. Carey's *gone*...”

Hervé filled in the end of Pietro's sentence with a miserable nod. “I don't know the details. It happened just before we got to this floor, I think.”

“He was too late,” Pietro said in a hard tone, and Hervé flinched.

“I tried. I did everything I could to get him here.”

Pietro met his gaze with an icy glare, and then after a second, he softened a little and held up his hands in surrender. “I’m...shit. I’m sorry. I know he’d still be on some fucking commercial flight right now if he had to book one. This just really, really sucks.”

Hervé nodded. “*Ouais*. And if it’s better for me to leave —”

“It is.” Thierry’s voice filled the room before he appeared around the corner, his eyes narrow. “It’s better if you leave.”

“No.”

Hervé and Thierry both whipped their heads over toward Pietro, who looked furious.

“I already told you we’re not having some fight about who should be where right now. This isn’t about either of us. Orion just lost his best fucking friend, okay? And he asked Hervé to come with him.”

“Because he must not know—”

“Of course he does,” Pietro snapped. Hervé eased back toward the chairs as Pietro crossed the room and dropped both hands on his lover’s shoulders. Hervé could only hear him speak because the room was so silent. “You talked to him about it already. You knew who he was with. And I’m never going to ask you to be okay with someone that hurt you, but I told you before we left that if this was going to be too hard for you, you needed to stay home.”

“He’s my friend too,” Thierry bit out.

Hervé knew he should go, but he couldn’t bring himself to offer. Not until Orion looked him in the eyes and said that he’d be okay if Hervé wasn’t there. He wanted to text him, wanted to call him, wanted to demand the nurses let him into that forbidden hallway for just a second.

But he wasn’t going to make a scene.

His gaze drifted around the room—the magazines that were untouched, an old paper cup of coffee, the chair the

sleeping man had vacated. Hervé wondered if that man's story would have a tragic ending.

There was a loud click from the wall, and Hervé nearly jumped out of his skin as his head turned to see Orion walk through. He was pale, and his eyes were a little red, but they were dry. He stared at Pietro and Thierry, who looked like they didn't know what to do, and then his gaze locked on Hervé.

He felt frozen in his shoes, wondering if maybe this was it. Maybe it was over. Then Orion crossed the room and gathered Hervé to his chest almost desperately. "You stayed," he whispered raggedly in Hervé's ear.

Hervé held him back as tight as he could. "I promised."

Orion's laugh was strained and a little wet, and he sniffed before pulling away. "It's over. He's...everything's, um...it's done." He cleared his throat and glanced over at Pietro before locking his gaze back on Hervé. "I don't know what to do now. I didn't book a place to stay."

"We got a vacation rental," Pietro offered quietly, "but I don't think Hervé should stay with us."

"I got my own place," Hervé said. "After you and Nova, *euuh*...after you went back there—" He stopped and cleared his throat. "I made a call. It's big enough for all of us, but if you want to stay with your friends, of course you should do that."

Orion shook his head, then quickly shot a look at Pietro and Thierry that was full of apology. "We'll figure it out. Nova's signing release papers or whatever the hell they are." His voice cracked, and he took a breath. "A bunch of stuff has to happen now." He turned to face Hervé and cupped his cheek. "You should go to the house. You can't keep sitting in this waiting room."

"I'll sit here as long as you need me," Hervé promised.

Orion smiled again, then gently dropped his forehead against Hervé's. "Please go get some rest. Some actual rest. There's nothing else to do here."

Hervé wanted to panic, mostly out of fear that the moment he spent even a minute alone with Thierry, the glass would

shatter, and he'd never see Orion again. He'd sit and wait in silence in that empty rental until he accepted that it was over. Then he'd fly back to France alone and figure out how the hell he was supposed to go on without Orion. Without closure.

Then he looked into Orion's eyes and realized that he hadn't fallen for a man who would do that to him. Even if, cosmically, he deserved it—because he did. But Orion was a good person. He was far better than anyone standing in that room, and Hervé wouldn't take that away from him just because he felt like he wasn't done being punished.

“Okay, I'll go. The rental comes with a car service if you or Nova feel up to driving...”

“I don't think we do,” Orion said softly.

“We can drop him off,” Pietro cut in.

Hervé didn't look over, but he watched the slight surprise on Orion's face as he did. “You don't need to do that.”

“Yes, we do. We didn't fly our happy asses all the way out here to leave your cheese out in the wind, Orion. We're here for you.”

There was a pause, and then Thierry sighed. “He's right. We'll figure it out.”

Hervé nodded, steeling his resolve as he grabbed both cases, then turned his face up just as Orion surged in for a kiss. It was with dry, closed lips and on the edge of desperate, and Hervé hated that there was nothing he could do to make this better for him.

“Text me when you get there so I know you're okay,” Orion said.

Hervé nodded, and he could feel the weight of Pietro and Thierry's gaze on him as he stepped back. A small part of him wanted to offer an apology for making this worse than it should have been, but he didn't. He just stepped toward the elevator, waited for the doors to open, then stepped inside and away from the man he loved.

The lobby was mostly empty as he got down, and he stopped by the doors to open his Uber app before heading out. It was warm and muggy, but there was a slight breeze under the awning, and he found a spot on a concrete bench to wait.

The Uber was twenty minutes out, and Hervé could only hope his body would keep it together for that amount of time. He'd dealt with his symptoms on his own for the better part of two years before Orion came along, but Hervé was dangerously dependent on him after the time they'd spent in each other's pockets.

He knew he couldn't let himself get complacent, but it was the first time he ever felt like he could rely on someone. It made him feel like a selfish asshole, considering the circumstances, but he couldn't help it.

The doors beside him swooshed open, and he didn't look over, but somehow, he knew who it was.

“Why him? Why turn it all around for him?”

The words were spoken in gruff French, and Hervé bowed his head. “I'm in love with him. I think.”

“You loved me,” Thierry said, wheeling closer until the tire of his chair bumped the bench. Hervé didn't look over, but he could see Thierry's shoes in his periphery. “You didn't love Pietro, really, but you liked him. And if you'd taken your head out of your ass for ten seconds, you would have fallen hard for him. So why? Why Orion?”

Hervé looked up with tired eyes and saw the pain in Thierry's face. “Because I didn't know how to be kind until I met him. Because when I loved you, I was afraid of being weak.”

“And you expect me to believe that changed? Just like that?”

Hervé laughed—he couldn't help it. He dragged his hands down his face. “No, not just like that. Taking drugs, all the drinking, it made it easier to breathe, but it made me a monster. So God—or something, I don't know—decided enough was enough.”

“What happened to you?” Thierry asked without an ounce of pity in his voice, and Hervé had never been more grateful for it.

“I fell. Right before the official diagnosis,” he admitted, shaking his head. “I was walking the red carpet, and I was high on... I don’t even know what. And my body collapsed,” he said on a sigh. “Cataplexy, the doctor told me later. I was awake for it, but I couldn’t move. I was just lying there, and my head was cracked open like an egg. I could hear everyone talking, the cameras clicking, all of it, and I couldn’t do anything to stop it. The press said it was drugs”

Thierry was watching him, his eyes almost like a hawk. “But it wasn’t, was it?”

“No. It was the narcolepsy,” he said. “But the drugs weren’t helping. My doctor made it very clear that the path I was on would either lead to me having an overdose or a fall that I wouldn’t get up from. I was sent to rehab for several months to get clean. Maman was watching it live,” he added with a bitter laugh. “In spite of Maman trying to bury it. I don’t think she’ll ever forgive me for humiliating her like that.”

“*Putain*. Humiliating *her*?” Thierry grimaced, showing all of his teeth. “Let me guess, she told you she wanted to save your career, and your addiction made her look weak?”

Hervé barked a laugh. “You know her as well as I do. When I told her I was sick—that this wasn’t going to get better—she told me to leave and not come back until I found a doctor to cure it.” He closed his eyes and heard her last words. He’d never told anyone about the last argument he’d had with his mother. It still made him feel sick. But it felt oddly appropriate to tell Thierry since he was responsible for keeping her away for so damn many years. He’d been his bodyguard but not against physical threats. Against her.

And he hadn’t realized how important Thierry had been until he lost him. Until he pushed him away.

“What else did she say?” Thierry pressed.

Hervé took a breath. “To think about a lobotomy.”

“That bitch.” Thierry sucked in air through his teeth, then swore under his breath. “This doesn’t change anything. It can’t.”

“I’m not saying all that to make you feel sorry for me. But I promised myself I’d never lie to you again. I know we can’t be friends,” Hervé said in a rush. His app beeped. His ride was just around the corner. He stood up and grabbed the handle on one of the cases. “I will never stop being sorry for what I did, and I also know damn well that I’m not entitled to forgiveness. I won’t put that burden on either of you, Thierry. I’m only here because Orion asked me to come, and he’s willing to allow me the chance to be the man I always wanted to be. I’m here because he’s in pain, and he wanted me to stay. For the first time in my life, I’m able to put someone else first. But I am sorry I wasn’t that man for you.”

Thierry said nothing. Hervé was expecting some kind of threat—hurt him and I hurt you, or do better because you’ll never deserve him. But he was just given silence, and somehow, that was worse.

Hervé could feel Thierry’s eyes on his back as he loaded the cases and climbed in, but he didn’t look over as the door shut and the driver pulled away.

There was too much to be said and too much that needed to be left unsaid, but Hervé realized he was okay with not having control over this part of his future. He would always want forgiveness, and he would always work toward deserving it, but he’d never ask. Not again.

Whatever Pietro and Thierry wanted to offer him—silence, cruelty, or even kindness—he’d take any of it as a gift.

SOMEHOW, ORION MANAGED TO FIND HIMSELF ALONE AT THE hospital café. He didn't think he'd be able to shake Pietro or Thierry at first, but they took one look at his expression and let him go. Nova was walking through an obvious fog, and Orion damn well knew nothing he said would be able to get her out of it, so his best option was to take a few minutes for himself.

He'd come to realize just after the nurse told him that Carey was gone that he wasn't in pain over missing Carey's last breath. In fact, he was fairly sure Carey's ghost had managed to pull the plug on his body because he knew that Orion wouldn't be able to handle those last moments.

The thought made him smile and tip his untouched coffee to the air where his friend was probably sitting and laughing at him in the Great Beyond or whatever. And oddly, that helped ease some of the pain around his heart.

But the fact remained, it was real. He was now in a world where Carey no longer existed. It was over. There was no going back, no rewinding. There was only chasing old memories of his voice and his laugh that would fade over time.

And that hurt the worst. That loss was going to stay with him until he died.

Silence in the air had never been so goddamn loud.

In the distance, Orion heard someone call his name, and he looked over to see Pietro lingering in the café entrance. Part of him wanted to scream and rage and demand everyone leave him the fuck alone because as soon as Nova walked out of the

hospital, he was going to have to check his shit and be strong for her. He just needed a moment to fall apart, and he didn't want to do it with a goddamn audience.

Then he saw the look on Pietro's face, and he softened, jerking his head to the side and inviting him over.

Pietro, being the man he was, didn't take the bench across from him. Instead, he shoved his bulk in beside Orion, then wrapped his arms tight around him and held him until something cracked. Orion didn't break all the way though. He just sort of breathed, then shuddered as the tears began to fall. A quiet sob lodged itself in the back of his throat as he pressed his face to the top of Pietro's shoulder.

"I'm sorry."

Orion nodded. He was too. He was really fucking sorry they lived in a world that could cause this much pain and force people to live through it.

Jesus, how was it fair?

He pulled away, swiping his hands over his cheeks, and took a fortifying breath. "I'm sorry I called you guys here. I shouldn't have put you in this position."

Pietro frowned, then seemed to realize what Orion was saying, and he shook his head. "Babe, don't you fucking dare. This is what we do. James and Luke are already at the airport waiting to board their flight."

Orion shook his head. "Some of you need to finish spring training."

Pietro gave him an endlessly patient look. "Spring training's over."

Fucking, *fuck*. Pietro was right, and Orion had missed all of it. They were two weeks away from the start of the season. "I lost track of time."

Pietro sighed. "No one expects you to do anything except get through this, Orion. I'm assuming Nova's having the funeral here, right?"

“I don’t know,” Orion said quietly. “She didn’t tell me anything, and I was...I was distracted.” He hadn’t really asked about Carey’s end-of-life plans because he thought he had time, so he let himself sink into those honey-slow, gorgeous days with Hervé.

He swallowed against the lump that wouldn’t go away and rubbed his hands over his thighs. He blinked, saw Hervé’s face behind his eyelids, and missed him with a ferocity he wasn’t expecting. The man had become something like a crutch in the last few hours—though maybe it was a little longer than that.

And it was dangerous.

“I think I’m in love with him.”

Pietro processed his words. “You don’t mean Carey.”

“No,” Orion whispered. “This is the worst fucking time to catch feelings. And for the worst fucking person.”

Pietro tilted his head to the side, then reached out and grabbed Orion’s hand. It wasn’t something they did a lot. Pietro was touch-feely but usually with James and always with Thierry. Orion knew he’d been a bit standoffish over the years, and he was regretting that now because he didn’t want this contact to be awkward.

Pietro didn’t seem to notice though. He just squeezed tighter. “If this was two years ago—hell, if this was a year ago—I might agree. I can see he’s not the same person. And the only thing that matters is that he’s good to you. And if he ever slips back into his old bullshit, I’ll—” Pietro stopped abruptly, and Orion was grateful for it because it was probably some metaphorical death threat he wasn’t ready to hear. “I’d make it bad for him. If you wanted me to.”

Orion bowed his head. “Thank you, but I can’t even think about that right now. I need to get through this and figure out how to move forward. I have to go home when it’s over, you know? I mean, the season’s about to start, and—”

“You know you can get more time off, right?” Pietro reminded him. “I will fight the entire goddamn organization if they try to tell you that you can’t have leave.”

“I don’t want it,” Orion told him, pulling his hand away. He reached for his coffee and took a sip, his stomach roiling with nausea. “I need to get back to something normal. *Anything* that won’t make me think about all this.”

Pietro looked a bit like he didn’t believe Orion, and hell, Orion didn’t know if he believed himself. But for now, it felt like the truth. “Whatever you want. I’m gonna drop you and Nova off at your place with Hervé, okay? Then we’ll shack up in our house and wait for you to call.”

Orion shifted and bit his lip. “It could be a while. I don’t want Nova to have to make all these decisions right now.”

Pietro made a soft noise of protest. “Babe, she already *has* made the decisions. She and Carey made them together when he was diagnosed.”

Orion blinked at him. “She told you that?”

“No. She didn’t have to. It’s what people do when shit gets real.” Pietro’s eyes cut to the side, and then he swallowed heavily. “Thierry’s healthy—relatively. He’s more mobile than a lot of men with spinal injuries, right? But he still has them. And he sat me down and told me about all the complications men with injuries like him can face. I hated him for bringing it up at first, but in the end, I got it. And now I know. If anything —” He stopped and breathed out with a shrug. “If anything happens, I know what to do.”

Orion’s chest ached, but he wasn’t foolish enough to believe his pragmatic sister hadn’t sat down with her equally pragmatic husband and detailed it all out. Even if neither of them had envisioned anything like this ever happening, Nova would have been the first person to get things right while Carey was still around to make his own decisions.

His eyes went hot all over again, and he forced the tears back. “I need to go find her. I gotta get out of here before I lose it. I just want to scream into a pillow for a bit, and I don’t want anyone to witness that.”

Pietro nodded and shifted out of the bench so Orion could stand up. “She sent me to find you. She said she’d be in the

lobby.”

Orion felt like he was walking through a fog as he made his way to the front of the hospital, and he almost missed Nova, who was sitting on a bench with her arms around her middle, head bowed. She looked up when he approached, and her eyes were a little far-off and red.

“Ready to go?” he asked. “Pietro and Thierry are going to drive us. Hervé got a house and—”

She shook her head, cutting him off. “I’m not going with you, babe. I’m going home. Alone.”

And Jesus, but that sounded like the worst idea in the world. “Do you really think that’s a good idea?”

“I think that drinking a bottle of wine, curling up in my bed wearing one of Carey’s shirts, and crying until I want to puke is the best idea in the world,” she said, her voice a little ragged. “It’s never going to stop hurting, but we knew this was coming. All that panic—the disbelief, the bargaining? I did that shit months ago. I don’t want to sit here and try to pretend like my heart wasn’t ripped out of my body today, so I need some space to figure out how to let it go.”

Orion wanted to argue with her because hell, he didn’t want to do this without her, but he also wasn’t going to be the asshole who forced her to stay with him because he was losing it. “Will you promise to call me if it gets bad?”

She rose and walked up to him, setting her hands on his shoulders. “The last promise I made Carey was that I was going to live my life. I’d let myself wallow and hurt and whatever the fuck else my brain decides to do in the fits of grief I know are coming. But I swore I wasn’t going to give up just because he drew the short fucking straw.”

Orion swallowed heavily, then tried to speak, but it came out like a sob. She gripped him and wrapped her arms around him, and he realized he was on a knife’s edge, about to lose it. “Nova,” he whispered.

“Not now. I can’t do this here. Please,” she begged.

He stepped away from her and let his arms fall to his sides. “Can you drive home?”

“I can do a lot of things,” she said, then rose to her tiptoes and kissed him before hurrying off.

He still had no idea what was happening with the body or when the funeral would happen and if they’d stay here. He didn’t know if she was going to actually be okay or if she was throwing him off her scent because she didn’t want anyone to realize how bad it was.

But he had to trust her, just like he had all of his life.

Turning, he saw Pietro waiting—face a little pale with one hand resting on Thierry’s shoulders. They were both somber, and neither of them tried to speak as they led the way to where they were parked, and Orion tried not to hold his breath on the drive.



HERVÉ WAS fast asleep when Orion got in. The door opened with a code Hervé sent over, and he stepped in to find him slumped over in a chair. Orion studied him for a moment, then walked over and lifted Hervé into his arms.

Eyes fluttering open, Hervé started to protest, but Orion just held on to him harder. “Please just...come to bed with me?”

Hervé mumbled something and nodded, curling close to Orion’s shoulder as he found the first bedroom and slipped inside. Using his foot to shove back the covers, Orion laid Hervé down and began to strip out of his clothes which smelled like a mixture of the plane and the hospital.

Fuck, he wanted to burn them.

Instead, he kicked them into the corner, then climbed over Hervé’s body and slipped beneath the sheets. Hervé was fully awake, watching him with hooded eyes as Orion settled onto

his side, and his small, delicate hand reached for him, tracing a touch over his eyebrow.

“I’m not going to ask how you are.”

“Ask me in French?” Orion offered. “Call it a French lesson.”

Hervé’s lips twitched, and in spite of the pain, he felt something lift in his chest at the sight of his lover’s grin. “What you would be taught in a classroom? *Comment ça va?*”

“And if I want to sound fluent?” Orion said and leaned forward, mimicking the accent again. “Is it just ‘oh-kay’?”

Hervé huffed a laugh and let Orion curl up against his chest, wrapping one arm around him and pushing his nose into the top of Orion’s hair. “Something like that.”

Orion shuddered and realized that for all he was exhausted, there was no way in hell he would be able to sleep. There was no way in hell he wanted to. He didn’t want to face his dreams. “Talk to me.”

“What do you want me to say?”

“Anything. English, French, Greek, Mandarin, Urdu—I don’t really care. I just want to lie here and listen to your voice.”

“I only know two of those languages,” Hervé told him, and Orion could hear his grin.

“Fine. Tell me a happy story in English. Something good from when you were younger. I know you don’t...I know you don’t have a lot of those,” Orion admitted. “But there must have been something, right?”

“There was something. There were many somethings after a French boy who grew up in England came to my school and beat up all the bullies so they’d leave me alone,” Hervé said.

Orion breathed out a sigh. “Thierry.”

“*Ouais*. This story happened when we were fifteen,” Hervé told him, his voice a little far-off like he was slipping into the past. “We were skipping school because it was a nice day, and

we pretended to be German tourists who were with a guide. It was Paris, so we were used to everything in the city. La tour Eiffel, Arc de Triomphe, Musée de l'Armée, Louvre..." Orion lost himself in the sweet lilt of his accent. "Notre Dame. But... it was different that afternoon. We weren't a pair of French boys embittered by living in a city full of foreign visitors. We were suddenly new. We were strangers."

Orion slipped his hand up the back of Hervé's shirt and drew lines over his knobby spine. "Did you get caught?"

Hervé laughed. "Non, *mon chéri*. We were very clever, and I don't think anyone cared very much where we were. I was already modeling and acting, and my mother—I don't think she cared if I finished school. I knew by then I would be worthless to her if I didn't become famous. Her love was based on how many strangers in public adored me."

"I think I hate her," Orion growled.

Hervé smudged a kiss on his forehead. "She's not worth hate." He went quiet again, and Orion waited for him to go on. "I didn't go home that night. We stayed out. We got hot dogs from a little cart and sat on the roof of an apartment building and threw breadcrumbs to the pigeons in the street. We watched the stars and went home at dawn to change for school. No one noticed we were gone."

Orion lifted his face up, cupping Hervé's jaw, and he kissed his lips softly. "I would have noticed."

Hervé laughed quietly and shrugged as Orion settled back against him. "*Peut-être*. I wasn't much to look at back then." Orion felt a heaviness in Hervé's following silence, and then his lover let out a slow breath. "We did it again after that. Not a lot. Just...every time it hurt to breathe."

"And you lost that," Orion said.

"I drove it away. I forgot," Hervé whispered. "I became beautiful on the outside and ugly on the inside, and people loved me, and I didn't care why. I just wanted their admiration to fill the hole my mother left behind because even in my grandest hour, she would call and tell me all the things I did

wrong. I'd be on the red carpet, and the next morning, my mother would tell me about crooked seams and how I was slouching, and how much potential I had to be better, but I kept failing her."

Orion growled softly as he pushed back up onto his elbow, looking Hervé in the eye. "Like I said. I hate her."

Hervé surged up and kissed him. There was no heat behind it, and Orion was grateful for it because there was no chance in hell he'd be up for anything besides these desperate kisses. But the connection kept him grounded. Their lips danced until Hervé started to falter, and Orion pulled back because he knew the stress of everything was putting a weight on Hervé that he probably couldn't shoulder.

Orion knew it wasn't fair to keep him, but he couldn't bring himself to let go.

Not yet.

Brushing his hands up and down Hervé's back, he lay there and listened to his breathing even out, and when he was fully unconscious, Orion rolled away from him and stood up. A small part of him wanted to bury his head in the pillow and just cry until he passed out, but he wasn't ready for that.

He was still numb, and in shock, and uncertain what would happen the moment reality set in. He ignored the urge to call his sister and check on her again because he couldn't lose her too, but instead, he pulled his phone out of his pocket and found the back door, which led to a large yard with a pool.

He hadn't realized how nice the place was until now. It looked brand-new, with marble floors and white kitchen countertops. The yard had a cabana and a pool house, with a huge stretch of grass and what looked like croquet wickets strategically placed.

It was...bizarre, to say the least, and oddly, very much Hervé. It was the movie-star version of the man Orion had only seen in passing though. Not the cozy, sweet, French countryside man who had made Orion fall head over heels in a time he didn't think he had room to feel anything but grief.

With a small smile, he made his way over to the pool deck, dropping onto a lounge. He stared at his contact list for a long while, then scrolled all the way to the *Ws* and tapped his finger over his manager.

Weber picked up after two rings. “I already spoke with Bassani.”

Orion rolled his eyes. “It’s good to hear from you too, Jimmy.”

Weber sighed quietly. “I’m not trying to be a dickhead, Coulter. I’m just letting you know you don’t need to explain. We’re here for whatever you need. We have your back.”

Orion tipped his head forward and squeezed his eyes shut. He and Weber had never been particularly close. He knew some teams looked at their managers like family. Hell, the Denver Huskie’s NHL coach had been in several of the guys’ weddings, from what Orion had seen on Instagram.

But he didn’t know what management was going to think about all of this. After all, they were professionals. They were expected to suck it up and do the damn job, no matter what.

Losing it—cracking—was a good way to end up thrown across the country to some team that needed to fill a couple of empty spots. He could be warming a bench if he wasn’t careful.

“Coulter?”

Orion snapped back to the present. “Sorry. I, uh...I’m not sure when the funeral is going to happen, but it should be pretty soon. Then I’ll be back.”

“If you need time—”

“Yeah, I don’t think I want that,” Orion said, and this time when he said it, he was pretty sure he meant it. Carey would never forgive him if he let the game go to shit just because of his death. “I need to get back to work.”

“Fine. But the offer stands. And don’t be an asshole about it if you need time,” Weber insisted.

Orion let out a wet laugh and nodded. “Yeah. Cool. Thanks, man.”

“You’re welcome. Now, fuck off and rest, or drown in a bottle of whiskey, or whatever the hell you need to do.”

Before Orion could shoot him a smart-ass comment back, the line was dead. The silence was heavy again, and Orion realized he wasn’t going to be able to function that way. He couldn’t wake up Hervé and force him to trudge through a day where Orion felt his control slipping, but he couldn’t be on his own, either.

He wanted to do what Weber suggested. He wanted a lot of drinks—until the world around him went black and fuzzy. He wanted to just lose control for a little bit, and he realized what was holding him back.

He couldn’t let himself go when Hervé was still struggling to hold himself together. He couldn’t shove this maladaptive coping in Hervé’s face while he was struggling to overcome all those toxic crutches that had gotten him to where he was.

Orion couldn’t let himself fall apart without putting Hervé at risk, and that was the last thing he wanted. But he also couldn’t ignore what his grief was screaming for.

His fingers trembled as he scrolled up again, then hit another button.

It rang three times before James’ breathless voice was on the line. “Babe.”

“Hey.” Orion’s voice cracked, then a string snapped, and the tears came. “Fuck. Fuck.”

“I’m literally getting in a car right now and heading to Pietro’s rental. Where are you at?”

Orion rubbed his hand under his nose. “Uh...I’m at some rental house that Hervé took care of.” He heard James suck in a breath, and he bristled. “Please don’t give me shit about him right now.”

“I wouldn’t,” James said in a rush. “Babe, come on. I’m a dick, but I’m not that bad.”

Orion felt a small twinge of guilt because he knew that, but there was this angry fire burning in him that wanted to lash out at someone or something. He swallowed back the bitter bile clawing at his throat. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be. Do you want to give me your address and I can come by?” James asked, quieter this time.

Orion shook his head, searching for his voice. “I think I’ll come to you, actually. Uh...I’ll get an Uber if you can bring a lot of alcohol to Pietro’s.”

“Orion...”

“Please,” he said stiffly, forcing himself to rise. He was just coming to realize he couldn’t handle anything right then. He couldn’t handle processing his grief and worrying about how everyone felt about Hervé being there. He couldn’t handle wanting to drown his sorrows and worry that he might be responsible for Hervé falling off the wagon after all the work he’d put in.

He’d been waiting this entire time for the other shoe to drop, and now he was watching it hurtle toward the earth.

“I have to get out of here. I need to get so drunk I can’t remember my name.”

“I’ll take care of it. See you soon?” James told him quietly, and without waiting for a response, he hung up.

Tucking his phone back into his pocket, Orion squared his shoulders and walked back toward the house. It was still quiet, but he could hear Hervé in the room, moving around. His stomach ached, and he was starting to lose his resolve, but he knew it had to happen this way. He’d officially run out of ways to make this work.

He needed wild distractions and his massive friends with their big arms and ability to cocoon him while the worst of it hit. With Hervé, he wanted to save the man from both himself and the outside world, but he’d lost the strength to do it the moment he stared down at the hospital bed at Carey’s too-thin, too-pale face and his unmoving chest.

There was no coming back from this.

As he pushed the door open, Orion nearly knocked Hervé on his ass, and he quickly caught him before he fell. Hervé looked up at him with a blossoming smile, but it faded as he took in Orion's expression.

Fuck, he hated himself now, even more than seconds before.

“What is it?” Hervé said, pulling away. He wrapped his arms around his middle and put feet of distance between them, which Orion knew he shouldn't cross. “Orion...”

“Asking you to come here was a mistake.” Fucking *fuck!* He hadn't meant to say it like that, but the damage was done. He saw Hervé's eyes widen, saw the pain, saw them harden. He watched as Hervé's jaw tightened, and his back went a little straighter because this man was used to taking hits. “I don't mean—I just. I didn't think about what it was going to cost. Not me.” He shook his head and amended, “Not just me. You too. I need to be able to let go and not worry about how it's going to affect you. I can't... I can't handle that right now.”

“I understand,” Hervé said. His tone was devoid of emotion, and Orion wanted to beg him to stop shutting down, but he had no right to. “It's not a problem. Michel said he was going to wait in town for a little while. I had a feeling it would happen like this.”

Orion took a step forward, but Hervé quickly shook his head.

“Please don't. I won't ask you to feel sorry for me right now. I don't know what your pain is like, but I know it's too much. I just need to protect myself. I knew it was going to hurt and—” His chin trembled, and he looked away. “I'm sorry. Can you let me do this alone? Please?”

Orion didn't want to. He wanted to demand the unreasonable—that Hervé just be okay with leaving and promise that once Orion had his head on straight, he'd be waiting for him. He wanted to demand that Hervé just sit here in this little house with no one while he waited for Orion to get past this huge hump of grief so he could function.

And he had a feeling Hervé might agree if Orion said those words.

So he kept his mouth shut.

He turned on his heel and left the room, closing the door behind him. He didn't linger for fear he might hear Hervé break down, and he couldn't take that, so he grabbed his phone and his shoes, then headed out the front door. There was already a text waiting from James with the address, and he opened up the car app and ordered his ride, his chest aching like he might actually be having some kind of cardiac event.

He didn't give a shit that he'd left his things behind, but he had left a huge piece of his heart in Hervé's delicate hands, and he wasn't sure he'd ever get that back. He couldn't wrap his mind around what he'd done or the reality that it might not be fixable, but what was done was done.

The Uber showed up minutes later, and without glancing at the house again, Orion got in the car and left it all behind.

HERVÉ WAS NO STRANGER TO THE KIND OF PAIN HE WAS IN AS he curled his knees to his chest on the sofa. He had soup—an easy enough meal to eat, which would ensure he didn’t choke if his cataplexy acted up while he was trying to swallow. He wasn’t really hungry anyway, and he was fighting the urge to just sleep.

Or to do things he really, really shouldn’t be thinking about.

A quick call to his therapist a few hours after Orion had left curbed his urges, but he knew this was going to be a test to see just how steady he was in his resolve to be better. Orion had given him a reason to try harder, but as Lucie reminded him, his recovery needed to be for him.

Not for anyone else.

His decisions, his life, they were his own. Oddly, where he thought he might feel an endless abyss of hopelessness, instead, he just felt a quiet sadness.

His flat in Paris waited, and he was still richer than he ever thought he could be when he was younger, but that didn’t soothe any of his aches. Just because he had a place to go didn’t mean he had a home.

But he also didn’t feel like there weren’t possibilities for him. That working on himself was pointless now that Orion had done exactly what Hervé had been afraid of.

He got on the line with Michel after his impromptu therapy, and he asked Hervé to stick it out for the night since he'd flown up to New York. When Hervé tried to insist he'd just book a flight home, Michel wouldn't let him.

“No. Please. I'm not leaving you there alone. I had a feeling I should stay, but I didn't want you to think I was hovering.”

Hervé was startled by how insistent Michel was, and honestly, he didn't have any fight left in him. Even if it meant sitting in that rental alone knowing Orion was in the city and had chosen—rightfully so—his family.

“Alright. I can do that. Just let me know when you'll be back at the airfield, and I'll get a car.”

“Or you can let me pick you up. I'll take you to breakfast,” Michel said, then added, “as a friend. When you talk to your boyfriend, you can promise him we're not—”

“He's not,” Hervé interrupted, his voice cracking a little. He cleared his throat and tried again. “He's not my boyfriend. We just met.”

Michel hummed quietly but didn't argue. “I'll see you in the morning, *chouchou*,” he said.

Before Hervé could even react to the sweet term of endearment, the call was over, and he was left on his own. He was tempted to call Lucie one more time, to have her talk him through the chaos in his chest that wanted him to give up and give in, but he wanted to believe in himself.

He wanted to look in the mirror and see the man who had been desperately trying to come to the surface.

And maybe this time, the pain of wallowing in his silence would be cathartic.

The hours seemed to pass in a rush after that. He went through his usual routine, showering, taking his meds, arranging his clothes for transport, then he climbed into bed. He'd only slept there once with Orion, but the emptiness in the space beside him felt like a cavern, and he let his hand rest where Orion's head had been.

It hurt, but not in a way that made his knees buckle. It was a slow burn reminding him that he was finally allowing himself to feel. He was finally facing down being human and being kind and opening himself up to vulnerability.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered to the emptiness, and silence answered back.

He knew he wasn’t going to sleep much—but at least he had a place to lie down, and that was enough.



MORNING CAME ALMOST AS SWIFTLY as the night passed, and Hervé had managed to get a few hours, which meant he wouldn’t be a total mess when Michel showed up. He dressed early and made the bed, then rolled Orion’s suitcase next to the door.

He was tempted to just leave it there and not say anything to Orion at all, mostly out of fear of seeming desperate, but he didn’t want bitter feelings between them. He couldn’t live like that anymore. He dug his phone out of his pocket and sent a quick text, telling himself he wasn’t going to expect a response.

Hervé: I left your case in the house. Please get it when you can. The code will stay the same until I check out, and I don’t want you to have to go without your things. I hope you’re okay.

He was far too tempted to put a little kiss on the end of the text, but he managed to refrain and instead busied his hands with making a cup of coffee from the little Nespresso machine on the counter. It was bitter and yet weak the way most American coffee tended to be, but it gave him a little pop of energy that would carry him until Michel finally got there.

He took his pills before tucking everything away in his case, and just as he was zipping it all back up, the doorbell

rang. He let out a heavy sigh as he walked over and pulled it open.

For a moment, he wasn't sure what to do. He was expecting Michel, so seeing Thierry standing there leaning heavily on a walker threw him. He swallowed, feeling like there were rocks in his throat, then he stepped back because if he was going to get punched, he'd rather do it without an audience.

"You're here for Orion's things?" he chanced, feeling a deeper ache that Orion would send Thierry of all people.

His former friend blinked, frowning in confusion before he shook his head. "Orion doesn't know I'm here."

Ah bon, at least it'll be a private beating, he thought to himself as he closed the door.

Thierry didn't look particularly murderous though. He looked more curious and even a little concerned, which was terrifying because Hervé wasn't sure he was prepared to handle anything even remotely resembling kindness.

Gesturing to the sofa, Hervé took a seat in the chair as far away as he could get while still being polite. "I'm waiting on a ride," he said softly as Thierry walked over and sat, setting his walker to the side, "so I don't think I'll have long."

Thierry nodded, then rubbed his fingers along his mouth. The gesture was old and familiar—partly lost in thought, partly anxious. He'd done it since they were young. "Please don't be angry with Orion, but he told me everything. About your," he said, waving his hand toward Hervé's head. "I don't remember what you called it."

"Narcolepsy," Hervé told him on the edge of a wave of weakness. He said a silent prayer he didn't collapse. It was the last thing he needed.

Thierry nodded, then bit his lip. "I spent a long while hoping something bad would happen to you."

Hervé gave him a dry look. "I hope you're not here to take responsibility for my condition."

Thierry stared, and then his mouth twitched. Then he laughed and shook his head. It was strange to hear it, but it was also nice. It gave him flashbacks of being young and loving him and trusting him with no idea what the future would hold.

“No,” Thierry finally said with a grin. “You know Maman. She’d kill me and bury me in consecrated ground if she heard me even whisper something like that.”

Hervé’s lips twitched, but he held back his laugh. He’d loved Thierry’s mom, and he’d also hated her because she had never been his, and all she did was remind him of what he’d never have.

Thierry’s chuckles died, and then he let out a breath. “The last time I saw you, before all this,” he said with a wave of his hand, “I was so furious at what you did. The shit you pulled at the hotel?” He shook his head, and Hervé felt a pulse of shame. “But after a few months, I was terrified. You were... you were a mess, Hervé. I thought you were going to die.”

Hervé wrapped his arms around his middle. “I think I came pretty close. If I hadn’t gotten rushed to the hospital after that fall, I probably would have. I was out of control.”

He closed his eyes and tried not to think back to those weeks after leaving Denver. He was high the whole time, everything foggy and surreal and wrong. And instead of that making him feel better, he just felt worse, so he kept taking more and taking more, waiting for the old, familiar numbness to settle in.

But it didn’t come.

He knew then it was the beginning of the end.

“Did I make it worse for you, before I was shot?” Thierry asked after a beat.

Hervé’s gaze snapped back up to him. “*What?*”

Thierry rubbed his hands over his thighs. “I enabled you for such a long time. The drugs, the drinking, the sex. Pietro calls it toxic self-medicating.” He said the last three words in English, and it took Hervé’s brain a few seconds to translate

the words properly. “You were hurting, and instead of helping you find a better way to deal with your trauma, I just let you do whatever the fuck you wanted.”

“You weren’t my mother,” Hervé reminded him.

This time, Thierry’s laugh was bitter. “No, and thank God for that. I hope you didn’t go back to her after what she said.”

Hervé shook his head, then stopped and shrugged. “For a little while, but we both weren’t going to last more than a few days in each other’s company. She sent me to Brittany so no one would see me in Paris, unable to walk five meters without collapsing on the ground.”

Thierry’s cheeks pinked with unspoken rage the way they always had when it came to Hervé’s mother. “For my own peace of mind, I need to know that I didn’t make you worse, and you owe me an honest answer.”

Hervé was surprised only because he couldn’t understand how Thierry had ever worried about that. His hands twitched with the sudden need to pull Thierry close, but he knew they’d never have that again. And he could live with it.

“Thierry, you were the only part of that life that made me good. When you were hurt...”

“Yes, you did tell me what an inconvenience I was to you,” Thierry said dryly.

Hervé winced and shook his head, trying not to think of their last meeting. “That was the ramblings of a man on too goddamn many drugs and out of his mind because he knew that without you, his life was going to fall apart. And there was nothing I could do to salvage what we’d once been to each other.” He took a breath. “But no, Thierry. You never made things worse. You’re probably the only reason I have the foundation strong enough to be better.”

Thierry met his gaze, then finally nodded.

Hervé took a fortifying breath. “When you were hurt, I knew the only way to save you from me was to let you go.”

“It was cruel,” Thierry said.

“I know.” Hervé nodded, his eyes going hot, but he wouldn’t let himself cry because this wasn’t about his pain. “Even if—God willing—you ever forgive me, I’ll never forgive myself.”

Thierry sat back, crossing his arms, and then he sat forward again like he was restless but didn’t want to move. “Is it about forgiveness? Being here?”

“It’s about Orion right now,” Hervé said. He bit his lip, then shrugged. “I’ve been seeing a therapist since I got out of rehab. She’s helping me stay clean and to learn how to live and function with guilt that will never go away.”

“And do you think it’ll last?” Thierry asked.

“I wish I could tell you, but I don’t know,” he admitted honestly. Hervé picked at his thumbnail, making his cuticle bleed. The pain shocked him, and he went to open his mouth, but his body gave in to the stress of having to give all those hard, painful answers.

He went limp. His chin hit his chest, and his arms went lax, and his eyes closed.

He heard Thierry swear and scramble for his walker. He heard his former friend’s gait on the floor as he shuffled over. By the time a warm hand touched his forehead, he was coming back to himself.

“Sorry,” Hervé managed thickly before swallowing and forcing his head up. Thierry took a step back and looked down at him.

“You just fall asleep like that?” Thierry snapped his fingers.

Hervé shook his head. “What happened just now, it’s not sleeping. My body sort of...stops, and I can’t move. But during those attacks, I’m conscious. I’m aware of everything going on.”

Thierry sucked in air through his teeth. “You could hear me? Feel me?”

Hervé nodded, wrapping his arms around his middle as Thierry made his way back to the sofa.

Thierry sat, letting his hands hang between his knees. “That’s not what I wanted when I said I wanted you to suffer. I think I...I think I just wanted you to understand how cruel you were. How badly you hurt me. It took me until last night to realize I wasn’t angry about it anymore because I have never loved anyone the way I love Pietro, and I don’t think I would have been able to find him if circumstances had been different.”

Hervé blinked at him. “You were *shot*. Your legs—”

“I know.” Thierry rubbed his mouth again. “But I would do it again. I took the bullet for you because I loved you, Hervé. You were my brother, and I was willing to put up with a lot to keep you breathing. The only thing I want from you now is to know I wasn’t worthless to you. Or that you don’t think I deserved it because I was just like everyone else in your life.”

“I—” Hervé’s words were cut off by the doorbell, but it was better that way. He had no idea what to say. He didn’t think Thierry would appreciate or want any kind of groveling with words that could never change the past. He took a breath, then stood. “That’ll be Michel.”

“*Michel?*” Thierry’s eyes went hard. “You still see him?”

“I called in a favor when we realized Orion couldn’t wait to book a flight,” Hervé said as he made his way slowly toward the door. “If it helps, I think he’s gone through some changes himself. He’s not the man he was.” Michel had been his usual, flirty self when they got to the airfield, but Hervé had noticed a profound difference in him. A softness and kindness that hadn’t been there before. “He’s taking me back to Paris.”

Thierry’s face relaxed after a beat, and he nodded. He stood, bracing himself on his walker as Hervé opened the door and smiled at the pilot. Michel looked beautiful and casual, just like he always did, and he leaned in, kissing Hervé’s cheeks before brushing past him.

“I found this little café not too far from here that we can —” His jaw clicked shut when he set his eyes on Thierry.
“*Putain.*”

Thierry scoffed. “Hello to you too.”

Michel glanced back at Hervé. “Should I leave?”

Thierry waved his hand, then gripped the handles on his walker and slowly moved toward the door. “Don’t bother. I just came by to get Orion’s case for him.”

Hervé felt those words like a stab to the chest, but it was better that way. It was better to just let go, cut clean, and move on. He watched as Thierry grabbed the case with one hand, navigating the walker with his other.

The door opened, and Thierry stepped out, and then the door closed.

And that was it.

“I’m sorry, *chouchou*,” Michel said.

All Hervé could do at that point was bow his head and nod. It was easy to be sorry. The hard part was moving on.

MICHEL WAS KIND ENOUGH TO SKIP THE BREAKFAST, INSTEAD grabbing a coffee from one of the drive-thru kiosks, which had better coffee than the pods left behind in the rental. Hervé made a quick call to let the agency know he was leaving early, then nibbled on a badly done croissant as they made their way to the airfield.

Michel was uncharacteristically quiet on the ride in, and he didn't speak a word until they were pulling down the road that led to the airfield. He cleared his throat, drawing Hervé out of his doze, then took an audible breath.

“Do you love him?”

“Thierry?” Hervé asked, because strangely, Thierry was more on his mind than Orion in that moment.

Michel snorted and shook his head. “Thierry was never for you. No, I mean your very attractive American sports man.”

Hervé rolled his eyes, but he shook his head, though he wasn't sure if he was telling the truth or not. His feelings were all twisted up inside. “I don't know if I love him. But I know I could.”

“It's terrible, isn't it?” Michel asked.

Hervé couldn't help a small laugh, nodding as the car rolled to a stop near the security gate. Michel flashed his badge, and they were waved through, and he took the winding road toward the large hangar, where Hervé could see his jet.

“It happened to me,” Michel said.

“With Matis?” Hervé asked. Matis had been his hairdresser once, part of his entourage, and he knew that’s how he and Michel had met. But they’d never been particularly close.

Michel smiled softly and nodded. “I didn’t see it coming, though I probably should have. He got drunk because he was furious at me after I’d spent the weekend with a couple of people I’d met in a club in Ibiza. He knew I wasn’t being careful. I was wasted the entire time, and I didn’t even know their names. He’d never been angry about shit like that before—at least, not that I’d seen. We had the biggest fight of our entire friendship.”

“But you got through it,” Hervé pointed out.

“Eventually. He quit talking to me for a while. Seven months, to be exact,” Michel said as the car rolled to a stop, and he put it in park, but he didn’t shut it off. “Then I got sick. I tested positive.”

Hervé frowned, then realized what he was saying, the jolt hitting him hard. “You—”

“Yes,” Michel said. “My viral load is undetectable right now, but it is what it is. It was probably from those men.” He dragged a hand down his face. “Matis was the first person I called after leaving the doctor’s office. When I told him my results, it was the first time we’d talked since the night of our argument. He showed up at my flat and punched me in the face, and then he told me that he’ll never forgive me for being so reckless with someone he cares about so much.”

Hervé stared at him. “He loves you.”

“Not that I deserve it, but yes. And for what it’s worth, I love him,” Michel said with a shrug. “I wouldn’t let him have sex with me for a long time, but I let him move in. I’m petrified of giving this to him because I can’t stand the thought that he might suffer because of me. But in the end, he reminded me it’s not just what I want. It’s not just what *I’m* afraid of.” Michel bowed his head, staring at his hands. “I’m going to ask him to marry me.”

Hervé's chest warmed. He needed that—needed to know something good could come out of something full of pain and disaster. He also understood where Michel was going with his talk, and he shook his head. “It's not the same for me. Orion—he just lost his brother, and his friends hate me with very good reason.”

“I remember Pietro,” Michel said, looking over. “And I'll never forget Thierry.”

“They'll never forget that Thierry took a bullet for me, and I just...left him,” Hervé said, his voice ragged. “And I wouldn't want them to, either. If they forget—if anyone forgets...”

“You could go right back to that place. To being that man,” Michel finished. He met Hervé's disbelieving gaze and smiled, shaking his head. “Don't forget, *chouchou*, I wasn't a saint. I was so far from it.”

Hervé hadn't...forgotten, necessarily. But the change in Michel was profound enough that it had allowed the man he'd been—partying, drugs, anonymous men, getting into fights—to fade into the background. It was an almost profound moment because God, that meant it could happen for him too.

That meant maybe it already had. Probably not with Thierry or Pietro. But maybe it was that way with Orion in the weeks they'd spent together.

And that mattered more than anything, even if it was over.

“We should head into the plane,” Michel said, clearly reading the exhaustion on Hervé's face. “Is there anything special you need from me? Since you're flying alone this time?”

Hervé tried not to feel the sting, and he failed. All the same, he shook his head and offered a smile. “I've got it. But thanks for this.” He started to get out of the car, but Michel reached for him and grabbed his wrist, steadying him.

He leaned in, almost hesitant, like maybe Hervé would be afraid now that he knew his status, but Hervé wasn't going to let that shit fly. He closed the distance between them and laid a

firm kiss to the corner of Michel's mouth, a reminder they both deserved affection.

“When we get back to Paris,” Michel said, gently releasing Hervé's wrist, “promise me you won't disappear. I don't talk to a lot of our old friends,” he added with a sheepish grin, rubbing the back of his neck, “but I think that's a good thing. Maybe we can start over? Make something new, you know?”

Hervé hadn't realized how desperately he needed to hear that and to know that there was a path forward for him. It was smaller, and it was a little lonelier, but it was there.

IT WAS TEN A.M., AND ORION COULDN'T GET THE TEXT OUT OF his head. He knew leaving Hervé on read was probably the worst thing he could do, but nothing he wanted to say could be said over text. He'd spent the night wallowing, drinking, and coming to realize that he'd made the biggest mistake of his life leaving Hervé to rot in that cold, empty house.

Even Thierry had called him a moron and told him he should probably figure it out in the morning, once he sobered up. "Life isn't going to wait because you're in mourning. You just need to ask the living to be patient."

Orion had stared at him a good, long while, his drunk brain trying to make sense of him. Then he sighed. "Promise you won't hate me for falling in love with him."

Thierry rolled his eyes and cuffed him around the back of the head. "I never loved you enough to hate you, asshole. Now, drink some water, or you'll regret everything tomorrow."

The alcohol had let him sleep, but he woke early and felt like shit until the rest of it had left his system. Suffering in bed with the dawn, he first read over Hervé's text, and then he checked the one his sister had left around one that morning.

Nova: Alive. All cried out. Cremation is tomorrow. He didn't want a service. He wants us to dump some of his ashes where it's illegal to dump a body.

It made Orion laugh and cry at the same time, and the sound poured out of him until his stomach ached and he felt like he'd lost most of the water in his body. That prompted him to get up and shower, drinking a few handfuls of water from the sink, then he stared at his dark circles and wild hair.

“Do I go after him?” he asked his reflection.

Yeah, came a voice in the back of his head that sounded way too much like Carey. *And you're probably gonna have to beg a little bit. But didn't I always say you had good knees for it?*

“Yeah, asshole,” Orion said. He sniffed and swallowed back a lump, then brushed his teeth and made his way downstairs.

Pietro was in the kitchen poking a stack of waffles with a spatula that he clearly had nothing to do with, and he grinned at Orion over his shoulder. “How bad is it?”

“I've had worse,” Orion answered with a shrug.

Pietro scoffed. “Yeah, I bet. James has been off alcohol for months now, so he's suffering. He'll be out 'til noon.”

That worked for Orion, who really needed to drive over to the house and talk to Hervé. He'd get his head out of his ass and ask him to come to the house, and they'd all find a way to get along.

“Where's T?” he asked, grabbing Pietro's coffee from beside his elbow. It was way too sweet, but it felt good in his empty stomach.

“He said he had to run a quick errand. He took our rental since it's got the disabled controls, but if you want James' car, his keys are on the coffee table.”

Orion gave him a quick nod, then stepped into the living room and grimaced. It was a mess with pizza boxes, beer bottles, and T-shirts. It smelled a little like BO, but that was better than come, he supposed, which meant at least his friends were respecting shared spaces.

He spotted James' keys next to Luke's ball cap, and he swiped them up, shoving his feet into someone's sandals as he headed out the door. His stomach was a mess, and his head was spinning, but he knew he'd be okay if he could fix this one thing. There was no bringing Carey back, there was no avoiding his grief, and there was no way to change the past.

But he could do this. He could make sure the man he was falling for knew that he was all in.

The drive to the rental felt eternal, but he pulled into the driveway and turned off the car in less than ten minutes. How had he spent the night so close but so fucking far? How had he just abandoned Hervé the way he did after begging him to come along and promising he would do exactly this?

The disembodied voice of Casey's memory was right: he was going to need to do some serious groveling.

Taking a breath, he knocked on the door and waited, but after a minute, there was no answer. He tried the bell after that, and he was met with silence, so he dug out his phone and pulled up the code, tapping it into the keypad. The light blinked red.

Weird.

He tried it a second time and then a third.

Just as he was about to panic, he heard the sound of a car pulling up, and he spun to see a sporty red coupe pulling in behind him. A tall, gangly man who seemed all arms and legs got out and offered Orion a frown.

"Can I help you?"

Orion gave him a sheepish smile. "Yeah, sorry. My, uh... friend, he was staying here. He's got this condition though, so I think he might be asleep, but the code he gave me for the door isn't working."

The guy's frown deepened. "Your friend?"

"Hervé Truffaut," Orion said slowly.

The guy's face relaxed a bit, but it immediately turned apologetic. "He checked out this morning around nine."

Orion felt his heart sink to his knees. He wasn't sure what he was expecting besides that, of course. He'd straight up left Hervé in the house, telling him he regretted asking him to come along, then left him on read like the world's biggest asshole.

Of course he left.

"Uh, I...yeah. Thanks." Orion stumbled a bit as he headed back to his car, and just as he was reaching for the door handle, his phone began to ring. In a half-desperate panic, he answered without looking, hoping to God it was Hervé. "Hello?"

"Are you at the house still?"

It took Orion a good five or six seconds to realize the French accent didn't belong to the one man he wanted to speak to. It was Thierry. "Which house?"

"Hervé's rental. I just got back, and Pietro said you were on your way to see him. He's gone."

Orion let out a watery laugh. "Yeah, I figured that out when the property manager or whatever showed up and told me he checked out. Did you talk to him today?"

"I went to see him," Thierry said. "I wanted to speak to him alone."

If possible, Orion's heart sank more. He was pretty sure it was a few feet under the earth by now. "Did you, um...did you two..."

"I didn't send him packing," Thierry said impatiently. "It was for me, not you. But he told me to take your case, so I have that."

Orion squeezed his eyes shut for a long second, then turned the car on and started down the street. It was too much. It was just all too fucking much. His chest was aching for a hundred different reasons now, and he wasn't sure he'd ever find his way back to normal.

How had he fucked up so badly in such a short space of time? And what did it say about him that he was worried about

his goddamn love life on the cusp of his best friend's death.

Because you love him, and you know I'd kick your ass if you didn't try to save this.

Orion almost laughed, but he managed to stop himself. He didn't need people thinking he was actually hearing Carey's ghost. "I wanted to say sorry. I fucked up. And I'm sorry if that messes things up for you, but I can't just let him go."

"He's with Michel. He seemed very sad," Thierry said, and Orion wasn't sure if the guy was taking pleasure in that or if he was trying to twist the knife in deeper. Or maybe he was just stating facts. "Did you call him?"

Orion let out a loud groan and slammed his hands on the wheel. "No, because I'm a fucking jackass. Let me..." He didn't get the chance to finish. Thierry cut off the call, so Orion ordered Siri to ring up Hervé.

It went straight to voicemail, Hervé's sweet tones rising and falling with his rapid French. Orion had no idea what it said, but he didn't care. He just needed to hear it.

He waited for the signal to start talking.

"Hello. Hi. Um. Jesus, I'm totally upside down right now, and I know you're probably asleep or on a plane or whatever, but I fucked up. I fucked up so badly. I was a mess last night, and I panicked because I didn't know what I needed, and I was afraid things would get ugly. But it came at the cost of you, and that's not a price I'm willing to pay. If you can find any way to forgive me, baby, please just call me, okay? I have to deal with the whole—well, we're not having a funeral, but we're doing a thing for Carey in a few days, and then I have to go back to work. But I swear to God, I don't care what time it is or where I'm at. If you call, I'll answer."

He breathed, debating if he should say anything else, but the rest of it needed to be said to Hervé, if he was willing to hear it.

He ended the call there and drove back to the house, feeling slightly lighter when he saw James' and Luke's faces in the front window. It was likely the whole house knew, and

Orion hated that he was doubly a mess now, but more than that, he was grateful he wouldn't have to be alone for it.



IT WAS midnight when Orion heard the car pulling up to the house. He was in the backyard, staring up at an unfamiliar sky, wondering if there was any kind of life after death. A small part of him hoped if there was, it was nothing like human consciousness. He knew damn well if he died young like Carey, leaving behind everyone he loved would hurt worse than anything.

He wanted to believe the man was at peace—floating in a haze of calm, pain-free amnesia. Orion had never been particularly religious, no matter how hard his parents had tried, so at this point, he believed pain was for the living.

He had a mug of tea between his hands, his phone, which had remained silent all night, lying like a brick beside his thigh, and he was doing his best not to really think about much beyond what he had to do when he got home.

Getting back on his nutrition plan was a big one. Working out, stretching his arm, making sure that whatever ended up in the media about him, he was able to prove every single article wrong.

He was in the middle of envisioning an ESPN interview when he saw the headlights, and his heart thudded a bit when he heard footsteps a few minutes later. The sliding door opened, and strangely, he recognized his sister's light gait as she crossed over the porch and sat next to him.

“Any alcohol in that?”

Orion snorted and shook his head. “Had my fill the other day.”

She leaned against him, and he felt her sigh more than he could hear it. “I keep trying to picture what Carey would be doing right now if we'd swapped places.”

“He’d be on the phone trying to track down a necromancer,” Orion said.

Nova went quiet, then laughed until the tears took over. Orion managed to get his mug set aside before he took her in his arms, and it felt strangely cathartic because she hadn’t really hugged him at the hospital. Not since before they knew. After she’d screamed, she’d gone into a quiet shock, and the numbness had spread between them.

Now, it was like a dam broke, and Orion gave in to his own ache, though it was quieter than her soft, hiccupping sobs. It went on for some time—he didn’t bother keeping track—but his tears dried before hers, so he just kept holding her.

“We started grief counseling,” she told him. “Before, uh... before the stroke. About a month after he was diagnosed, his doctors all seemed pretty grim. It was like one thing after another, and he didn’t want to tell anyone because his parents expected him to go full Stephen Hawking.”

That sounded about right. They’d been a little too optimistic when Carey had joined the military, like somehow, he was bulletproof.

“He didn’t want to deal with the stress, but we both knew it was going to be sooner rather than later.” She stood up abruptly, swiping her hands over the backs of her jeans. She looked older in the dim porch light, but he knew that was just her lack of sleep. She clenched her jaw, and he knew something more was coming. Something big. “I’m pregnant.”

All the air rushed out of him, and it took a minute for the world to go right side up again. “Did he know?”

Nova met his gaze almost like a challenge when she spoke. “No. And if he’d lived longer, I probably wouldn’t have kept it. It’s bad enough with Callie. I haven’t seen her since Rob and Sharon took her because I’m obviously unable to be a good mom right now.”

Orion shook his head quickly. “You’re not a bad mom right now. You’re grieving. And she’s not going to remember this,

Nova. She's going to know something's wrong, but this is the time to be a little selfish."

Nova swallowed heavily, then laid a hand on her stomach, and Orion fought the urge to wrap his arms around her again. "What am I going to do?"

"Whatever you want to do," he told her. He pushed to his feet and pulled her close. She stiffened, but it only lasted a second before she melted against him.

"What am I going to do?" she whispered again, and this time, he didn't have an answer.



NOVA EVENTUALLY PASSED out on the sofa. Luke was the last one up, and he threw a blanket over her, tucking her in, then shooing Orion out of the room. 'Go,' he mouthed. 'Sleep.'

Orion wasn't sure he could now that he knew the situation was somehow even more complicated, but the one thing Nova had was support. Carey's parents had always been like family, and their own would happily sell their home and settle wherever Nova needed them.

She was young, and she was beautiful and strong. She might not ever find a love like Carey again, but she'd never be on her own.

That thought carried him to the bedroom, and he stripped down and fell on top of the duvet. He starfished, stretching his limbs out to help some of the tension he'd been carrying, then he rolled onto his side and picked up his phone to check the time.

It was well past two. His eyes ached.

He blinked, struggling to open them again, but then a text buzzed, and he knew. Somehow, he just...*knew*.

Hervé: I listened to your message. There's a lot we need to say, but not over text.

Orion: No. Not over text.

Hervé: Why are you awake?

Orion: Insomnia. Is that why you sent the message so late? Were you trying to avoid me?

Hervé: Mais non. T'es un peu cul-cul.

Orion: I'm too tired to google translate that, baby. If you're telling me to fuck off, take pity and use English.

Hervé: I forgot the time difference.

He was home. His home, in Paris or...wherever. Fuck, Orion hadn't even asked where Hervé lived or what he was going to do after their countryside trip was over. But it was obvious he wasn't there anymore.

Orion: Michel got you home okay?

Hervé: We had a long talk. I think maybe I didn't understand that I still had friends who cared about me.

Orion: I'm glad, since you have such a shit boyfriend.

Hervé: Are you my boyfriend?

Orion: I'm not sure I deserve it, but if you want me to be, then yes. I don't want to be done, sweetness. I'm so sorry I didn't get back sooner.

Hervé: I do, but I have a lot to work on. I almost relapsed last night after you left. And before you blame yourself, it's not you. I'm still working on my recovery, and I think it might be best if I take some time to get myself steady before we go any deeper.

Orion: I hate that I hurt you, but I understand. I wasn't capable of being better for you last night and I'm so sorry.

Hervé: I forgive you, and I hope you forgive me for not being strong enough yet. But we can talk after you put

your brother to rest, yes?

Orion swallowed thickly and pressed the phone to the center of his forehead in the same place Hervé had pressed his lips before. He could feel the echo of that old kiss, and God, he missed those arms like they were his own limbs. But he understood everything Hervé was saying. He understood that this space, this time, was what they both needed.

Orion: Yes. I'll be waiting, and you can text me any time. I think I'm about to pass out though.

Hervé: Get some sleep, mon chéri. We'll make it right soon.

Orion set his phone down instead of giving in to his hysterical need to call Hervé and hear his voice. The words on his screen were enough to lift some of the weight from his shoulders, and knowing that there was still a chance—that he might not have to say goodbye to this thing too—was enough to send him crashing over the edge into a black abyss.

CRACK!

There was something to be said about the sound of the bat making contact with the ball, even if Orion was trying to get his pitch over the plate and into Connor's glove. But there was something about that noise that told him he was home, and the fact that it was Pietro and he couldn't get a pitch past that fucker no matter how hard he tried.

And he was horrifically out of practice.

No one was judging him, considering his circumstances, but he was getting a little tired of the pity looks. He'd missed spring training, he'd missed preseason, and they were three weeks into the official season. He wasn't starting, of course, but the entire world knew something was wrong. ESPN had been reporting on his status since it was announced he was taking leave, but no one had been brave enough to ask him about it yet.

Not that he was any good about talking, but he felt like maybe it would take some of the weight off if he could just let it all out.

Rolling his shoulders, Orion reached down toward the bucket, but he could see Weber off in the distance, giving him the signal to quit. It was fair. His pitching was shit, and it would be a good while before they put him on the mound unless something tragic happened to James and he was their only choice.

Dropping the ball back into the bucket, Orion started to cross the field, massaging the heel of his pitching hand. His fingers felt too stiff, and he knew it was probably psychosomatic. The last thing he needed was a case of fucking grief-induced yips, but it would just be the cherry on the top of his shit-sundae.

“Breathe, babe.”

Orion glanced up to see James heading toward him. He looked loose and limber and ready, and Orion tried not to hate him for it. “Shut up and make me proud,” he shot back.

James’ smile lit up his face, and he leaned in, knocking Orion gently with his shoulder. “Your phone’s been buzzing. I think your sex-friend is missing you.”

Orion had been balking at the word “boyfriend” since they left DC, but it was obvious to everyone around him that the rift between him and Hervé was killing him. Even his sister, who was going through the ebb and flow of grief gave him shit about it and told him to make it right.

“Trust me when I say that you don’t want to waste any second you have left on this fucking planet.” She had his niece sleeping against her shoulder, and she looked like she hadn’t gotten more than a few hours since they’d scattered Carey’s ashes in the lake. But she was surviving, and that was something that gave him hope. “I liked him, you know.”

“You met him for ten seconds,” Orion grouched.

She laughed and shook her head. “Five seconds was enough to know I was going to marry your idiot best friend.” Her voice got a little thicker. “Even when I hated him—even when you two were relentless assholes—I knew. And I can tell that about Hervé too.”

Orion didn’t have the strength to argue with her. He and Hervé had been in fairly constant contact over texts, but they hadn’t called. Not yet. Hervé promised that he wasn’t angry, but he was trying to sort out his life before making any decisions, and Orion had to respect that.

Being with him would never be easy. His schedule was grueling, and his moods were never the best during the season, and even in his off time, he couldn't do all the things normal couples did. And with Hervé's career up in the air and him still battling his addictions—not to mention he wasn't even a citizen of the same country—Orion felt a little out to sea with how to manage their love.

But he also wasn't going to give up. There wasn't a chance in hell he'd let this go without a fight. He was just trying to practice patience.

Slipping into the dugout, he grabbed his phone from his jacket, which was draped over his water bottle, and he slumped down on the bench. Luke was sitting a few spaces away from him, his legs manspreading like it was his job, and he tipped his hat lower over his brow as he watched Orion flick on the screen.

“If he's sending you nudie pictures...”

“Can you call nineteen thirty-five and tell them to take them and their bullshit slang back?” Orion asked. He rubbed his thumb over Hervé's name before opening the message.

Hervé: Cc! I had an audition today. I didn't fall asleep.

Orion: I'm proud of you, sweetness. Do you think you got it?

Hervé: No. They asked me to lose several kilo.

Orion: Fuck them.

Hervé: That was also on the table, AMHA

Orion: Fuck you

Orion: I didn't mean that.

Hervé: MDR. I know. I wanted to ask something.

Orion: Anything.

Hervé: Can we talk after your practice? On video?

Orion: Yes. Ouais. Ben sur. All that shit that means hell yes.

Hervé: MDR. Okay. Just send me a text when you're done. I might be awake. Things have been better lately.

Orion: Okay. I miss you.

Hervé: bi1to. BIZ xx

“Did you just sext?”

Orion almost dropped his phone, his gaze snapping up to see Pietro cross-legged in front of the dugout fence. He stood up, walked over, and linked his fingers through the chains. “Is that any of your fuckin’ business?”

“It is when my bestie isn’t getting laid because his French boyfriend—”

“*Your* ex-boyfriend,” Orion reminded him because as much as Pietro and Thierry had sworn up and down that it was fine, he was too afraid to trust that he could just have this.

“He never made me smile and blush at my phone like that, babes,” Pietro said with a shrug. “Seriously though.”

“Seriously, we weren’t sexting.” Orion took a breath, then stuck his hand in his pocket and curled his fingers around the little worry stone he carried with him. His sister had ordered it—a piece of Carey to keep with him.

It had crept him out at first—knowing it was made from Carey’s ashes. But after a few days, it felt less strange. And now it just brought him a comfort he wasn’t sure he was ever going to feel again. He rubbed his thumb over it and closed his eyes, picturing Hervé’s smile from before everything went tits up.

“Holy shit. You love him, don’t you?” Pietro said, his voice barely a whisper. A stray foul went flying past Pietro’s ear and smashed into the fence. Pietro picked up the ball and turned, his eyes narrowed. “Fuckin’ watch it, rookie!”

“Get your ass away from the fence,” Weber snarled.

Pietro rolled his eyes before jumping to his feet and walking down the steps. He grabbed Orion by his arm and

hauled him to the very back, shoving him into the furthest corner by the door. “Talk to me, Goose.”

“Goose dies,” Orion said through clenched teeth.

“A lot of people die,” Pietro said, like he needed reminding. “I’m not trying to be an asshole, but I know your misery was more than just losing Carey, and now you’re smiling. So talk to me.”

Orion rolled his shoulders back and didn’t bother waiting for Pietro to sit since his ADHD was peaking and he was restless and fidgety. “I fucked up and abandoned him, and a small part of me wondered if maybe I was his karma, you know? For everything? But that didn’t seem right because hurting him hurt me.”

Pietro took a breath, then sat sideways on the bench, letting his knee bounce with his unrestrained energy. “I could have told you that. I don’t think karma works that way. It’s like...people who pray for someone’s cancer to get better, right? So then it does, but is it prayer? And if it is, then why did some baby die of cancer and some crotchety old bigot gets cured?”

Orion blinked at the odd turn of topic, but he understood what Pietro was trying to say, so he nodded. “Knowing that, I wasn’t sure if he should forgive me. I promised I’d never be one of those assholes who gave up on him, and the second shit got hard, I told him I regretted bringing him with me.”

Pietro winced. “Yeah. Fair.”

Orion sat back and let his head rest against the wall. “I want him more than I’ve ever wanted anyone, but I don’t know how to make it work. Like...it works for you and T, right? He runs your restaurant, and he was already living here and working for you before that. Ridley is a coach at the high school, and James doesn’t have to figure out how to fly across the goddamn world just to get a weekend with him. Even Luke can fly to wherever the fuck Tomas hid himself away because it’s not far. And Tomas was one of us, so he gets it.”

Pietro's eyes were full of sympathy. "Yeah, man. But even with all that, it's still hard for us. I hate that look on Thierry's face when I come home all pissed off and all he wants is some affection. Or when we're on roadies and shit, and I get back and I don't have the energy to give him anything. We all have to decide if it's worth the struggle. You and Hervé won't be any different."

Orion bit his lip. "So is it actually worth it?"

"Yes," Pietro said without hesitation. "Hervé will have to do something he's notoriously shitty at though."

Orion raised a brow.

"Meet you halfway. Sometimes more than halfway." When Orion's mouth dropped open to protest, Pietro threw up his hands and stood up again. "Yo, look, I'm not dragging him, okay? I know he's been working on himself. Like, who even is this guy, right? He and Thierry have been *talking*."

Orion warmed slightly. "Yeah?"

"Thierry sent him some cooking videos and some recipes. He was researching some—well, whatever, it's probably bullshit, but some diets that supposedly help with narcolepsy symptoms."

Orion felt a tightness in his chest, and he cleared his throat, but he couldn't get rid of it. "I didn't know."

Pietro softened. "I think that's for them, you know? There's a mountain of bad things that Hervé needs to atone for, but Thierry was his priority, and I think he's willing to let Hervé try."

Orion didn't know what to say, so he said nothing.

"Anyway, sorry I got off topic," Pietro said with a sheepish grin, though it wasn't like Orion had ever minded. "But yeah. I think he's worth it. If he's willing to humble himself for Thierry's forgiveness, I think he'll be willing to do whatever it takes to be with you. And for the record, I've never seen him smile the way you make him smile, either."

That didn't feel like a fix, and it certainly didn't answer his questions, but it made it a lot easier to breathe in air that finally filled his lungs.

“YOU’RE PANICKING.”

Hervé bared his teeth at Matis in the salon mirror. He was the only one there, so no one would witness anything humiliating like him slumping over in the chair if he had an attack, but it had also been weeks since he’d lost control of his body like that.

His sleep was still erratic, and his rigid schedule hadn’t changed, but he was starting to feel like maybe his therapist and the doctors were right. Maybe he could live with it. Maybe it could be managed.

His anxiety was high though, and it was only Matis’ offer to give him a little touch-up that had him breathing easy. He hadn’t seen Orion face-to-face since DC. They’d exchanged more texts than he could count and even sent a few Snaps, but he hadn’t heard Orion’s voice in a short forever.

He’d seen him, of course. Orion had been plastered all over the sports news, and Hervé had been religiously following every channel he could. Several of them were speculating on his performance and why he was off on leave, but the Vikings hadn’t given a statement, and Orion hadn’t either. He’d posted one cryptic photo on his Instagram of a worry stone in the palm of his hand, and Hervé didn’t have to ask to know what it was about.

But he drank up the media shots of him, and he watched the highlights whenever he could stream them. Orion hadn’t

pitched at a single one yet, but there would be occasional shots of him warming up, and Hervé set those on repeat.

He missed those arms, and his warmth, and the soft way he'd kiss Hervé—not like he was breakable, but like he was worth tenderness. He missed Orion's deep rumble, and his laugh, and how he was just so fucking unrestrained with his emotions, no matter if they were good or bad.

He was hurt, of course, when Orion had all but shoved him away. That pain hadn't quite cleared up, but being able to trust him had never been in question. Especially now that he was speaking with Thierry again without his throat being clogged with guilt.

Thierry made it clear that they'd never get their relationship back, but Hervé wasn't quite sure he wanted it. It was odd to know that Thierry worried about being part of the problem, but in a way, he was. Thierry had given up somewhere along the line and just stood back, helping everyone else enable Hervé's destruction.

Hervé would never, ever blame him for it. Hell, if the roles had been reversed, Hervé would have probably walked away long before taking a bullet. Thierry was and always would be a better man than him.

But their old life was dangerous, and every now and again, Hervé lost himself to the fear that he'd be tempted by it again. Every audition he went on, every callback, every chat with his agent had him shaking because it was too close to what had him nearly falling apart.

Part of the conditions of his rehab was that he avoid most of the temptations that had created his addictions, and so much of that was rooted in his job.

How could he work closely with the people from his past who were still knee-deep in that lifestyle without slipping?

“Are you going to fall asleep on me?” Matis asked.

Hervé blinked, then shook his head and straightened his shoulders so the man could finish his trim. His hair was dark again—closer to his natural color—and there was a bit of new

growth showing where he was going slightly grey. Hervé normally would have panicked and hidden himself away, but now, he embraced it.

He hadn't gone back to his near-starvation diet. He hadn't injected Botox or fillers. He hadn't called his plastic surgeon for a lift.

He let Matis give him a microdermabrasion facial and add a little bit of hair color to get rid of the blond. He let him sculpt his brows a bit and pluck a few stray hairs from his neck. And then he called it a day.

"He's going to come in those tight little baseball pants the second he sees you," Matis said, staring at Hervé in the mirror.

Hervé rolled his eyes and shifted away from his friend. "That's disgusting."

Matis scoffed. "Don't tell me you haven't thought about that more than once. Michel has me watching these godforsaken American sports, and it's giving me ideas."

Hervé laughed, knowing exactly how that felt. He'd never really given a shit about baseball players, even when he was with Pietro, but meeting Orion had changed that. He'd even taken to watching the Denver NHL team play from time to time, and while no one came close to capturing his attention the way Orion did, he could appreciate a few of those butts.

"Well, maybe if he comes to visit, I'll ask him to bring a few friends," Hervé said.

Matis pulled a face. "Don't you dare. I don't think either of us could take it."

Hervé laughed, knowing he was kidding. Matis had a ring on his finger and a wedding date planned. And he and Michel had become a fixture in his life now that he was back in Paris and trying to figure out what he was going to do with the rest of his life.

Setting his comb down, Matis laid both hands on Hervé's shoulders and squeezed him. "When do you speak to him, *chouchou*?"

Hervé almost laughed about how Matis had picked up on the little nickname Michel had given him, but it made him feel like family, so he said nothing. “Late, I think. He’s at his practice, and then they have other...sports things to do,” Hervé said with a wave of his hand.

“And you’ll be up for it?”

“I don’t have a choice,” Hervé admitted, bowing his head to stare at his lap. “I need him.” After a beat, he slid from the chair and set the cape over the arm before walking around to face his friend.

Matis took him by the shoulders again and pressed a long, sweet kiss to the corner of his mouth. “You deserve him.”

Hervé started to shake his head. “No—”

“You deserve him,” Matis repeated. “I remember what it was like before. I remember the anger in your eyes and the pain. I saw that same thing in Michel. I know what it’s like to be hurt by someone going through it all.”

Hervé squeezed his eyes shut, but he opened them when Matis touched his chin. “You deserve to have the people you need. It’s why we’re here. And it’s why he’s going to text you and then see your beautiful face on that screen. And someday soon, he’ll have his arms around you again.”

Hervé was too terrified to hope, but he couldn’t ignore the small flame now flickering warm in his chest.



IT WAS ALMOST two in the morning when Orion called. Hervé jolted from his sleep, sitting up in a half panic before he realized the sound was his phone. He answered, falling back, trying to breathe through his pounding heart.

“Hello?”

“Oh, sweet thing. I know it’s late. I’m so sorry. I got stuck in this fucking meeting, and everyone was drinking, and I just

managed to get out of it. I was actually hoping to leave you a voicemail.”

Hervé winced as he rolled onto his side. “You didn’t want to see me?”

“I didn’t want to wake you. There’s no chance in hell I’d fuck with your sleep schedule if I don’t have to.”

Hervé laughed quietly. “Living this many hours apart, I don’t think we have much choice. But I kept my laptop by my bed.”

Orion was quiet for a long beat. “You still want to?”

“Yes,” Hervé said, his words couched in a yawn. He pressed his fingers to his lips until he could speak again. “I need to see your face, *chéri*.”

“Fuck, I...” Orion let out a ragged breath. “Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve heard you call me that?”

Hervé did—almost down to the hour, because he’d been counting the seconds since he’d heard Orion’s voice addressing him directly. It was strange, though, because he’d expected to be overwhelmed when he finally spoke to Orion again, but instead, it was like coming home.

“Let me set everything up,” Hervé said. “Give me five minutes?”

“I’ll give you however many minutes you need,” Orion swore.

He was clearly overcompensating, but Hervé decided to let him. He understood perfectly well what that felt like. “I’ll speak to you shortly,” Hervé told him, then quickly hung up so he didn’t linger on the sound of Orion’s voice.

Throwing his legs over the bed, he quickly scrubbed his hands over his face, then went for a quick piss before hurrying to the sink to wet his hair. He was a mess from sleep, his face creased from his pillow, but he decided not to care. He tamed a few wild locks that were sticking up in the back, then hunted down his robe before slipping back into bed and pulling his laptop beside him.

It took him a few moments to fire up his program, then he sent his info to Orion in a text and waited on the edge of a tense breath for the call request.

It took three minutes, which felt like three hours, before the app began to chime, and his fingers shook over the trackpad as he clicked Accept. The screen was dark for a second and far too silent...

And then it connected.

Orion's face appeared like a goddamn angel with the soft Denver dusk behind him in his bedroom window. Hervé had never seen his place before. Hell, he knew so little about Orion's life outside of that little cottage in Brittany, and yet, it was almost like he recognized the background.

"Hey, sweet thing," Orion murmured.

His voice sounded different over the speaker, but it was enough. Hervé touched the edge of his laptop and wished he could feel the warmth of Orion's skin against his hand. "*Bonsoir*," he murmured. "I missed your voice."

Orion's eyes fluttered closed, and he tipped his head forward. "I can't believe you're talking to me right now. I seriously thought you were going to eventually tell me to go fuck myself."

Hervé choked on a laugh. "*Tu me manques vachement, chéri*. There's no way I could tell you anything but yes."

Orion's eyes darkened. "Is that so?"

Hervé licked his lips nervously, but he nodded in spite of his hammering heart. "Yes. It's so." Most of the time, he hated when Americans got all hot for his language, but something about the way Orion's eyes darkened set him on fire. Maybe it was because Orion was turned on that the words came from him. Like he could say anything at all, and Orion would melt. He leaned in close. "*Je brûle de pouvoir encore de toucher*."

Orion shuddered and let out a quiet breath. "What does that mean?"

"I'll show you when I see you," Hervé promised.

“When?” Orion asked. “Does that mean—”

“I’ll only stay away if you want me to stay away,” Hervé vowed, meaning it with his whole chest.

“No. God, no. I’ve regretted every single second since I walked out of that house,” Orion said, his voice rough. “If it had been any other time, I would have gotten on a plane to come after you. I almost took the leave my boss offered me.”

Hervé’s desire began to dim, replaced with a sort of wonder and disbelief because my God, he wasn’t worth that. But the sincerity in Orion’s tone was enough to make his knees tremble. “I’m glad you didn’t.”

Orion looked hurt, flinching slightly. “I know. I know you needed to get over what I—”

“No,” Hervé said in a rush, shaking his head. “I mean, yes. I needed to process the way it hurt, but it was good. Everything that happened to me, it happened so fast.” He snapped his fingers. “I was hurt, then suddenly, I was in rehab, and my mother was telling me I was worthless for destroying my career. And then she told me I had to hide away in some cottage in the middle of nowhere until I could figure out how to cure this,” he tapped his temple. “So I didn’t embarrass her.”

“Can I meet her?” Orion asked, his voice almost a growl. “Just to talk.”

Hervé laughed and closed his eyes, shaking his head. “She’s not worth it. But for a good, long while, I thought she was right. I thought I needed to be punished because I had almost destroyed my soul to live up to her expectations, and I couldn’t even do that right.”

“I’m glad you failed,” Orion said.

Drawing his lower lip between his teeth, Hervé nodded. “So am I. I have Michel and his husband now. And I’ve been making amends with Thierry.” He closed his eyes for the next part. “And my head has been so quiet, which means I was able to listen to my heart when it told me I was falling in love with a man I had just met.”

“Hervé...”

“I’m not afraid of feeling these things,” Hervé went on, not letting Orion speak just yet. He needed to get all of this out. “Not like I would have been before. I’m not afraid of telling you, even if it scares you off.”

“It’s not scaring me off. It feels nuts because I don’t even know where you live...”

“Five seven Rue Pascale, Paris, France,” Hervé parroted quickly, and Orion laughed that deep, gorgeous booming sound that made Hervé shiver all over. “Now you can send me something in the mail.” He finally opened his eyes and saw Orion’s gorgeous ones staring back at him.

“Could I send myself?”

Hervé’s heart thumped. “Can your life spare you right now?” The way Orion’s face fell told him enough, but Hervé didn’t mind. “I didn’t think so. But my life can spare me.”

“You mean, you could—”

“Yes,” Hervé said. “I can’t come yet. I still need to see a doctor, and I need to figure out what I want to do next, but yes.” He didn’t tell Orion that he’d set up a meeting with his agent to speak about maybe working in the States. He could do stage, he could do movies, or ads, or radio. He could do damn near anything so long as it meant he didn’t have to leave right away.

Hell, maybe he’d write a book, or he’d teach a class on acting.

There had to be more than what his mother had tried to shoehorn him into.

“Hervé?”

He blinked, realizing he was drifting. “*Désolé.*”

“Do you need me to let you go?” Orion asked.

Hervé quickly shook his head. “No. I need you to keep me.”

Orion cleared his throat before he managed a smile. “I didn’t mean forever, sweet thing.”

Hervé nodded, and he reached for the strength he wasn’t sure he had. *Courage sans peur*. No fear. “I need you to tell me how you want me to touch myself.”

Orion sucked in air so hard Hervé knew it had to hurt his throat and lungs. He choked for a second, then adjusted his position, which sent the screen rocking from side to side. “Baby. Are you serious?”

Hervé nodded, and he carefully opened his cardigan to reveal his bare chest. “We didn’t get to do all the things we wanted to. The things you promised. The things I promised.”

Orion groaned slightly, and Hervé could see his shoulder moving rhythmically. “I know.”

Shifting onto his back, Hervé propped his laptop on a couple of pillows, pulling them close but far enough that he could give Orion a view. “Are you touching yourself, *mon coeur*?”

Orion nodded, his jaw clenched. “Yes.”

“Do you want me to touch myself?”

“Yes.” Orion took a slow breath. “Nipples. Did you like when I touched your nipples?”

“*Ouais*, but only when you touched them,” Hervé said. It was odd, doing it like this. It wasn’t that Hervé never jerked off, but he didn’t spend time with himself, and Orion was the first person to ever really make him feel something more than just a race to get to the end.

Orion’s eyes darkened. “Then it’s my hand tonight. My fingers touching you, pinching them.”

Hervé’s breath caught in his chest as he nodded, and he carefully took one nipple between his thumb and finger, pinching down until he gasped. Orion moaned, and Hervé joined him as he rolled the nub, sending sparks flying under his skin.

It wasn't the best he'd ever felt. It was nothing compared to the way Orion felt kissing him on his neck and his shoulders, but it was so much better than being alone.

“What now?”

“Part of me wants to draw it out, but I know you're exhausted, and I'm really worked up, baby,” Orion said, breathless. Hervé could see his arm moving faster, a faint slapping sound of skin in the background, which made his own dick twitch. “Are you hard, sweetness?”

Hervé nodded. He shifted the laptop further away and propped himself up as he pulled the sheets down to show his tented pajama bottoms. He palmed himself as Orion's eyes darkened.

“Put your hand in your pants and touch yourself. Touch your balls first.”

Hervé's whole body shuddered as he obeyed, spreading his legs and cupping himself between the legs. His balls were rough and hairy, hot and hanging low with all of his unspilled come.

“I'm going to put them in my mouth when I see you,” Orion promised, his tone practically feral. “I'm going to make you beg for my mouth on your cock. Hervé, stroke yourself.”

Hervé was caught up in his words and almost missed the command, but his brain caught up a second later, and he did. He started to feel a little weak-limbed, and he was fairly sure that he was going to have an episode the moment he came, but he didn't care. He was safe, he was in his bed, and he was with Orion, even if they were an ocean apart.

Curling his fingers around himself, he gripped lightly the way he liked it and began to move his hand. It looked odd in his pants, shielded from Orion's view, but something about that was obviously doing it for Orion because he looked seconds away from losing his mind.

“Tell me more,” Hervé begged, his head tilted back. His eyes were starting to close. “Tell me what else.”

“I’m going to fucking feast on your ass,” Orion said. “I’m not going to leave a single inch of your body untouched and unspoiled. You’re going to feel like the god you are, my love. Fuck...I’m going to come. Stroke faster, let me hear it. I wanna see you *ruin* those pants.”

Hervé obeyed mindlessly, his arm moving so fast it began to burn. It felt odd and restricted by the fabric, but he lost his ability to care as his hips began to meet the rhythm of his wrist, and he began fucking into his hand.

White-hot heat crashed through him on the heels of Orion’s soft cry, and as he began to spurt over himself, his body went limp. His eyes fell shut, and his breathing was slightly restricted as his chin hit his chest. His come was still dribbling out of him, his dick going softer in the lax grip of his fist, and it took Orion a moment to realize what had happened.

“Oh, baby. Oh shit. Please open your eyes for me, okay? I’m so sorry. Fuck, I wish I was there. I know you can hear me, so just breathe and let yourself come back to me. God, I’m such an idiot. I shouldn’t have—”

Hervé managed to get his mouth to work. “*Non.*”

“Baby?”

Hervé’s eyes fought against him, but he moved his limbs slowly and rocked his head from side to side, and finally, he could see again. Everything was a little blurry, but he focused his gaze on the screen and saw Orion sitting close, his chin propped up on his knuckles.

“I don’t know if that’ll ever get easier,” Orion admitted.

Hervé took a few cleansing breaths, his head clearing as he rolled to the side and struggled out of his soiled pants. He used them to clean off his stomach and hand, then tossed them to the side before curling around the pillow and pulling the laptop close to his face.

“We don’t need to do this again if it makes you uncomfortable.”

Orion quickly shook his head. “I just don’t want you to suffer.”

“Suffering is part of life,” Hervé said. He understood it in more forms than he wanted to think about, but it was less heavy now that he understood he could be happy. That things didn’t have to be hard and miserable and wanting. “It’s easier when I have you.”

“Well, good. Because you do. You have every single piece of me.”

Hervé closed his eyes and just basked in those words because he’d gone most of his life believing that he didn’t want to hear that or need it. That it would make him weak—that it would just give him a bigger soft underbelly where more people could hurt him.

But now, those words—that promise—made him feel strong. It made him feel untouchable.

“Je t’aime.”

“I know that one,” Orion said very quietly.

Hervé smiled back at him. “Good. Because I do.”

IT FELT A LOT LIKE THE FIRST TIME HE SET FOOT OUT ONTO THE Vikings' field for the first time. His first starting game had been at night—a cool spring evening at the start of the season. Moths were everywhere, the crowd was massive, the music pumping through the speakers.

“Take Me Out to the Ball Game” had been blaring through his ears as he'd rolled his shoulders back and met James' gaze.

‘You've got this,’ he mouthed. He'd only been on the mound with the Vikings a couple of years longer than Orion had been, and their careers were almost evenly matched. But Orion didn't feel like he belonged, like he was wanted, until that moment.

James wasn't angry that Orion was starting. He was proud.

That was how it felt now, except James was at his side and squeezing his shoulder and leaning in toward his ear. “Kill those motherfuckers.”

They were playing the Lightning—a more friendly rivalry than some of the other teams, but James understood what was riding on this game for Orion. Everyone was watching, and even some of their fans kind of wanted him to fail. They wanted that public display because they didn't really understand that he was a person behind the pitcher.

That he had love, and loss, and pain, and anger, and happiness just like them.

He was rich, and he was famous, and some of them believed he had no right to struggle.

But he wasn't going to give them that satisfaction. Not tonight, and hopefully not ever.

Glancing over at Pietro, who was speaking furiously with Weber, he met his friend's gaze and Pietro nodded at him. That simple gesture was enough to fill that gap of nerves that had been creeping up his spine and making his fingers tingle.

They didn't have to win tonight. He didn't need to pitch a no-hitter. He just needed to prove to himself, to Carey, who was watching from wherever the hell he was, and everyone else who cared about him, that he wasn't giving up.

Taking a breath, he approached the mound, feeling everyone's eyes on him. His hands were a little chalky and dry, and he rolled the ball between his fingers to loosen his knuckles a bit. His glove flexed in his hand as he stretched his palm, and he began to circle his arms.

No one was up to bat yet, but Luke was behind the plate, staring at him. He felt settled. His gaze swept the crowd, lingering on the fans who all blended together in a mass of faces he'd never be able to pick out of a lineup. He glanced over at the front row, where Thierry and Ridley were seated, leaning in to talk to each other like they always did.

Then his heart stuttered in his chest when he realized the dark-haired man beside them wasn't a stranger.

It was the other piece of his heart.

Hervé was sitting up in his seat, straighter now because he realized that Orion could see him. He rose slowly, and in his periphery, Orion saw someone heading up to the plate, but he couldn't stop staring. Hervé's fingers curled into fists at his sides, and then he nodded and backed up, sitting down.

Orion felt like his heart was going to hammer straight out of his chest. He held up a finger, making the ump frown, but he jogged close and jerked his head over for Luke, who quickly joined him.

“Uh, what the fuck?”

Orion bowed his head to hide his lips from the cameras. “He’s here. I don’t know how the fuck...but he’s here.”

Luke blinked behind his mask, then his eyes widened. “Hervé?”

Orion nodded sharply. He took a breath, then glanced at Hervé over Luke’s shoulder. “If I strike this fucker out, toss the ball to him.”

Luke sighed, but Orion could see his grin. “Cheesy motherfucker. Gonna write a proposal on the ball? I have a Sharpie if you want it.”

Orion could hear Weber screaming at him, but he ignored him. “No, but I’ll have something else. Just...will you?”

“Yes, you disgusting piece of shit. Now, let’s go.” Luke slapped the back of his glove on Orion’s side, and then they both jogged back.

The mound seemed like it was impossibly high off the ground, and the weight of the ball was strange in his hand. But he also felt powerful. He wouldn’t do anything ridiculous like take it as a sign if he couldn’t manage this first strikeout, but he had hope burning in his chest.

“Help me out here, bud,” he murmured to the spirit he knew wasn’t watching. He felt Carey’s presence anyway. “You said as long as I ended up back here, you’d do this for me.”

He took a breath, then wound his arm back, his leg rising toward his chest. Luke’s fingers told him curveball, so that’s what Mansen got. It sailed over the plate, just barely missing the edge of his bat.

“Strike one!”

Orion’s heart beat harder as the ball hit his glove. He didn’t dare look at Hervé for the second. Curveball, Luke told him again. It was a gamble, but Mansen probably thought he’d change it up since it wasn’t his strongest pitch. His shoulder tensed, and his arm whipped forward, and the ball sailed past the bat.

“Strike two!”

Orion caught the ball and turned away from the crowd for a second. He could see Pietro hovering to his left, concerned, but Orion ignored him. “I love him, Carey. So much. I didn’t wallow, and I held up my end of the bargain. Now’s your chance to hold up yours.”

He turned around, adjusting his stance, and then he met Hervé’s gaze, smiling when he saw his lover was on his feet, looking a little pale. Orion lifted the ball to his lips and pressed a kiss to the center. He felt the collective shift in the crowd, and he knew the commentators were probably freaking the fuck out.

The thought made him smile even wider, and he met Mansen’s eyes, who looked like he was worried Orion was about to strip naked and streak around the field. Luke was howling laughing behind his mask, but he still dropped the signal.

Submarine pitch.

Orion’s grin turned a little mean as he curled the ball into his glove and twisted his body. Mansen’s eyes hardened beneath his helmet, more determined than ever.

But the fucker wasn’t going to get this one.

Orion breathed, pulled his arm back, twisted his body, and threw the ball. It sailed impossibly low to the ground, skimming the plate and landing neatly in Luke’s glove.

“Strike three!”

The crowd was screaming as Mansen threw his bat angrily, and Hervé was on his feet, rushing forward as Luke turned and the ball went sailing over the short wall. Hervé’s mouth opened in a perfect O, and Orion knew every single camera was pointed at him as his hands fumbled and caught it.

He held it close to his chest as he stared at Orion across the field, his mouth stretched impossibly wide.

‘I love you.’

Hervé flushed. ‘I love you too.’

“THAT WAS...AH. THAT WAS QUITE A...*UHF*...A SPECTACLE.”
Hervé was already struggling with his words, and Orion grinned against the fleshy globes of his ass as his tongue teased him. Pretty soon he’d start losing his English, and then his French, and he’d be nothing more than a mess of pleading noises.

Exactly like Orion wanted.

Orion felt some type of way about finally having Hervé spread out on his bed, his legs in a wide V, his hard, leaking cock pressed against the sheets as his fingers clawed into the fabric. Orion had been taking his time with the man, but even he was starting to get restless.

His hand reached down and cupped Hervé’s balls as he plunged his tongue deeper, fucking him with his mouth until Hervé was sobbing. Rolling the rough skin against the palm of his hand, Orion pulled back and pressed a hard kiss to the left side of his ass.

“More?”

“I want you,” Hervé gasped. He tried to get up onto his knees, but Orion held him down by the small of his back.

“You’ll have me, sweetness, but you have to lie there and take it. I have a lot of promises to keep.”

“You don’t,” Hervé said and hissed through his teeth when Orion pressed the pads of his first and middle finger against his sloppy, wet hole. “Not all...at once,” Hervé managed.

Orion grinned and leaned down, kissing the small of his back. “Trust me, this is just the start.” He pulled back, watching Hervé for signs that he was starting to slip into sleep or cataplexy, but for the moment, he seemed fine.

It was something to work around and work through, and Orion knew that their lives together would never be normal, but he was fine with it. Normalcy was the last thing he wanted. He liked the chaos, so long as it came with Hervé crawling into his bed at night with the promise on his lips that he’d stay.

Reaching for the lube, Orion carefully coated his fingers, then eased one in, listening to the way it made Hervé gasp. His body was almost painfully honest, helpless against responding when he felt good. Orion knew it was because no one had ever taken their time with Hervé before. No one had ever gotten to know what made his toes curl and his breath stutter and his eyes roll back in his head.

No one had ever stopped to appreciate how agonizingly beautiful Hervé was in the throes of passion.

And he was glad of it—in a way. He was glad it could be him, that he could hoard all of this to himself. He wasn’t a man that liked sharing, and while Hervé had an entire lifetime of experience, there were still some firsts.

Like the I love you they shared and the eventual I do that would come because Orion was damn well going to marry this man.

With that thought wrapped around him, Orion reached over and grabbed the condom from the bed, tearing the packet open with his teeth. He wasn’t great doing things one-handed, but he kept fucking Hervé—two fingers now—as he rolled it on and gave himself a few good strokes before he moved to kneel between Hervé’s spread thighs.

“I’m going to fuck you now, baby.”

“*Ouais*,” Hervé breathed out, a bit limp like he’d given up all the fight. He tried to crawl onto his knees again, but Orion shoved him back down. “*Chéri*,” he protested.

Orion rocked up toward Hervé's head, leaning in to kiss him. It was awkwardly angled and messy, but he didn't care. He tasted sweet and sour and absolutely perfect. "Trust me."

Hervé relaxed again. "I do."

Orion leaned back, spreading Hervé's cheeks wide, and then he positioned his cock and rocked in gently. Hervé groaned so loudly Orion was pretty sure his neighbors could hear, but he didn't give a shit. He was making his lover moan. He was making him gasp and cry and beg.

He rolled his hips forward and used a firm grip on Hervé's hips to finally lift him. Hervé let out a sharp breath as his hands hit the bed to brace himself, and Orion quickly curled his hand around Hervé's weeping cock as he slammed home.

"*Putain,*" Hervé gasped.

Orion grinned and began to thrust shallow, hard, rolling his hips and sending Hervé rocking on his arms. It was so much—maybe too much because he wasn't going to last, but it was hard to care because neither was Hervé. His arms were trembling, and his cock was pulsing against Orion's palm as he stroked it, and his mouth was curving around words in French that Orion didn't understand.

"Louder, my love," Orion ordered as he sped up his thrusts, his hand matching the speed.

"Ah. Ah... *je veux...je veux que tu jouisses.*"

"Again," Orion said, going faster.

Hervé groaned loudly and shook his head, but he repeated himself.

Orion laughed in spite of the fact that he could feel his orgasm rolling in like a hurricane. His fingers were starting to tingle, and his chest was hot, and his balls were so fucking tight. "Tell me," he said.

"Come," Hervé gasped. "Please. I want you to come!"

And as if his body was built to obey, Orion did. He thrust rabbit-fast into his lover's ass, filling the condom with pulse after pulse. As he collapsed on Hervé's back, it was only then

he noticed the streaks of semen coating his fingers, and he let go in time for the both of them to collapse on their sides.

For a moment, he thought maybe Hervé had gone into cataplexy again, but after a beat, Hervé's hand laid over his. Their breathing matched softly, and Orion felt the edges of exhaustion creeping in.

“My love,” he murmured.

Hervé didn't say anything. He just squeezed his fingers and held on tight until Orion finally succumbed to the darkness creeping in.



IT FELT like hours later when Orion woke with a gasp, and he realized the spot in the bed beside him was empty and cold. His blurry eyes caught the alarm clock on his nightstand, telling him it was just past two, and he rolled out of bed in a near panic because he wasn't supposed to be alone.

Not now.

And maybe that was Hervé's way of getting back at him, but that was just his anxiety talking as he hustled out of the bedroom and made his way to the kitchen. There was no one there, but it was obvious the kettle was used, and after a second, he caught a glimpse of the porch light.

Taking a steady breath, Orion opened the back door and let his eyes adjust, eventually finding Hervé on the massive wooden swing James had talked him into getting. It was set in a huge frame, a daybed on thick chains, and Hervé was sitting in the center with his knees to his chest, his hands around a mug.

He looked up when Orion crossed over the grass, and he smiled softly, shifting over. The swing began to move as Orion's bulk climbed on, and Hervé let out a soft laugh, nestling close the moment Orion got comfortable.

“Did you miss me?”

“I panicked that you were gone,” Orion admitted.

Hervé’s expression went a little pinched and annoyed at first, but then it settled into understanding. “You know I wouldn’t leave. Not like that.”

Orion nodded. He reached over and urged Hervé to lay his legs out flat, and when he did, he twisted his body to lay his head on his lover’s thigh. Hervé smiled down at him and threaded fingers through his hair. “I can be an idiot some days. How do you say idiot in French?”

“*Idiot*,” Hervé said with a grin, and then he shrugged. “Or you can call someone *quiche*.”

“Like the egg thing?” Orion asked.

Hervé burst into laughter. “We’re French, okay? We love to bring anything back to food.” His fingers slid down Orion’s thigh, then cupped the side of his ass. “*Cul comme une pêche*.”

“*Pêche*?” Orion repeated quietly. “Peach?”

“Ass like a peach,” Hervé said.

Orion rolled his eyes. “I hate to tell the French this, but peach isn’t clever. What do you think that emoji is for?”

Hervé laughed again, then leaned over to set his cup on the thick armrest. When his hands were free, he leaned back, so Orion adjusted himself so their legs were hanging off the edge, their faces pointed at the sky. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the worry stone, running his thumb over it before holding it up for Hervé to see.

“My sister had it made with his ashes,” Orion explained after a long beat of silence. “Do you think that’s creepy?”

“I think people have done worse. The church displays the bones of saints for people to pray to,” Hervé said quietly. “At least this is personal.”

Orion blew out a puff of air. “I miss him. I fucking miss him so much.” Hervé said nothing, but he shifted closer and pressed a kiss to Orion’s shoulder. “You know how, like, if the

moon were to move even a fraction closer to the Earth, it would change the tide?”

“Mm.”

“Not a lot. Not if it was just nudged closer. Most people probably wouldn’t notice, but people who had homes on the shores might. People who spend their lives studying the tides—they’d notice.” Orion rubbed a hand down his face, grasping for his metaphor. “Very few people care that he’s gone. I’ll pass a stranger in the street and think, they never met him. His death means nothing to them, but somehow, it devastated me.”

Hervé reached between them and threaded his fingers through Orion’s, pulling his hand up, and kissed his knuckles. “I wish I could help your pain.”

Orion shook his head, then slipped the stone back into his pocket. It was a small, comforting weight. “I read a thing online that said the pain never gets smaller, but the space which you hold it grows bigger. I think I’m starting to get that a little bit now. There’s room for other things.”

“Like?”

Orion turned his head and looked at Hervé for a long moment before leaning in to kiss him. “Like you. Like falling in love. Like finding places to take you on dates and feeling good about wins and bad about losses. Like waking up in the morning and not thinking about him until after my morning coffee.” He went quiet for a long moment. “I wish I could have given you the better part of me.”

“There is no better part of you,” Hervé said, his voice barely above a whisper. “There’s just all of you, and that’s what I want.”

Orion closed his eyes and let those words sink under his skin. That’s exactly how he felt, but he wasn’t sure Hervé was at a place where he could hear that and believe it. Not yet. So he chose patience, leaning in to steal another kiss.

Hervé let out a quiet, happy hum as their lips lingered together, then he pulled back and took a breath to speak. “An acting school offered me a job here. It’s very little money,”

Hervé said. “My agent got me the interview, and I was going to tell you during our next video chat, but then I asked Thierry to help me surprise you at the game instead.”

“That was...baby,” Orion said with a groan, pulling a hand down his face. “I can’t explain what it was like to see you last night. I just wish we’d won the game.”

“Do you think it makes me a bad-luck charm?” Hervé asked.

Orion scoffed and rolled onto his side, grabbing Hervé and kissing the breath out of him. “Never ask me that again. I’d quit baseball for you.”

Hervé lifted a brow in disbelief, and Orion said nothing because he wasn’t really sure if he was telling the truth or not. Part of it felt like brutal honesty, and he wasn’t sure what the fuck that meant.

But the moment passed in a rush when he realized what Hervé was trying to tell him. “Wait. So. You...you’re staying?”

“I have to work out my visa,” Hervé said quietly, “but yes. I think I am. I don’t need the money, but I need something to do. I can’t be idle.”

“I understand,” Orion said. He knew that Hervé had more than just his disorder going on. He was also a recovering addict who was unpacking childhood trauma, and it would be rough more than it would be smooth. But Orion had never been afraid of choppy seas.

Hervé was shifting slightly, so Orion rolled back onto his side and noticed he was holding something in his left hand. It took him a second to see it was the ball from the game.

His chest went hot. “You kept it.”

Hervé gave him an incredulous look. “Of course. It’s my kiss.”

Orion licked his lips slowly. “Luke suggested I write a proposal on it. I thought maybe we needed a few more months before taking that step.”

“Months,” Hervé said, his voice weak.

Orion leaned in and kissed the spot on his neck he knew would make his lover melt. “Weeks? Days?”

Hervé turned his face to capture Orion’s lips. “Hours?”

Orion breathed out through his nose as their tongues danced slowly, sweetly, like they were the only things in the world worth tasting. When he pulled back, he dropped his forehead against Hervé’s, then placed his hand over Hervé’s fingers where he was gripping the ball.

“It’s a piece of my heart to carry. It was a promise I made to the universe that if she gave you back to me, I’d do everything in my power to keep you.”

Hervé breathed out a quiet sigh and nestled closer. “My answer will be yes. When you ask.”

Orion pulled back and smiled down at him. “*Oui?*”

Hervé laughed, then kissed him again.

And again.

And then one last time for good measure.

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E.M. Lindsey is a non-binary writer who lives in the southeast United States, close to the water where their heart lies.

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