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# HAWKKE

JESCIE HALL

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**HAWKE**

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# CONTENT WARNING

This book contains heavy elements of infidelity throughout.

This book explores themes of drug use, sexual content and mature scenes, discussions of general trauma, and varying addictions. The book also contains a scene of attempted sexual assault.

Hawke is a standalone with a spin-off book, KID.



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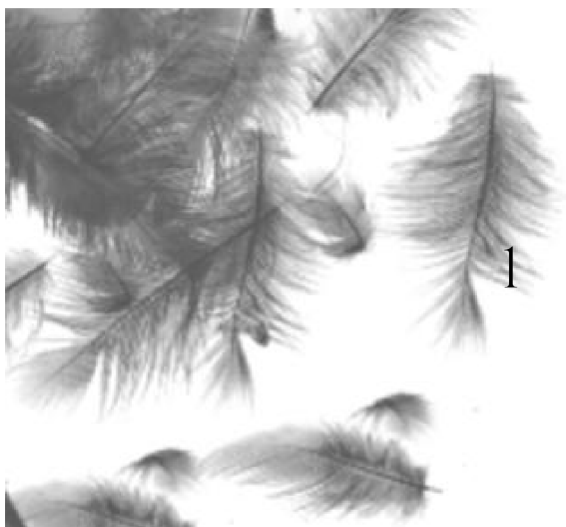
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About The Author

To ignorance. May you forever miss out on the sexy, tatted-up  
bad boy with the purest heart because of it.





**T**wo minutes and thirty-five seconds.

I watched the clock this time. Counted it out in my head. I promised myself I wouldn't, that I wasn't the type to care about such trivial things...but is unsatisfying sex really that trivial when you're considering spending your life with the person delivering?

*He loves me.*

Patrick made it a point to tell me consistently. He was the first to say it. When I was enjoying the beginning stages of our relationship, he told me he was falling for me already. It flattered me; I felt honored to be loved by someone of his caliber. He was handsome in a subtle sort of way, more of a short and stocky guy. His mom always said he was a meat-and-potatoes kind of boy, whatever that meant. But it was his kind, brown eyes and that loving smile that drew me in.

He was also very successful for our age, having worked within his father's company. He had the drive to succeed and make something of himself, and I always admired that. That

he saw me, the five-foot-nothing, dirty-blond-haired, come-from-nothing book nerd I was, meant the world.

I had my issues growing up. I was never in the popular cliques. Reading and writing were my strengths and school was easy for me. Socializing was a whole other story. I was the girl that liked to stay home on the weekend, curled up with food and a book or new Netflix series, so when Patrick came along, I fell right into that imaginary romance novel. One that seemed too good to be true.

Where Patrick lacked in sex, he made up for it in effort. He cared deeply for me, and made it a point to succeed in life for us and our future, despite his failed attempts at intimacy. But sex was just fluff when considering the overall aspect of a relationship, right? Besides, what did I really know about sex at all? I was no expert.

“Oh, my God...” He groans before lightly chuckling as I smile kindly up at this missionary-positioned face.

He breathed heavily on top of me until his heart rate decreased.

“Nic. That felt so good,” he says before kissing the tip of my nose sweetly.

*Nic.*

My lil’ nickname he uses, besides Angel, that always gives me little butterflies in the pit of my stomach when I hear it pass his lips. Butterflies that make me feel special. I love that

he calls me Nic and not just Nicole, like my sister always does.

She always uses my entire name to get under my skin, knowing how much I hate it. Nicole has a whole new meaning since my dad started dating again. Apparently, mistresses ruin names along with marriages, so Patrick made it a point to call me Nic instead, and luckily, it caught on.

He kisses my forehead before pulling out of me and heading towards our bathroom, disposing of the used condom into the trash and jumping into the shower.

I shouldn't feel weird about this. He always showers after we have sex. Doesn't everyone? I try not to overthink it, yet something about it always makes me feel dirty. It's not like I have much to compare things to, though. Patrick is my first, my only.

Rolling to my side under the sheets, I hear the water start and wonder about orgasms. I've read about them, and heard about them from my oversharing sister, but never have I actually experienced one that I know of. As it stands, the need to orgasm is just another obstacle in my relationship I'm forced to brush aside. I suppose it's better than the problems my sister faces.

Johanna deals with things like dating women who are already married to men but have yet to come out of the closet, or dating men whose dicks find their way into other women. The problems she deals with always seem worse and entirely more dramatic than mine. I shouldn't complain. At least



Patrick loves me and truly cares about a future with me. We can work out all the rest in time.

“Hey, I need to run to the grocery store to pick up some steaks for dinner tonight,” I hear him call from the bathroom.

“Don’t we have enough meat?”

There’s literally a freezer full in the basement from his hunting excursions with his dad.

“I just need to grab a couple more fresh ones if I’m going to be starting up the grill soon. No time to thaw. I’ve got a little surprise up my sleeve.”

A little surprise? Could it be what I’ve been waiting for? I bite my lip and check myself reluctantly in the long mirror next to the closet. I definitely don’t look engagement-ready. My hair’s in need of a trim, and this casual pajama set isn’t a good look.

“I’ll be back in a bit, babe. Promise it’ll be quick.” He comes over to where I’m standing, kissing the top of my head before heading out of the door in his jeans and sports coat.

Sunday dinners were our thing. After about a year of dating in different cities, and bouncing between my dorm room and his, we’d made the move and shacked up together.

Patrick had luckily found this cute little house for sale in his hometown, close to his college in Michigan and his father’s company. I made the seven-hour move once I finished school, leaving the past in the dust. We started our journey towards truly being together, despite my dad’s reluctance.

My father wasn't entirely excited about the idea, nor was I, about moving back home with him and his new mistress-turned-name-ruiner. Seriously, hearing your dad call out your name during sex does horrible things to your mental health.

Patrick's parents certainly weren't for us living together either, with their deep Catholic values and all, but the timing just worked for us. We saved money when he bought our first home instead of renting and it was one of the happiest moments for me. Were we playing "pretend" as his mother often called it? Maybe, but it was my first serious relationship, and I felt like it was a crucial step toward us really being together.

Sunday evenings were for us. After Patrick and his family attended their church service and extended family brunch at his grandmother's, we'd always prepare dinner together, just the two of us. We grilled, or made a special meal and shared it together at the table, sans phones, sans television, sans anything that would distract us from our conversation. It was our time to connect, and I looked forward to it every week, including today, even after our lackluster lovemaking session.

I comb my hair and throw it into a messy bun, deciding to take a quick nap since I have a little time before dinner. Laying back and daydreaming of all the ways we could amp up our seemingly bland sex life, I drift off into a peaceful sleep.

"Do it! Do it harder!" I hear a woman's voice moaning in my head as I come to, out of my hazy slumber. "Yes! Just like that!"

The moans continue getting louder as I rub my eyes with my knuckles before focusing on the shaking pictures of Patrick and I smiling in frames, bouncing off the wall.

*Am I dreaming?*

I sit upright, listening for a moment to make sure I'm not just hearing my own voice, just awakened from that needed dream.

“Fuck! C'mon! Make me come!” I hear a strange man's voice, with a deep, throaty rasp to it.

*Oh my God. This isn't a dream.*

Grabbing my phone on the nightstand, I get up, wrap a robe around myself and run out of our bedroom towards the guest room next door where the sexual noises are coming from.

I burst through the door, still hoping this isn't reality, when I see a man planted behind a woman, slamming into her from behind as she grips onto the headboard before her.

My headboard.

*From my childhood bed.*

From back home.

That we placed in the spare room for when friends and family come to visit.

If I wasn't so mortified by the sight in front of me, maybe I would have responded differently. But I'm not going to lie, my initial reaction is to stand and stare with my mouth agape. I

want to scream in horror, but I can't help being slightly in awe of the ridiculous exhibition in front of me.

*In what world do random couples just start having sex in people's homes?*

Here is this muscular, tattooed man with jet black hair, wet with sweat hanging in his eyes, settling himself behind a petite brunette. On my childhood bed. *Holy. Hell.*

“Oh, shit!” he curses, noticing me before pulling out of the woman and throwing a blanket on her while wrapping himself in the bed sheet beneath them.

After picking my jaw up off the ground, I fumble for my phone, dial a number, and shakily put it up to my ear.

“Hello, Dune County Police Department. How can I help you?”

“Uh, yes, there's a burglary, or intruders, or something...” I relay the situation, watching the man's panicked eyes as he walks towards me, shaking his hands in front of him while shaking his head from side to side. “And they're having sex on my bed!”

“I'm sorry, did you say sex?” the woman responds.

“I don't—I don't know. Yes?”

The man approaches, his tall frame growing on me, making me feel smaller with each step he takes. Too stunned to say or do anything, I drop the phone, put my hands up in the air and back into the wall behind me, terrified of his superior

demeanor, even while he's only dressed in a white sheet clutched by an angry fist.

I hear the woman's voice on the phone from the ground beneath me, "Excuse me, miss? Are you there? Shall I send someone out to this location?"

The tattooed man bends down and picks it up, placing it against his face as he stares at the floor. "I'm sorry for the confusion, ma'am. Everything is fine. Just a minor miscommunication." His smooth, calming tone pours into the receiver, somehow sounding like melted chocolate to my ears.

I bet he can get Mrs. Dispatch to do whatever he wants with that voice.

"I'll need to confirm that with the woman I was just talking to," she says into his ear, loud enough for me to hear.

His gaze shifts directly onto me with the most piercing eyes I hadn't noticed until now. They're emerald green, flaunting specks of teal, brown, and cyan mixed with stunning perfection. I suck in a breath at the sudden closeness of this mirage of a punk man before me while the faint smell of sex and cigarettes lingers in the room.

"Tell her everything's fine," he mouths to me with his plump lips still wet from who knows what. A lip ring pierced through the middle of his bottom lip, draws my eyes to it. His eyes are still staring directly into mine with a dangerous look of urgency. "Everything's fine!" he repeats.

“Uh...” I stutter, then blink, shaking my head and clearing my mind of the flurry of sexual confusion I’m processing along with the unsettling aura he’s covering me in. “Send someone here immediately. I need help. There’s someone in my house who isn’t supposed to be!”

“Fuck!” he says under his breath, running a hand through his semi-wet hair to brush the tendrils back off his forehead and out of his eyes. The pose gives me a full image of his toned abdomen and tatted-up chest.

The tiny stick of a woman puts her clothes back on in a hurry. “I’m fucking out of here.”

She opens the window and slides herself out of our tiny bungalow home, falling into the bush beneath the window, then scurries down the street. He rips the phone from my hand as I’m watching the girl make a run for it, and hangs up, tossing it across the floor.

“God dammit!” He screams out to the ceiling, making me jump. “Why the fuck did you do that?!”

“Get out of my house!” I yell back at him.

*The audacity of this guy.*

He turns to face me, his eyes narrowing, jaw flexing, as he stalks his way towards me again. I back into the wall, uncertain of what he might do to me. He traps me by one of his arms, still holding the sheet below his waist where the material is now dipping below his hips.

I'm terrified. My mouth drops open as I try to breathe, wishing Patrick would hurry back already. Or maybe he's been back for a while? I have no idea how long I was sleeping. What if this guy killed him in the other room and began screwing this chick while waiting to decide what to do with his body?

*Jesus, I'm losing it.*

"This is my house." He growls, lifting his lip while he talks. "And you're gonna pay for that shit."

I suck in a breath at his threats and try to calm my racing heart and shaking hands. I hear the front door open and close as I swallow. I wonder if the police are here to check on my well-being, which is currently in question.

"Nic? What's going on? Why are there police outside the house?"

Immediately relieved to hear the familiar voice, I slide under the strange man's toned arm and turn out of the spare room, crashing into my boyfriend in the hallway.

"Patrick! Oh, thank God!" I cry out into his chest, clutching his shirt in my fists. "There's a strange man in the house and he was having sex with someone in the spare room!"

"Shit," he mumbles, sighing as if finally realizing the situation. "Nic, I'm so sorry."

He parts from me with a light reassuring nod and walks into the bedroom to talk to the man in a muffled tone. The light conversation was not the yelling I was expecting. I'd expected

fists being thrown to protect his woman from this odd intruder who screws random girls on my childhood bed. I hear a light, embarrassed chuckle come from Patrick's mouth.

*Jesus, what is happening?*

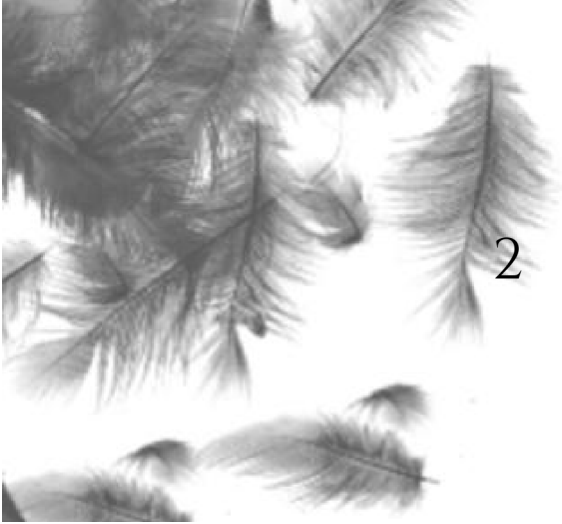
Coming around the corner together, Patrick is now wearing a light smile while shaking his head, looking at me, then back to the strange, rebel man, who's still holding the sheet to the bottom of his pelvis, the arrows of his muscles pointing sharply down beneath the sheet. His colorful eyes now hold a look of cocky amusement with a hint of annoyance as he takes me in from head to toe, eyeing my body. I swallow, clutching my robe a little tighter to my chest.

“Nic, meet Hawke.”

My eyes shift from Patrick, back to the glaring thug, then back at Patrick again.

“He's our new roommate.”







“Patrick, are you serious right now?” I sigh in frustration. “A roommate? Were you going to talk to me about this before just making this decision for us?”

I pace our bedroom, heated from the “surprise” he was going to drop on me tonight.

And here I thought he was going to propose.

“I’m sorry sweetie, really I am,” he begins. “I’ve known Hawke for a long time, and trust me, this isn’t a normal situation by any means. He just needs our help right now.”

No, this is not a normal situation. *This is a mess.*

“He needs our help?!” I scoff. “No, he needs to find a new place to crash, especially if he’s going to be bringing drugs, or girls, or whatever else he’s involved in under our roof. This is *our* home!”

“Technically, it is...but it’s not,” Patrick declares, squinting his eyes as if not wanting the truth to come out. Not like this.

“Explain. Now,” I demand.

He grabs for my hands, pulling me to sit on the edge of our queen-sized bed next to him as he begins, “Don’t be upset with me, okay?”

I glare at him, already annoyed.

“Remember when I went with my father to the bank to get the loan for the house?”

“Yes...” I answer cautiously, bracing for disaster.

“Well, I never actually got a loan. We didn’t even really need to get a realtor or bank involved. My father bought it outright. From Hawke.”

His words pour into my mind again. *This is my house.*

Confusion and curiosity hit me at the same time as I try to process this.

“So, you bought his house and are now letting him live here because...?” I ask vaguely, waiting for an answer.

Patrick licks his lips, taking in a deep breath before running his hand over his short sandy hair. His cheeks become rosy like they do when he’s nervous. He lets out the breath, gripping my hands before lifting his eyes back to mine to explain.

“He couldn’t afford to make the mortgage payments on it anymore. H-he wasn’t around.”

I arch an eyebrow at him, urging him to continue.

“Hawke just got out of prison.”

*The air has left the room.*

Suddenly I can't seem to suck in a breath. I'm just silently sitting there staring at him.

First of all, how have I never heard of this "Hawke" guy? I've known Patrick long enough to know his circle of friends. All of whom are intelligent, successful, in relationships, and know his family through the church or the golf club.

Not anywhere does a "Hawke" character fit in.

Second, is he crazy? Does he not realize that I basically work from home? I'd potentially be trapped home with this ex-convict all day while Patrick is away at work.

And third, Hawke? What kind of prison name is that?

"This is something you really should have talked to me about. I do not feel comfortable with this," I declare, raising my hands and getting up to pace the room.

My heart rate is rising. I'm visibly pissed.

"Listen, Nic," he says, grabbing my upper arms to stop my incessant movements. "He just needs a little help to get back on his feet. Don't you think we should do that for him? Especially as Christians?"

I roll my eyes. It's always about faith with him. I get it, it's the kind thing to do, but I'm not always kind. Nor am I always Christian. Not that I have anything against Christians or any other religion. To each their own. But, as soon as your religion has ridiculous expectations for who you need to be, or chastises you for making mistakes, it just doesn't seem healthy anymore. Jesus forgives, crappy Christians don't.

I'm one for charity, but I'm also realistic. Especially when being charitable means having to live with a tattooed, sex-crazed, ex-convict who may or may not be shooting drugs into his nose or whatever it is junkies do.

“Just to get him on his feet,” Patrick reiterates, like we're some sort of homeless shelter. “Trust me, he's not as bad as he seems.”

I sigh. “Fine, but if this interferes with my work or sleep, I'm going to lose it.”

He smiles at me, then tucks a piece of hair behind my ear. “I promise you I won't let that happen, Nic. I love you.”

He kisses my nose, then rubs his against mine, before wrapping his arms around me and rocking me side to side.

“Everything will be fine. You won't even notice he's here.” His voice carries through my hair into my ear.

I roll my eyes, doubting that entirely.

“Now, let's go have an adult conversation with him over dinner.” He grins humorously. “I'll give you a moment to change.”

He exits the room as I take my robe off and slip into something appropriate for guests.

Guests.

A guest.

A guest who won't be leaving anytime soon.

Sighing heavily, I look at myself in the mirror. I look horrible. I don't even want to make myself presentable to this hoodlum. Changing into some leggings and a hoodie, I untangle my unruly hair, leaving it in loose waves.

Walking out into the living room, a scene immediately pulls my eyes outside the window.

Hawke has his hands on top of his head, legs spread wide, as the police officers are practically assaulting him with their hands. They check him over, then exchange some words as he waves his hands aggressively in the air.

"They don't make it easy on him," Patrick comments, sliding up beside me.

Finally, the officers turn away, heading for their cars as Hawke yells something to their backs and flips them off before turning to walk back into the house.

The tension is thick.

He pushes in through the door as I stand in the living room with my arms crossed, biting the corner of my lip, unsure of what to do.

I did that. I called the cops after he *begged* me not to.

*He hates me.*

A few hours later, Patrick takes the steaks off the grill as I finish up the baked macaroni and cheese. We work like a well-oiled machine making our Sunday dinners, yet now we have a kink in the chain.

Hawke went to his decided room, which is the spare bedroom, after the incident, closing himself in there.

I'll be fine if I never have to see him. If we can keep this distance when Patrick goes to work tomorrow, I'll be alright.

As we get settled down to eat, I place a plate down at the table for Hawke, assuming this "get to know each other" dinner was what Patrick had planned.

We begin eating without him. Patrick looks over at me and simply shrugs. *Guess the happy family meal won't be happening. Surprise, surprise.*

Just as Patrick says grace, Hawke storms through his bedroom door, wearing nothing but loose-fitting gray sweats—that just so conveniently hang off his narrowed hips—as he heads towards the kitchen. He's definitely thinner than Patrick, yet more toned and his muscles more defined. He has strange disorganized tattoos all over his chest and arms, and his disheveled hair is hanging down into his narrowed eyes as if he just woke up.

"Join us if you'd like. We made plenty," Patrick announces.

He grabs the plate from the table as I try to divert my eyes away from a solid wall of abs and deep V directly in front of me. It's uncomfortable for me with Patrick right here. Hawke is definitely not my type. I would never find him attractive. I just can't look away because he's so...he's just so in my face.

I've literally only seen Patrick naked. Once I walked in on my dad with my mom back in the day, but other than that, the

only man's body I've ever seen this close was my boyfriend's and it doesn't look like this. I'm just blushing out of pure wholesomeness. Clearly.

It's not that Patrick isn't attractive or anything, he's just different. Patrick is kind of hairy and bulky but not ripped. He's my burly teddy bear and I like him soft.

I'd never use those terms to describe Hawke, however. He's lengthy, and tall with the broad shoulders of an Olympic swimmer. His hair is all a mess, plus he smells. Well, he smells clean, actually.

I look down into my food, trying to swallow, before peeking up through my eyelashes again. I shouldn't be looking at this half-naked man standing in front of me and my boyfriend.

He must notice my failed attempts at looking away, because I see him sneer at me as he passes around the table. Then, taking his now filled plate, he walks around us and gives Patrick a light head nod before heading back into the bedroom, shutting the door with his foot.

I take a deep breath and finally let it out.

"Just leave him be," Patrick comments softly, sensing my discomfort. "He'll keep to himself until he's comfortable."

I drop my fork, looking up at him with a pained face. "He's so...rude."

"Yeah, he's definitely not someone you'd want to hang out with, I'm sure."

"Was he always like this? Since you've known him?" I ask.



Patrick clears his throat, clearly thinking of an earlier time, one before me. “Uh, yeah, I guess.”

It perplexes me that he would befriend such a rough-looking guy. Patrick is as clean as they come. He’s never even smoked weed that I know of.

I’m a bit more experienced than he is, only because of my wild and reckless older sister. Countless nights of picking her drunk-ass up from the bars late at night with a new guy, or girl, each time gave me plenty to work with, plenty to learn.

This one guy she used to see, Devon, was addicted to coke. His saucer-like pupils and endless nights of keeping my sister up having sex in the room next to me was enough to have me vowing to never be with the likes of him.

“Listen, just keep your distance. He’s the type that minds his own. Not much for conversation. He won’t cause any issues. His past is his past.”

I hate the fact that he thinks this isn’t a big deal.

“But, why would you—”

“Because it’s the right thing to do!” Patrick interrupts me, slamming his fist on the table.

Biting my tongue like I always do, I hold in what I’d really like to say to him. I’m frustrated but left in a position in which I can’t really say anything. I don’t own this property. I’m lucky to be living here with him rent-free. I don’t make the rules, nor does how I feel seem to sway them.

“It’ll be like he’s not even here,” Patrick says in a softer tone, grabbing my hand on the table. “You’ll see.”

As soon as he says the words, Hawke comes out of the room with an empty plate.

Shirtless as the day he was born, he glides across the living room and into the kitchen, dropping the plate and silverware into the sink, and begins washing them.

“Want to watch a movie with us after dinner?” Patrick asks as I glare at him for asking.

*So much for ignoring the fact that he’s here.*

He turns around to face us, his hands holding him up as he leans back behind him on the counter, stretching back and showcasing his broad shoulders and chest.

He’s like a punk rock swimmer with his lengthy toned slimness. And dammit for not being able to look the other way when I need to. I bite the corner of my lip—a nervous twitch—trying my best to ignore his presence entirely.

“Nah, wouldn’t want to *impose*,” he comments, the dripping sarcasm not lost on me.

He clearly means we are the ones imposing on him. We are in *his* house now. This couldn’t get any more uncomfortable.

His eyes wander over to mine, pausing for a moment to look with an arched brow. I can’t help but notice the tiniest curl of his lip into a smirk.

Not only is he an ass, he’s cocky too. *Great.*



After dinner and washing dishes, I hit the lights and settle into the couch, under the blanket next to Patrick, who starts up some action flick.

I lay my head on his shoulder as we watch Jason Statham chase after some bad guys...again.

“Why can’t we ever watch what I like to watch?” I whine, my cheek squished against him.

“Because no one who’s seriously intelligent enjoys RomComs,” he comments without pause.

I huff in frustration, rolling my eyes next to him. “I like mob movies, jerk.”

The door to Hawke’s bedroom opens as he walks to the fridge, now wearing a white, ripped t-shirt with the sleeves cut off, so low that I can see the ink on his tight abdomen through the sides, paired with his same gray sweatpants.

My eyes shift from him back to the television without moving my head.

I hear the fridge open as he grabs what sounds like a beer before coming over and plopping on the other side of our L-shaped couch.

“Changed your mind, eh?” Patrick asks, lifting his beer to him in the air.

“Got bored,” he comments in a husky tone, lifting the bottle to his lips.

His lip ring clinks against the glass ever so lightly and I watch him with narrowed eyes as his Adam’s apple bobs with each swallow.

I hate that I love Adam’s apples for this exact situation.

He gets comfortable in the seat, slouching back with one hand over the back of the couch. One leg is propped up while the other extends straight out. He’s so long.

“Nic, watch this part!” Patrick says animatedly as Jason Statham knocks some bad guy out. “Yeah!”

He cheers like a jock watching an action movie would, as I chuckle, shaking my head before getting up off the couch.

“Where are you going?” he asks, his eyes never leaving the screen.

“To bed. Goodnight.”

Leaning in, I kiss him on the cheek as he drags me onto his lap. He grabs my face, pulling me into a kiss with a little tongue.

I pull back, scolding him, “Patrick!”

It’s awkward in front of Hawke, but Patrick just chuckles, then gets back to the movie. “Love you, Angel.”

I walk around the back of the couch, passing Hawke as I do.

“Night,” I mumble blandly.

He doesn’t respond as I suspected.

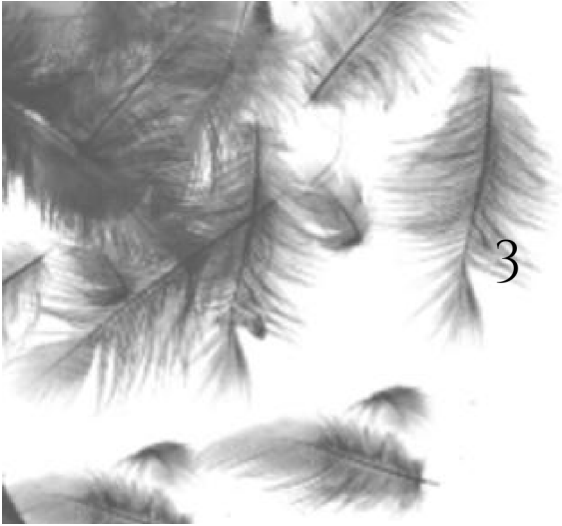
I turn the corner to our room, closing the door and looking back at the boys. Patrick's sucked back into the movie, but to my surprise, Hawke's slightly narrowed eyes are glued on mine. His tongue dips out of his mouth as he plays with his lip ring, his stare never faltering, even though our eyes have connected for more than what's socially acceptable.

Staring back, my brows knit together in confusion. I suck in a breath as his eyes trail my body, making me feel slightly light-headed. Shaking it off, I shut the door abruptly before his eyes have the chance to meet mine again. I lean my head back against the door, wondering why. Why was he looking at me like that?

It's like he was studying me, searching for my soul through my eyes. Almost as if he was trying to figure me out by letting me in on some sort of secret. It's overwhelming, his stare, and it makes me feel entirely uncomfortable.

I slide down the door, disappointed in how today went down, disappointed in these recent changes I'm forced to deal with, and disappointed because I can't do anything about it.

I don't know what Patrick's talking about when he says to ignore Hawke, when I know it's going to be next to impossible to pretend he's not here.





I open my eyes to a new day.  
A cloudy day.

A tortuous day.

It's Monday, so I'll be home for the duration of the day, alone with Hawke, while Patrick heads off to work at his father's financial firm.

He and his brother were locked into the family business before they learned how to walk. They are the wealthiest family in this town by far, yet make a point to show just how humble they really are, or pretend to be.

Either way, I've got a day of editing ahead of me before I head to my night job, bartending at the local bar in town.

Do I need to do it? No. Patrick tells me all the time to leave the job. That he can provide for me, but I'm just not the type. If I don't make it on my own, I didn't make it at all. It doesn't count.

I also just so happen to love the people I meet. They're real, down-to-earth souls who sometimes just need a bartender

session; like therapy, but it comes with a side of whisky. Some days I'm the teacher, some days I'm the student, but every day, there seems to be a lesson learned.

I wake up early enough before Patrick gets up to go start some much-needed coffee. Putting my silk robe over my tank top and underwear, I tie it loosely, then head to the bathroom to brush my teeth and wash my face.

Walking around the living room and into the kitchen, I almost jump out of my skin when I see a tall figure behind the counter.

“Oh! My God.” I gasp, standing with my mouth open.

Hawke stands, leaning against the counter, wearing nothing but loose-fitting gray sweatpants with a large imprint of where his infamous member is.

*Seriously, does this man not own any other clothing?*

He doesn't say a word as I divert my eyes away awkwardly, biting the corner of my lip again.

“See something you like?” he asks blandly, raising an eyebrow at me while his face remains cold.

“I-I'm sorry, I didn't think...” I stutter, shaking my head before looking down at my partially open robe, showcasing my hardened nipples straight through my little white tank top.

I clutch it to my chest, sucking in a breath in embarrassment.



His eyes saw it all. I can tell by the way they narrow a bit while his tongue toys with that damn lip ring again.

“I didn’t take you for a morning person,” I comment, using my long hair to hide the blush in my cheeks as I reach for a cup.

He already has the coffee going and I’ve never been more thankful for a roommate at this moment.

“So you think you know me?” he asks coldly, before filling his cup.

He leans back against the counter with a scowl on his face and a cocked head, setting his cup down to cross his arms. The motion somehow accentuates the toned muscles beneath the ink of his forearms and biceps.

I try to look away, but fail miserably. There’s just something about his whole look that draws my eyes to him.

“I mean, yeah...I think I get the gist based on what I’ve seen thus far.” Being honest, I shrug.

If he’s going to be blunt, I’ll be blunt right back. He stands up straight off the counter, grabbing his glass as he walks past me. He pauses, turning his head to look down at me, while his words slice through me in a deep, direct tone. “You don’t know *shit*.”

I swallow at his sudden closeness and striking words before he walks away, and I can breathe again.

“And I guess I won’t be learning any more today,” I say under my breath, before bringing my cup to my lips.

I smell it before I take a sip.

Yes. Black and strong, just as the devil intended.

He might be an ass, but he makes a mean cup of Joe.



I get settled in my room, sitting at my large oak desk with my little succulent friends surrounding me, and pull out my work for the day. The manuscript in front of me looks promising, and I'm actually looking forward to working through it.

I was lucky enough to find a part-time job as an editor for a small publishing house in a neighboring city. What else do you do with an English major other than teach? I got the job in hopes of one day publishing my own work through the company while simultaneously perfecting my craft.

The gig doesn't pay well, hence the need for the bartending job, but I truly enjoy it, plus it gives me time to work on my personal material.

Getting lost in this new dystopian love story I've been working through, I put the manuscript down, pull my earbuds out, and check the clock.

*Jesus, it's already past lunch.*

I stretch, and the aching rumbling in my belly lets me know it's time for some grub. Remembering the plate of leftover

steak and macaroni waiting for me in the fridge, I leave the room to head towards the kitchen.

As soon as I exit, I'm reminded in the worst way that I have a new roommate. There's Hawke, standing by the front door, shirtless again, making out with some red-headed chick. His tongue is all down her throat, his hand pulling her ponytail back to angle her head up to his.

He must've been screwing her brains out while I was in the other room with my eloquent classical music bursting through my ears. How fitting.

Rolling my eyes, I huff and head towards the fridge, opening it and slamming it shut. It must cause some attention because I hear them say their goodbyes with the promises of another good time, then hear the door close.

I place my food in the microwave, staring at it like it's my saving grace. Only a few more minutes and I'm back in my room.

As my unfortunate luck would have it, the timer on the microwave slows to a snail's pace just as I hear Hawke approaching the kitchen.

He comes to the fridge beside me, grabbing what sounds like another beer. I'm refusing to turn away from the microwave to see.

"Do you have a problem with me having guests over?" he asks behind me.

He sounds genuine enough, but who knows, he's probably being a dick.

"Nope," I reply plainly, still staring at the food slowly rotating before me.

"Seems like you do," he says, walking past me and leaning back against the counter, directly in front of the microwave. Directly in front of me.

I take a deep breath with my arms crossed and look at the ceiling, letting it out. "As long as you don't disrupt my work, you can fuck whoever you need to fuck, snort whatever you need to snort, drink whatever you need to drink. Do you, homeboy."

He lets out a dry chuckle, looking down to the floor, then licks his lips and looks back at me with that stare again. His ocean eyes are sending waves through me, pulling me out into his treacherous water. I need an iceberg to sink this ship.

"You should try it sometime." His eyes scour my body as his tongue flicks against his lip ring.

"I don't do drugs," I snap, attempting to look anywhere but at him.

I fail the attempt miserably as my eyes flutter back to him.

He tightens his jaw, tilting his head with his eyes narrowed, looking directly at me. "I mean get fucked."

My eyes grow wide as I finally turn my body towards him. I can't tell if he means it sexually or if he's literally just using

the opportunity to tell me to get fucked. *I choose sexually demeaning for 200, Alex.*

“I get fucked. I get fucked often, and hard. Happens when you’re in a serious relationship with someone you love.”

Even saying the word *fucked* in front of him makes me feel like a blushing, babbling amateur. I apply a thick layer of brave face, like a broke drag queen in need of a job.

He stands there with humor dancing in his eyes as he toys with that damn lip ring again.

I wince my face slightly after saying it. It sounded better in my head, but now that the words are out in the open, floating around in the kitchen between us, I can’t help but feel the effects of sounding like a total prude who has no idea what it is to be fucked.

“Trust me, by looking at you, I can tell you’ve *never* been properly fucked.” He scoffs, brushing past me. “Oh, and next time you wanna play Harriet the Spy and watch me mess around, let me know. I’ll give you a better view.”

I hate that he knows I saw him. I hate that he thinks I was gazing at them mid-kiss. I hate that I was.

He looks like an experienced lover, probably because he is. He’s been with hundreds of women. I’m not doubting it. I’ve already seen two of them and I’ve known him for less than forty-eight hours.

I can’t wait until Patrick gets home and I don’t have to worry about the awkward moments between Hawke and I.

Until then, I work.



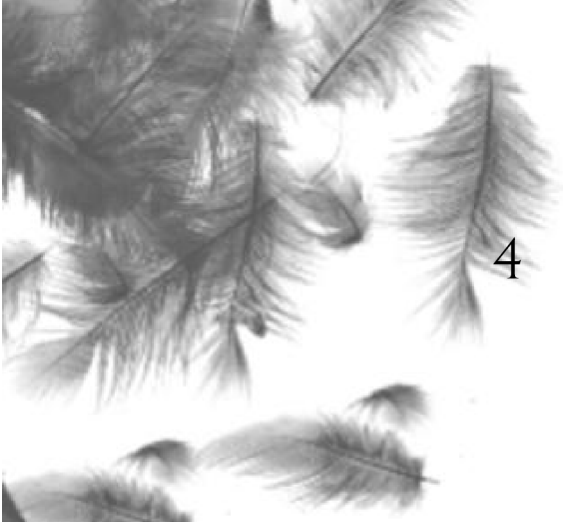
A little later, around dinner, I text Patrick to see where he is. When he answers, he informs me he's running late and probably won't see me until after I'm done with work at the bar.

It's so frustrating when the only time slot we have to enjoy one another gets filled with work from his father. He could walk away from it, he could tell his dad he's done for the day, but he never stands up to him. He always feels the need to do the right thing, even when that means putting our relationship, and me, last.

Seven o'clock rolls around and I'm finishing getting ready for work. I enjoy looking somewhat cute at my job, so I curl my hair and let the loose dirty blond hair fall down my back. Jeff, my boss at the bar, has a pretty relaxed policy on what we choose to wear, so I wear some comfortable chucks with some ripped jeans and a black halter top.

I'm ready to make some tips, have some friendly conversations with my type of people, while getting the hell out of this house for a few hours.

Time to work the dive bar.





**W**ho doesn't love a good dive bar?

They are literally made for therapeutic conversation and budding friendships. These places serve dual purposes.

The people who come into 9-5 Slide on the regular are my people. Laid-back, a little rough around the edges, but real. Maybe it's because I just often feel out of place with Patrick's perfect family, but I have a hard time dealing with fake, plastic-like individuals.

In the bar at two in the morning, you are your truest self, all bullshit aside, and I respect that more than I respect someone trying to keep up appearances.

"Hey, Nic," John's voice greets me with a smile from behind the old mahogany bar, seeing me walk in as he's drying glasses.

"There he is!" I say enthusiastically. "Ready to make some serious cash tonight?"

My sarcasm isn't lost on him.

He throws his head back in a dramatic laugh. "Right."



I've been working with John for exactly eight months now. How do I know this? Because his girlfriend got pregnant right before he applied for the job. More spending money for diapers and shit, he always said.

I enjoy working with him because he is the type of guy that's clearly overqualified for the job, like me. He's an engineering student at the university by day, and bartender by night, keeping a rainy day fund from the tips he's collecting. Hard worker, funny as hell. A perfect coworker in my book.

Just as the night is getting on and the patrons fill up the space, I pour another Jack on the rocks for my old friend Leonard.

"Shall I add it to the tab?"

"Sure thing, darlin'." He nods, handing me a few dollars for a tip before getting back to his reading.

He's probably my favorite person. Leonard is here *every* Thursday night, drinking his Jack while reading his old novels. He claims the missus talks too much, so he comes to a bar to read, where everyone talks all the time.

Adding the drink to his tab, I hear someone clear their throat, awaiting service.

I turn, then immediately lower my brows when I'm met with a tall guy donning the brightest bleach blonde I've ever seen, with spiky hair and piercings covering his face. *Who the hell is this Billy Idol knockoff?*

“What can I get for you?” I ask politely, shrugging off the initial shock.

He eyes me up and down like a snack with a little smirk plastered on his strangely attractive face. “Depends what’s on the menu.”

He leans into the bar on his elbows with a shit-eating grin, getting closer, obviously trying to make a pass at me.

I cock my head to the side, waiting for his order with my brows raised, not feeding into his attempts.

“Ah, alright...” He chuckles. “Can I get a round of Tequila for my guys? We’re celebrating tonight. At that corner booth in the back.” He points with a half-smile. “Should come join us when your shift is over.”

“I’ll be right over with the shots,” I respond, ignoring the last comment while ringing him up.

“None of the frilly shit needed. We’ll take ’em straight,” he adds, as I check out his tatted-up arms, covering every inch of available flesh, handing him his card back.

He’s littered with them. Hours of work, I’m sure.

God, these guys and their tats. If tattoos were a genetic trait, he’d be related to Hawke by the looks of it. Probably his first cousin.

I grab a tray and fill it with the five shots of Tequila he requested and make my way around the bar to the back corner booth by the pool tables.

“Guys,” I say, interrupting their conversation and setting the tray on the table.

I look up and nod to the blonde to take them off, as he takes one and the other four hands follow.

The last hand to grab a shot has a bird tattoo on the back of it, accompanied by a few black rings. The bird is not just any bird; the bird is a hawk.

My eyes snap up. There he is, sitting in the booth’s corner, staring at me as he grabs the shot. His eyes do that weird thing again, looking through me like we’re in on some little secret together.

“To Hawke! So glad to have you back,” Billy Idol says to the group, holding his shot in the air.

They’re celebrating his prison release. In a hole-in-the-wall bar with shots. How idyllic.

They all throw their Tequila straight back, Hawke’s eyes on mine while he finishes his. I watch the warm liquid slide down his throat, the roll of his Adam’s apple hypnotizing me.

I swallow nervously, needing an escape from the strange knot forming in my stomach, and turn to head back to the bar.

Billy Idol wannabe catches my elbow, pulling me back. “Wait, stay.” He grins cheekily at me.

“She can’t,” Hawke announces firmly from the corner.

He’s looking down at his phone, not making eye contact with anyone. His voice is authoritative and harsh, making me

feel suddenly weak.

“What? Why not? The bar is empty, plus that golfer-looking guy is right there. She can hang for a bit.”

“She can’t,” he says again, definitively.

I narrow my eyes at his tone.

*What an ass.* As if I’d actually want to hang with this group of heathens. They probably brought heroin to snort in the bathroom stalls later. Or whatever they do with it.

“Well, if you’re bored later, you’re welcome to come back to my place. We can talk about the stars and see if our astrological signs coexist, or whatever it is you girls like to do.” He winks flirtatiously, earning him a few laughs from the other guys.

He’s actually kind of cute, minus the spiky blonde hair, the piercings, and the never-ending tattoos. And kind of funny too. So funny that I give him my best nose chuckle.

“It’ll never happen,” Hawke says before downing the rest of his drink and pushing past the guys to get out of the booth.

“Where ya going?” Billy Idol asks with his hands raised.

Hawke throws his leather jacket on and heads towards the door, not answering.

“Ah, forget him.” He tosses his hand in Hawke’s direction.

He leaves the bar, pushing a shoulder roughly through the doors as if someone did something wrong to him.

*Some people are just assholes by nature.*



I head back behind the bar, serving up a few more drinks. Tips aren't great tonight, but they're alright. Leonard closes out his tab for the evening and as he's walking outside to leave, I see Hawke smoking a cigarette in the parking lot.

*Ah, so that's where he went. One of many addictions, perhaps?*

Ashing out, he heads back inside. To my surprise, he walks straight up to the bar with his intimidatingly tall form. To me.

He leans forward, elbows on the scuffed-up wooden surface, looking at me with a scowl. "Kid." He tosses his thumb behind him. "He doesn't know."

I get a whiff of him as he leans inward. His scent, best described as a combination of cigarettes, fresh mint, and leather, is not horrible for some odd reason. I cock an eyebrow, having no clue what he's talking about. Wondering why he's even talking to me when he wouldn't even address me a minute ago.

He runs that hand, the one with the hawk tattoo, through his shaggy, eye level dark locks, pushing it back as best he can over top of the shaved area beneath. "Kid," he says, pointing more directly to the wired-out blondie. "The guy that was hitting on you. He doesn't know you're married."

My eyebrows run together as I frown, looking at my hand and back. “I’m not married.”

He tips his head to the side with a *give me a break* look about him.

“Whatever, it’s fine. He seems fun.” I brush it off.

“He’s not. Mind your business,” he commands, glaring at me with those piercing greenish-blue eyes.

I cock my head at his threats, shooting a questionable look in his direction.

*Who does this guy think he is?* Does he really think I’d step out on my relationship with Patrick for Billy Idol? Of course, I’m going to stay away from him. Mind my business? Please, because I’m so interested in hearing about random hookups and junkie parties.

“Yeah. Okay.” I roll my eyes, turning to go dry some glasses from the wash cycle.

I hear him huff with frustration before turning to leave through the doors with a slam.

“Jesus, what’d you do to that one?” John asks, filling a drink beside me.

“No idea, probably breathed wrong.” I shake my head.



I sneak into the house late after work, trying to set my keys on the key tray as quietly as I can by the door. All the lights are off, including the one to Hawke's room. I didn't see him with a vehicle at the bar, and to be honest, I don't think he even has a car. God only knows his whereabouts.

I tiptoe into the bathroom and do all my nighttime regimens before slipping into some short shorts and a camisole for bed. Crawling under the covers, I slide up against Patrick's warm body. He lets out a little groan, moving from his side to flat on his back.

Feeling courageous, I slide my hand across his exposed hair lined stomach. My fingertips reach the edge of his boxers as I toy with the elastic band. Finally dipping my hand inside, my fingers graze his member, sending a little shock wave through him.

He moans, opening his eyes, looking down at my hand, then back at me with a slow, growing grin. "Angel."

I continue stroking him until he grows hard and his chest is rising and falling at a faster rate. I quickly straddle him, pulling my shorts to the side as he reaches the nightstand, grabbing a condom.

He rolls it on as I'm breathless and ready to go. Opening my hips wide, I sink myself onto him.

"Ahh, shit." He moans, grabbing my hips softly.

I grind against him, enjoying the sensation of me being on top, when I forget what it does to him.

“Wait. Stop,” he says, out of breath, holding a hand flat against my stomach.

I can't stop. I need this. I want this. With all the tension that's built up around me lately, I just need a good orgasm to be set right again. Right?

I continue grinding myself against his pelvis while backing onto him. I'm beginning to build up to what seems like an amazing sensation—what I think is about to be an orgasm—when I feel him jerk beneath me.

“Shit, Nic!” He groans a few times, his chin to his chest before his head falls against the bed.

I hang my head, sighing in frustration, as his breathing relaxes along with mine.

“I'm sorry, Angel, you know what that position does to me,” he says, moving my hair out of my face and bringing his lips to mine. “Just look at it as a good thing. It means you overwhelm me in the best possible way.”

I reluctantly kiss him when he pulls my chin towards his lips before rolling off him onto my back. I'm upset.

“C'mon, lie back. I'll go down on you.” He grins, his head drifting beneath the covers.

“N-no. It's fine, I'm tired anyway,” I say, stopping him.

The mood is ruined. I don't even like it when he goes down on me. It's awkward and uncomfortable imagining just how gross he probably thinks the process is. He showers after sex, for crying out loud.

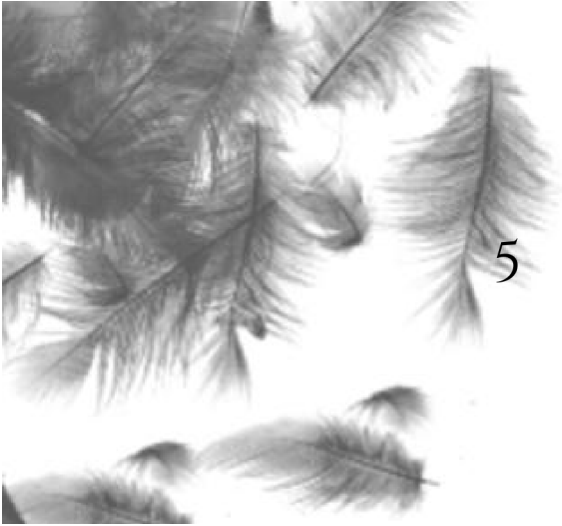


“You sure?”

“Yeah. Let’s just go to bed.” I flip over while he sits there for a second.

“Love you, Nic.” He kisses the side of my head before getting up and off the bed.

I hear him head towards the bathroom, turning on the shower as the tears fall from my eyes just like the water down the drain.





**W**aking up early, like I always do, I roll out of bed, rubbing the sleep out of my eyes with my fists.

Last night's memories haunt me. The unrealistic short sex, the showering afterwards...

Everything about it feels painful.

I have to find a way to talk to Patrick about it. To tell him that there's a real problem here for me. To show him how messed up that is and how it hurts me mentally. Will he understand? Will he be empathetic? Who knows? But if I don't bring it to his attention, I'm only hurting myself. I can't do this anymore.

Walking to the bathroom with my mind full of thoughts and my eyes attempting to lure me back to sleep, I open the door and get hit with warm steam and a delicious spicy musk in my nose. Before I can turn back, my gaze falls upon him.

Hawke.

Naked.

Wiping both hands down his face in the shower, his exposed body is all I see through the partially fogged glass. His rippling abdomen, toned chest, and arms littered with tats, glistening with droplets of water clinging to his form. I see his thick, flaccid dick hanging between his legs, water dripping from the tip.

*Oh my God.*

I'm frozen for a moment, my mouth dry and open, gaping at the naked man before me. This is twice now. Twice I've seen him in fewer clothes than Patrick. Twice I've been unable to tear my eyes off him. Twice I've felt like shit because of it. I turn back out of the bathroom, tiptoeing as quickly and quietly as I can.

Hopefully, he didn't see me. I don't think he did.

On my way to the kitchen, cursing at myself under my breath, I head to the coffeemaker and start up a pot.

The bathroom door opens behind me and I lean against the counter, biting the corner of my lip. I'm pretending to look at an old receipt lying next to the fridge on the counter. Interesting stuff, savings.

I hear him walking to his room, shutting the door behind him. I let out a vast sigh, dropping my forehead flat against the counter, bent over in half, when the door opened again.

*Fuck me.*

"You alright?" he asks softly with a hint of humor in his tone.

“Fine,” I say quickly, lifting my head from the counter.

I stand with my chin raised, pretending to be as fine as I say, yet my eyes never quite reach his. He leans against the counter wearing nothing but a pair of black sweatpants hanging off the hips.

*Seriously, we need a clothing policy in this household.*

“You should knock before you enter when someone’s showering,” he states with amusement in his eyes.

I swallow and my eyes finally connect with his. Those damn ocean eyes. I look at him and there’s no hiding it now. He knows. There’s a smirk stretched across his lips. No, a devilish look about him that makes me think he’s enjoying the fact that I saw him.

He runs a hand through his wet locks, pushing the hair off his forehead and away from his face. His angular jaw pulls me directly into those plush lips, separated by that ring right in the middle.

“I’m not used to having to knock in my own house. Sorry.”

Sarcasm is my dear friend.

“Just be sorry you didn’t burst in five minutes earlier,” he says with a serious face, folding his arms over his inked chest.

“W-what?” I turn away from his gaze as I pour water into the coffee machine, only to have my traitorous eyes find him again.

“Nevermind. Over your head. Clearly.” He rolls his eyes, leaning back against the counter next to me. Too close.

*He was masturbating.*

My insides churn and I get a tingle between my legs at the thought of him touching himself in all his naked glory in that shower. Feeling slightly flushed, I tighten my thighs together to ward off the stupid sensation as I lick my dry lips and attempt to grab a coffee mug from behind his head without fumbling it.

“Maybe we should set some ground rules,” I say, turning to face him.

I’m over the awkwardness, ready to set some much-needed boundaries.

“By all means...” He cocks a brow.

I let out a quick sigh.

“First, if you’re using the bathroom, lock the door. It only makes sense,” I comment smugly.

He chuckles, licking his lips, then refolds his arms, waiting for more rules. His little smirk is the kind that makes women weak around him. I know it.

“Second, if you’re going to be messing around with various women, keep it to your room.”

His eyebrows raise humorously with that one.

“And third, if you see me outside of this house, don’t assume you have any right to tell me who I can or cannot talk

to. I'm in a committed relationship with an amazing man who trusts me. I don't need your low-level assumptions spreading onto me and my relationship."

I cross my arms over my chest, leaning back on the counter, feeling proud of myself, but the narrowed-eyed, maddening look I'm getting from him has my pulse raging out of my neck.

"Ground rules?" he asks, pushing off the counter and slowly lurking towards me. "I've got some myself."

I nervously shift my weight at his closeness. He places both his palms on the counter behind me, trapping me with his arms. My eyes nervously dart around at them before I lift my chin and try to maintain some semblance of confidence.

If Patrick came out right now, this would look totally threatening.

"First, if you're going to walk in on me in the shower, the least you can do is give me a handy."

"Ha!" I scoff at his crudeness, then attempt to breathe normally. Yep. Nope. My mouth is parched inside the bubble of his aura.

"And second, if you're going to have sex in the bedroom next to me, at least try to pretend you're enjoying it."

My face heats immediately. I feel the flush of fire travel up my neck and settle in my cheeks. He heard us having sex last night. All three seconds of it. I'm mortified. It's one thing for

me to deal with the embarrassment of it all, but for Hawke to know? Ugh. The torture.

His lip pulls up at the corner, a little dimple forming in his cheek as he smirks at me. A knowing smirk. An asshole smirk.

“Do you like being called Nic?” he asks, leaning forward more, uncomfortably close.

His face is hovering above me, and I’m sure he can hear my heart racing. I can through my ears. It’s pounding. He smells so fresh, and oozes sexuality out of his pores like a new, exquisite fragrance. I can’t stand it.

I’ve never had this type of reaction to someone’s presence before, not even Patrick. It’s an adrenaline rush, like I’m about to send my body plunging off of a cliff. His aura is an extreme sport in and of itself. A dangerous one.

“Yes.” My voice comes out weak like a whisper.

“Let me guess, that’s short for Nicole?” he says smugly, cocking his head above me.

“Yeah, it is.”

I’m confused about where this is going.

“Well, I don’t like it. I’m not calling you Nic.” His face twists with disgust. “When he calls you that, it makes you sound like a child.”

The way he says *he* doesn’t go over my head. It’s not the way “friends” talk about each other.

“Well, I’ll kill you if you call me Nicole,” I retort.



It really shouldn't bother me the way that it does. I've grown up with the name. But I can't stand to be called Nicole after hearing my father grunting that name. Plus, it just reminds me of all the ways our relationship has fallen apart since he left my mother.

"Hmm," he hums, his eyes narrowing as dark thoughts appear to flood his mind. "Would you prefer Pompous Pam?" he suggests, his eyes lighting with enthusiasm. "Or how about Pretentious Paige?"

I glare at him. I can't stand pretentious or pompous individuals at all. It's literally one of the main reasons I dislike all of Patrick's people. He's purposely teasing me. Pushing me. Trying to get a rise out of me.

"Fuck it. Fine, I'll call you Cole," he says abruptly, sensing my anger.

"Cole?" I scoff, raising my brows at him.

He bites his bottom lip, nodding as he moves in closer. Stilling, he plays with his lip ring, making my stomach instantly drop. There's a dangerous look about him, and I'm unsure of his intentions.

The way he tongues that ring, seeing it dart out of his mouth, makes me wonder about the feel of it.

I nervously the corner of my lip again, my eyes heavy with this intoxicating aura his presence is drawing out of me as I blink and look up at him again, feeling heavy and light all at the same time.

His mouth drops open a bit as he stares at my lips, his warm breath reaching my skin.

“Yeah, Cole,” he whispers above me. “And third, don’t look at your roommate like that again.”

He speaks coldly as he leans around me, pouring a cup of coffee before heading towards the kitchen table. He sits down, leaving me trying to catch my breath as he pulls out a book and casually begins reading like the event that just transpired never happened.

I’m in a whirlwind of confusion. *Look at him like what? What did I look like?*

Patrick comes out of the bedroom and I stand straight, trying to rid myself of the toxicities of this new roommate of mine.

Hawke’s eyes dart over to me and I could’ve sworn he chuckled.

“Good morning, you two,” Patrick announces, happy as ever. “Couple of early risers, huh?”

Neither of us respond to his rhetorical question.

He smiles, approaching me, kissing me softly on the lips, then lingering there for a bit.

Hawke’s eyes peek from behind his book, watching us from the corner of my eye, so I put more effort into the kiss, basically telling him to screw off with it.

“Damn, Angel. Last night and now this? How’d I get so lucky,” Patrick comments, running his hand up my exposed thigh.

I giggle bashfully as his hand slides up the back of my loose silk night shorts. Patrick smiles in playful approval, grabbing a handful of ass. I peer over to Hawke, who’s staring at his book with his brows drawn together, as if he’s contemplating the origins of life.

“I’ll pack you lunch. Are you heading out soon?” I ask, turning to grab the sandwich meat from the fridge.

“Yeah, it’s going to be another long day. My father has me meeting investors to take over some of his accounts for him.”

“That’s amazing, babe. Sounds like a promotion to me,” I say proudly, grabbing a knife to spread some mayonnaise on the bread.

“Yeah, it definitely is, but it means more work. I’ve got to get all the files in order tonight and tomorrow before the meeting. It’s going to be a late night. But you’ll be working tonight anyway, right?”

I see Hawke look up from his book at us from the corner of my eye.

“No. This was the one night I had off this week, remember?” I sigh, trying not to sound like a whiny little brat, but I can’t help it.

It annoys me. My one night off, with no plans because I was holding out for Patrick. Again. And with everything else going

on, the surprise convict roommate, the lackluster sex, and now leaving me home alone on my night off...I'm just, well... bummed.

“I'm sorry, Angel. But you know I have to do this. My dad —”

“It's fine,” I interrupt. “You don't need to apologize. I'll find something to do. I'll be fine.”

“Hey, maybe you and Hawke could hang out? Watch a movie or something? Netflix and chill? Isn't that what we're calling it these days?” Patrick suggests aloud.

My eyes widen in horror as I look over at Hawke, who wears an uneven smirk on his mouth, his brows raised in confusion.

*My poor, sweet boyfriend. So naïve.*

“I have plans,” Hawke interjects coldly.

Trust me, I don't care. But he's just such an ass about it. Yes, hanging out with me probably isn't on anyone's wish list, but Jesus, his decline came fast and with a punch.

“Ah, well,” Patrick starts, trying to come up with something.

“I'll be fine, just...go,” I say with a light, reassuring smile.

He shouldn't have to worry about entertaining me. I'm a big girl, I can figure it out.

Patrick leaves for work as I head to my room to edit for the day. Hawke is still at the table reading, so I pass by with my

coffee in hand, saying nothing at all.

“Cole,” he says softly, eyes still on his book.

*Did I imagine that?* His voice was so quiet. I brush it off and continue walking.

“Cole,” he says again, louder, and I turn to look at him by the door of the bedroom.

He’s slightly turned in his chair, his arm dangling over the back of it while his head tilts at an angle to look at me. I raise my brows, waiting for him to talk.

“Just wanted to try it out.” He grins his wicked smile, then turns back to his book.

*Jerk.*



Later in the day, I hear Hawke leave the house, so I relax and decide to watch some TV.

After binging a few shows, I grow bored and realize it’s only five. I grab my phone and look through my contacts. Who could I call?

There’s my sister, Johanna, who luckily lives on the other coast. Not happening. There’s John from work who’s probably spending time with his pregnant girlfriend or working at the bar tonight.

And...that’s it.

After college and moving to this new town with Patrick, I lost touch with most of my friends. I didn't have many people I truly connected with here yet, and I literally don't know anyone but Patrick and his family. When I moved here, it was solely for him and his plans. I should really try to branch out, meet some new friends. The problem is, I put so much stock in Patrick. I'm always waiting for him, planning my day around his schedule. I literally work around him instead of deciding what I want to do and when. It isn't fair.

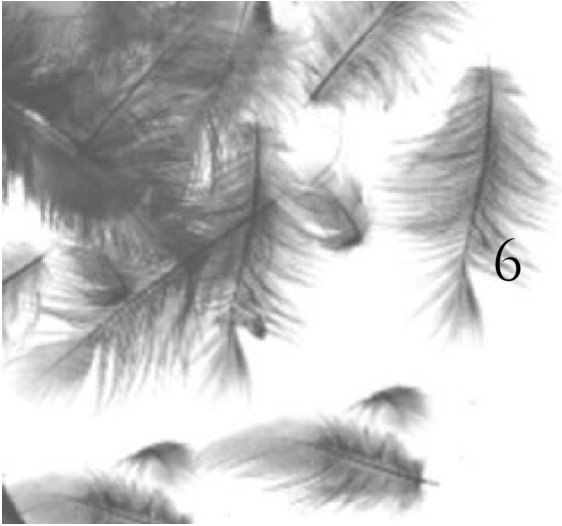
Yes, he provides for me, wants to build a life with me. But that doesn't take away from the fact that I'm my own person, too. I'm realizing how much I've been giving in this relationship and it's really affecting me.

I get up off the couch, head into our bedroom, and open the closet, looking at my sad reflection in the long hanging mirror. I can't hole up here just because Patrick's gone.

Screw this. Let me take a page out of Leonard's book and go to the bar solo.

Grabbing my cute mini skirt from the hanger, I pair it with a simple rose-colored tank-top and slide into my over-the-knee velvet boots. I curl the ends of my hair and leave it loose and down my back, apply some light makeup, then grab my purse and a light jacket, and hit the road.

If no one is around to wine and dine me, I'll take myself out on a date. I deserve it.





## NOT A PARTY

**W**hat a horrible idea this was.

I felt confident at home, but as soon as I stepped foot into 9-5 Slide, I felt like a damn fool.

It's busy tonight, which is helpful, but I keep getting looks from random guys, probably wondering what the hell I'm doing dressed up in a small town biker bar. Because, let's be honest, who the hell does this?

John's eyes catch mine from behind the bar as his face lights up. "Nic! Hey! What are you doing here?!"

"I'm here to drink," I answer, sidling myself up to the old mahogany.

"Well, you came to the right place. I think?" he comments with confused amusement.

"Kinda got ditched last minute, and I just wanted to get out of the house. I was hoping to ask Leonard on a date, but it appears even he is busy tonight."

He laughs and grabs a bottle behind him. Putting two shot glasses down, he pours up the Dragon's Blood.



“Oh man,” I whine. “What’s this mixed with tonight?”

Dragon’s Blood gets made early in the night. Usually tail ends of whatever bottles of alcohol that could flow together, making a toxic concoction that would be sure to set you right. Total small-town bar shit.

“Your guess is as good as mine.” He raises his brows along with his shot glass, clinking mine before we both choke down the burning liquid.

“Fuck.” He coughs.

“Ugh, I taste Jager in that,” I say in a hoarse tone.

“And something peach.” He twists his face. “Another?”

I make a pained face, pushing my glass forward, shrugging. “Why not?”

A few drinks in and I’m feeling all warm and friendly. I play a game of solo darts while making conversation with a sixty-year-old construction worker who’s also conveniently alone for the night.

He offers to buy me a drink up at the bar as John watches in total amusement. He laughs and slides over a cranberry vodka and I thank the old man who’s settling up to leave.

I head back over to my solo dart session with my fresh drink. Just as I’m pulling the darts out of the dartboard, the front door swings open and I see Billy Idol knockoff walk in with some of the same guys that were here the other night celebrating Hawke’s recent prison release.

He peeps me in the corner immediately and walks over.

“Hey! It’s you!” he says excitedly, leaning against the pub table near me.

It’s hard not to admit he’s cute. In a wired out, Machine Gun Kelly, kind of way. But he also has a very good vibe about him. Good energy. Fun energy.

“It’s Nic.” I smile shyly, lining back up to throw my darts.

“Nic,” he says with a grin. “I like it. I’m Kid. Nice to officially meet you. But what are you doing here? On a date?” He looks around behind me as if some man is about to jump out at him.

“Something like that,” I respond, trying not to admit that I’m a loser who takes herself on dates.

The door flies open again as Hawke walks through. I groan internally at the sight of him. Fitted black jeans, loose-fitting olive green top with his leather jacket on top, and black lace-up combat boots to match. He should just announce, “I’m a bad boy!” upon arrival. I think we’d all get it.

His cold, hard face turns to find his friend as his eyes narrow at my presence. He looks around, confused, then walks over to us. His inky hair falling into his eyes before he swiftly pushes it back.

“What are you doing here?” he asks in a hostile tone.

“She’s on a date,” Kid answers with a grin, wiggling his eyebrows at Hawke.

His face drops as he looks back at me with a quizzical expression.

“Toad! There you are,” Kid yells, running over to the bar to someone he recognizes.

Hawke. Kid. Toad. What’s up with people in this town and their strange names?

“You’re on a date?” Hawke practically growls at the words.

“Chill *bro*, I’m here by myself,” I retort with an attitude all my own, turning to throw a dart.

The liquor is definitely kicking in. Along with the confidence, apparently. Screw him anyway. I have more rights to this place than him. I work here.

Hawke repositions himself in front of the dartboard, casually leaning back and dropping his head against it, looking at me through lowered lids while toying with that lip ring with his tongue again.

“Move, or you’ll force me to show you how good I really am.”

His eyes rake over my body, and I can feel every part that they touch like a ray of lasered heat. He lingers on my exposed thighs, then trails his gaze back up to my eyes, a grin forming.

“Wanna make a bet?” he asks in a dangerous tone.

I shouldn’t, but screw it—Dragon’s Blood.

“Sure,” I answer.

“Shot for shot, whoever gets the highest points on one throw wins.”

“Easy. What are we betting on?”

He turns to grab the darts from the board as I accidentally peer at his tight, muscular thighs and ass in those distressed black jeans. He’s so proportional.

“You decide,” he says, handing me the dart.

“Hmm.” I think for a moment, then look at the bar, coming up with an idea. “If I win, you have to finish the bottle of Dragon’s Blood.”

His brows knit together as he looks at me like I’m crazy, clearly not understanding what I’m talking about.

“Fine.” He shakes his head as if it doesn’t matter, anyway. “If I win, you come with us.”

“What? Come with you where?”

He doesn’t answer, just holds his hand out for me to shake.

Black rings line his long fingers, his knuckles pronounced, more than likely split from numerous fist fights. I see the hawk tattooed on the back of his hand, noticing how it somehow represents his strength in the way it’s formed.

Grabbing his hand, I shake it, feeling slightly flushed at the contact, then feel him tighten his grip, holding onto it, not letting go. I direct my eyes towards his and the seriousness his face holds makes me swallow. He’s looking through me again.

My body comes alive in his presence, and I'm suddenly aware of everything. My heart pounding in my chest, my hairs standing on the back of my neck, my hand burning from our only point of contact.

He finally lets go and I stand with my toe against the yellow taped line, attempting to breathe while lining my arm for the shot.

I shoot, hitting the 20.

I glance over at him with a little smirk. *Take that sucker.*

He removes his leather coat, setting it on the chair at the pub table behind us, then rolls his shoulders as if preparing to pitch a no-hitter. I try to sneak a peek at his veiny, tattooed arms, but before I can even make out one image, his head twists towards me as he throws the dart.

I squint, trying to see where it landed, then look back to Hawke, who hasn't taken his eyes off me.

*He hit the triple twenty.*

"You bastard," I whisper.

He smirks, then turns to grab his jacket from the chair where he left it, never even looking at the board. He puts his arms through it, showcasing a flash of tattooed flesh beneath his shirt, above his pelvis. There's a phrase that's inked there, and I want nothing more than to find out what it says. But before I can see it, he turns and begins walking towards the exit.

With his palm flat on the door, he turns back, giving me a little let's go nod.

I take a deep breath and sigh. This is about to be bad.

Kid sees Hawke leaving and pats the guy he was talking to on the back. "Ah shit, looks like we're leaving. Catcha later, man."

He bumps into me as we both head to the door together.

"Aye, Nic, you leavin'?"

"Nope, I'm coming," I reply blandly.

He looks at Hawke, who's grinning mischievously back at me, then back to my reluctant face.

"Well, alright then." He wiggles his eyebrows with a devilish smirk. "But, I get shotty!"

I follow them over to a vintage, burnt orange Mustang, ready to hop into the back seat when Hawke wraps his hand around my wrist, stopping me.

"Fuck no you don't. Get in back," he yells at Kid, letting go of my wrist so I can walk around the car.

I rub the spot he touched, suddenly feeling the burn of his skin on mine again.

We all get into the car, one I've never seen at our place before. I didn't think Hawke even had a car to be honest, but this one is unique. It feels like if he would fix it up a bit, it'd be worth a lot. We take off, driving to an unknown location as the smell of weed fills my nose.

“Wanna hit?” Kid asks me with a coarse tone to his voice, tapping my shoulder lightly with a bowl.

I’ve smoked weed before. More than once, actually. But at the moment, I’m feeling nervous as hell, not knowing where I’m going with a crazy-haired pothead and an ex-convict driving me there. Kinda not feeling the vibe.

“You dick. You know I’m still on probation. Get that shit out of here!” Hawke yells from his seat, glaring at him in the rearview mirror.

“Oh, you’re such a drag. Drag, get it?” He laughs hysterically in a high-pitched hyena voice from the back seat, clearly on his way to being messed up already.

I glance at Hawke, who must feel my eyes on him because he looks over at me. Shaking his head at Kid, he readjusts his grip on the wheel, slouching back into the seat with his legs spread wide.

He looks ridiculously attractive driving this car. So natural. So manly. I divert my attention away from him towards the window for the duration of the trip as a necessity.

We finally turn onto another road, then turn again, pulling up a small pathway between rows of trees until we follow an old gravel road leading us to a cabin in the woods.

Hawke parks the car and gets out, saying nothing. I instantly feel stupid for agreeing to this bet. *Damn Dragon’s Blood.*

There are a few other cars lined up and I can already hear the bass of music being played from inside. Laughter comes

from the porch, and a couple of girls are hanging out outside the door.

“Is that who I think it is?” one girl, a brunette with shoulder-length hair, yells.

We walk towards the door as Hawke grabs my hand, lacing his fingers through mine gently. I suck in a breath. The intimate gesture has me looking down at our hands, then up at him with confusion.

*What is he doing?*

He gives me a light nod, as to go along with it, so I do.

We approach the girls, and their eyes immediately go to Hawke.

“Oh my God, it is you! I didn’t think you were coming back.” The brunette jumps up and attempts to hug him.

I try to move back and release his hand when he holds on tighter, pulling me back towards him.

“Guess once wasn’t enough.” She tries kissing him and he backs away from her, pushing her down with one hand and pulls me into his waist.

It’s a strange feeling. It feels so natural and so comforting while also making every part of my skin that’s touching him itchy.

“Fuck off, Lilah.”

Her smile drops as he pushes us past her. She scowls at me as I stare wide-eyed at her. I didn’t come here for trouble.



I feel her glare following me more than I can see it. She's pissed. An ex-girlfriend, perhaps? Clearly, they messed around earlier tonight, probably before he came to the bar.

We walk into the cabin and I get hit with a pungent smell of stale beer, weed, and firewood. A strange mixture, but this is a party cabin, clearly.

There's a couple making out on the vintage chair in the corner of the room, a girl going down on a guy in the kitchen, and a guy and two girls getting intimate on the couch. The coffee table is lined with drugs and beer bottles, whiskey bottles, pipes, coke, you name it.

Kid runs over to a girl with jet black hair who's sitting on the kitchen counter, clearly waiting for him—her body, littered with tattoos and piercings. He grabs her by the back of the neck, tilting her head and sticking his tongue down her throat immediately.

*Where the hell are we?*

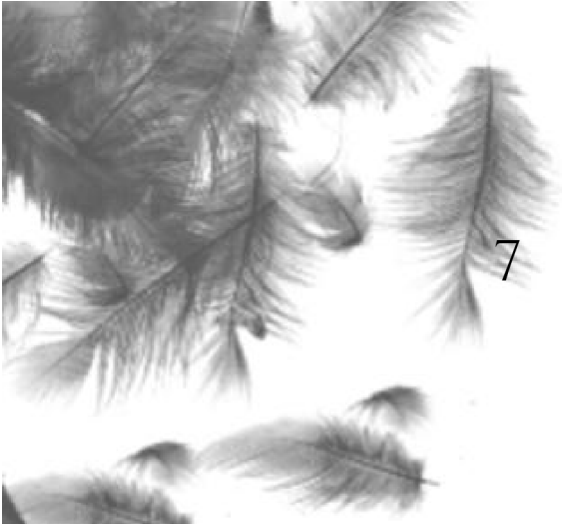
A couple of scantily dressed women shoot more glares in my direction, then focus their eyes on Hawke. It appears he's the hot commodity here.

“What is this?” I ask softly, still staring at the couples practically engaging in sex before me.

“A party,” he replies smugly, enjoying my prudish behavior.

My wide eyes focus on the guy with two girls as one of them undoes the zipper of his pants while the other licks his tongue.

“This is not a party.”





## BULLSHIT NIGHT

“**Y**ou’re so pure.” Hawke mocks in a condescending tone.

He leads me out of the busy group sex session that appears to be forming in the living room, and into a room off the hallway that has a couch along the wall and a distressed leather lounge chair settled into the corner. Books fill a bookshelf in the opposing corner and there’s a wooden desk against the wall under the window.

He sits back into the lounge chair, cracking open the beer he grabbed for us, and props one leg up. Taking a drink of the beer, I noticed the roll of his throat as he takes a long pull, staring at me the entire time until his lips finally slip from the glass bottle.

“Because I don’t attend orgies or junkie parties on the regular? Yeah, okay.” I scoff, attempting to open the beer he so kindly handed me. But I can’t. It’s not a twist off.

He watches me struggle with a cocked brow and an amused smirk pulling at the corner of his lip before standing, stripping my hands of it. He hits the top of it at the same time he drops

the bottle against the corner of the desk beside him, effortlessly opening it and handing it back to me. I swallow before looking away, reluctantly taking it from him.

“So, why were you at the bar, anyway?” I ask, attempting to clear the awkward air with conversation.

He rests his arms casually on his knee, the neck of the beer hanging from his fingers. “Kid needed a quick ride. He’s tanked. Clearly.”

“He needed a ride to the bar? To stop there and then leave?” I ask. *I’m confused.*

“See. Pure.” His lips hover on the rim of his bottle as his eyes roll.

I sit and think about that for a minute. Then it clicks, he was probably buying or selling drugs, Hawke was his sober ride.

I’m getting really annoyed by his rapid change in attitude. First, he’s playful and somewhat easygoing, then he’s annoyed and standoffish. Why bring me here if this was all that was going to happen? Sitting in an office while people have sex and do drugs around us? I could’ve been back home by now, in my pajamas.

“Why did you want to bring me? Why even make the bet?”

He toys with his bottle, peeling at the corner of the label before his eyes snap up to mine. “I just wanted to piss off Lilah. You looked decent enough.” His eyes trail my body, focusing on my exposed thighs again. “Plus, it’s entertaining

for me, seeing her upset. Now she'll leave me the fuck alone," he comments before returning to his bottle peeling.

*Dick.* He brought me here just to use me to piss off some girl he messed around with so she wouldn't bother him? He's disgusting.

"You're a class act," I spit out. "You used me."

"Please, this is the most thrilling thing you've done all year. I'm sure of it."

"I was having more fun by myself." My arms cross over my chest as I glare at him.

"Really? Going to the bar...that you work at...by yourself? It's the saddest shit I've heard in a while."

I roll my eyes. "Let's just go home already."

His face turns combative at the mention, but then his lips curl up again. "As much as I love the fact that you call my place your home"—his grin drops to a scowl—"we can't."

"What do you mean? Take me home. Let's get in your car and go! This is stupid!" I say before turning to leave the room.

"Cole, wait," he rushes, getting up off the lounge chair and walking towards me.

He grabs my arm, pulling me back and shuts the door I had just opened. Pushing me back against it, I suck in a breath as the hard surface hits my back. He holds the doorknob in one hand as his other rests on the wood beside my head. His face is

inches from mine and it's obvious in the way his pupils dilate that the closeness is doing something strange to him.

"What are you doing?" I ask breathlessly, surprised by his actions and his response to them.

He knows I'm with Patrick. This can't be what it seems.

"You should stay in here," he says, his gaze drifting down to my parted lips. "It's not safe for you out there."

"W-why?" I whisper, too aware of his closeness to me.

I have a feeling witnessing an orgy would be a lot safer than this bubble of Hawke's I'm in. I feel the electricity pulling my body to his, but I fight it. It's wrong. He's wrong. He keeps gazing from my eyes to my lips, slowly inching forward as his mouth parts ever so slightly, then pulling away, tightening his jaw.

He closes his eyes, slowly moving forward until his forehead drops on the door next to me. He turns his head, facing my cheek as I try to remain focused on looking forward. My eyes curiously look over at him, our lips inches apart. A pained expression takes over his face, and he closes his eyes.

*Why is he doing this to me?*

I smell the faint beer on his breath and wonder for a second if his tongue tastes the same.

*Jesus, Nic, snap out of it.*

My heart rate is fast enough to cause a heart attack. My chest rises and falls at the light contact between us, and my entire body comes alive, realizing his presence, yet I'm frozen in place. I couldn't move if I wanted to.

He opens his eyes, catching me biting the corner of my lip. His tongue glides slowly across his bottom lip as his dangerous eyes seem to imagine things. Things that he shouldn't.

The animalistic look that once held his eyes slowly turns from passion into a painful emotion that spreads across his face.

"Fuck," he curses beneath his breath.

He slams his hand against the door next to my head, making me gasp, as he turns and walks back to the chair. He finishes the rest of his beer in a quick few swallows, then tosses the bottle in a bin near the desk. I'm just standing there, pinned to the door in confusion.

"We can't go right now. I don't have a car." He scowls out the window.

My eyebrow raises in question, and he turns to see it.

"It's Kid's car now. I sold it to him."

Well, that explains why he looked so casual and comfortable while driving it. So if I understand correctly, he sold his house, sold his car, and sold his soul too, by the looks of things. He's got nothing but Patrick and me to help him get back on his feet.



Patrick.

*I shouldn't be here.*

*Why am I here?*

“So, are you going to tell me why you really brought me here, Hawke, or are we just going to stay locked in this room forever?” I demand walking towards where he’s sitting, needing answers.

His face hardens and I feel a coldness come about, the darkness clouding his gaze. Not the same one he had a minute ago when our foreheads were together. When his eyes told an unspoken story of want and pain. When we were breathing the same air.

“The truth? Guess I was hoping you’d suck me off, maybe more,” he says cruelly, his brows lowering.

He switched up entirely. The guy that playfully brought me here, the one who looked at me with a pain in his eyes by the door, the one who’s clearly protecting me from the shit going on outside this door. He’s gone, replaced with this repulsive being who’s intentionally trying to upset me. He wears so many hats.

“You’re disgusting.”

The comment and the fact that he knows he’s under my skin has him standing and lurking back towards me again. “Am I?”

He cocks his head and I swallow, knowing I’m in trouble.

“The way you bite the corner of that lip every time I’m near you, and the way I can literally see your pulse pounding in that delicate little neck of yours, says otherwise.”

I take a step back, then another one as he continues to close in on me again.

“I mean, don’t you wonder what it’s like to be fucked by someone like me? That painful pleasure that’s just sitting deep inside you.” He backs me towards the couch against the wall near the door. “There’s an ache. A want. No, a *need* to be filled.”

My eyelids grow heavy as my lips parts open at his erotic words. I can feel myself getting flustered again as I become numb by his tone and the deep sultry voice he uses to coax me, curious about this pleasure he so willingly speaks of.

He ushers me against the couch until the back of my calves hit and I fall back into the seat. I quickly press my thighs together under my skirt and he takes notice.

“Isn’t that what you need?” he asks, leaning in closer. “To be fucked?”

His tone is raspier than normal, his entire demeanor somewhat terrifying, yet the words he spews entirely erotic.

He leans over me now, fists gripping the back of the couch as I sit beneath him, my legs unintentionally slipping open as one of his thighs slides against the inside of mine. I feel myself getting excited through my panties. My toes curling tightly into my shoes, my nipples suddenly awakened and aching to

be touched, licked, sucked, anything. The no touching is driving me to the brink of insanity. I blink my eyes rapidly, trying to wake from this sexual intoxication.

“I get fucked,” I reply, furrowing my brow as I glare back at him, but my breathy answer says anything but.

His dark, inky hair drops into his eyes, our faces inches apart. He toys with his lip ring again, clearly knowing what it does to me now.

“Like I said, I’ve heard. Literally. And no, you don’t.” He tips his head to the side. “Bet you wanna know what this feels like against you.” He flicks his tongue against the ring again. “I see you looking at it all the time.”

“Because it’s repulsive,” I counter, lying.

“I beg to differ. I think you want to see what it’s like to wrap those soft lips around it.” His lips curl into a devilish grin again.

He puts more weight on the knee onto the couch between my legs, rubbing the inside of my exposed thigh again. My aching center is begging to be rubbed by that knee. If he just leaned a little further...

Nope. I’m losing myself.

My body is entirely alive and alert in his presence, and I hate it. I can’t control this...this lust. That’s what it is. It’s lust. Lust I don’t seem to have for Patrick because we have love. It’s different. It’s better.

He leans forward, looking down at my parted lips, and I'm sure he's going to kiss me. His hand comes up as he slowly drags his fingers along my jawline and then under my chin, holding it between his thumb and forefinger. It's too much. I'm feeling too many things someone in a relationship should feel. I turn my head to the side, out of his grasp.

"I want to go home," I say abruptly, closing my eyes tightly, wishing like Dorothy to get my ass out of here, away from this temptation. A dangerous temptation that has me questioning myself. This isn't the place for me.

I slowly open my eyes and peek to see him paused in place with an eerie look on his face.

He straightens entirely at my words. His cocky smirk instantly drops into a somber face, almost sad for a moment, as he gazes deeply into my eyes again, trying to read me.

He turns, looking around the room, shaking his head.

"Yeah." He nods, almost agreeing to something in his own head before running a hand through his locks. "Yeah. Let's go."

He walks out of the room as I sit there confused by his total switch up again. Was that part of his plan? To seduce me? Sell me out? Ruin my relationship? Friends don't do things like this to each other. Patrick and Hawke's relationship is confusing me more and more every day.

I get up, following out the same way he left. The couples are all still groping, touching, licking, and sucking things to

the beat of the surrounding bass. There are people snorting coke off the end table, and a woman topless in the corner dancing with a handsy guy. Looking closer, I see that Lilah chick he was trying to make jealous in the other corner, still eyeing me with daggers.

My eyes find Hawke in the kitchen where I see him talking to Kid again. The woman's legs are still wrapped around his skinny waist on the couch, her mouth on his tatted neck while he talks to Hawke. He grabs his keys from his back pocket and tosses them to him.

Hawke starts towards the door, giving me a nod to follow. Internally groaning, I clench my jaw, hating the way he expects me to just follow a head nod.

We get into the car as the scowl takes over my face.

*What a bullshit night.*

I'm mad at Hawke for bringing me here to use me then embarrass me, I'm mad at myself for even agreeing to come, and I'm mad at Patrick for leaving me when he could've prevented this entire evening from happening by just being home with me on my night off.

I see Hawke peer over at me from the corner of my vision. I roll my eyes and lean my head against the window. The drive couldn't take any longer and I swear he's never driven so slowly in his entire life. The silence is deafening and I'm counting the seconds until I can get out of this vehicle with him. His presence is just...aggravating.

He toys with me, teases me, does things to get a reaction, then leaves me feeling all awkward and self-conscious for having one. It's strange. What's the intention?

I check my phone to see if Patrick texted me yet, and my heart skips a beat when I see he did.

**Patrick:** Sorry baby, it's going to be a late night. Might just crash at my parents. Still here, working through files.

I read the text and let out a whiny groan, causing Hawke to look my way again. I drop my head back against the window until we get back.

As he pulls into the driveway, I grab the handle to the door, ready to pull it open before the car even stops. I can't get out of here fast enough.

"Cole," he says in a raspy tone.

I close my eyes, not wanting to turn and look at him.

"Cole, I'm sorry," he whispers in a peculiar tone. Different from the one used at the cabin.

What he's apologizing for, I'm not even sure anymore. Who knows? Who cares? I'm too grown for kid's games.

I just continue pushing the door open, leaving him behind me while I open the front door and make my way to my bedroom.

Collapsing onto my bed, the tears follow shortly after. I feel guilty for how I felt under his gaze; I feel sad for being used to provoke someone else; I feel strange for enjoying being in that private space with Hawke, liking how it made my body feel alive. Something about me just feels totally off with what happened. I can't even begin to describe it. All I know is I wish things could go back to being easy again. Less complicated, less...weird.

I finally hear Hawke enter the house, listening for his footsteps as he walks towards my door.

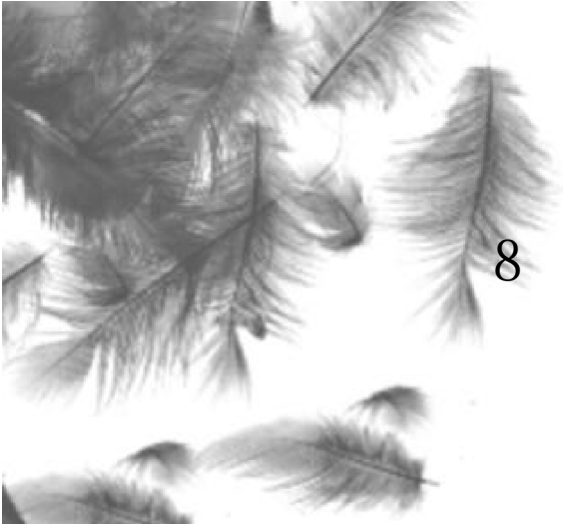
I hold my breath, hoping he doesn't knock or say anything. And thankfully he doesn't. The footsteps pause, then fade away, just like the vision of the fun night I thought I could have by myself.

A weird part of me wants to know why he's sorry. A part wants to know what he processed in that room when he turned off the seduction real fast and became a sad version of himself. The other part of me doesn't want to care at all.

He's an ex-convict, a liar, a manwhore, a manipulator, and who knows what else. He's proving that to me day by day.

I attempt to sleep this night off and hope that tomorrow brings some sort of clarity.

Clarity I desperately need.







The next morning I roll over, reaching to feel the cold spot on the bed beside me.

Even though I knew Patrick was going to be staying overnight at his parents' house, a small part of me still hoped he'd come back late at night. The need to be near me, touch me, smell me; unbearable for him. But, it wasn't.

I reluctantly roll out of bed, aware of the fact that my roommate may be in the bathroom or in the kitchen, so I throw on some oversized sweats and a sweatshirt, tossing my mess of hair into a messy bun and head for my lifeline; the coffeemaker.

As soon as I open the bedroom door, I'm hit with the smell of freshly ground coffee beans and the back of a certain someone's head.

*There's no escaping him.*

Walking into the kitchen, I brush past where he's sitting at the table.

I'm not totally over the embarrassment of last night, but I'm also not the type of person who holds grudges. Today is a new day and the ability to get along with him, or at least tolerate him, is inevitable.

I grab my favorite mug from the cupboard, sensing his eyes all over me as I pour myself a cup. Feeling the need to clear the awkward air, I sigh against the counter, then turn to face him. He's sitting in a chair at the kitchen table, legs crossed in his sweats and no shirt. His hair is wild and twisted all over the place, but he pairs it with a shockingly bright smile on his unfortunately attractive face.

"What are you so happy about? It's not even nine." I groan, crinkling my nose.

He slides down into his seat, crossing his arms behind his head, clearly unaware of how disgustingly perfect that makes him look, and shrugs. "I don't know. Guess I'm just a happy kind of guy."

The comment, made by probably the moodiest person I've ever known, has me nearly buckling over with laughter.

"You must be insane." I shake my head, putting some creamer into my cup.

"Honestly," he begins, swallowing, and my curious eyes find his again. His humorous face drops into a solemn look. "I just wanted to let you know I'm sorry about last night."

My lips part. I don't know what to say. I don't even understand last night, nor do I really want to.

“It’s fine. Really.”

“Are you going to tell Patrick what happened?” he asks abruptly, catching me off guard.

I stall at his question as my mind swirls around it. Was what happened significant enough that I’d need to tell my boyfriend?

I suck in a breath. “Uh...no. I mean, what is there to tell?”

“Right,” he murmurs, his eyes wincing in the corners.

I stare at him with my cup in hand, trying to figure out this man in a glance, as I lean against the kitchen counter. He sits forward in his seat, eyes on mine as well. We stay like that for a minute at least, and it’s the strangest feeling. It’s strange because it doesn’t feel weird.

Just two people gazing at each other.

“Well, I’m sure you have plans today—”

“I don’t,” he answers immediately, eyes still glued to mine.

I suck in a breath, then blow it out. “Okay...”

“Okay, well...wanna watch a movie or something? I don’t have shit to do and I’m not gonna lie, I’m bored as hell.”

*How kind.*

“I’m really thankful to be here for you to fall back on when you have nothing else cool to do,” I snap sarcastically.

He chuckles, showcasing that little dimple on his right cheek. One that I’m sure most people never get the chance to

see or even know exists. I hardly believe he smiles at anyone except for me when he's taunting or teasing.

"Cool," he says, clearly mocking my use of the word playfully.

The word sounds so unnatural coming from him and his whole badass look.

"C'mon, we can be friends." He runs his hand along the back of his neck, tilting his head to the side.

"Friends?" I cock a brow. *Yeah right.*

"It's not like we don't live together now. We should find a common ground. What's your favorite movie?"

"Favorite movie? That's like asking a lawnmower which blade of grass is its favorite."

His face contorts. "What a strange thing to say."

I chuckle. "I just mean, there are so many I love to tear through. I could never pick just one."

He nods lightly, as if understanding. "Okay, genre?"

"Mob movies," I answer immediately.

He tips his head at my quick response, nodding while circling his finger around the edge of his coffee cup.

"Looks like we found our common ground." He grins at me with a certain twinkle in his eye.

We settle into opposing sides of the couch and decide on *Goodfellas*, one of Hawke's favorite movies.

I get curled up into the blanket as he stretches out entirely on the end part of the L-shaped couch. I check my phone, hoping to see a good morning text from Patrick anytime now, but keep waiting with nothing activating my phone.

It's ridiculous really. I understand he's working hard, but him being gone from the house for this long is getting weird. I refuse to believe he'd actually be seeing someone else. A cheater in the Catholic world does not fly. His family would castrate him before I would. But despite that, this entire situation is hitting a nerve of mine.

About halfway through the film, I hear slow, steady breaths coming from the other end of the couch. I peer over at Hawke and find he's sleeping. One hand draped over his stomach while the other is casually resting above his head.

My phone vibrates against my thigh, so I check it immediately.

**Patrick:** Hey, I was up late working, only slept a few hours, will try to finish out some of these files this afternoon if that's alright. I'll be back later today. Love you, Angel.

Great. Just great. I'm trying not to get angry, but it hurts. It's a heartbreaking kind of pain to come second to someone who always comes first to you.

I turn back to Hawke and study him for a moment. The previously repulsive, egotistical asshole suddenly looks

peaceful and soft. Almost childlike. His mouth is slightly parted, leaving his full lips looking pouty, and I finally get a close look at the random tattoos littering his arms and chest.

Random shapes grouped together, the hawk on his hand, skulls paired with roses, and a few choice word slogans. One slogan says, *'I lied to get here.'* Another says, *'Aren't we all sinners?'*

There's a strange beauty in his chaos, a deceptive depth to his story, a magic to his madness.

A blanket lays propped up behind him on the edge of the couch, so I get up, walk over, and quietly pull it off. I reach over his sleeping body to pull it and when I finally do, he rustles beneath me. I still myself above him then lay it down across his exposed chest, covering the length of him while hoping he doesn't wake up.

As I'm turning to go back to my warmed space on the other side of the couch, I'm stopped by a hand on my hip.

Hawke grabs me, pulling me down onto the couch next to him. He wraps an arm around my waist, pulling me back into his chest, then wraps the blanket over us.

I stiffen immediately, my breath catching.

*Does he know what he's doing? Is he dreaming?*

He curls his legs up behind me, spooning me while he sighs and breathes softly against my neck.

My heart rate is racing and I'm frozen in position. What do I do? If I get up and he wakes up seeing me here, what will he

think? As much as I know I need to move, I settle into his warmth, his hard chest behind me. I can't help but to be totally and completely aware of the presence of his manhood pressed against my backside. *Good Lord.*

I swallow, trying to regulate my breathing by watching the movie, then decide to move after he's fallen into a deeper sleep.

Before I can do just that, I slip into my own slumber, peacefully falling asleep with Hawke curled around me.

The ringing in my ear is loud and obnoxious. I press the button on my snooze, but it doesn't stop.

"Make it stop." I hear a deep, raspy voice in my ear, causing my spine to straighten and sit upright.

"Oh my God," I say breathlessly.

I fell asleep next to him.

Panicking, I search the living room, then behind me towards the kitchen, seeing no Patrick in sight. My phone rings again, snapping me out of my horrified thoughts.

"Hello?" I say before clearing my throat, sounding guilty as hell.

"Hey, Angel, I'm on my way back, just wondering if you want me to pick up some food. Maybe a pizza? Is Hawke there?"

*Shit.*

I look back over my shoulder at Hawke, who is still lying there with his eyes closed.

*What am I doing?*

“Yeah, uh...yeah, pizza sounds good.”

There’s a slight pause in the conversation and I convince myself he knows I’m a dirty whore who takes naps with random ex-convicts in her boyfriend’s home.

“You alright? You sound a little out of it.”

“Uh, yeah. Yeah, sorry, I just woke up from a nap.”

Fact.

“Ah, alright. Well, I’ll grab a couple of pizzas and be back soon. Love you.”

My heart hurts.

“Love you too,” I respond, wincing in regretful pain.

I hang up the phone, sitting there for a minute, trying to convince myself I’m not the worst person in the world when I feel Hawke move beside me.

“Fuck yes, pizza.” He groans, stretching his legs.

I get up immediately, pulling the blanket off him entirely, then chuck it back at him, hitting him in the face.

“The fuck?”

“Why did you do that?!” I yell.

“Do what?”

“Pull me into you? I’m with Patrick.”



He scoffs, running his hand through his hair that I so eagerly messed up with the blanket. “Chill out, crazy. I didn’t see you moving. You could’ve got up.”

I grit my teeth, scowling at him. He’s right and I hate it.

“It’s really not that big of a deal,” he says coldly, rolling his eyes.

“Just...please don’t tell Patrick,” I ask, feeling my heart ache in my chest.

“Tell him what?” he comments angrily, before getting off the couch, heading towards his room, and slamming the door.

I go to the bathroom, adjusting my messy hair and spraying some of my perfume on to cover any smell of Hawke that may be lingering on me.

Patrick comes back home after another ten minutes and I imagine how it could’ve been if he didn’t call and just walked in on us curled up together sleeping on the couch. My stomach churns.

“Za’s here! Come get it while it’s hot!” he announces loudly.

He drops the pizza on the table at the same time Hawke exits his room. I was really hoping he’d stay locked up in there for the rest of the evening, you know, to make my life easier.

“How was your night, Angel?” Patrick kisses my cheek, making me blush.

“It was”—I glance at Hawke, who’s also conveniently looking at me—“interesting, to say the least.”

“I missed you,” he comments before kissing my lips.

I kiss him back eagerly, almost attempting to kiss away my strange cuddling infidelity. Hawke clears his throat, ruining the moment. I roll my eyes.

“Hawke, sorry man.” Patrick chuckles. “How are you?”

“I’m great. Refreshed from one of the most comfortable naps I’ve probably ever had.” He grins smugly at me.

My smile drops instantly—heart racing, throat constricting.

“Yeah, that bed isn’t so bad, is it? Nic and I slept on that our last year of college. It’s comfortable for being so old,” Patrick answers, oblivious to the remark.

“Is that so?” Hawke cocks his head to the side. “Did you enjoy sleeping on it too, Nic?”

He directs the question at me, with an emphasis on the “ick” of Nic. With a twinkle in his mischievous eyes and a smirk pulling at his lips, it’s clear to me he’s thoroughly enjoying this little game of his.

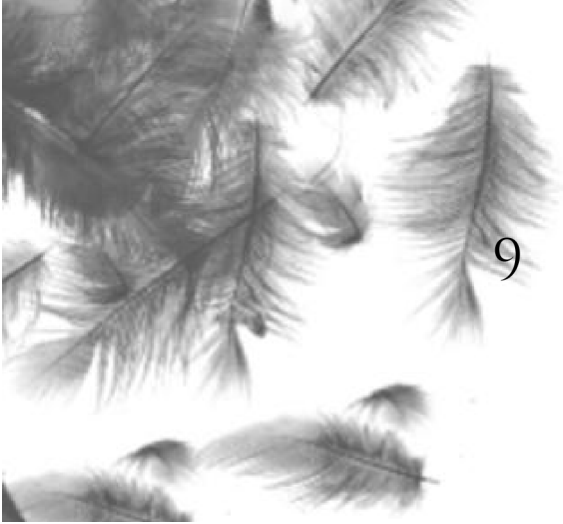
“Unfortunately, no. There’s a pesky coil that pops up and ruins everything. Worst sleep of my life,” I reply, eyes narrowed at him.

“What? I thought you loved that bed?” Patrick comments, grabbing a slice as Hawke’s eyebrows raise humorously.

“Loathe. Loathe is the appropriate term,” I grumble.

We know the truth behind the conversation, the euphemisms for our little nap setting up a fun game for him.

I can only hope Hawke plays nicely.





## PORTRAIT OF THE PAST

**T**here are so many things I feel like I know to be true in this world. For one, Patrick loves me. Another is the fact that Hawke is someone entirely unknown to me. As much as I feel like I understand him to an extent, the reality is, he's got a past. A horrible one at that.

Despite that, how is it you can still find so much comfort in the proximity of someone you don't know?

I am bound and determined to get to the bottom of whatever the past was between these two "friends" to discover the truth of who I'd been abashedly spending my free time with.

After an uncomfortable dinner, Hawke finally left after getting picked up by Kid to go who knows where to do who knows what...or who.

I was glad to finally have some alone time with Patrick, even if it was long overdue.

"Remember that night we ordered pizza at The Roma after Chris's birthday party?"

I snort, already remembering the memory. “The night we never got a chance to eat the pizza because we both fell asleep in the cab on the way back, forgot it on the backseat?”

“Oh, I was so mad! The Roma has the best pizza, and we just left it there like it was nothing!” Patrick cries out.

“Well, I think we had other things on our mind that night.” I grin seductively.

He pulls me into him on the couch. “We sure did. I couldn’t take another minute without putting my hands all over you. You looked phenomenal in that dress.” He nuzzles his nose into me playfully.

“God, Chris was so drunk. Remember, he told me that if I didn’t marry you, he’d amputate his thumb after medical school?”

“He said that?!” Patrick asks humorously.

“I told you that.” I giggle.

“Well, we can’t let that happen. Everyone needs a thumb.” He smiles, pulling my hand up to his lips and kissing my thumb.

I bite my lip, cuddling into him again on the couch. This is how we were. Playful, happy, content. We just need to get back to us again. The distractions and issues lately have my head spinning and I just want to get back to what makes sense. Part of that problem is the new roommate.

“So, in all honesty, how long do you think this arrangement is going to last?” I question, circling my finger in the air as we

lay back on the couch.

“What, with Hawke living here?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I don’t know. I didn’t set a date or anything for him to leave by. Just assumed he’d figure it out once he got his feet on the ground again.”

“And how’s he going to do that? Seems he has no interest in finding a job, unless you count hooking up with whores, a daytime gig.”

Patrick chuckles, dropping his arm around me. He pulls me into him and continues watching the television while talking.

“If it bothers you, I can talk to him.”

*No way.* That would only insinuate that I didn’t like him seeing other women, which is *not* the impression I want to make.

“No, really, it’s fine.”

He kisses the top of my head and continues silently watching the episode.

I pull back from him, turning to face him with my legs crossed beneath me on the couch. “I want to know something.”

He cocks his brow, sensing my seriousness. “Of course, anything.”

My lip springs free of my teeth before I finally ask, “What was Hawke in prison for?”

“Nic...” He groans, looking away.

“What? Why can’t I know? I trust you to tell me the truth of the matter before I find out on the internet for myself.”

He sighs, rubbing his forehead with his thumb and forefinger.

“Tell me,” I demand.

He glares back over at me, reluctant to talk, so I cock my head with brows raised, making it clear I’m not dropping this.

“I don’t want to get into it. It’s not my place.” He raises his hands.

“Seriously Patrick?”

“Look, I’ve got a plate full of work I need to focus on, a girlfriend to keep happy, and bills to pay. I’m not focusing on the past, just moving forward. Don’t bother yourself with the technicalities. He’s out now, and trying to make a life for himself. No need to go digging.”

He ends the conversation with that, leaving me utterly confused.

*Why is he protecting him?*

I’m going to find out what happened one way or another.

Soon after our episode finishes, we climb onto our queen-sized mattress together after brushing our teeth and washing up before bed.

He wraps his arms around me, holding me to his chest as his thumb trails along my arm. I run my fingers through the light



chest hair, enjoying the smell of him I missed so much.

How could I ever have done this with Hawke? It's so intimate, cuddling, holding someone like this. What a terrible mistake that was.

"I missed this last night," I confess.

He sighs, continuing his motions along my arm. "I'm sad to say there will be more of that."

I prop my chin up on his chest. "What? What do you mean?"

"One of our accounts in Denver wants us there to meet with the executives to discuss advancing our services. I was going to tell you about it tomorrow so we could enjoy tonight, but you need to know."

"Patrick—"

"I'm sorry Angel. You know I hate leaving you, but this is important."

"Important?! We are important. Why can't your dad go?" I whine.

I know I'm being childish. This is his job, and the company is doing extremely well. I should be overjoyed at the fact that they are extending the business statewide and beyond, but it hurts. I hate when he leaves and I miss him when he's gone.

"This is what I need to do. I'm taking over more of his accounts, you know this."

I huff in frustration, turning my cheek and laying back down on his chest.

“Hey, don’t be upset. Please Nic.”

I’m trying not to be. I really am. It’s not like I’m new to this. Even while in college, we had our fun, but studies always came first. He just seemed so much more laid-back, back then, not so worried about his father’s expectations and trying to appease him.

“I’ll be leaving next week for a few days to jump-start the paperwork and get our presentations ready. When I get back, we can plan an entire weekend of dates. How’s that sound?” He kisses the top of my head, squeezing me, attempting to cheer me up.

“I work weekends, Patrick. How’s that going to work?”

“Maybe you can get that guy to fill in for you? I’m sure there’s a way.”

There’s always a way for me to move around my life for him. I drop things for Patrick, and he expects that now, because my job isn’t as important as his. He never drops things for me. It isn’t right.

I roll over onto my side, hoping he’ll realize how upset I am and try to figure it out, make it better, make me happy. But, he doesn’t. He rolls over to the side and falls asleep, assuming that tomorrow will be better. Tomorrow I’ll give in.

I can’t sleep. My mind is reeling and I feel the need to scream, but I can’t. I want to shake Patrick awake, tell him he

needs to make a real place for me in his life or I'm leaving, but I can't.

Unfortunately, I depend on him financially. I moved here knowing I'd be living in this house with him, not needing to help with the mortgage. He'd allowed me the chance to stay here and pursue my writing career, finally try to focus on what I love. I owe him that.

I also know that if I make a big deal out of this, it won't change anything. He'll still stick to pleasing these bigwigs at the company and expect me to understand. He'd do anything for them and his dad, but would he do anything for me?

I creep out of bed, slowly tiptoeing out of the bedroom in my silk nightshirt and shorts, hoping to get a glass of water and get my mind right.

The kitchen is dark and quiet. I'm assuming Hawke is still out because I don't see a light coming from beneath the door to his room.

*Then I hear it.*

“Yeah, take it. Ah, fuck, take it all.”

His deep, strained voice tells me all I need to know about whoever is in there taking it.

I hear slurping noises along with his breathy groans, and I know exactly what's happening behind that door.

He's got a girl over, and she's sucking him off.

“Come on, faster,” he demands as the slurping continues along with his grunts and groans.

I can't move. I'm frozen in place, listening to this interaction. It's horrible, it's disgusting, it's wrong, but with my lack of an adequate sex life at the moment, it's surprisingly erotic.

“Use your hands.”

He keeps telling her what to do and doesn't sound happy about it, but they keep going at it.

I listen for a few more seconds until I hear him come. I actually hear him come. He's groaning as I imagine him filling this chick's mouth with it, shooting it down her throat.

I wonder what his face looks like. I wonder if she's enjoying being able to get him off?

*What's wrong with me?!*

I shake my head at the stupid and completely disturbing curiosities, grabbing a glass from the cabinet and filling it with water. I swallow a few sips, then set it back down in the sink and make my way back to the bedroom.

I'm not fast enough.

He opens the door as soon as I'm walking past. His eyes catch mine and a curious, confused look overtakes his face. He's wearing a pair of sweats and his skin is glistening with perspiration. His mouth drops open as he takes in the sight of me. I swallow, looking away, glad for the darkness of the room to mask my flush as I make my way back into the bedroom.

The woman who he was with is promptly ushered out. So much for cuddling, I guess.

*Such a manwhore.*



The next morning I wake up early as always, ready for the thing that satisfies me more than anything else. Coffee.

To my surprise, even after his late night rendezvous, Hawke is already up, sitting at the table in a pair of black sweatpants with a matching sweatshirt, his hair ruffled as if he slept on it while it was wet, and the coffee brewing away from the pot. I should've known.

Guess this is a thing. Early birds obsessed with coffee. We definitely have that in common.

“Good morning.” He speaks first, his green eyes twinkling as a tiny grin forms in the corner of his lips.

“I bet it is,” I comment with a snarky attitude, raising a brow suggestively.

He knows I heard him. He has to.

“Ha, it's like that?” He chuckles, showcasing his teeth before tonguing his lip ring.

His smile is completely contagious in the worst possible way. It gives me jitters in the pit of my stomach. Knowing I

can make him smile like that is a dangerous game I'm not ready to play.

“Like what?” I ask sarcastically.

He shakes his head, running his hands through his hair. I place my elbow on the counter, leaning to the side casually, waiting.

“Well, for your information, it wasn't that great.”

“Oh yeah? Why's that?” I play along.

“I've never had to work so hard to get off. Some people have no fucking idea what they're doing when it comes to sex.”

“Oh,” I whisper, my throat suddenly thick.

I'm more than likely one of those people. In the grand scheme of things, I'm practically considered a prude when it comes to the topic of sex. Not that I've really tried to be super courageous in exploring the bedroom, but Patrick keeps it pretty PG between us.

“You think you're one of those people,” he states, literally reading my mind.

I scoff. “No.”

He looks me up and down with a lustful gaze, eyes focusing on my exposed thighs before trailing along my body as he takes me in, thinking. “Nah, I bet you're one of those closet freaks. The good girls usually are.”

I can't tell if this is a compliment or supposed to be a diss. It's as if he can read my sexual struggles and problems just by looking into my scared, intimidated eyes.

"Too bad old Pat can't keep up." He smirks while his voice purrs.

"Too bad I can't what?"

Patrick's happy morning voice fills the room, and I immediately suck in a breath. I hide my wide eyes by blinking profusely, then smile and run up to Patrick for a quick hug.

"Too bad you can't come to the party next week. Cole said you were busy." Hawke clears his throat, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Cole? Who's Cole?"

"Nicole," he clarifies, as if he misspoke.

This is the only time he gets a pass for calling me that.

Patrick gives him a little curious glance, then brushes it away. "Oh yeah, she must've told you I was leaving town. I'll be gone for a few days."

Hawke nods his head slowly, his eyes slightly narrowed. Clearly we never talked about it, but he's playing along the best he can.

My heart is beating out of my chest. I swallow nervously, then turn to Patrick to change the subject. "Lunch? Want a sandwich today?"

“Nah, I’ll just eat out. Maybe you, if you’re around.” He nuzzles his nose into me and I blush in awkward embarrassment.

He leans in and gives me a kiss on the lips, before squeezing me against him, cupping me in front of Hawke.

I quickly glance over Patrick’s shoulder to see Hawke staring intently at a spot on the floor. His jaw is tight as he holds onto the kitchen chair with white knuckles, seemingly uncomfortable.

This PDA is becoming too awkward for me lately, but I can’t let anyone know it bothers me. Wouldn’t want someone thinking the wrong thing. I smile at Patrick, then shy away from his embrace.

“I’ll be back around five tonight. Maybe we can watch another episode of *Survivor*? We need to catch up.” He kisses my cheek, grabbing his keys off the counter, and heads for the door. “Love you, Angel. Have a good day. Later Hawke!”

*Survivor*, his favorite show that he assumes I like because I enjoy time with him, even if he makes me watch old episodes of an overdone reality TV game show.

I smile and give a light wave, crossing my arms in my robe while I chew on my thumb, watching his departure.

“*Survivor*?” Hawke scoffs from behind me.

I turn, facing him with a pained frown. “Shut up.”

He laughs at my remark, then pours up two cups of coffee. One for him, and my favorite mug for me. *He remembered?*



“He’s leaving next week?” he questions, making small talk.

“Yeah, work has him going to Colorado, so...guess he’ll be gone for a few days.”

“Nice.” He purses his lips together and looks at me like he’s waiting for something.

“What?”

He straightens from the position he’s stuck in. “Nothing, I just meant good for him.”

He’s acting weird. Insinuating something, giving me funny eyes, but I can’t ever quite grasp what he’s up to. He stalls, looking at me like I’m crazy, for not understanding. But understanding Hawke and the complexities that encompass him is not something that comes easily to me.

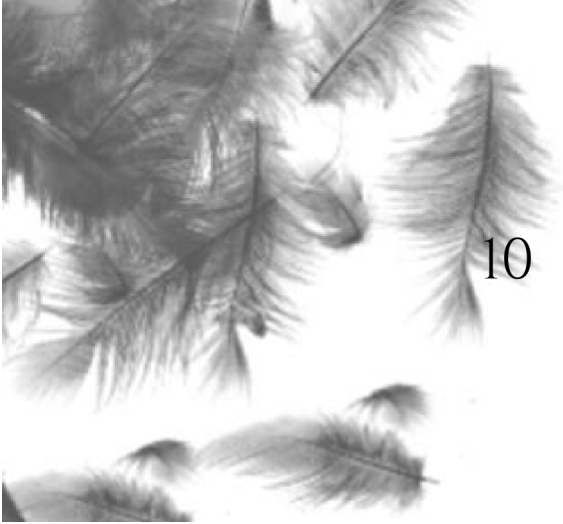
Grabbing his cup, he makes his way towards the living room, plopping down on the couch and turning the TV on as if he’s been doing it for years.

I can’t ignore the fact that he’s so casually effortless in his look. The sweats just always work for his tall, statuesque frame. But it’s more than just that. He looks content and relaxed. His face is a lot brighter than when he originally showed up. He just seems...happier.

Maybe “Susie-sucks-a-lot” cured him?

He calls to me, snapping me out of my little daydream, “Cole. Get over here. *Scarface* is on.”

A smile creeps across my face. *Now we're talkin' my language.*





**E**njoying coffee while watching mobsters murder each other has become a new favorite part of my day.

Hawke and I have been doing this for the past few days. Every morning after Patrick leaves for work, we settle into the couch, watch a new gangster movie, and enjoy a few cups of coffee before I begin my editing work from the office of our bedroom.

After we made our cups, we sit down together, slowly inching closer each day. We started on opposite ends of the sectional sofa initially, but after a few days and feeling more comfortable around each other, we've settled into the middle. It's fun, being able to enjoy films and talk freely about topics considered outrageous or easily dismissed by Patrick.

I've also been learning more about Hawke and who he is.

I found out he also grew up here like Patrick. Went to high school with him and everything. He had plans to enlist to become a Navy SEAL like his father once was, but when his father passed away, he was on his own. Each of his tattoos has a deep underlying meaning, his favorite being an outlined

image of Phil Collins on his ribcage. *Strange*. He'd dabbled in drugs to not only help pay bills, but to ease the pain of losing his only parent. While he kept the conversations short, he definitely cued me into a few realizations. He'd lost his way after his father's death, got into drugs, and shortly after went to prison. Why he went is still a mystery.

We're building a unique friendship and it's been nice seeing a more carefree side of him lately.

"So, are you actually going to get a job, or just continue drinking coffee, watching mob movies, and smashing women throughout the day?" I ask unabashedly.

He laughs. "It must really bother you."

"No, just curious if you had...plans?"

I don't know how else to word what I'm trying to ask. '*Are you planning on getting back to having a life after prison?*' just doesn't roll right off the tongue.

"If you're wondering what I'm going to do with my life now, don't," he remarks. "I don't have much of a choice in the matter."

He kicks his leg up on the coffee table, relaxing in his sweats, and leans towards me on his elbow. I can't help but study his long frame, or the way his piercing always draws my eyes to his lips. He's so interesting to look at. As soon as I feel like I'm gawking, I speak up.

"Why don't you have a choice in your own life?"

He ruffles his hair with his hand. “There are rules after you’re released. You don’t just get to go back into society again. I have a transition job that I’ll be starting soon at some presort mail company to get me back into the workforce. I’m under watch. Parole. You familiar?”

“Yeah...” I reply softly, not entirely sure how much he wants to divulge to me.

“Well, I’m on parole, meaning I have an officer who will check up on me and the house itself. I’m sure Patrick told you all about it.”

Not at all. I can’t believe Patrick. “No, he didn’t tell me anything,” I admit.

Hawke cocks his head, staring at me with confusion in his eyes. He drops his leg from the end table, sitting up and turning to me. “He didn’t tell you anything.” The words fall out of his mouth as if he can’t believe it.

“Nothing.”

“So you have no idea what I went to prison for?” he asks, his brows raising.

“No. I was about to google you,” I admit, a grin pulling at my lips.

His face drops instantly as he stares at me. He drops his eyes to the blanket on my lap, then a somber face hits.

“But I won’t, if you don’t want me to...” I finish, hoping to ease the sudden uncomfortable tension.

He talks, looking down as the words spill out. “One day.” He nods to himself. “One day you’ll learn the truth, and it’ll change everything.”

The words feel like they have so much weight to them. Whatever happened to him in his past was heavy. There’s no doubt. And yet, he speaks about it as if my life will change. Change everything? If he thinks that I’m going to think differently of him because of what I find out, he’s got it all wrong.

“I’m not the type that’s quick to judge like Patrick and them,” I mumble, my eyes finding the courage to connect with his.

“Ha!” He half laughs, half scoffs. “I think you called me a junkie the first day we met?”

I stretch my bottom lip, making a pained face. “Yeah. I think you’re right. Okay, I totally judged you...and maybe I shouldn’t have.”

“Maybe?”

“Well, you’re still an ass.” I grin, making him smile. “I know you were attempting to get back at me for calling the cops on you when we were at the cabin. Don’t think I’m not aware. Plus, my assumptions aren’t totally off.”

He swallows, looking suddenly uncomfortable. “I’d never have taken it too far. I was just messin’ with you.”

“Ahh...so my assumption was right. You did have a plan.”

He rolls his eyes. “Yeah, I wanted to seduce you, maybe get some pics, and blackmail you into fucking me.”

My eyes stretch like saucers.

“I’m just playin’. Chill, crazy. I’m really not that well thought out. I just wanted to kick it with you.” He leans back against the couch again and sighs. “Could’ve been fun, though.”

“Blackmailing me?”

His brow furrows, as if blackmailing is literally the last thing he’d want to do. “No. Fucking you.”

A sly grin slowly creeps across his devilish face, making me feel things in places I shouldn’t.

My face flushes and I try to hide my blush as well as you can hide a blush. “You whore.”

“Still judging me, I see.” He smirks back at my grin.

“I think you’ll find we are more alike than not in some regard. You have judged me too, Mr. Hawke.” I smirk and crack the ‘k’ of his name dramatically. “And for that, you are no better than me.”

“I think I’m starting to realize that.”

He stares at me for a moment, the words we’ve spoken just lingering in the air. He judged me the moment he saw me, too. Stick up my ass, prissy girl, tattletale, bible-humping girlfriend. Sure, I could see where he’d get it, but I’m not like these fake people I’ve surrounded myself with. I care deeply



and enjoy things that are real and authentic. Everything that I thought Patrick was when we first met, but that seems to be changing by the day.

He licks his teeth, thoughts clearly going through his head as we stare at each other for a moment before he turns his head back towards the movie.

I take in a breath. Being in his presence sometimes causes me to feel unable to breathe properly. He switches from being easy-going to serious to flirtatious to cold, all within a matter of seconds.

Today's movie is *The Departed*. I've seen this movie before, so has Hawke. As we watch, we get to the scene where Leo is about to have sex with the female character in the kitchen, you know, the one with the boyfriend? *Talk about uncomfortable.*

The air feels thick around us. The playfulness has settled and I'm trying my best not to move, not to swallow, not to breathe too hard. We watch the scene play out, about two feet away from each other on the couch. From the corner of my eye, where he's leaning his head back against the sofa, I can see Hawke's eyes glued to the screen, his lips slightly parted.

I shift uncomfortably and he notices. His head rolls towards me, eyes scanning over me. It's a passionate scene. A lustful scene. A scene in which each character can not contain their sexual attraction to one another, despite the issues at hand, and despite the fact that it's considered wrong.

I nervously bite the corner of my lip, unable to control the fact that my breathing has picked up. Hawke's staring at me

now, gauging my reaction to the scene, by what it seems.

I turn my head slowly, making eye contact with him. His expression is unreadable. His eyes hold a seriousness to them I haven't seen before. He gazes at me for a moment, then his gaze travels down to my lips.

My eyes fall hooded and every part of me feels on alert. I feel like I can't breathe; I feel dizzy and need to leave the heaviness that has become this room.

I close my eyes tightly, then turn towards the TV again and stand up, leaving my coffee on the table before me. "I should really get started on my work."

He closes his eyes for a moment, almost processing it, then his face turns cold again as he watches the TV, giving me a small head nod, almost dismissing me.

I shoot him a confused look. I don't understand his shift in energy. He's sending me so many unreadable signals. At least, I think so. Am I imagining these things? His looks? His energy? Maybe I'm losing it.

I make my way around his side of the couch, heading towards my room, feeling somewhat frustrated in myself when I hear his voice behind me.

"Cole, wait..." he says, sounding urgent.

I turn around at my door, seeing him walking towards me quickly. He reaches me, then pauses, standing directly above me.

"What?"

He moves in closer as my back hits the door, his large frame towering over me. He stalls, his mouth open, lips parted as if he's about to say something, but the words are stuck in his chest.

The look he's giving me makes me feel weak, like my knees are about to buckle under the weight of his presence. I stare into those eccentric eyes, the eyes that have seen things, horrible things I'll never even begin to imagine. For some strange reason, he sets those eyes on me with intent, as if they were meant to, and I fall into their intoxicating hypnosis.

“What?” The question comes out again, but more breathy than I intended.

I want him to say what he has to say, or do what he was about to do so I can run far away from this feeling. But he doesn't. He just drops his head forward against the door frame above me, his hair disheveled against it as he sighs.

I'm frozen again at the closeness. My face is by his neck. His scent hits my nose. Woodsy spice with a mix of cigarettes and coffee. An odd combination that he owns entirely. His forearm rests against the door frame, the other, hanging long, draped down as the edge of his hand gently brushes against mine.

I find I have the urge to touch his hand with the tips of my fingers, so I hold onto the edge of his. It should be an insignificant gesture, something friends do to comfort each other, but it feels like so much more.

He sucks in a breath at the contact, then swallows, his Adam's apple bobbing above me. He shifts his head down to look at me, still pressed against the door frame, his hair looking unkempt against it, almost representing the messiness that's happening here.

His fingers slowly lace through mine as his thumb gently runs small circles over my skin.

*What is this?*

I have the desire to feel his lips on mine, the urge to kiss him becoming an undeniable reality. I've never felt this way before. This ache to touch him, to feel more of him. I wonder if he's grappling with the same struggles.

"I—" he starts, leaning down towards me with his mouth parted, looking at my lips. "I-I need a smoke."

He backs away from me, flexing his jaw as he turns towards the door, running a hand through his hair. I hear him curse beneath his breath.

I stand there, blinking at his departure. There's an unspoken truth beneath the surface of our eyes. I can't seem to understand it yet, but something inside of me wants to keep trying.



Later that night, Patrick came home from work and jumped into the shower. I'd gotten some work done today, but

endlessly stared out of the window, replaying that scene between Hawke and I at the door.

Brushing it away, I make dinner for everyone. Not knowing if I would see Hawke again tonight, I'm surprised when he comes out of his room with his jacket hanging over his shoulder just as I'm setting out plates.

He looks like he is about to head out, but stalls when he sees me.

“Want a cheeseburger?” I offer with a brief grin.

Whatever tension there was, I need it gone. Let's get back to normal. *I need normal.*

His face relaxes with a half-smile as he slings his coat over the back of the chair. “Sure.”

We all sit and begin eating as Patrick fills the air with conversation about work. He goes on about contracts, and paperwork, and this new guy they hired who is a total nightmare. Hawke just eats in silence, looking up every so often to make eye contact with me, then looks back down at his food when I look away.

“But yeah, they want this guy to travel to Colorado with me, learn as we go. They even suggested he room with me, which is ridiculous.”

“What's wrong with that?” I question.

He turns to me, mouth agape. “What's wrong with that? Plenty. First, I should be able to have a room to myself to get my work done, and second, I don't even know why we've kept

this guy around. He isn't a part of our congregation, he doesn't align with our values."

I'm not even going to explain the frustration I'm feeling right now. Everything he's saying is totally contradictory.

"Do you really need to align yourself with people who are only of your religion?"

"*Our* religion," he clarifies. "And I don't feel like our family-owned business should hire someone who isn't. Our company is based on our Catholic values. It's what we stand for."

"So, let me get this straight. Being Catholic means aligning yourself with other Catholics. Okay, got it," I reply with a snarky tone.

"Don't give me attitude, Nic. You know how important this is as a representation of my family. If anything, you could do more in the church to help show your support. You said once we moved here, you'd start coming to Sunday service, but you haven't even done that. Hell, you need to, especially with your father and his little affair."

I drop my fork to the table, sending my steamed veggies flying. I push back away from the table, shaking my head. Hawke looks up from his burger, eyeing me, then Patrick.

"Ridiculous Patrick. This is ridiculous."

"Our faith is *ridiculous*?"

"You want to talk about faith?! Where in the church does it allow for premarital sex?! Or do all Catholics just get to pick

and choose which rules to live by?"

I don't care how unhinged I probably look. I've about had it with these Catholic values that don't seem so Christian after all.

"Nicole, lower your voice," he says sternly.

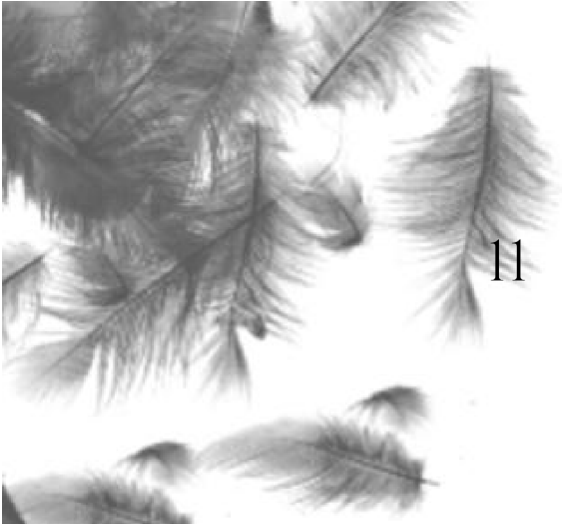
I get up from my chair, glaring at him and pointing my finger in his direction. "Do *not* call me that."

I turn and walk away from the guys, leaving to head to the bathroom.

I can't stand it. This religion talk, the fakeness of their family, and then the use of my messed up family issues as a low blow to end it.

I strip myself of my clothes, frustrated in dealing with this continuous issue between us we can't seem to change. I get into the shower, allowing the warm water to blend in with the tears already streaming my face.

I silently cry, feeling trapped in an uncontrollable situation, until the tears run dry and water is the only thing left to clean me of this night.







**A**fter I got out of the shower, I wrapped myself in my silk robe and went to our bedroom to get into something comfortable before bed. I needed that breather to cool off. Had I stayed at the table, who knows what would've come out of my mouth next.

As I walk into the room, Patrick is sitting on the edge of our mattress, waiting for me with his head in his hands. He looks up with a soft look on his face upon hearing me.

He stands, walking towards me, shaking his head. "Nic, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

He wraps his arms around me as I stand still, holding onto my anger, unable to just let it go.

"What I said was awful. It's been such an arduous week and I'm overworked and stressed and what I said was uncalled for. I went too far. Those words should never have come out. I feel awful." He sighs, shaking his head. "I apologize for hurting you."

His sincerity rings true. It's evident in the redness of his eyes. It's not like Patrick to do this. He's never talked down to me like this before. In all honesty, we were the couple everyone admired in college. We didn't fight; we didn't have drama like other relationships surrounding us. People always looked at us as the relationship that they strove for. But what was becoming of us?

As much as I want to stay mad, he is leaving tomorrow for two nights and I'm going to regret holding this grudge longer than I should. I know he's truly sorry, but he needs to know what he said was wrong.

"It's just not okay. You can't use my father against me like that. It hurts, Patrick. You know that."

"I know Nic, God, I'm so sorry." He holds my face in his, brushing his lips against mine. "You mean so much to me."

He presses his lips to mine in a tender kiss, and I part from him. "I'm just really tired."

He holds my hands, bringing me over to the bed and helping me under the covers. Wrapping an arm around me, he pulls me back into him, whispering into my ear, "I love you, Nic."

"I love you too."

I mutter the phrase but still feel the pain of his words. He plants kisses along my neck and jaw, littering me with love to make amends, but it's just not working at the moment. I'm hurt.

I wake up after falling asleep in that same position with Patrick, to a dark room. Checking the clock, I see it's around two in the morning. Realization hits me and I remember I left out all the burgers and sides I made for dinner, and knowing men, they're probably all still sitting out on the counter, spoiling.

I slip back into my robe, tying it over my underwear and tank top, and make my way to the kitchen. As soon as I open the door, I see a light shining from the kitchen. Walking up to the table, my lips automatically curl into a light grin.

“You.”

Hawke turns to me from the sink, his brows raised in surprise at my voice. The way his forehead wrinkles as his hair falls into his eyes when he looks at me gives me a strange tingling sensation in the pit of my stomach.

“Oh, hey. Thought you were sleeping,” he says softly, putting the pan in the drying rack as quietly as he can, then drying his hands with the towel slung over his tatted-up shoulder.

*He was washing dishes.*

He must've just taken a shower because his hair is extra shiny, as if it's halfway dry, and he's wearing a new set of gray sweatpants hanging off his hips. I can count every ripple, every ridge of his abdomen, with the way the kitchen light is highlighting the deep cuts from above. It's insane.

“I was, I just...” I stutter. “I forgot about the food with everything that happened.”

“You alright?” he asks abruptly, like he’s been wanting to ask for a while.

“I-uh, yeah...I’m fine.” I sigh. “Sorry I ruined dinner.”

“You didn’t *ruin* anything.”

I pause, looking up at his concerned face. His green eyes look darker in the moon’s light. I’d never take him for the sensitive, empathetic type, yet here he is surprising me again. I totally judged this book by its cover way too early.

“Thank you. And thanks for cleaning up.” I smile, an appreciative one.

“It’s nothin’.” He brushes me off, sitting down at the chair across the table from me. “So, did you guys make up? Make him sin again?”

His face is serious, then breaks into a deep hearty laugh, holding his hand across his lips to suppress it.

“Shut up.” I laugh along with him, dropping my head into my hand.

“Honestly, that was the funniest shit I’ve heard in a long time. You didn’t hold back, and to be honest, you were totally right. I’ve just never seen anyone lay it on him like that.” He looks at me, brows raised, impressed.

I rest my elbows on the table, holding my head up as I listen to him.

“I just wonder...” he trails, almost unsure if he should finish the sentence.

I feel like I know what he’s going to say and the questions he wants to ask. Why are we together? How do I deal with him? The family? But I don’t have the answers.

“It’s just hard for me sometimes...to deal with the family and the expectations...” I trail my words, realizing I may have said too much.

I don’t want to disrespect their family, talking badly about them with Hawke, who I still barely know.

“Hey.” He reaches his hand across the table, grabbing mine. The simple gesture, the softness of his long fingers on mine, gives me instant butterflies, making my stomach flip. “It’s okay.”

It’s like he can read my mind. He looks through me, feeling the hesitation I hold in my heart. He’s allowing me to be open and feel what I’m feeling. To be honest with myself. Something I haven’t done in a while. But, it’s too much for me. I’m not ready.

I smile nervously, then slowly pull my hand away. “Thank you. I really appreciate it. I should”—I clear my throat—“I should get back to bed. Have to get up early to get him to the airport.”

Hawke watches our hands separate for a moment, staring at the table. Finally, he nods and stands, his voice just above a whisper. “Yeah, of course.”

I walk back towards the bedroom, then stall when I reach the door, my hand on the frame, tapping my fingers lightly, remembering when he was leaning against it above me with that look in his eyes. That look of need. That look of knowing. Knowing that there's no going back.

I turn to face him, to tell him good night, to tell him thanks again, to look into his eyes and feel whatever I feel when he looks at me. But when I look back, he's gone.



The next morning after departing with Patrick to the airport and spouting out more *I'm sorry*, and *I'll call you the whole time* comments, he flies out to Colorado, and I make my way back to the house. I feel empty inside. Stuck in a moment. It's a strange feeling I can't seem to explain.

It's quiet when I get there. I don't know what I was expecting, but I guess I'd hoped to see Hawke standing in the kitchen in his sweats, making us some coffee while *The Irishmen* is starting on Netflix. But he isn't there. The place couldn't be more silent, more lonely. I decide to go back to bed for a while, cuddle up, and try to forget everything and everyone.

When I wake a few hours later, I smell coffee brewing from the kitchen. An excitement fills me that he might be out there. *Maybe he's back*. Going to the bathroom and brushing my teeth again, I fix my frumpy look and put my hair up into a

messy bun. I don't look awful, not amazing by any means, but I feel cute enough to be seen.

Walking into the kitchen, I look around for him. I see the pot of coffee and a little ripped piece of paper next to it. A note with his words scribbled on the surface.

*'For you. See you later.'*

I frown a little at the note. I can't lie to myself. There was some excitement in knowing I'd be able to hang out with my new friend today, watch movies, maybe even order some takeout while simultaneously working. Not spending time with Hawke makes me realize how much I truly enjoy spending time with him. Especially now that we'd have some freedom to just relax.

He makes me feel good about myself in a completely new way. I can be exactly who I am without worrying about saying the wrong thing or sounding like an idiot. He isn't a judgmental person by any means, especially because he's actually gone through tough times himself. He's more open-minded than Patrick, which makes talking to him delightfully interesting.

*See you later?* I wonder when that means. This afternoon? Tonight? It was kinda bothering me not to know. I brush it aside, grabbing the delicious coffee, and begin working on my edits for the day. Lucky for me, I love my work, and when I'm genuinely interested, I get sucked into stories that take me to unknown places for hours at a time.

Around dinner time, the house is still silent. I'd texted Patrick this afternoon, wondering if he'd made it safely there, but never heard back. He promised me he'd text, FaceTime, whatever it was going to be, but I'd heard nothing.

After sending my work in, and making myself a bowl of soup for dinner, I accepted that I probably wouldn't hear from anyone tonight. I settle into the couch to watch some reruns of a favorite comedy show of mine when I hear some rumbling at the door.

It rattles, and the door shakes, until I hear a loud bang against it, followed by a dragging sound. My heart rate increases, my breath getting caught in my chest. Getting up, I run around the couch to peer out the peephole, seeing nothing but legs that look like they're coming out of the bottom of the door with all too familiar black combat boots.

I let out a breath and open it as Hawke falls back into me.

"Fuck," he groans.

"Hawke? What are you doing?!" I shriek, catching him under his arms.

He's so heavy, like dead weight. He reeks of alcohol and a combination of other substances. Clearly, he's messed up. I vaguely remember him telling Kid that he can't be caught doing drugs at the moment. He could get sent back to prison. *I have to get him in this house.*

"Cole." He groans again. "I didn't want you to..."

"Shhh, just c'mon. Let's get inside."



With his assistance, I successfully drag him into the house and lay him down on the couch.

“What did you do?! Are you drunk? What are you on?” I ask him with legitimate concern.

“Just, just go to your room,” he slurs, running his hands down his face.

His black t-shirt is riding up on his abdomen and I see the tattoo that says *‘Every Saint has a Past, Every Sinner has a Future’* right above his pelvis. His ripped, dark jeans are hanging around his slim waist, his heavy boots, mostly untied, and his hair all disheveled.

“What? No.”

“Go to your room, Cole!” he yells, his bloodshot eyes staring into me.

“No,” I retort.

He throws his head back against the couch, giving up the fight, clearly not in the right frame of mind to even attempt to win this battle.

I make my way to the kitchen and fill up a large cup with ice water, handing it to him before grabbing a frozen pizza and putting it in the oven.

Reluctantly taking the water, he downs the entire glass before me. I listen as his lip ring hits the glass, watching as his throat rolls and his Adam’s apple bounces as he swallows it all. He pulls the empty glass from his mouth and the water

clings to his lips like it loves where it is. He's not even aware that I'm blatantly staring.

"Patrick's in Denver?" he asks, staring straight ahead at the wall as if trying to focus.

"I don't know, I think so." I shrug.

"He didn't call you?" His eyes narrow in disgust.

I shake my head no. He scoffs, then rolls his eyes.

I'm sure my relationship with Patrick is a total joke to him. He doesn't seem like the kind of guy who would ever want to commit to only one person. Where's the fun in mild sex and occasional fighting? But it's the love he doesn't see that makes it worth it, it's the trust that makes it sustain. Right?

After the pizza's done, I bring him a plate full to where he's still lying on the sectional.

"You didn't need to do this," he comments, still sounding messed up, looking up at me through his long eyelashes, his eyes red as ever.

"Shut up and eat," I reply, then grin, because that felt good to say.

"Damn. Who are you?" He looks at me with eyebrows raised, then grins back lazily, taking the pizza from my hands.

He eats and I refill his water.

"Thank you," he mumbles.

"So, are you going to tell me why you were out drinking?" I ask, humor in my tone.

“No.”

“Ha, I figured. You’re reckless. Trouble,” I say playfully, sitting down next to him.

Teasing him is slowly becoming my new favorite hobby. I like our banter.

He leans back against the couch again, licking his lips, then looks at me with hooded eyes and no humor whatsoever. “You have no idea.”

I suck in a breath, my mouth suddenly feeling dry as a desert.

“I’ll get you a blanket.”

I grab a blanket from the basket near the TV, assuming he’s probably just going to crash where he’s at. I hand it to him with a light smile. He looks at the blanket, then at me, then grabs it with his hand. The same hand with the black hawk on it. The same hand with the black rings adding to his whole badass look. The same hand that screams masculinity in its large, rough form.

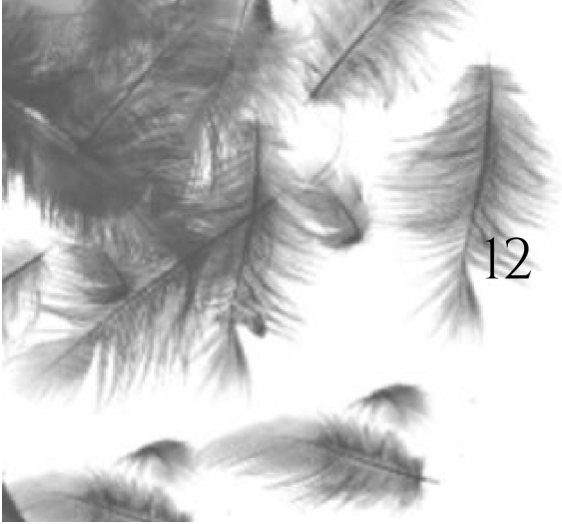
After he grabs it, he grabs my outreached hand. His eyes close tightly, as if fighting himself on what he’s about to say. “Stay.”

The one word drops from his mouth as a command, not a question. The one word that means more than the definition itself. The word that carries a weight with it. A weight I’m finding I want to carry.

He opens his reddened eyes again, his lips just barely parted, before kicking off his boots and laying back casually. He opens the blanket for me to lie next to him. I stand there for a second, debating whether or not this is a good idea. I know it's not, but I find any excuse to make it one. It's only cuddling, it's only the couch, he's only a friend. *Where's the harm in that?*

I lay beside him, my back to his chest as he props the pillow beneath my neck for support. He's so warm, yet so hard against me. His long arm drapes around me, pulling me tightly to him as he adjusts his position, fitting perfectly against me. He breathes me in, then sighs as he slowly drifts off to sleep. It feels way better than it should and I don't know what to do with that. I'm losing myself to him, slowly but surely.

I drift off to a new place. A place that's terrifying, yet comforting, amazingly effortless, yet filled with trouble. I'm crossing a line that shouldn't be crossed, but can't help but inch closer and closer to that satisfying destruction I desire.





## THE PARTY IS HERE

**S**itting in the chair at my desk the next day, I breathe deeply, calming myself before calling Patrick.

The phone rings against my ear and I remember Hawke's arms encircled around me, holding me against his solid, warm frame.

The phone rings and I recall the way our legs were intertwined, my thigh resting over his, as one hand held my lower back, the other wrapped up behind my neck.

The phone rings and I remember the sound of his heart beating beneath me, my cheek against his chest, breathing in mint and musk, the sweet scent of him.

The phone rings and I hear my boyfriend's voice, snapping me out of my late night memories.

"Nic, hey, baby! I'm so sorry I didn't call."

"Patrick," I shake my head, clearing my thoughts. "Are you alright? Did you make it okay? I've been worried," I say, rolling a pencil between my fingers at my desk.

“I did. The guys wanted to check out downtown, so we had dinner and then went out for a few drinks.”

“Oh...”

And yet, he couldn't call or text just to tell me that? I'm trying not to be that girl. That girl that gets mad at a guy for being a guy, but it's getting a little difficult lately.

We talk for a few more minutes while he tells me how amazing the hotel is, and that he did, in fact, end up getting a room all to himself. He talks about his plans for the day and the work he's got ahead of him. He sounds excited and energized, and I'm truly happy for him. We get off the phone with the promise for him to call later, a promise I'm hoping he'll actually keep.

As I get into the shower, the memories come flooding back. With my hands washing my body, I remember Hawke's hands on me. I shouldn't do this. I don't know what's come over me. I imagine his hands scouring my curves, wrapping around my neck, cupping my breasts.

*No. Snap out of it, Nic. You're just lonely.*

I turn the water off and get dressed. I need to leave this house while Hawke is still passed out, so I don't have to deal with the awkwardness of this cuddling situation again. Putting on a cute off-the-shoulder sweater, I slide into some ripped jeans that hug my curves, and a pair of cute brown booties with a nice little heel.

I check myself in the mirror before I go, my hair draped down my back in loose curls. I feel good.

I sneak back out into the living room, passing Hawke on the couch. He's sleeping so peacefully. I stare at him for a moment, contemplating leaving. I consider just curling back into him again, continuing this quest towards desires, but choose against it. Instead, I decide it's best to leave. I try to make my way to the door quietly. Thankfully, I do.

After mindlessly shopping at a couple of different stores for a few hours, I pick up a much-needed bottle of wine and some groceries for the week. I figure I've given him enough time to get up, so I head home.

Lucky for me, he's gone when I get there. No uncomfortable conversation. *Phew.*

Later that evening, I make myself some spaghetti when I hear my phone ring. Excitedly running towards it, I see it's Patrick calling and pick it up immediately.

"Hey!" I answer.

Nothing.

"Patrick? Hello?"

I hear loud noises in the background, as if he's dining out somewhere. It's then I hear muffled voices talking. *He butt dialed me.* I listen closely, attempting to pick up anything when I hear my name.

"Nic...move...oh well."



Frustrated, I hang up and try to call him back, but he doesn't answer.

*Nic. Move. Oh well.*

That just doesn't sound like anything good.

I pop the bottle of wine, pouring up an enormous glass, and decide to go with a liquid diet tonight as my phone rings on the table.

"Patrick."

"Hey, Angel! Sorry I missed your call. We're having dinner at Toruni's. I was just about to call you."

*Sure.*

"Where am I moving?" I ask directly.

I'm getting to the bottom of this. He's been acting weird.

"What?"

"Patrick, I heard you a minute ago. Where am I moving?!"

"I really didn't want to talk to you about it like this. Can we just talk when I get back?"

"Please Patrick, just tell me," I beg, feeling the heat of my agitation warm my face. "It can't wait."

He huffs, clearly fighting with himself to tell me.

"I got a job offer from the company here. They really like me and it would be a huge salary increase."

"I thought you were only doing business with them? Signing contracts? What happened?"

“We’ll talk when I get back,” he says, dismissing me.  
“We’re about to finish up dinner, then head out.”

“Out?! Again?”

“It’s business, Nic,” he snaps at me. “You’re being a little ridiculous.”

I’m being ridiculous and yet, he is potentially accepting jobs in a new state, planning moves without discussing things with me, partying every night he’s there, not calling me, oh and he said “*oh well*” when it came to me dealing with it.

But I’m supposed to do what the women in their family do and shut up about it. The men run the family business and the women don’t have a say in anything. They sit back and nod their pretty little heads. Am I really trapping myself into this for the rest of my life?

After ending our brief fight, we hang up with his promise to call me in the morning. I throw my phone on the coffee table, then grab my oversized glass of wine and chug it. I want more than anything to dull this aching, lonely pain.

I hear the front door twist to open and my heart rate immediately increases. I turn to see Hawke coming in quickly with his boots and jacket still on. He walks towards my bedroom and peers into it, clearly searching for me before his eyes meet mine on the couch.

I’m sure I look amazing, my eyes are all puffy from the stupid tears that decided to exit my face after Patrick’s call, I’m sitting in the dimly lit room with no TV on, and I have the

wine bottle in between my thighs, glass in hand. Why I'm using this glass, I don't even know anymore.

“Oh, hey. I didn't see the TV on. Didn't think you were here.”

“Yep,” I reply, holding up my glass of wine.

He walks over to me, a questionable grin on his face. “You alright?”

“Never been better.”

He eyes me quizzically while I eye the bottom of my wine glass, finishing the drink.

“What happened, Cole?” he asks in a stern tone.

I shake my head, peering at the smudged lip gloss on the rim of the glass. “Nothing, and I don't want to talk about it.”

He stares at me for a moment and I see his jaw flex before he finally gives in to my plea and nods once.

“So this might be kinda weird, but...”

He talks with some hesitation, so I know there's probably a girl waiting in his car to be properly fucked.

“It's fine Hawke, you can bang whoever you want whenever you want.”

His eyebrows shoot up, then furrow together before he lets out a dry chuckle while rubbing the back of his neck.

“No, I meant to say that Kid was wondering if we could come hang here tonight.”

*Wow. I'm an idiot.* I blame the wine.

“I just assumed maybe with Patrick being gone...” he trails off. “I told Kid I’d ask you first, of course.”

“Oh, yeah.” I stand. “Yeah, that’s fine, I’ll go—”

“No, stay,” he demands, and I sit back down.

Why is it I listen to him like a damn puppy dog?

Kid barges into the house with a large bag of what sounds like bottles rustling together and a petite brunette with a bob cut behind him. “The party is here!”

Shooting Hawke a questionable glance, he grins back then rolls his eyes at Kid as he and some girl walk in.

I introduce myself to Marion, who I found out is my age, works at a club a town over, possibly a stripper, and most definitely not dating Kid. *Her words.*

I have a feeling Kid is under the impression that maybe she will be after tonight, but by the way she’s eyeing Hawke from head to toe, I’d think she has other plans.

Circling around the kitchen table, we play some drinking games. We decide on Spades since it’s just the four of us, but before long, the game gets rowdy as drinks are flowing. Kid and Marion keep having to take shots because Hawke and I are killing them.

We’re sitting across from one another, Hawke and I, and every time our eyes connect, I feel that little flutter again. That

deadly flutter that makes me just want to poison my guts with more wine and forget why I feel this way around him.

It doesn't help that we're partners and playing off each other's looks. The flirty smiles, the biting lips, the tongue to the corner of the mouth, all "signals" we're trying to communicate to continue cheating our way to victory.

After another win, we fall away from the table, venturing around the living room. Hawke puts some music on the TV to listen through the surround sound speakers as Marion makes her way over to him. She settles into the couch, her legs over his as I hear her ask him about his tattoos.

I clean up in the kitchen, then pour myself another glass of wine.

It's bothering me. Watching them.

She runs her finger along his jaw, then brushes it across his lips, touching his lip ring. He just sits back in the cushioned seat, holding her as she sits on his lap.

"Here I thought she was into me." Kid shrugs, leaning against the counter with me, staring at them with our arms crossed.

I give him a little pitied shrug, then continue watching.

"This happen a lot?" I turn to face him with a sorrowful grin.

"Always. This jackass gets them all." He chuckles, clearly not entirely hurt over the matter. "I shouldn't be mad. He's missed five years of this. He's got some making up to do."

*Five years?*

I look back over to where Marion's giggling about something, leaning further into Hawke as I'm mentally kicking myself for ever feeling any stupid feelings I felt these past few days.

This is what he does. And often. How could I think for a moment that the looks we shared were anything more than a prerequisite to get into my pants?

I watch as she bites his ear, playing with it, then giggles and straddles his lap. His hands cup her bottom as her arms wrap around to the back of the couch. Then she kisses him.

This shouldn't bother me. I've seen him kiss before. The chick by the door. I've heard him get a blow job for crying out loud! But watching this play out just delegitimized any type of connection I thought we may have had. As uncomfortable as I suddenly feel, I'm glad this happened. Something needed to stop me and my messed up head from reading too far into this...lust.

Hawke pulls away from her kiss as she sucks on his bottom lip. She kisses along his neck before he turns, looking in our direction. He spots Kid and I leaning together and looking his way, when his face changes from playful to something unreadable.

I take another much-needed sip of my now empty wine, filling up another.

He politely moves Marion to the side so he can get up. Moving his way from the living room to the kitchen, he stands before us with his brows lowered and a wide stance.

“Kid, layoff. I already told you—”

“She’s got a boyfriend, yeah, yeah...I know, but shit, she’s hot and lonely. What am I supposed to do?”

I feel the heat rising up my neck and face as I blush. I’m not hot, but I am lonely.

“She’s fine,” he says quickly, dismissing him.

“What are we talking about over here?” Marion joins us in the kitchen, hanging her arm over Hawke, making me scowl unintentionally.

“Nothing,” he replies sharply.

“Well, I brought the ‘white girl’.” She makes her way over to the table. “Who wants a line?”

As I’m trying to understand what she’s referring to, she pulls out a bag with a white powdery substance. She’s about to snort a line of coke off Patrick’s old family dining table. The irony almost makes me laugh out loud.

My eyebrows shoot up, but I say nothing. Kid excitedly joins her at the table and Hawke looks at them with squinted eyes as his jaw flexes.

“Get that shit outta here,” he says in a deep, threatening tone.

“Oh c’mon! Let’s liven things up. Church girl, try it. You’ll probably loosen up a bit,” Marion exclaims, assuming he said that because of me.

“Are you fucking serious?! I said get that shit out of this house, in fact, both of you, go!” Hawke yells, making them snap their heads up at him.

He’s mad. Like *really* mad.

“Jesus, I thought we were here to have fun.” Marion groans, packing it back up.

“Fuck that. Go to the cabin. You can do whatever the hell or whoever the hell you want there,” he replies, walking to the door and opening it.

“We’ve been drinking, dude. I can’t drive,” Kid explains.

“Fuck.” Hawke rakes his hands through his hair. “I’ll drop you off, bring you the car tomorrow.”

Kid agrees as he and Marion grab their stuff and head for the door. Kid gives me a friendly salute paired with his crooked, adorable smile. Hawke walks towards where I’m standing in the kitchen. He lingers for a moment, tapping his finger on the counter.

“I’ll be right back,” he whispers.

I nod my head, rubbing my lips together, feeling funny about the whole situation.

“You okay?” he asks, moving in closer to me, the care in his greenish-teal eyes evident.



I breathe in his scent, looking from his eyes to his lips, then back again abruptly. Those lips that Marion just had sealed to hers. I know that's what he means when he asks if I'm okay. He knows I saw him, but he's fearful that it affected me. I hate that it did.

"Yeah, I've got like, half a bottle of wine somewhere in the fridge yet, I'm good," I stutter out the words like an idiot, trying to be totally nonchalant.

He gives me his sexy side grin, his hair falling into his eyes. "Alright, good. Wait for me."

*Wait for me? What does that mean?*

My brows lower. "No, Hawke, I'm just—"

He leans in, grabbing my wrist softly, and looks at me with hard eyes. "Wait for me."

I say nothing as I watch him leave with Kid and Marion. Grabbing the opened bottle hiding in the back of the fridge, I sink down the cabinets to the floor of the kitchen. I take a large pull of the wine, letting it warm me.

I don't know what *wait for me* means, but I have a feeling I'll be doing just that.





## MISTAKES THAT MAKE US

I've officially done it.

I've successfully gotten myself good and drunk while waiting for Hawke to return. He probably found some girls at the cabin and is currently banging them into oblivion. I don't know why I'd agreed to wait for him. Why would I even? What is it exactly I'm waiting for?

I slump over on the couch after changing into a more comfortable tank top and shorts set. Grabbing my phone, I check to see if Patrick tried calling me. It's late now, but I would assume he'd still be up if they went out after dinner.

No calls. No messages.

So I call him. I'm tipsy enough to tell him how I feel, so I wait as it rings. It rings and rings and rings. No answer.

I hang up, then call again. Ya know, in case I dialed the wrong number or something like that. Sure, that's what I'll say. Immediately after trying to dial him, the phone goes straight to voicemail.

One thing I know about Patrick is he's a perfectionist. He's a planner. He doesn't allow his phone to die while he's out. It would be considered irresponsible. There's only one logical answer to this.

He blocked my call.

I try again. Straight to voicemail.

*What the hell?!*

Now I'm mad. I'm tipsy, I'm mad, and I never made my spaghetti, so now I'm even more mad because I'm hungry.

I hear the door creak open as Hawke walks in. He approaches where I'm laying back in my pool of drunken anger. His tall frame stands above me, and I get a whiff of cigarettes and mint.

He came back.

And he brought food.

"I bought us some food," he says with a hint of excitement in his playful green eyes, his tatted-up forearm, flexing, holding out the rolled-up brown bags before me.

My eyes light up and I almost instantaneously forget that I was upset. Food is what I need right now, and those bags of burgers and fries are just the trick.

We eat our deliciously fattening food on the couch next to each other in communal silence, while *Public Enemies* plays in the background.

“Sorry about earlier,” he says, turning towards me, popping a cluster of fries into his mouth.

“What do you mean? I’m not upset.” I take a bite of burger, chewing gracefully as I talk. “I’m just sorry your friends pissed you off. Guess they don’t understand how your situation works.”

He drops his food, brushing the salt off his large, inked hands, then runs a hand through his dark tendrils.

“I don’t give a fuck about that,” he declares in all seriousness. “I just didn’t want that shit around you. Here.”

He kicked them out for me? I guess it makes sense. It’s not like he wasn’t around drugs and everything else at the cabin when we were there. He even made Kid put away his weed in the car when we were on our way out there. It wasn’t for him, like he made it seem. It was for me. I just find it odd that he wants to protect me from it. I’d assumed he didn’t think twice about anyone around him.

I gaze at him, trying to understand, trying to piece this together. He’s staring into me, doing that thing again, where he toys with his lip ring while looking from my eyes to my lips, then back. He blinks, closing his eyes tightly, looking away, then rolls up the food and sets it aside.

He gets comfortable, kicking off his boots and sliding his legs behind me on the couch. He lays down, grabbing the blanket and opening it up, nodding his head for me to join him like it’s the most casual and normal thing in the world.

Are we doing this again? Cuddling has become our friendly thing?

*I shouldn't. Don't do it, Cole.*

Look at me, using his nickname for me in my head. He's infiltrating my intoxicated mind.

I crawl next to him, my body disobeying my brain, as I cuddle into his warmth. I'm facing him this time, as he wraps his large arm around my lower back and pulls me firmly into him, leaving no space between us. Releasing a little moan at the contact, I bravely look up at him through nervous lashes.

A chunk of hair falls into his eyes. I reach up with my loose hand and brush it back off his forehead, an intimate gesture that clearly catches him off guard. His chest is rising and falling between us as I slowly trail the hand from his forehead, past his ear, then down the side of his neck, tracing over the tattoos as it falls down between us.

The way he's looking at me is fascinating. His expression is a combination of bewilderment and longing, as if he can't believe I'm right here in front of him. With his brows knit closely together, he slowly leans his head down to rest his forehead against mine. His mouth is parted and I can feel his soft breath on my lips.

We're close. Too close. Dangerously close. I can almost taste him from here. My senses are firing off. Everything feels amplified and surreal. Is it the wine? No, it's the desire. The desire for this temptation dangling in front of me. The ache for

him to please me and for me to do whatever I can to please him.

Why can't I pull away? Why can't I leave? Everything about this is wrong. I'm drawn to this sensation, this need I've never known.

"Cole," he whispers softly.

This is different. It's something I can tell we both feel. It isn't normal what's happening between us. Yet, with how we look at each other, it's inevitable, knowing there's nothing that will stop this.

He grabs my hand between us, holding it up to his lips, and kisses my knuckles softly while staring into my eyes. The feeling of his lips against my hand runs directly to my center, the cool metal of his lip ring brushing between each finger as he kisses every knuckle. My stomach turns, imagining those lips against mine. I'm breathless, and can't control the rate at which my chest is rising and falling. I feel numb all over while my insides glow at the same time. I'm in a tailspin headed straight for the earth, bound to crash.

The friendship line has been crossed. It was crossed a long time ago, to be honest. I'm just great at making excuses.

Now, at this moment, I can't seem to control myself anymore. His fingers trace along my cheek, along my jaw, then finally across my lips as he licks his bottom lip.

"You wreck me." He studies my lips, as if memorizing the curve of my mouth. My eyes flutter up to his as we stare at

each other. I swallow at his words as his eyes sear through me, reaching something I'd thought unreachable. "Wreck me, Cole."

The words are my undoing. I slowly part my lips as we tease each other with the closeness. He makes the final move, pressing his lips onto mine softly, almost unsure of how it will affect him.

He pulls back, looking at me in almost disbelief, before the flood gates crash open and I pull the back of his neck into me, pressing my lips to his again.

The feeling is completely erotic. His tongue slips between my lips, deepening the kiss. The warmth of his tongue against mine sends shivers directly down my spine. I'm floating now, in a cloud of pure seduction, while the neurons fire away, trying to tell me to stop, trying to tell me that this is wrong. But I won't stop. I can't.

A groan reverberates through his throat into mine. He kisses me like I've never been kissed before. Softly, then with such hunger, then gentle, then out of this world passionate. His hands hold me to him, pressing my hips into his, as his body moves along with the kiss. I've never in my life been more turned on. He licks, then sucks, then massages my tongue with his in perfect synchrony. The sensation of his lip ring rubbing my lower lip as he sucks on it, then its placement between my lips as he sucks my top lip, is enticingly erotic.

This is the sort of kiss songs are made of. The earth-shaking, mind-numbing, cataclysmic eruption of two forces



that aren't meant to collide.

Hawke grabs the sides of my face with his hands now, almost pulling himself away so he can breathe. He parts from my lips, slowly opening his half-hooded eyes to mine. The way I feel his pulse through the air, the way his dilated eyes absorb my being, the way his hand shakes.

“You're shaking,” I whisper, cupping his hand against my cheek.

He licks his lips, looking down, then back into my eyes. “You just...fuck.”

I chuckle lightly at the fact that he's speechless, understanding the feeling entirely. This didn't seem normal by any means. It felt far beyond that. It felt explosive. We will both get burnt by the end of whatever this is.

He leans forward slowly, eyeing my lips, then eyes, almost asking for permission to allow himself more. I don't stop him; I let him indulge, just as I'm enjoying the indulgence as well.

We connect again and continue kissing on the couch together, lying on our sides under the blanket, until his hands explore. They run the length of my body, cupping my breast over my shirt, making me arch into him. He drags his hand down my abdomen, then further down my leg before he gently slides his fingers up the side of my thigh, leaving a trail of fire in their path.

I can't help but lean into his touch. A soft moan escapes me while he sucks on my bottom lip, dragging his teeth lightly.

His hand is on my thigh, slowly sliding his fingers up higher and higher, pausing just before he reaches the aching place between my thighs.

I'm on fire for him in a way I've never been before.

"Touch me." I moan, losing all rational thought, all self-control.

He kisses me again, before running his long fingers along the waistband of my shorts. Dipping his hand in, I settle more onto my back, parting my thighs.

"Cole, tell me to stop," he whispers into my mouth, his hand lingering.

"I won't. I can't," I whisper back breathlessly.

"Please," he begs again as he continues the motions, trailing his hand further south.

His fingers find my clit, slowly sliding down until he's cupping me beneath my flimsy shorts. I moan at the contact, as his middle finger slides between my slit, touching me in my most sensitive place. I close my eyes tightly, my mouth dropping open.

He's watching me, my face, his mouth reciprocating mine as if he's feeling what I'm feeling. His middle finger glides up along my center, and I can feel just how wet I am. I'm aching, pooling for him to slide into me, to satisfy that deep urge that's just waiting for him.

He pushes his middle finger into me, making me suck in a breath. He drops his head against mine, then slowly places

kisses along my jaw as he moves his finger in and out of me at a slow, torturous rate.

“Oh, God,” I cry out with my eyes closed, face towards the ceiling.

His thumb rubs circles against my clit, a place that’s never been stimulated like this. The build up is overwhelming as he fingers me, slow and steady.

I feel this deep sexual urge that’s so close to overflowing; I spread my legs further so he can get deeper into me while my hips roll upwards.

He licks my ear, running his warm, wet tongue along the shell before gently sucking the earlobe, then dragging his teeth on it. He slowly eases another finger in, watching me take more of him.

It feels so good, so erotic, so wrong, but so needed.

My breathing is so rapid now, my chest billowing like a runner finishing a sprint in the Olympics as he continues pumping his fingers, then curling them gently inside of me. The sensation comes to a point, and as my eyes are rolling back in my head, I see explosions behind my lids. My whole body clenches up, tightening around his fingers. I gasp and hold my breath while the most pleasurable sensation runs through me. It starts at my center and travels out through my toes like lightning as I cry out. Tingles reverberate down my spine as I fully let go, embracing the feeling.

I take a few breaths, my eyes still closed, until I slowly blink them open, unaware of how that must've looked to Hawke. I find his eyes above me and his expression is unlike what I thought I'd see.

He looks confused.

“Has that—” He knits his brows. “Has that never happened?”

If I could feel my face, this might be embarrassing, but lucky for me, I'm completely numb all over.

I shake my head, still catching my breath.

His face is cautious now, and his frame is stiffer than it was before asking. The seriousness of what has happened is hitting me.

This was wrong on so many levels. I had my first orgasm with a man that wasn't my boyfriend. I came with someone who isn't the man I'm hoping to marry. He, unbeknownst to him, took that away from Patrick and, by the looks of it, he's appalled.

With the erotic lust disappearing like smoke from the dying fire that was this moment, the room is becoming clearer and heavier than before.

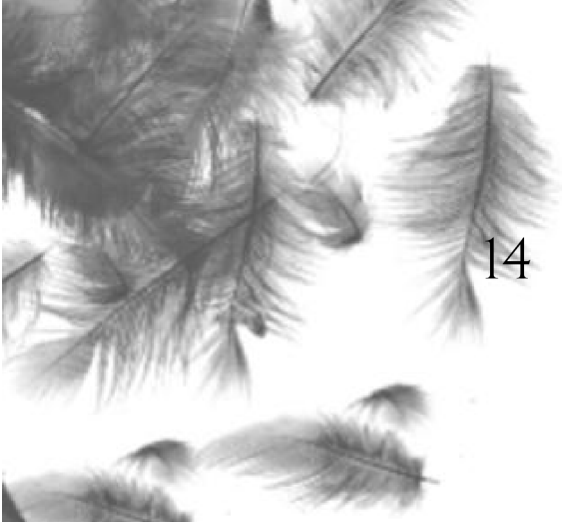
“Oh, my God.” I cover my face with my hands, not wanting to be seen by him ever again.

“He's never given you an orgasm?” he asks, his mouth hanging open, looking perplexed.

I'm mortified, embarrassed, hurt, sad, mad, and regretful all in the same breath.

I get up off the couch, getting as far away from him as I can, and run into the bathroom to hate myself for what I've done. Getting in there, I close and lock the door. I stare into the mirror at the face of a girl who looks flushed, confused, yet exhilarated. I wish I could relieve myself of this night, erase this horrible nightmare.

A nightmare that not only was my fault, but my ultimate undoing.





## THE AFTERMATH

I don't know what to do.

I stayed in the bathroom for what felt like hours. Terrified to see him. Terrified to face this new reality.

*It's official.* I cheated on Patrick.

The overwhelming sense of guilt floods me as I drown in my own tears. I can't believe I allowed myself to fall into the temptation, to succumb to a feeling so immature and irresponsible.

I was mad at him, yes. I was drinking, yes. But even with that, it still felt better than anything I'd ever experienced. And this was before the orgasm.

Flashbacks of Hawke's face above me fill my vision with every blink of my eyes. I can't undo it, this tingling in the pit of my stomach when I think of him. He's seeped beneath my skin, somehow got through and I'm so blinded by the passion of it all, I strangely find myself not wanting to let it go, but wanting another taste.

But I have to end this. It was wrong. What am I going to say to Patrick? How will I fix this? I come to the horrible conclusion that I'll wait a few days, think it over, and try to decipher what this little mental blip was before I expose my wrongdoings.

Maybe I was so sexually frustrated over never having that release with Patrick that I just bubbled over and let it all go. I couldn't say for sure, but it was definitely out of character.

A part of me was hoping I'd never see Hawke again. That in the aftermath of what happened, he'd decided it was best to hop on a jet and leave the country forever. Another small part of me kind of wished he'd come check on me, make sure I was alright.

I hate every part of this.

Leaving the bathroom, I slowly open the door, peeking out into the living room. Hawke is sitting up on the couch, his arm resting on the back of it, watching TV as if it's just another normal night. But it's not.

I tiptoe my way to the bedroom, but cross his line of vision.

"Cole," he calls out, immediately seeing me.

I'm frozen in place. Slowly turning to look at him, my heart is racing, and I feel like I could vomit.

"*Casino* is on. Wanna watch?"

His casual tone throws me off guard. Maybe this is normal for him. Fuck around, forget about it? He doesn't seem bothered in the least.



I take a deep breath, hoping a steady voice comes out. “Uh, yeah. Just a sec.”

I hop into some sweatpants and an oversized sweatshirt. Anything to insinuate what happened will never happen again and make my way back to the opposite end of the couch.

His eyes follow me, and a light chuckle escapes him as he sees my intentions. We watch in silence for a bit when he finally speaks.

“It’s not a big deal.” My eyes lock on his as he continues, “It’s not, really.”

He shakes his head, rolling his eyes like I’m overreacting over what happened. He can sense I’m totally in my head over it, hating myself.

And yet, his cool demeanor upsets me. It is a big deal. It’s a big deal to me. It’s changed my relationship. Now I have this cloud hanging over me, while Hawke can go on living his normal life, hooking up with different women every week. Kisses and orgasms don’t mean anything in the world of Hawke. He gives them out like Hallmark does cards on Valentine’s Day.

“C’mon, don’t be mad,” he whispers, giving a head nod, opening the blanket up beside him, patting the empty space.

I glare at him. Ugh, I want so badly just to hate him right now. I want to hate Patrick. I want to hate everyone. But I can’t. I don’t know why. That space beside him is calling my name like a snake, begging me to bite that apple, the toxic

juices sliding down my throat just waiting to bring me to a sudden death.

I get up, walk the three steps to him, and sit down in a huff. A grin pulls at his devilish lips. Those lips that I now know taste like spicy cinnamon and faded cigarettes. The lip ring, I now know, feels cool against my lips, the way it ever so lightly rubs my bottom lip while he tongues me. I hate that I know that. I hate that I like that.

He pulls the blanket over us, sinking back into the couch with his arm around my shoulders, bringing me against his hardened chest. It's a horrible idea, but I can't help but feel a little comforted by it.

Maybe we can do this. Maybe we can just be friends who cuddle and occasionally get fingered to their first orgasm. *Oh, who am I kidding?* This is all sorts of fucked up. But I'm sinking deeper and deeper, and for some reason, the darkness never felt so good.



I awake to a soft feeling against my lips. A kiss. It feels so good that my lips move along with the second one. It's warm, it's gentle, it's caring.

"Patrick, you came back early?" I whisper against the kiss, feeling that lip ring.

*Lip ring.*

I open my eyes and gasp. “Oh, my God. Hawke. I—”

I’m left speechless. I’m still on the couch next to Hawke, not in my bed as envisioned. I don’t even know what to say or do. First of all, what the hell? Why is he kissing me while I’m sleeping? And second, what the hell am I doing with my life right now?! We slept here. Together. All night. Again. This is a mess!

He gets up off me, moving to sit at the end of the couch with his elbows on his knees, staring off at the wall.

“I’m sorry. I thought I was in my room. I-I’m...sorry.” Shaking my head, I lean forward towards him, not knowing what to make of this.

He shakes his head, closing his eyes, leaning away from my approach, seeming upset.

“Don’t apologize to me. I shouldn’t have,” he says blandly.

I bite the corner of my lip, not sure what to do. I’m waiting for him to make the next move. To tell me where we stand now in the light of day. The day my boyfriend comes back home. But he just shakes his head, gazing at the wall before him.

“Want some coffee? I’ll start up—”

“You better go fix up before Patrick gets back. Wouldn’t want him worrying over nothing,” he interrupts.

Wow.

He thinks I feel the need to fix myself up so Patrick doesn't know I'm a whore. Awesome. And worrying over nothing? Guess I am just another Hallmark receiver.

He stands abruptly, heading towards his room, where he slams the door without another word.

I wince, then take a deep breath, and let it out. I can't figure him out. I hate that I may have hurt him, but then again, did I? I never even thought I could, to be honest. Maybe he wasn't just toying with me for entertainment like all the other girls? Maybe this was something different? What if I wasn't just another plaything to him? His words last night strike a chord. You wreck me.

How am I wrecking him?

Either way, I have to put an end to it. It's wrong. I can't be this woman who holds secrets inside of her, filling her until the pressure becomes too much, until the point of eruption. I have to think this through, so I didn't lose the man I knew best. The man I should've never done this to. My hardworking, loyal Patrick.

And he's literally on his way home. I check my phone, trying to see if he's reached out to me at all. I tried calling him last night and was ignored. As much as it pissed me off, I feel I have no legs to stand on. I'd hate to think he's mad about our little argument when, to be honest, there was much more for him to be mad at.

I deceived him.

Like clockwork, my phone rings.

“Patrick? Did your flight just land?” I rush, answering a bit too energetically.

“It did indeed. I’ll be riding home with my dad. He can drop me off, so don’t worry about a ride.”

I wasn’t even thinking about it at all. Preoccupied mind.

“Oh good. That’s great. I-I guess I’ll see you soon then,” I respond, attempting to dry my wet palms on the comforter I was clutching.

“Sounds good. And Nic?” His voice is soft and hesitant.

Stomach full of nervous energy hits.

“Yeah?” I squeak out.

“I missed you,” he says sadly.

Deep breath in, deep breath out.

“I missed you, too,” I whisper.

He hangs up, and I faceplant onto the bed. I hate myself. So much.



A few hours go by and I’ve committed myself to my work. Manuscripts left and right, pages of notes, edits, messages to myself. I’m clearly working as hard as possible to disappear into a fictional world rather than focus on my own issues.

Either way, I've somehow accomplished a decent amount in only a few hours.

Pulling my earbuds out, I check the clock again, knowing Patrick has to be close. I put on some leggings and a cute crop top tee with my wavy hair down my back. Casual, comfortable, yet cute. Anything that says, I'm not trying too hard because I totally messed up everything while you were away.

I ground some beef in the kitchen for tacos, assuming he might be hungry when he gets back. That, and food has a way of making people happier. Peering over towards Hawke's room, I see the light is off. I'm assuming he left at some point while I was working. Maybe he left so he wouldn't have to face Patrick himself after what we did. I mean, they used to be friends, or something.

"Nic?" I hear Patrick's voice by the door, making my heart swell.

I walk out of the kitchen and see him at the door with his bags and a bouquet in his hand.

I frown immediately upon seeing them, and then turn it into a sorrowful smile. *God, I'm the worst type of human ever.*

"Patrick, you shouldn't have. You are so sweet," I say, helping him by taking them off his hands.

He walks into the house, setting his bags by the kitchen table, then stands with his arms open, waiting for me.

I smile sheepishly, then enter his embrace. He wraps his arms so tightly around me, kissing the top of my head, as I breathe him in. He still smells like the lilies and daffodils he brought with him.

“I’m sorry, Nic.” He pulls back away from our hug, looking me in the eye.

“No. No really, it’s—”

“No, you’re right,” he interrupts. “I should always come to you first. We’re a team. We work best when we work together. I won’t ever make a decision without you or make you feel like you aren’t important in our partnership. I ignored the situation rather than dealing with it and your feelings.”

Twist the knife once you stab yourself. Feels great.

He cups the sides of my face in his hands, then kisses my forehead before leaning against it with his.

“We really should talk.” I sigh, looking at the floor.

*Am I really doing this? Can I bring myself to tell him?*

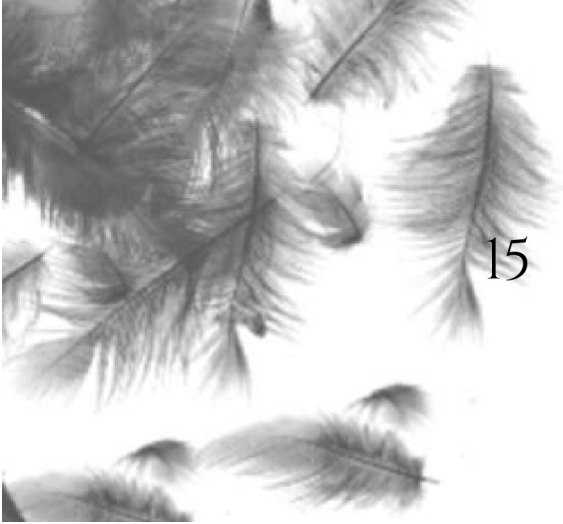
“Later, Angel. We can hash everything out later. Right now, I just want to get comfortable and spend time with you.”

He pulls me into his chest again, rubbing my arms with his hands. I grind my teeth, holding back the tears I feel on the brink of release, scrunching my nose to hold back the pain.

We spent the rest of the night eating tacos, laughing, cuddling, watching movies, and reconnecting together, just us. We didn’t address the issues at hand, on either side. Do we

have things to work through? Of course, it's literally pertinent to the survival of our relationship. But tonight, it seems we both wanted to forget.







The following morning, I woke to familiar arms around me. I was here with Patrick, but in my mind, I was still in bed with Hawke.

I'd dreamed that Patrick never came back. That he took the job in Colorado, without so much as a word to me. I'd tried desperately to get a hold of him, to no avail, but Hawke was there for me. He held me while I fell apart. Kissed me when I felt I couldn't be loved. He told me it was better this way. That it was meant to be. He walked me to his room where we stayed together, side by side as he kissed my forehead, telling me he would be the one that never left, and that in time I'd see that Patrick was actually the liar.

I didn't know what it all meant, but I know how it made me feel. It felt so real. It felt amazing. It felt right. Now, waking up, I felt guilt and a deep-rooted sadness. But was the sadness for Patrick? Or was it Hawke?

I kissed Patrick on the cheek as he let out a little sigh and smile before rolling over on his side. He was so sweet last night with everything that he did. He was really trying to make

me happy, make it feel like old times. I could tell. It just made me feel the guilt all the more. I got up, slipping into my robe, and made my way towards the coffee machine.

Was I hoping to see Hawke? Yeah, for some reason, I was. He never came home last night, that I was aware of, and I really wanted to talk to him. Clear the air a bit so things weren't so awkward with the three of us being back under one roof. But not only that, I wanted us to be okay again. I didn't want any bad blood between us, and not just for the sake of him holding onto one of my biggest secrets, but because I truly missed him and the newfound friendship we'd formed.

As if my luck would have it, he wasn't there. He wasn't in his room either. The door to his room was left cracked open, and I desperately ached to get in there. I wanted to find out more about this curious creature who'd somehow come in and taken over my thoughts. He seemed to have so many untold stories that needed telling. A plethora of secrets that'd been encased in that heart of stone. So much so that he'd almost forgotten what made him. I wanted to know what made him.

I stayed in the kitchen, drinking my coffee, until every last drop in my favorite mug was gone. I sat in that chair, facing the door to his room, lost in my thoughts, lost in my feelings.

Patrick made his way out of the bedroom to join me at the table. His warm smile and kind eyes brought me back to reality. He really did have such a calming presence about him. One that made me feel at home when he was here.

“Where’d Hawke go?” he asked, looking back at his door, then back to my pale face.

“Uh, I have no idea,” I responded as casually as possible.

“Huh, funny. Must be at his friends or some chick’s house, I guess.” He shrugs.

The thought provokes me.

“Don’t know, don’t care. Anyway, what are we going to do today? I thought maybe we could grab some lunch somewhere, maybe catch a matinee, or do that new rock climbing wall at the sports center?”

We need this day together. After his work trip, we need time to be us again.

Patrick tilts his head, then winces a little, looking at me sadly. “I’m sorry baby, I know I told you we’d have today to hang out, but I really need to finish up the reports from our trip.”

I look up past him, and stare at a tiny mark on the wall that was put there when we first moved the couch into the living room.

We had the hardest time putting our sectional sofa together. They had sent us the wrong connecting piece to hold the couches together, so when we went to sit on it the first time, the seats separated and we landed together on the floor between them. We laughed for hours, teasing each other about whose fault it was. We laughed so hard I cried.

Patrick stopped laughing at one point and stared at me with a look of love about him while his lips curved into a loving smile. It was the kind of smile you always wish someone would gaze at you with. He looked like a man so in love. A man who felt like he was the luckiest guy on earth to have found you. He cupped my cheek and told me he loved me more than anything.

We'd said it before, but it felt so monumental, as if I knew we were making a memory that I'd access often in the future. He pulled me into a kiss, then held me against him as I gazed off behind him. It was then that I saw the mark on the wall. I pointed it out with an amused face as we began laughing at our inability to move and put together furniture.

I always see it, I always told myself I'd paint over it, but yet, there it remains. A time when promises were made to build this home as our own. To really make that big step towards being those couples we always dreamed about. It sits there now, taunting me.

"I'm sorry, Nic, this is my—"

"Job," I finish for him, still focused on that mark. "I know."

I'm not showing emotion in my tone. I can't anymore. I don't want to be the person who begs someone for attention like this. It hurts my ego. It hurts my heart.

After Patrick gives me a sweet, intimate kiss, he leaves for work and I spend the rest of the day editing while anxiously waiting for Hawke's return. A return that never came.

I'm tired of waiting for people. All I seem to do is wait. Wait for a life that was promised to me, wait for the feelings of an overwhelming love to kick in, wait for a deeply moving moment to make me realize this is where I'm supposed to be in life, and that this is what I should be doing.

But it never seems to happen. Does it happen for anyone? Is that a dream we as adults plant in our head, or in use in fictional stories to strive for? Maybe life isn't supposed to be like a novel. Maybe getting used to the ever disappointing reality is what we're meant to do. Live and hope for the better. That's it.

I pull into work a half hour early. I've straightened my hair for tonight's shift, wanting to feel different. Even applied a bit more makeup than I normally would, using some black eyeliner and eyeshadow to really bring out the tiny hint of green in my hazel eyes. I'm dressed in a black crop top paired with some black high-waisted jeans that are torn at the knees. I paired the look with some black tie up booties, giving me a bit of height. Black is my mood today, so it felt fitting.

"Damn girl, if I wasn't a baby daddy to be, I'd be asking you out for a drink!" John calls out from behind the bar as I enter, making my skin turn a shade of red.

"Shut up." I laugh at him, feeling embarrassed.

He chuckles as I walk behind the bar. "What's up though? New look?"

"Just needed something different." I sigh, clocking into the computer.

“I feel that. Sometimes I get highlights to feel more like a badass,” he says with a straight face.

There’s no containing the laughter that bursts from me. “John, oh my God. How Anna can deal with you, I have no idea.”

“She loves me. She’d put up with whatever just to keep me.” He grins proudly, tilting his chin high.

“You guys are cute.” I smile genuinely.

“And you and P? Please. Adorable!” he announces animatedly.

My smile drops a bit as I look down at the floor, thinking of the past few days in totality.

“Ooh. What’s that? What’s that face for?” he questions, sensing everything I didn’t want him to sense.

I think for a moment, getting my words together. “John, how did you know that Anna was *the one*, as they say?”

He blinks a few times, looking past me at the bottles on the shelf, thinking as he sighs. “Well, since the moment I met her, I knew I couldn’t not have her in my life in order for me to be happy. Not a chance in hell I’d ever smile the way I smile when I’m with her. She allows me to be me and loves the bad parts of me just as much as the good. You can’t ask for more from someone.”

Absorbing his words, my heart clenches in my chest for him. You can see it in his eyes when he talks about her. Every

woman deserves to have someone talk about them the way John talks about his Anna.

“I have a hard time believing you have a bad side.” I lower my brows, then grin questionably.

He uses his middle finger and pushes the black-framed glasses up higher on his nose. “Oh, I’m all bad, Nic.”

We share a laugh at his expense. It’s beautiful, their connection, yet makes my heart ache in the same beat. Patrick won’t love the bad parts of me. The parts of me that are tainted will be our undoing.

Getting to work, I find myself feeling so much better than I did sitting and sulking at home. We’re really busy, even for a Friday night. Tips are coming in hot, and unfortunately, I think it has something to do with the crop top. Either way, John and I are moving behind the bar like a well-oiled machine, serving up patrons left and right.

“Hey, can I get a whiskey, neat?” A familiar voice reaches my ears.

Turning to look, I see Kid leaning against the bar on his skinny little tatted up elbows. His eyes go wide when he recognizes me, and a grin slides across his face. “It’s you! What’s up, girl? I didn’t recognize you for a minute. You look hot as fuck!”

His eyes scour my body as he tilts his head from side to side, licking his lips, checking me out.



“Kid, please. Don’t.” I chuckle, feeling my face flush with embarrassment.

“Ugh, and you used my name?” He clutches his shirt over his heart.

I pour up a whiskey neat for him, secretly wondering who he’s here with.

“Hawke’s over there if you’re wondering,” he mentions, eyeing me for a response.

My stomach drops five stories in a second. “Cool. I wasn’t, but have fun.”

I raise my eyebrows at him, pushing the drink towards his hand on the wooden counter. He lingers for a second, watching me add it to his card to start a tab before I hand it back to him. I avoid his eyes and turn to the next customer.

I see someone who doesn’t look like he belongs. Sidled up to the bar is a man wearing a dress shirt and tie. Far too fancy for the likes of this place.

“What can I get you?” I ask, smiling kindly.

“Still thinking.” He smirks at me, his eyes somewhat unreadable.

His voice is deep and sounds like there’s a slight accent on his tongue. He must be here on business or something. He doesn’t look like the typical 9-5 Slider. For starters, he doesn’t have a long, burly beard.

I nod, moving along to Leonard to get him another refill, before coming back to “suit-man”.

“Decide on anything?” I ask again.

“Yeah,” he says before leaning forward on the bar, as if to whisper his order in my ear. I bend across the bar, turning my face as he continues, “What I’m really thirsty for is twenty minutes with you in the backroom.”

“Excuse me?”

I push back away from him, but he wraps his hand around my wrist tightly, his eyes narrowing dangerously.

“Get off me!” I reply, attempting to rip my wrist away from his hold.

He grips my bones tightly, his lip curling, enjoying my struggle. Before I can make a scene, he drops my wrist and pushes away from me, backing away from the bar. With a final sneer, he forces himself through guests to make his way to the door.

I stand there for a moment, dumbfounded by what happened as I rub my wrist, looking towards the door, making sure he left. Such a strange encounter.

Peering by the entrance, I see Hawke against the wall towards the back, gazing at his friends before his eyes connect with mine.

We stare at each other for a moment and I feel an overwhelming tingle deep in my stomach that radiates

throughout me in a matter of seconds. Like an electric heat scouring my insides.

His eyes don't tell me much, they just peer back at mine. I can't tell what his expression is. There's a somber look about him, but externally he's as cool and collected as they come. He runs a hand through his unruly hair before some girl in a short leather skirt brushes up against the front of him, pressing herself against him, blocking our gaze.

I force myself to focus on work. Restocking things that are full, drying glasses that are dry, while of course, filling drinks left and right. I didn't want one moment of freedom to be given the chance to look for him again. But, as it appeared, I wouldn't be given the option.

Hawke, Kid, and some other guy I've never seen before all make their way to the bar.

"Shots!" Kid yells out as I steal a look at Hawke, whose eyes are already glued to mine.

"What do you guys want?" I ask Kid directly.

"What you got for me tonight?" He licks his lips, looking at me flirtatiously before getting hit in the chest by Hawke. "Shit, alright, fine...we'll have three Jamesons."

I pour up three shots of Jameson, pushing them out towards the guys.

"Want a chaser, Kid?" I tease.

Their friend attempts to hold in his laugh. Hawke raises an entertained brow at Kid before looking back at me with those

same somber eyes. We connect for a quick second again before I flutter my eyelashes, breaking contact.

It's too much for me, too direct.

Kid's smile drops. "I thought we were cool?"

"We are. It's on the house," I tell him, making him smile his big cheesy grin again.

They take their shots, and I sneak my gaze over to Hawke. One quick swallow and the alcohol is gone like it's nothing down the roll of his throat.

I look away before he puts the shot glass back down on the bar.

"Thanks, babe. I really like this relationship. I buy, then you buy...very new age of us."

Rolling my eyes at him, Kid and the other guy take off through the crowd, but Hawke lingers for a moment. He opens his mouth as if he's about to say something before some curvy girl with bleach blonde hair and tattoos wraps her arms around him.

Her hands are all over him as she whispers something into his ear before squeezing him somewhere below the bar. She pulls him away, and he turns to look at me with a side grin and a shrug.

I shake my head, and move down the line to my man, Leonard.

"Need anything, chief?"

He looks up from his book, then at his glass with a bit of whiskey left. “Nah, this’ll do. Thanks, sweetheart.”

“What are you reading tonight?”

“*Anna Karenina*, ever read it?”

Once the knife is in and twisted, pull it out and plunge it in again.

“Yep,” I answer simply.

I am Anna right now. Deceitful, lustful, filled with revenge for a life she doesn’t fit. I just hope I figure this all out before I throw myself in front of a train.

“It’s an interesting read. This Tolstoy guy is somethin’, I tell ya.” He chuckles.

This guy. I love Leonard. He’s so...not typical. It’s refreshing. What big, badass biker dude with faded tattoos and a huge scruffy beard with long hair tied back into a ponytail comes to a bar to consistently read classic novels. Leonard does.

“Let me know what you think of it.” I wink, patting him on the shoulder.

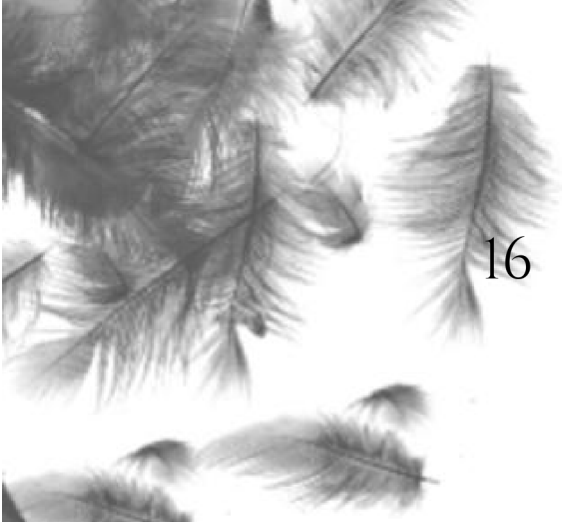
Wiping down the bar, I see Hawke sitting on one of the bar stools over by the darts with that same woman now between his legs. She leans into him, either kissing his neck or whispering something into his ear before he stands. He heads over to Kid and says something, grabbing what looks like the shared car keys. Pushing through the doors, he exits the bar, the woman on his tail as they leave together.

I shake it off, blowing out a sigh. This is Hawke. This is what he does. It's about time I got used to it and moved on. I look back up and out to the dwindling crowd and connect eyes with Kid. He's watching me curiously and I can only pray he didn't see my eyes just follow Hawke out of the door.

He's on to me. I can feel it. I flip him off as he cocks a brow, pointing to himself.

"If not tonight, then soon!" he yells back, making me laugh.

His crude behavior makes me roll my eyes. I laugh now, but I really need to focus on being more discreet around him. I have secrets now that can't be exposed.





**F**inally laying down next to Patrick after working my shift, I let out a content sigh. I turn to face him and watch him breathing peacefully. He's really beautiful and soft in the most desirable way. I lean forward, placing my lips against his as a little grin forms on his lips.

"You're home," he whispers with his eyes closed.

"I'm home," I whisper back into his lips, pressing mine against his again for another kiss.

He wraps his arms around me, pulling me into his chest. It feels good; it feels warm and comforting. He rolls on top of me, pressing my back into the bed as his lips trail down my neck. The sensations ignite my body, and I begin to feel like maybe this time I can get there with him. Now, knowing how it all works, how it's all supposed to feel.

He slips his hand under my shirt, cupping my breast. I release a breath of pleasure at the much-needed contact. I need Patrick to erase the stained memory of Hawke. He kisses along my jaw, moving down my neck to my chest, and flicks his tongue against my nipple.



I moan loudly at the sensation, the tingle it sends to the heat down below. I'm ready for more; craving him inside me. He reaches over to the nightstand, grabbing a condom to sheath himself. During the quick intermission, I hear a rhythmic banging against the wall. My eyes dart around the room, then back at Patrick.

A grin grows across his face. "Looks like we both had the same idea tonight."

Thank God it's pretty dark in here. I'd hate for Patrick to see the look of complete disgust on my face. I know who Hawke has in there. I know who he's fucking right now, and the worst part is I can hear all of it. These walls are thin.

Patrick rolls the condom on and leans forward to kiss me again. I'm trying my best to get into it, to forget everything but this moment between just the two of us. It isn't easy, but I'm really trying to focus. He eases into me and I hear Hawke groan loudly while the woman screams out as the bed creaks beneath them. This couldn't be more messed up.

"Jesus, do they have to be so loud?" I grumble.

Patrick laughs lightly as he moves in and out of me. "Don't think about it."

I try to focus on us again, rolling my hips to meet his. The feeling of him in me while hearing Hawke is sending me into overdrive. I find myself imagining it's him that's filling me, making those noises above me.

“Grab me,” I instruct Patrick, needing something I’m just not getting.

He grabs my hip with one hand, entering me more forcefully. I dig my nails into his shoulders roughly, making him groan. Pulling him down onto me, I bite down on the top of his shoulder, meeting each of his thrusts. I’m starting to really get into it, feeling the deep burning in the pit of me, edging me towards the pleasure I seek. The feeling of him gliding in and out of me while imagining things I shouldn’t has me on the edge.

He groans loudly, and with a couple more jerky thrusts, I know it’s over.

I sigh, then catch my breath. My hands cover my eyes as Patrick falls to the side of me.

“Nic, that was insane. I’m bleeding.”

I pop up onto my elbows and assess the damage I’ve done.

“Oh my God, Patrick.” I sit straight up. “Let me get you something. C’mon.”

We get up and head to the bathroom together, me in my robe, Patrick in his boxers. Just as we get in there, I hear the front door close. I scour the cabinet for some antiseptic ointment I know I bought at one point but haven’t used.

Hawke bursts through the door in only his boxer briefs and my eyes deceive my mind as I take all of him in. Rippling chest and abdomen littered in phrases and images, the boxers hanging crooked on his hips as if he quickly threw them on.

His hair is all disheveled in what's better known as *sex hair*, and I can't stand that it looks so perfect.

His eyes are wide with surprise as he takes in the image before him. Patrick's shoulders are bloodied, streaks which are clearly from my nails and a bite mark to match. I'm leaning against the sink, feeling the flush of the blood filling my face.

"Oh, shit..." he mutters, running a hand through his hair. "Sorry, I was just..." He trails the sentence, slowly backing out of the door with a peculiar smirk on his mouth.

Patrick chuckles, almost proud of his wounds. I'm sure it inflates his sexual ego. It does nothing but make me want to pound my head into this porcelain sink until it cracks in half.

What a horrible night.



The next morning I wake up early, showering, then getting into some comfortable leggings and my crop top sweater. I want to get my coffee, and get to work. I have a deadline for one of the manuscripts I'm working through, and editing this one has been a real pain in my ass.

Heading out into the kitchen, I see the tatted-up back of the person I'd rather avoid. I contemplate just returning to the bedroom, but decide against it. This is my home too, and I can move around freely without worrying about it being awkward. It's only weird if you make it weird, *right?*

He hears me enter, and turns, leaning back against the counter on his palms, flexing his biceps and chest in the process. His eyes run the length of me as I approach and I feel the heat in every inch he trails. He tilts his head back with a knowing look, peering at me through his lashes as he toys with that lip ring.

“What?” I ask, unable to hold back my impatience and hostility.

“I just had no idea,” he says with a raspy, deep morning tone, his brows raising in surprise.

I stare blankly at him, crossing my arms over my chest and wait for him to continue, but he doesn't. I scoff and move around him to grab my mug and fill my cup. To my surprise, he follows me, leaning around me, placing each of his hands on the counter, surrounding me so I can't move. My breathing increases at the closeness as he then presses his front into my back. He pins my hips to the counter and I can feel his manhood swell between my buttocks.

“I just have one question,” he whispers into my ear, nuzzling his nose into my hair, breathing me in.

I swallow, closing my eyes tightly as a breath escapes me.

“Who was it you were thinking about when you turned into an animal?” he whispers before firmly pushing his hips into my backside, taking my breath away. “I'll let you in on a little secret.” He flips my hair over my shoulder, exposing my neck to him. “I was thinking about you, too,” he whispers against my skin.

Tingles. Everywhere throughout my body. I bite my lip and release a small moan I instantly regret. He was thinking about me while he fucked that girl, just like my mind wandered to him while I was with Patrick. The thought of him did exactly what he's suggesting. It turned me into some sort of sex-crazed animal.

His lips trail my neck and run the length of my shoulder. I feel a light sting and gasp as I realize he nipped me. Right where I bit Patrick. I turn immediately and push him off me.

He grunts a little at the firm push, then grins, looking at me devilishly as he backs away, taking a seat at the kitchen table.

He's trouble. *So much trouble.*

Patrick joins us after a brief moment of silence passes between Hawke and I. He proudly walks around the table, grabbing my hand, and spins me around into his arms. I smile at his peppy energy. He cups my cheek before kissing me.

"My wild girl." He smirks, pressing me into his front.

I blush, realizing we aren't alone, and look over Patrick's shoulder to see the smug look on Hawke's face behind us. But it isn't there. He's just staring down into his coffee cup.

"I'll be back tonight. Maybe we can order in before your shift?" he offers.

"Yeah, depending on when you get off. Just let me know."

He kisses my hand and gives me a wink before saying his goodbyes and heading out of the door.

“What’s wrong with you? Catch a nonrefundable disease last night?” I joke at Hawke’s strange demeanor, walking towards the table.

He looks blankly up at me through his lashes, not responding, then back down to his coffee. His finger runs the edge of the cup as he remains deep in thought. His mood seems to have shifted entirely.

“Do you wanna talk?” I ask in a softer tone.

“No.”

*Okay, not connecting.* I think of an ulterior plan that I know will reach him.

“Want to watch *Carlito’s Way*?” I wiggle my eyebrows playfully.

“Fuck yeah,” he says, getting up from the chair with his coffee.

We do our thing again. The one where we sit close to each other and watch mob movies while sipping our java. It’s strange how oddly comfortable we can be around each other. When he’s not teasing me and being ridiculous, we actually have amazing conversations. He puts his arm around me, pulling me closer to his side. I lean into him as his fingers softly play with mine. We’re crossing that line again. This would look super suspect to anyone looking in, yet it just feels so natural.

I sneak a peek at his face and something just isn’t right.

“What’s wrong, Hawke? You can talk to me,” I explain, sensing this weird demeanor isn’t going away.

He sighs, running his free hand through his hair. “Nothin’ Cole.”

“Is everything set for your new job? Is that what you’re worried about?”

He stares blankly at the wall, his jaw tightening, then loosening again.

“I’m sure it’ll be fine. The hours don’t sound horrible, and at least you’ll start seeing some money.”

“I don’t need money,” he snaps harshly.

I pause the movie, turning to face him head-on. Something isn’t right.

“I know you like to live a simple life, but—”

“I have more money than I know what to do with,” he interrupts in a cold, snippy tone.

*He has money?* So much so, that the only reason he’s getting this job is to abide by his parole, to get back into society as he says. But where is the money coming from? I’d hate to think it was something illegal.

“So, what’s wrong, then?” I ask again.

He looks up to the ceiling, so I touch his jaw, attempting to move his head down to look at me. He moves looking down off to the side so I pull his head up to face me. He’s trying to avoid me. Brushing me off again, he looks towards the door.

*He's playing this game.*

I playfully climb into his lap, grabbing his head and lowering it to face me while giggling. "Hawke. C'mon, you're being ridiculous."

His lip pulls up in the corner, creasing slightly as he watches me. At least he's entertained by my antics.

"What is it?" I ask in a calming, caring tone.

His mouth drops open to say something, but he stops himself and licks his lips, looking at the floor.

I'm now very aware of how close we are. My legs are surrounding his as I sit in his lap, my hands on his chin. If Patrick walked back into this house right now, this would be a hard one to explain.

"You should get off me," he says with a coldness to his tone, moving his head so my hands drop between us.

My brows raise as I look at my hands.

Why he does this, I just don't understand. One minute he's telling me how he imagined fucking me while trailing his lips down my neck, then the next he's acting as if I'm the only one coming on to him, treating me as if I'm so out of line.

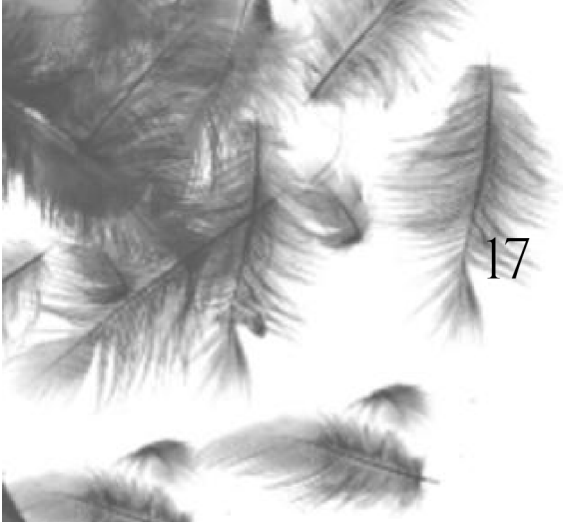
I'm over this. The back-and-forth shit. It's confusing me more and more. He doesn't talk to me about his feelings, so I have no idea where he even stands. Every time he does this, it just solidifies how stupid I am for wanting to remain close to him, trying to be around him.



I get off him, shaking my head, and walk towards my room. I hear him curse and throw something at the wall. Whatever demons he's dealing with, he'll need to deal with them alone, the way he intended.

I hear the front door slam. I can't help but wonder what he's been through. Five years in prison? He's clearly still holding on to the heaviness of whatever it was and it's sinking him deeper and deeper into that dark place. I wish he'd talk to me about it. I wish he'd know that I'm here for him. That I wouldn't judge him or think differently of him for a past he can no longer control.

Either way, I've decided I need to know.





**H**e's gone. He left for who knows how long. But, this is my chance.

Holding on to his doorknob, I tap my fingers on the brass lightly. I know it's a bad idea, but I want to see for myself who he is, and if he's not going to tell me, I'm going to find out for myself.

I need to know who I'm dealing with. I have to know who this man is that makes me feel the way that he does. I deserve to know the truth, don't I?

I open the door and it creaks, startling me. I look back to the front door to ensure I'm still alone.

Taking a deep breath and letting it out, I enter his room.

It's surprisingly clean for a guy. I'd expected a mess of strewn clothes, fast food wrappers, change thrown across the dresser, but no. Nothing like that at all. Walking past his dresser, my fingertips graze the clothes hanging up in his closet. I grab the sleeve of one of his jackets and smell it. It

smells like him; leather, cinnamon, and faded cigarettes. Something inside of my chest flutters.

There are no pictures or wall hangings whatsoever. He has a TV set up in the corner of his room, a nice flat screen with some random old DVDs in the cabinet below it. I make my way over to the desk. He's got a nice laptop. It rivals mine, to be honest. I pull open the drawers of the desk, seeing nothing inside, until I hit the last one on the bottom. There's an old shoebox filling it.

Grabbing for it immediately, I pull the old cardboard shoebox out and sit on the floor next to it. I shouldn't be doing this. I should put it away and leave his room immediately. But, I can't. I need to know something, anything, about the mysterious man who stays as closed off as Fort Knox.

I open the box. Inside there are a few court papers, documents I'm assuming are from his case, and beneath those, there's a small, stunning silver cross pendant etched with a coiled design attached to a silver chain. I pick it up, rubbing my thumb over it. It's hauntingly beautiful.

Looking back at the box, a bent-up picture catches my eye. Picking it up and inspecting it closer, I see a boy, probably around fifteen years old. The picture looks like he ripped it out of a newspaper. It's all worn, the paper is thin, and the image is a grainy black and white. The name beneath the picture says Ben Collins. He's a cute kid, looks to have blonde or light colored, shaggy hair, and an amazing smile to match.

*Who are you, Ben Collins?*

Placing the picture back in the box where I found it, I set the pendant on top as I flip through various court papers. What I can't figure out is why this is all in here together? Just as I'm shuffling through the papers, about to read through them, I hear the front door open.

*Shit.*

Placing the top back on the box, I throw it back into the drawer when Hawke walks in.

There's nothing I can say that would make this alright. I'm busted, snooping through his stuff. My stomach sinks in embarrassment. My pulse rages with fear and trepidation as his eyes narrow at me.

"What the fuck are you doing in here?" he asks, eyeing my hand still in the drawer.

"I just..." My mouth is dry as I attempt to form words. "Just wanted to know—"

"Know what?!" he snaps, interrupting me.

"Know what happened," I whisper.

His eyes soften for a moment, looking at the drawer, then narrow again as he looks back at me.

"Get the fuck out of my room," he demands. "Now!"

"Hawke..." I say softly, getting up and walking towards him.

He raises his hands to ward me off. "Don't."

“Talk to me,” I whisper, touching his hands, making him wince.

He licks his lips, closing his eyes tightly, then opening them to look at me. I see the pain behind his them. A deep affliction swirled into those mysterious eyes, right along with the teals, blues, and greens.

“Talk to you? For what? You don’t want to know this.”

“I do. I would understand,” I plead, dropping our hands between us, placing my fingers on his hard chest.

He acts like my touch burns him, flinching at the contact as his chest rises and falls between us.

“Don’t do this to me.” His voice cracks and I feel his tortured agony.

He needs to open up, he just feels like he can’t. His eyes tell me he wants me to know, but there’s a hesitation. I know he doesn’t think he can trust me. I haven’t exactly given him a reason to. But, he means something to me now, even if I don’t know what that is.

“Who’s Ben?” I ask softly, looking up into his troubled expression.

He glares past me at the wall, his mouth open as he runs his tongue along his teeth, trying to hold back the pain by mindlessly moving his tongue. The name affects him. It pains him deeply. I can tell by the way his hand curls into a fist at his side, the way his eyes wince to hold back the agony.

“Let me be here for you,” I whisper, dragging my fingers down his pecs slowly before wrapping my arms around him in a gentle embrace.

I need to touch him, to comfort him. I feel like I’m the only person in this world who can and would understand him. And I desperately ache to show him that.

His breathing changes as his eyes close and his mouth drops open.

“You want to be here for me?” he asks with an edge, opening his eyes to look down at me, a new darkness to them.

My bottom lip springs free of my teeth as I nod. “I am. I’m right here.”

I don’t know what I’m doing, but I can’t help but press my entire body to him. He’s my magnet and I can’t do anything to repel him. I can’t fight it anymore. This devastating desire.

“Then be here for me,” he says before grabbing the back of my neck and pulling me into his lips.

I moan into his mouth at the contact as his tongue brushes against mine.

It all happens so fast. He’s pulling me backwards as he kisses me until he hits the bed. Gripping the back of my thighs, he pulls me onto his lap. Wild and reckless hands grab for my sweatshirt, quickly pulling it over my head.

He kisses me with such hunger, such need. He drags his tongue up the side of my neck, making me bite down on my lip while a moan escapes me.

“Fuck,” he breathes against my skin.

His tongue licks my bottom lip before entering my mouth again. I unknowingly wrap my arms around his neck, my hands instinctively finding their way to his hair. I pull as our kiss deepens. He groans, lifting his hips to meet mine. We’re out of control, in a lust-filled hell. There’s no stopping this. I need him and I don’t know why.

I don’t have a conscious or clear thought in my head as his hands scour my body, his fingers undoing my bra and discarding it before I remove his shirt. We’re on a crash course and nothing can stop this.

His hands cup my breasts as he groans in pure delight. He gently pulls my nipples between his fingers, setting my insides on fire for him. Pulling one to his mouth, he sucks, savoring it while releasing the sexiest growl from deep in his throat.

I push him back down against the bed, reaching for his pants to unbutton them. The look in his hooded eyes is wild. He wants me, needs me, just as badly as I need him. He hisses as I pull the zipper down, the bulge straining against his jeans making me warm all over.

He grabs for my pants at the same time, lowering them as I step out of them quickly. Everything is happening in fast motion. It’s as if he knows, given a second to think, I’d stop this immediately. But I’m not thinking, not about anything but this feeling deep within me, a need for pleasure, a need for deep-rooted connection to him.



I dip my hand into his boxer briefs, watching his face change as I wrap my hand around him. He's so warm, so hard, so big. He groans, throwing his head back as I stroke the length of him. I can't get enough of the faces he's making, the erotic sounds slipping through his luscious lips. It's intoxicating and addicting. I want more. *I crave him.*

"Cole." He groans again, his mouth dropping open. "Fuck."

I'm fascinated by the sudden power I have over him. I continue stroking him in my hand, marveling at his size before he grabs my wrist, stopping me.

"Come here," he commands breathlessly.

He pulls me up to the top of the bed, laying me on my back, wearing nothing but the underwear I put on beneath my clothes this morning. His lips start on my stomach, planting kisses until he finds my breast. He licks my nipple, wrapping his mouth around it. That lip ring dragging along my skin, the look in his eyes as he peers at me through his black hair that's fallen like a veil, slightly covering his vision. Everything is churning my insides.

He leans over me, grabbing a condom from the shelf, looking at it, then looking at me with an unsure face.

"What we're about to do is wrong." He rips the condom with his teeth, spitting out the edge of the wrapper. "So, so wrong."

I can't focus on anything but him before me at this moment. His broad frame towering over me, watching him roll the

condom onto his manhood as he looks at me like a starving animal. My pheromones are on fire for him. The desire radiating from his skin, exuding nothing but pure passionate lust from his eyes, from the way his muscles flex as he prepares himself for me.

He leans down, settling himself between my thighs.

“Please tell me not to,” he whispers against my mouth.

He wants me to stop him. He always does, but there’s no extinguishing this fire between us. It’s out of control and it needs to run its course, burning through everything until there’s nothing but ash left to settle.

“You have to tell me you want this,” he says cautiously.

I press my lips to his and kiss him before pulling back and reaching between us to remove my underwear.

“I need this,” I moan. “Please.”

I’ve lost all self-control beneath him. Whatever regrets that will come with this will have to wait.

Settling back between my thighs, he brushes himself against me, making us both suck in a breath, before angling himself to my entrance. We gaze into each other’s eyes as he pushes into me, achingly slow. My eyes wince as he slides deeper and deeper.

“Just a bit more,” he says in a strained tone, attempting to reassure me as he stretches me like I’ve never felt.

He drops his forehead against mine once we are fully connected, stilling for a moment for me to adjust.

“You’re as perfect as I imagined,” he whispers under his breath, eyes falling closed.

I’m stretching around him as pleasure spreads throughout my core. I feel so full and so numb and so amazingly charged all at the same time.

“Hawke,” I whisper breathlessly.

His eyes find mine and something changes in him.  
“Cameron.”

I swallow, confusion hitting me.

“Call me Cameron,” he says, gazing from my eyes to my lips and back before wincing his eyes tightly at the feeling of being inside me.

I’ve never felt so connected to someone as I do at this moment. I don’t know what to do with that.

“Cameron,” I breathe out.

He opens his eyes quickly at his name and I see him. I see his soul through those troubled eyes. He’s affixed to me now, just as I am tethered to him.

He begins moving out of me as we stare at each other. He picks up the pace, almost synchronizing his motions with the increasing rate of his heart. I hold on to his neck, opening my hips for him as we connect again and again. The soft tenderness slowly changes into a forceful collision. If I had

any self-control left, I'd care about the sounds I was making, but I don't. I moan and cry out as he thrusts into me, his hoarse voice and sounds filling the air right along with me.

He wraps my thigh up and around his hip, holding on tightly for leverage as he urges me deeper and deeper into the darkness with him.

His lips connect with my neck, right beneath my ear. His tongue darts out, alternating between licking and sucking motions before his other hand cups my breast firmly, then softly kneading it. Everything feels so perfect, like it was destined to happen. It needed to feel this good just to solidify any doubts.

“You're ruining me.” He groans against my lips.  
“Goddammit Cole.”

I feel myself peaking, the pleasure right in my grasp now. As if he can sense it too, he wraps his other hand around the back of my neck, holding me in place as he drives into me, watching my face closely, studying my eyes, my lips, the crease between my brows, as I lose control.

I cry out, closing my eyes tightly as I come undone like I never have before. I feel myself tighten around him as hot waves of pleasure course through me. He doesn't stop. He just keeps going as I ride through the orgasm, feeling an electric pulse flying through me each time he fills me. It's the longest, most amazing feeling I've ever felt.

His head drops to my shoulder and his thrusts get sloppy and slower as my fingers grip tightly into the skin of his back.

He finishes with a deep groan against my skin, the pants from his breath felt against my neck.

As soon as he finishes, we stay connected, slowly coming back down to earth. I feel the flood of regret swarm me immediately as I hit the surface, pulling me under its suffocating waters. The tears well in my eyes as I stare at the ceiling. I can't believe myself. *What have I done?*

He lifts his head, swallowing to catch his breath to look at me. He takes in my change of emotion, his eyes looking back and forth between mine.

"I told you. I told you to tell me to stop. I begged you," he says, shaking his head as my tears spill down my cheeks.

"I know, I just..."

I don't know what I'm feeling. I feel regret, but not because I didn't enjoy it. I feel regret because it was one of the most amazing feelings I've ever felt and I can't process that.

He slowly gets off me, running a hand through his hair. His face looks so hurt, so disappointed.

I reach out for him. "Hawke."

"It's fine. It meant nothing," he says coldly, putting his pants back on.

My heart breaks in half. I just threw myself at him for him to tell me it was all for nothing. I thought it meant something. I thought we truly connected. I felt like he was opening up to me. But now that I can see more clearly, I can tell he used sex to avoid dealing with whatever I was chipping away at. I've

ruined my relationship, for a quick fuck with the bad boy who got under my skin, the way he does with everyone. He's right. No part of this was special at all.

“Cole, just leave.” He shakes his head, walking towards the door.

Panic hits me as I realize I've completely destroyed everything with two horrible, childish, impulsive decisions. I'm so hurt in totally different ways. I've just risked losing everything for someone who isn't willing to admit that this was anything at all.

“You're not going to say anything, are you?”

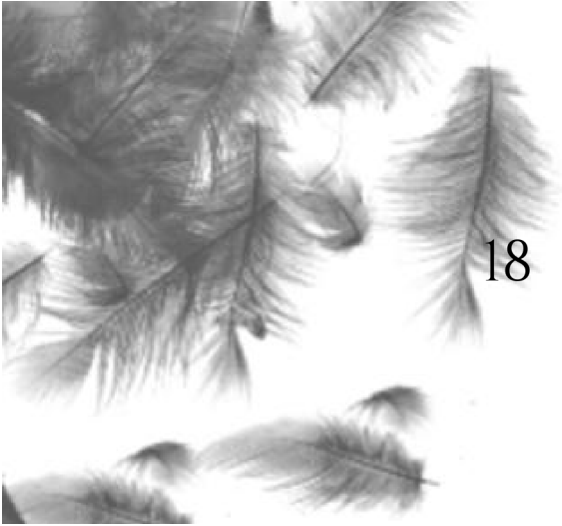
He peers down at the floor, raising his eyebrows almost in disbelief.

“No, Cole. I won't if you don't want me to.” He sighs, raking his hand through his hair again.

I quickly step into my clothes, feeling more naked and exposed than I ever have as I walk past him.

Leaving the room, I go to close the door, but it creaks open a bit. I stand outside in the hall, seeing his silhouette through the crack. I watch him as he falls to his knees, his hands dragging down his face. He opens the bottom drawer to the desk, where the shoebox is. He places his hand on it to open it, then quickly shuts the drawer, kicking it in with a loud bang before resting his head in his hands.

Some secrets are buried so deep, that the only way to find the truth is to discover the depths of the darkness yourself.





**D**istance.

It's what we need. Space. Time away from each other to fully process what just happened. My mind is so foggy, so clouded when I'm near him, that all rational thought gets thrown out the window. I need clear air to process just how wrong and horrible and awful this situation is.

I sat in my room until Patrick came home from work, chewing my nails until there was nothing left to chew. I've never felt so nervous, so anxious, so disgusted by my careless actions. So confused. I have no idea what to do with these emotions. I seem to want what I can't have; I need what I don't know, and I know nothing. Mentally drained doesn't even begin to cover it.

I knew I needed to tell Patrick, but how? When? Would he forgive me? Could we move past this? Did I want to?

He comes in the door cheery as ever, which doesn't help my situation. I was sick to death, and worried that Hawke would decide against keeping our little secret and just blurt it out to him, simply for the fact that I had invaded his privacy, so he



invaded mine. *“We had amazing sex, and I gave her an orgasm. What have you done today?”*

“Babe? Why are you so pale? Are you feeling alright?” he asks, taking his coat off and laying it on the corner of the bed.

I place my hand on my forehead. “Must’ve eaten something funny.”

“Well, I hope it passes soon,” he says with an excited grin.

“Why? What’s going on?”

“Come with me.”

He grabs my hand, pulling me out into the kitchen. My eyes nervously scour the scene for Hawke but I breathe easy seeing he isn’t out here, he’s still in his room. I briefly wonder what he’s been doing or thinking since our little encounter.

Patrick leads me to the table as I take a seat. He walks over to his door, knocking a few times.

I gasp. “What are you—”

Hawke opens the door, peering out at Patrick, wearing a loosely fit black t-shirt and some gray sweatpants. He eyes him curiously before glancing over at me.

God, he still looks so effortlessly good. And now, knowing everything that’s under those clothes? I can almost see the imprint of the thing that was just deep inside me. I swallow bile. My face must be a shade of maroon with the heat I now feel in my cheeks.

“What’s up?” he asks casually, rubbing the back of his neck.

My stomach is literally doing a full Olympic gymnastic floor routine inside of my body. I think I'm going to faint.

Hawke's eyes sweep from me, back to Patrick, and the concern there is evident. Either he thinks I told him or he found out.

"Come on out here for a second. We need to talk," Patrick says with an easy smile.

I gnaw at my bottom lip as we all sit around the kitchen table together. Hawke sits back into the seat, seemingly relaxed. My hands are sweating like crazy, tucked inside my sweatshirt.

"I know what's been going on," he begins.

My face drops as all the air leaves the room. Hawke's eyes narrow, looking from me to Patrick.

"You guys aren't really getting along," he finishes.

I inhale a breath for the first time in what feels like two hours.

"I know it's hard, having a new roommate and all, especially when you're both so different and having to share this space during the day. But I really want this to work for the time being. I want us to all be adults here."

I can't stand it when Patrick talks down to people like this, especially when it's me.

"We're being adults, Patrick, we're just giving each other much-needed space," I clarify.

“I don’t know. Maybe he’s right,” Hawke interjects. “Maybe we should put more effort into spending time together. Get to really know each other,” he says with amusement in his tone. “I mean, all we do is avoid each other, clearly.”

He leans back in his chair, placing both of his hands on top of his head with a grin pulling at his lips. My eyes narrow at him from across the table. I know what he’s doing. He’s toying with me.

“Exactly. Thank you, Hawke.” Patrick nods. “With me being gone so much with work lately, I’d hate to think it was awkward around here.”

I scoff, rolling my eyes and looking towards the kitchen. Hawke’s eyes are all over me from across the table. *Why is he like this?* Serious, sexual, then sadistic.

“C’mon Nic...” Patrick scolds me.

“Yeah, Nic,” Hawke says the name with a pop. “Maybe we can *come* together and be friends?”

I’m not even going to pretend I didn’t just catch what he did there. Cute. Real cute. If my glare could shoot bullets, it would.

Thank God Patrick is so oblivious. Ugh, I feel awful. He’s trying so hard to make me happy. I know he is. He cares about me having to deal with this situation that *he* brought upon us. If only he knew.

I grab Patrick’s hands on the table and turn towards him with soft pleading eyes. “What I’d really love is some more

time with you.”

Hawke rolls his eyes while Patrick smiles lovingly back at me.

“Well, you’re in luck.” He grins. “I got us all tickets to go see Divine Intervention in the city tomorrow night.”

“What?” I ask, looking from him to Hawke.

His face holds humor, amusement, and surprise.

“Divine Intervention?” he asks.

“They’re a Christian rock band. They’re on the rise.”

Patrick smiles proudly. “Anyway, I got tickets for the three of us. Figured we could leave when I get off work tomorrow, we can pick up some food on the way.”

“Patrick. I have to work.” I shake my head.

“Problem already solved. I called and asked if someone could cover for you and John said he would figure something out.”

I can see Hawke wanting to laugh as he listens. He’s entirely entertained watching us interact and I could kill him. I could literally kill him.

“I don’t like that you did that. John’s only saying that because he’s a nice guy. Now he’ll be crazy busy by himself trying to cover for me on a Saturday night.” I sigh, feeling frustrated.

“Nic, it’s fine. This is important. We need this,” he replies.

“Yeah, Nic, this will be good. For all of us,” Hawke adds, his mischievous eyes narrowing in on me. I glare back at him.

“Whatever,” I grumble, turning to face Patrick.

“Great. This is good.” Patrick sits back, looking proudly at us both.

This is going to be so bad.



“You look fantastic,” Patrick says, coming up behind me in the mirror.

I blush as I finish curling the last few pieces of my hair. I had no idea what to wear to a Christian rock concert, but I decided on a sunflower floral mini dress, with a cute leather jacket, some thigh-high stockings, and some wedged black booties.

I might look too risqué for God-Rock, but here we are.

Patrick’s wearing a pair of jeans with a cream zip-up sweater and Doc Martens. I tease him for looking like a hedge fund kid as he teases me for looking like a groupie.

Our playful energy is back and as horrible as I feel for the awful mistakes I’ve made, I’m just thankful we can be flirty and fun again for the time being. That is until all hell is unleashed once the truth is finally out.

We walk out into the kitchen area, his hands all over me as Hawke walks out of the bathroom. He styled his hair back with a few pieces hanging down. He's wearing black ripped, fitted jeans with a dark gray t-shirt that clings to his muscular figure. Black combat boots with a few chains around his neck and rings to match. He smells amazing, like some sort of spicy, aftershave-type cologne or whatever guys put on.

My eyes take him in from head to toe and I swallow down the heat that is rising within me. He looks edible in the way that toxic things usually are. He seems to have the same problem, standing there somewhat awkwardly, staring at me.

“Ready to go?” Patrick asks excitedly.

His hands are around my waist as we walk towards the door. He squeezes me as I squeal before he plants his lips on mine. Hawke watches us from behind, using a fist to his chin to crack his neck, then follows us to the car.

“A Kia, huh?” Hawke says from the back seat as we start the hour drive to the city.

“Yeah, yeah. I get it. Great gas mileage though. Perfect for traveling for work.”

I smile at him, squeezing his hand in mine as he picks it up and kisses my knuckles. God, I'm the worst. I can feel Hawke grinning behind my back with the knowledge of what just transpired moments before Patrick came home. I wonder if he's still thinking about it the same way I can't seem to stop thinking about it. His hands, his groans, his eyes, his face, his

cock. The condom is probably still in the trash in his room.  
*Jesus, I'm going to puke.*

We arrive at the venue, and it's not what I was expecting. I was ready for at least a bit of an edge, but all I see are men dressed like they're on their way to a golf tournament, girls on their way to Sunday brunch. Sure, there are some people dressed a tad edgier, but even in my floral dress with a leather coat, I feel like the baddest gangster this side of Harlem.

Hawke's expression says it all. He's walking around behind us with a brow cocked and a twisted face. My guess is his type of raves are nothing like this.

We find a spot to stand in the open area, near the stage, when Patrick gets us all a few beers.

“Should I come with? You'll need help carrying—”

“No, babe, I got it. Just...talk to Hawke.” He kisses my nose before turning away and heading towards the bar through the growing crowd of people.

I grumble then reluctantly face Hawke, who's smiling devilishly at me yet again. This is all a game to him. Toying with me and my emotions, the only goal.

The crowd gets packed together as more and more people fill the small space before the stage. Hawke and I get pushed closer together. He holds his arms out, shielding me, as a group of boys no older than sixteen push past us.

He settles behind me and takes the opportunity to wrap his arms around my waist, pulling me back into him. He nuzzles

into my hair, finding my ear. I feel his warm, wet mouth surround my earlobe, sending a wave of pleasure below my waist. A breathy moan escapes me as his teeth drag on the sensitive tissue.

I come to my senses, pushing him off me while he chuckles.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?! Are you crazy?!” I ask, peering past him, ensuring Patrick is nowhere near.

“Sorry, just saw something I liked,” he says with a cocked head, licking his bottom lip, toying with the ring.

“You can’t do that!” I scold.

I turn back around to face the band, who’s getting ready to start. Patrick rejoins us, passing beers around. He puts an arm around me, casually sipping his beer while the music starts up.

The band is actually not that bad. I sway to the music as the rest of the crowd enjoys the catchy hook as well. I peek over at Hawke, who’s standing back from us a bit, leaning against a pillar with a leg crossed casually, sipping his beer.

A group of girls walk past him, giggling and flashing him looks, but he doesn’t pay attention. His eyes are locked on where Patrick’s hand is sliding down my waist. I really wish he’d focus on anything else.

Patrick cups my ass with one hand, nuzzling my hair as he continues listening to the band.

The awkwardness is becoming too much between the two, and I can feel Hawke’s eyes on me like lasers. I get flushed,



feeling as if I can't breathe, like the room is closing in on me. Or maybe it's just my conscience screaming at me.

"I'm going to grab some water. I'll be right back!" I call out to Patrick over the music.

He nods as I push out of the crowd. I walk past Hawke without looking or saying a word, and his head turns to follow me.

Grabbing a glass of water from the back bar, I take a deep breath and relax some. I don't know if it was the crowd, Patrick's hands on me, or Hawke's eyes that had me feeling like I couldn't breathe, but I'm much less congested back here.

I find a set of stairs leading towards the balcony and take them to get a better view of the band. It's nice up here, away from all of my problems. I'm guessing I'm not allowed because no one else is up here, but I'm loving the space. I finally feel like I can breathe. Leaning against the railing, I watch them rock out, singing their new song "Saved by Your Grace." It must be their hit song because the crowd sings along to every word.

Gripping the railing with both palms, I feel someone's hands slide around my waist. I gasp at the sudden contact, unsure of who it might be. Happens when you have a boyfriend, but are also conveniently fucking your roommate.

They pull me back into them, hands sliding down from my waist to my hips. I feel a hard body behind me and smell that delicious cologne as soon as I spot Patrick down in the crowd.

“What are you—”

“Shhh...” he interrupts.

His hands make their way to the front of my exposed thighs, slowly trailing their way up. We’re hidden up here, in the dark, and no one is around us. This is a setup for something bad.

I relax a little against him, taking a breath, leaning back, and enjoying the sensation of the bass beating through my chest as Hawke’s fingers find the place where my legs meet.

I moan when he touches me under my dress, his fingers circling the outside of my panties, driving me insane. He applies just the right amount of pressure. A devastatingly perfect amount, getting my heart rate up and my breathing irregular. The build-up is becoming too much.

His other arm wraps around my waist, holding me in place as he presses himself firmly against my backside, letting me know just how aroused he is too.

“Jesus, you’re all wet,” he whispers in my ear. Feeling the dampness from the outside of my panties, he continues stroking my slit with his finger.

His words, the tone of his deep raspy voice, and what his fingers are currently doing, have me swirling in intoxicated lust.

I blink my eyes, trying to wake myself up, when his lips find my ear again, his tongue trailing down my neck.

“No,” I say breathlessly, pressing my ass back into his erection.

“You want me to stop?” He breathes against me before planting open-mouthed kisses on the sensitive skin.

“Oh, yes.” I moan, rolling my head back into him. His other hand dips inside my jacket, cupping my breast, his thumb flicking over my erect nipple.

I shake my head, opening my eyes, seeing Patrick beneath us watching the band.

“No,” I say breathlessly. “No!”

I grab his hands, throwing them down, then turn around and push him back against the wall. “Stop! We have to stop this! This is insane!”

I finally come to my senses. I just can’t function around him and he knows it. If all he wants is to fuck around with someone, he’s going to need to find someone else to do it with.

Hard eyes find mine as a look of confusion washes over him. He shakes his head once before grabbing my upper arms, pulling me back towards him. Spinning us around abruptly so my back is against the wall, he presses his lips to mine.

His lips are so soft, yet burning for me. His tongue plunges into my mouth as his hands slide up and around the sides of my neck. He pins me against him as his lips seamlessly run against mine. Groaning into my mouth, he presses his erection against my thigh. It feels so good. Too good. So good that I know it’s wrong.

“Hawke, stop!” I finally say, pushing him off me again.

He stands there with his hands up, his eyes half-lidded and his mouth open, as if he was just as intoxicated as I was by our connection.

“I’m sorry, you just...weren’t acting like you wanted me to stop.”

“Does the word no mean nothing to you?” I snap.

“Well, not when it’s followed up with a moaning yes.” He grins his cocky side grin. “You’re sending mixed signals.”

“How’s this for a signal?” I say, flipping him off.

“Again?” He tips his head. “So soon?”

His sarcasm is sending me into a rage. I head for the stairs, leaving him standing there with an amused face.

“Don’t follow me,” I warn, turning to see his sexy grin one last time.

His hands are raised towards me, telling me he knows, hands off. I take a deep breath, trying to calm myself before walking back down to Patrick.

I really need to get my priorities straight. I almost hit second base at a Christian rock concert.

Hell is just a stone’s throw away.





“**T**urn the brights off, crazy, you’ll blind someone,”  
Hawke yells at me from the passenger seat.

I throw him a quick glare before turning them off.

I’m not used to driving Patrick’s car and often forget how it works. After the concert ended, we made our way back home. Patrick asked if he could lie down in the back to catch up on some sleep. The sleep I’d been keeping from him with the apparent wild and crazy sex.

Hawke was more than willing to let him take the back so he could take the front with me. I groaned at the thought.

Not only was he a horrible back seat driver, as you call them, he was also throwing little sexual innuendos in at every opportunity. I’m kind of over this asshole side of Hawke at the moment. I, however, wouldn’t mind seeing Cameron again.

Hearing Patrick lightly snoring in the back was the only thing keeping my head from spinning off inside of this car.

“So tell me, have you always liked Christian rock?” he asks, playing with one of his rings on his finger.

I look over at him with knit brows and a twisted face. “No.”

He laughs, showing off his white teeth.

“To be honest, the last concert I went to may surprise you,” I reply.

“Oooh, okay, let me guess.” He sits up in the seat, facing me. “Jonas Brothers.”

I give him my best glare at his smartass response.

“Okay, not Jonas Brothers, how about...Kelly Clarkson?”

“Jesus, you really think I’m a square, huh?”

“I mean...yeah.” He shrugs.

“Screw off.” I scoff. “No, the last concert I went to was last summer, RockFest. I saw Disturbed with my sister.”

Hawke looks over at me like I said the most outlandish thing he’s ever heard.

“Disturbed?! You?!” He shakes his head. “I don’t believe it.”

“Well, believe it, because it’s true.”

“Damn, I had no idea you got down with the sickness,” he replies, gazing through the front windshield, still in shock.

“Yep. I get stupified,” I comment, adding to his humor.

He chuckles to himself muttering unbelievable beneath his breath.

“How old’s your sister?” he asks, changing the subject.

“She’s two years older than me. Her name’s Johanna. We couldn’t be any more different, but at least we bond over music.” I shrug.

“So she’s wild and reckless and you’re cool and calculated.” He smiles.

“Pretty much.” I nod. “Has it been hard for you? Being an only child?” I ask with caution.

He’d mentioned to me that he was an only child in our couch conversations, only him and his dad for a while before he passed.

“You mean to ask, has it been hard to be on my own with no one to have my back through some of the shittiest times in my life?” He pauses for a moment, looking at the dashboard. “Yeah, it has.”

My heart breaks for him.

“Well, siblings aren’t always all they’re cracked up to be. Hell, when I told Johanna about you moving in, the only thing she could think about was that she was dying to visit to—” I stop myself from finishing the sentence.

Remembering our conversation last week, I realize I should’ve never brought this up.

Hawke becomes intrigued. “Dying to visit to do what?” He smirks, trouble twinkling in his eyes.

“Forget I said anything.”



“She wants to fuck my brains out? Lay it all on me? Get some good dick with the bad boy roommate for the night?” he asks, making me blush at his crude use of verbiage.

“Basically.”

“So when is she visiting?”

I smack his chest with my free hand, making him chuckle, then turn to the back seat. Patrick is still knocked out.

“I mean, if she looks anything close to you, I’d call it a win.”

I blush at his comment, attempting not to smile.

“She’s way better looking,” I admit.

He stares at me from the corner of my eye, clearly taking inventory of the woman sitting next to him, possibly running down memory lane of my naked body in his bed. This is beyond uncomfortable.

“Doubtful,” he says confidently. “But I guess it’s better than nothing.”

“So classy.” I scoff at his joke.

“What, would that bother you?” he asks in a softer tone.

“What? You fucking my sister?”

I turn to face him, and he waits with a cocked brow. I sigh, facing the front again. Thinking about it for a moment, I realize it would bother me. But it shouldn’t. I’m with Patrick. I have no claims to this man, nor do I ask for any, but if I’m

being honest with myself, it bothers me. The problem is, I can't seem to be honest with him.

“No. Why would it? I'm in a serious relationship and you're free to fuck whoever you want, like you have been.”

He's silent for a moment. Not retorting with some smart-ass comment like normal. My eyes slowly look over at him and find he's looking out of the windshield with a strange look about him. I suddenly regret my decision to not speak my truth.

After a moment of silence, he says, “You don't really expect me to believe that, do you?”

I look over at him and his cocky smirk is back like it never left.

“Alright,” I begin, checking the back seat in the rearview mirror, then speaking softly, “It would bother me. A little. There. Is that what you wanted to hear? Are you happy now?”

He places his hands on the top of his head, kicking the seat back and slouching down with a content sigh. “Yep.”

I roll my eyes at his smugness. He baited me. I was honest, and now I feel like a fool.

“Don't you have enough women on your plate awaiting a call?” I ask in a condescending tone.

“None that beg for it like you do,” he whispers in a hoarse voice, his grin growing by the second.

“Oh my God, piss off.”

He laughs, then toys with his lip ring. I know he loves getting under my skin. It literally gives him a hard-on.

“You’re a firecracker and you don’t even know it. But it’s okay, I’m patient.” He gives me a light head nod.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you don’t even know who you are, yet you seemingly hold yourself back. I don’t get it. But I’ll be here when you figure it out.”

His words hit something deep inside of me. The thought has come across my mind before. Wondering if I’m living a lie. Wondering if this life I’ve been so set on planning out is truly what I need or if it’s just become a habit. A comfortable habit that soothes me. How can he just see through me like this? It bothers me.

“Says the guy who holds everything in and fucks anything walking.”

He chuckles, then his face grows somber. “That’s... different.”

I look over at him and he’s staring at me side-eyed through his dark lashes. I see the sadness inside of him. In a look, I can feel that he’s hurting in a place he doesn’t let anyone see. Maybe he can feel I see a different side to him. He has this thing about him where he looks like he wants to tell me something, but is stopped by a force out of his control. Like he’s praying I’ll just guess it so he doesn’t have to tell me.

“Okay, so we’ve established that sometimes sex means nothing to you.” I try to continue some sort of conversation.

“I don’t fuck around *that* much,” he says.

“Oh, like that one skinny brunette chick I walked in on? Or maybe the redhead at the door. Oh, no! I bet it meant something with that blonde curvy girl. Yep, I bet it was something with her.” I taunt him like he taunts me.

“You know, you pay pretty close attention for someone who supposedly doesn’t care. You must think a lot about it.” He smirks, and I see the playfulness is back.

I hear Patrick continue snoring behind me.

“I don’t think about it at all.” I smile smugly, lying through my teeth.

I haven’t stopped thinking about it.

“It’s okay if you wanna think about me when you...you know,” he comments quietly, looking to the backseat, then back at me with that devilishly wicked grin.

My mouth drops open as I gasp at his crudeness.

He sits up in his seat, leaning into me, brushing the hair back behind my ear while cautiously keeping an eye on the backseat. I swallow at his closeness, closing my eyes at his touch, trying my best not to move and stay focused before I steer this car off the road.

“Because I guarantee I’ll be thinking about you, wrapped tightly around me, cumming around my cock, as I jerk off in

the shower tonight,” he whispers, his lip ring tickling my ear.

My chest is rising and falling fast as his words intoxicate me again. Lust-filled seduction. No, not again.

“P-put, put your seatbelt on!” I stutter, all breathless and flustered.

Why do his words tickle me between my legs? He opens his mouth and I just want to do bad things. I need him impulsively and I can’t stand it. He does things to my hormones that I can’t mentally process. He’s bad. He’s bad for me. He’s a horrible temptation that I can’t be around.

“It’s on.” He chuckles, clearly laughing at my inability to speak.

“I supposed you’re making up for lost time though, like Kid said.”

“What?” He straightens in his seat. “What did he tell you about me?”

His tone changed from playful to angry in a matter of seconds.

“Only that you were making up for the last five years with all these women.”

He looks out the side window, running his hand through his hair as he blows out air.

“It’s not like that,” he says in a direct tone, facing the road.

“It’s cool. It’s just sex. It means nothing, right?” I reply, using his words with a bit of a sarcastic edge to it.

I'm not forgetting the fact that after what we did he said it meant nothing. As bad as the situation is, it still meant something to me, even if I haven't figured out what that something is yet.

He scoffs, then shakes his head, almost looking annoyed.

"It can mean something sometimes," he whispers after a slight pause, looking down at his rings again. He looks back up at me with a tight jaw and a sad expression, like what he's about to say hurts him in an unexplainable way. "It meant something with *you*."

His hand brushes against mine on the console, his pinky finger crossing over onto mine. The tiny gesture speaks volumes and instantly makes me feel emotional. I gaze back at him and feel the weight of timing and how it changes everything.

"It meant something to me, too." I sigh, being honest.

Patrick grunts from behind us, shifting in his sleep, and Hawke immediately sucks in a breath and pulls away from the contact. The feeling...so final, as if we'd both finally admitted there was something real there, but acknowledged the timing had taken away what we'd only just found.

We finally got back to the house, the rest of the ride filled with silent questions. Questions that flogged my head. I felt more lost than ever, like my head and my heart weren't aligned like they once were. I was torn.

“Home sweet home,” Hawke says sarcastically before getting out of the car and jogging into the place.

I can't help but to watch him as he casually makes his way through the door. He's so effortlessly together. Confident, sexy. It's really unfair how even in the way he lightly jogs, I see it. He's ridiculously attractive, there's just no denying it.

I put the car in park and unbuckled my belt, turning to wake up Patrick. Heading inside the house, I head to our bedroom, changing into something more comfortable when he comes up behind me. “Sorry I fell asleep. I've been so tired lately.”

I turn to face him. His sweet smile greeting me, his hands wrapping around my waist. *What am I doing? I'm just awful.*

“I love you, Patrick,” I confess, holding his face in my hands, feeling the weight of guilt again.

How could I do this to him? He's been nothing but sweet and amazing. He tries so hard to make things better in my life and what do I do? I act like a child, impulsively acting out, doing whatever I want, no matter who it hurts.

“I love you, too.” He smiles back, his kind eyes like a knife to my heart. “I'm so happy with you and how things are...”

I swallow a huge lump that's caught in my throat, feeling nothing but regret. It's breaking my heart, knowing what I've done to him. He doesn't deserve this. I need to figure this shit out and be done with it.

“I just want you to know that even if I'm going to be gone more, it's all for you, for us.”

“Wait, what?”

He sits down on the bed, pulling me to join him. *Not this again.*

“I have another trip coming up.”

My heart sinks.

“Just a couple of days again. Back in Colorado.” He pauses, looking at me with a sorrowful face. “Are you mad at me?”

“What am I supposed to say, Patrick? I can’t do anything about it. If I complain, then I’m an annoying girlfriend who’s being selfish, and if I don’t, then I suffer internally.” I run a hand through my hair, pulling it at the roots.

“I know it isn’t easy. But I’m trying to set up a life for us.”

“A life where you’re on the road all the time and I’m alone? Maybe that’s what your mom signed up for with your dad, but I never once expected this. This was never part of your plan. I thought you hated your dad being on the road when you were growing up. That’s never something I wanted. I wanted you. That’s why I moved here. That’s why I left my life back home, to be here with you, not by myself.”

“I know. I know you gave up everything. I know you don’t have anyone here.” He grabs my hands, pulling them into his lap. “But I’m the one who’s supporting your life choices. And I need this job to do that. I’m starting at the bottom, even if it’s my father’s company, and working my way up. To do that, I have to do bottom-level work.”



He's doing it again. Making me feel like nothing without knowing it. I understand he's the breadwinner between us, but life to me isn't all about the looks and the money. I don't care about showing off wealth. I don't need the latest fashion or newest car; I don't need the biggest house on the block. I just wanted something real.

"I leave next weekend, but I took some days off so we can spend more time together." He shifts his head so he can look at me with his adorable smile.

"You did?" I ask eagerly, feeling filled with a sliver of joy.

He's trying. He's compromising for me. And I don't even deserve him.

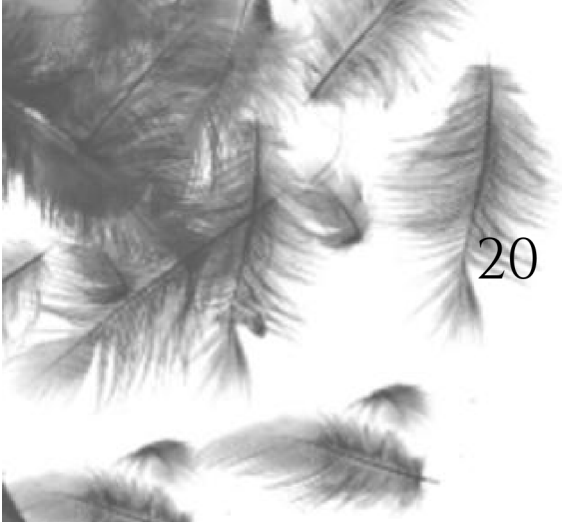
"Yep, and I might even have a little date planned for us."

"Patrick." I bite down on my lower lip, holding the impending emotions. "Really?"

"Just trying to keep you happy." He wrinkles his nose while ruffling my hair playfully.

We snuggle up and cuddle in bed together the rest of the night, just the two of us, holding one another, watching some Netflix show on my laptop like we used to. I'm hopeful for something more, hopeful for some sort of change between us. Being here with him feels comforting, even if I don't deserve it.

I fall into a deep sleep before I can even tell if the water in the bathroom ever turned on.





**T**he next few days were incredible.

Patrick and I were our old selves again. Playful, constantly touching, kissing whenever possible, laughing all the time...

It felt like the Patrick and Nic I used to know. We were reconnecting after finally being given the time we needed.

I didn't see much of Hawke at all. He started his job at the mailing company, working third shift to start. He was gone the last few nights and slept most of the day, or left the house and was out with Kid or some girls. I honestly didn't know. I tried not to think about it, knowing I shouldn't.

Our coffee meetings were nonexistent the past few mornings. I'm not sure if that had to do with the fact that Patrick was off work and he just wanted to avoid being around us together or what. Maybe I was being bold for even thinking I had that effect on him. Maybe he was just sick of being around me. A part of me worried, but I was still up early each morning with a sliver of hope he'd greet me with that easygoing smile.

Patrick was really putting effort into making me feel loved. He took me out to dinner and wined and dined me. He bought me flowers; he bought me a new sweater; he held my hand and opened doors. It was surprisingly overwhelming in the best way.

I selfishly hadn't told him what happened between Hawke and I. Why? Because I was afraid. I was afraid of what the repercussions of that would mean. He'd leave me and never forgive me for my infidelities. I'd be homeless. On my own. He'd tell his family and everyone they knew through the church. Everyone in this town would know I was the whore that broke poor Patrick's heart. Everyone would hate me. Everything I'd known the last four years of my life would liquify before me. I wouldn't know where to turn.

I'd decided to bear my guilt, at least until I could process my next steps. Guilt is a funny thing, though. It's like a heavy cloud that follows you around. Sometimes, if you allow it, it floods you completely, leaving you feeling wet, drenched, and not worthy of the sun. I was working hard not to let my cloud flood me, but the shadowed space I'd become used to wasn't going anywhere.

Tonight we've decided to stay in, watch movies, order a pizza, and be lazy. It's our last night together before he leaves for another two days. I got our slices on a couple plates in the kitchen when Hawke suddenly walks through the door.

"Hey, what are you doing off already?" Patrick asks him from the couch.

He moves into the kitchen, not looking towards me at all, but opens the cupboard above the fridge, grabbing the bottle of whiskey. I see a sliver of tatted skin under his shirt, right above his low-hanging jeans, and I immediately flush and look away. The sight only further reminds me of my hands dragging along that skin.

He opens the bottle and swallows at least five shots worth of the dark liquid. He pulls the bottle down, looking over at Patrick while wiping his bottom lip with the back of his hand. “I quit.”

“You just started,” Patrick retorts, turning around from the couch.

“Yep, and now, just ended.” He takes another pull.

I look at him questionably, wanting him to see my eyes, to know I’m here for him, but he never looks my way. He’s avoiding me, and I understand it but also kind of hate it.

Patrick gets up and joins us in the kitchen now. “You do know you need to keep a job to—”

“Don’t you fucking tell me what I need to do,” Hawke snaps, pointing a finger into his chest.

Something strange is happening. The energy in the room has shifted. I stand there with wide eyes, watching their exchange.

“I’m not trying to tell you what to do. But you know that if you don’t keep that job your Parole Officer will come asking about it and I’ll have to be honest,” Patrick explains calmly, a

hint of authority in his tone that makes me narrow my eyes at him.

Hawke glares at him, tightening his jaw and clenching his fist at his side. His breathing increases and he looks like a bull ready to charge, but something's holding him back.

Why would Patrick rat him out like that? Aren't they supposed to be friends? Granted, Hawke isn't exactly holding up his end of the friendship when it comes to me.

"Hey, hey...we don't need to say anything yet. Let's just let him figure it out," I say, walking between them, trying to intervene. "I'm sure he has a backup plan."

I look at Hawke with brows raised, and his eyes finally connect with mine. His face softens a bit as he takes a breath and lets it out.

"Yeah, I'll have it figured out," he says, cooling off.

He stares at me for a moment, trying to communicate without words. I have a feeling if Patrick wasn't here, he'd tell me what was wrong, but because he is, he's trapped and can't be who he wants to be around me. He can't open up.

"Good. Problem solved. Now let's eat and watch this movie." Patrick smiles, grabbing his plate of pizza. "Join us."

Hawke stands there, clenching his jaw with narrowed eyes as Patrick walks back over to the couch.

"You alright?" I ask quietly.

He blinks his eyes, shaking his head slightly, then snaps his head to look at me. “Never been better.”

“Wanna talk about it?” I ask, moving in closer.

I hate the feeling that he’s going through something and has no one to vent to.

“No,” he responds blandly.

He brushes past me while I sigh. I’m not going to push him, but I’m definitely curious about just happened. I hate to imagine him keeping even more buried deep inside him with no one to open up to.

He heads to his room, slamming the door as I chew on my bottom lip, releasing another regretful sigh. I join Patrick on the oversized couch, finishing our pizza slices. After we eat, I hit the lights, turning the movie on, and hop back beside Patrick. He tickles my waist, making me playfully smack him, before pulling me into him, kissing that spot on my neck he loves so much.

I don’t know what Patrick is thinking, but he pulls me further between his legs, my back to his front, putting the blanket over us as his hands explore beneath it.

I swallow nervously as his hand slowly moves down my shoulder and underneath my arm. His hand slides under, drifting over my rib cage before cupping my breast. I suck in a breath at the contact as his thumb brushes over my nipple.

I adjust myself in the seat, and Patrick adjusts himself as well. I can feel him hard against my back. He’s enjoying this

little situation, that's quite clear, and he's getting bolder.

Patrick's hands start becoming extremely friendly as the fingers of his other hand slip over my stomach, finding their way into the waistband of my leggings. He can't seriously be thinking about doing this right now. This is so unlike him. Anything outside of the bedroom has typically never happened. Missionary beneath the sheets is enough to do him in.

His fingers slip under, sliding down until his hand is cupping all of me. I lick my lips, trying to calm my heart rate while looking down at the blanket. He begins slowly moving his middle finger up the length of me, making me shudder.

Just as he touches me in my most sensitive place, I hear Hawke's door open. I suck in a breath as he comes out into the kitchen in some new off-green sweatpants sans shirt, and decides now is the best time to come hang out with us. It's like he has a Cole-is-wet radar.

He plops down on the other end of the sectional with a pissed-off look about him.

I hold Patrick's hand to stop his motions, feeling how inappropriate this is, but he shakes me off.

Hawke glares over at us, and we connect eyes for a moment. I dart my eyes away immediately, but he keeps staring. Why now? Why did he decide to come out here? Luckily, from the position we're in, Patrick can't see him behind the back of my head.



I shudder slightly, wincing my eyes as Patrick moves his fingers again. I blink my eyes open to Hawke, who's still looking in my direction, totally captivated by my weird behavior.

He lifts his head a bit, narrowing his eyes while watching, chewing casually on his thumb. My eyelids flutter and my mouth drops open a tad as Patrick's fingers start circling my clit.

I'm stuck. Caught in one of the most awkward moments in my life and I can't seem to do anything to change it because I don't want to make a scene. It would be so obvious what we're doing. The fact that Patrick is continuing this, knowing he is right there on the couch across from us, is crazy to me.

Patrick is unaware of where my eyes are, but they are glued to Hawke's. His jaw flexes as Patrick pushes a finger into me. I let out a small breathy moan as Hawke's eyes narrow dangerously as he's figuring it out.

He knows what's happening and I can't decipher if he likes what he sees or if he's bothered by it. He licks his lips, adjusting in his seat a bit, then tips his head back against the couch and stares at me dangerously. His tongue slips out of his mouth, toying with his lip ring as Patrick adds another finger.

I bite my bottom lip as he begins fingering me on the couch. The sensation of his hand against my clit while Hawke's eyes burn through me has me on the edge of orgasm. I'm so close to letting go. My eyes never separate from his, so he has to know I'm thinking about him. He's just watching it all unfold.

*This is so wrong.* I'm enjoying the feeling of Patrick while imagining it's Hawke. I think of our uninhibited sex, the way he used his mouth on my body, finding those erogenous zones that he knew would get me off while pummeling into me with his massive cock, again and again, making sure I came before him. Even at my release, he relentlessly took me past the edge, falling recklessly into a tailspin of sexual pleasure until he came along with me.

I'm close now, remembering it all, and dripping wet as Patrick continues playing with me. My mouth drops open again as my eyes seal tightly together and I fall into my orgasm, shuddering silently through it.

Hawke stares at me with his lips parted. He's looking at me all crazy, impressed, but with a boldness about him, a cockiness in his eyes. I hate how much I like it. I hate that he knows it was all him. This is so beyond fucked up. The look quickly changes as Patrick withdraws his hand and nudges me a little to get up. I look at him, confused, before he excuses himself to go to the bathroom.

I hear the sink turn on and my heart drops to my stomach as a frown takes over my face.

Hawke's face distorts as he looks towards the bathroom, clearly confused. *Yeah, guess washing up after touching your partner isn't normal. Just another stab to the ol' heart.*

My emotions are all over the place. I'm feeling amazing, while feeling embarrassed. I'm feeling confused by my emotional response to all of this, while somehow feeling this

rush of excitement and lust by this odd voyeuristic moment. Patrick and I are in a good place. We are supposed to be happy, especially after these past few days, but now I'm feeling anything but. I feel hurt, and now, to top it all off, I feel dirty.

As if it finally clicks, Hawke shakes his head, looking completely disturbed. He looks from me to the bathroom door, then back again. A sorrowful look encompasses him before an angry one takes over. He leans forward towards where I'm sitting and touches my chin, running his thumb gently over my bottom lip.

"I would've licked them clean," he whispers into my ear, before backing into his position on the couch again. "Fuck him," he mumbles.

How, even after I've finished, do his words make me tingle between my legs? Just the thought of him sucking me off his fingers makes me feel a yearning in the pit of my stomach. I should hate him for saying *fuck him* about Patrick in front of me, but it only makes me feel justified in knowing how messed up it is that he feels the need to clean himself after doing anything sexual with me. At the same time, I'm horrified and totally ashamed.

I glare at him. My anger towards Patrick is now radiating off me, redirecting towards Hawke. I hate the fact that I feel this way about him even after trying not to, hating that he seems to be the only one to get me there, hating that Patrick

can't seem to do it for me anymore since knowing Hawke. Hawke makes everything more complicated.

“Why didn't you just stay in your room?!” I whisper through gritted teeth, misdirecting my anger towards him.

He cocks his head, giving me that dangerous smirk yet again. “Because if I don't get to be the one to make you come, I at least want to see your face while you're thinking about me.”

“You arrogant prick.”

How dare he. Assuming I'd only be thinking about him to get off. I can't stand how right he is.

Hawke gets up, stalking closer to my side of the couch, sporting a cocky grin before dipping down to my ear. “You should be thanking me.”

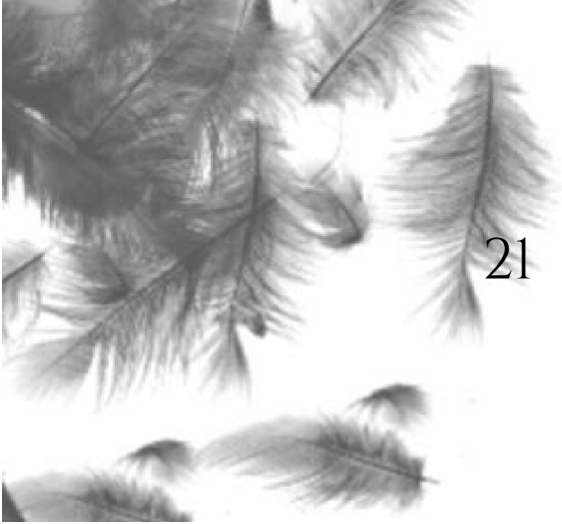
“Just go,” I say with a scowl, looking past him at the TV behind his head.

He scoffs, then makes his way back towards his room.

Patrick rejoins me, smiling like he just accomplished the impossible, probably because he did. This is the first time I've ever climaxed with him. But he doesn't deserve the credit, he doesn't deserve the pompous look about him right now. I hate the idea that he thinks he did that alone. He didn't.

It was all Hawke.

*It's always Hawke.*





**Y**ou know the feeling when you're just agitated and the presence of another person literally drives you mad?

*That's where I'm at.* After the incident on the couch, I went to bed. I wanted to be alone, to sit with myself and process my emotions. Think things through and come to some sort of understanding or clarity as to why I've been acting the way I have, but also why Patrick's been acting the way he has.

It's out of character for me to be so reckless and deceiving.

Even so, with my infidelities, I just can't seem to stand Patrick anymore.

He followed me into the bedroom with his confident stride, and that alone killed me. I've been with him for years. *Years.* And not once have I had the explosive orgasms I seem to have with Hawke. I literally came looking into his eyes.

*Who the hell does that?!*

I guess the part I'm struggling with most is that I so desperately want Patrick to be the one. The one that starts my insides churning at the sight of him. The one that brushes

fingertips across my arm and I'm on fire. The one that lures me in with his eyes and has me smitten with his words.

But he's just not that guy, and realizing that is sending me falling through a whirlwind of confusion.

He's comfort. He's happiness. He's, for the lack of a better word, easy.

Being with Patrick has truthfully been easy. We don't fight often. We practically never yell. He does his best to make me happy. He strives for a future for us. But maybe that's where the problem lies. Everything is brushed under the rug. The deep-rooted issues, the plans for the future, the truth of the past, it's all just lingering.

Just as I'm grabbing for my phone to do the google search for the truth I've been putting off, the answers to what happened to Hawke, Patrick slides his hand across my abdomen.

I lay still, not trying to send all the signals I can. I'm not in the mood.

"That was pretty hot earlier. Did you like it?" he asks into the back of my neck.

He nuzzles into my hair, attempting to connect with my skin.

"Yeah, it was nice, just different." I cringe while saying the words.

"Different?"

“Yeah, I mean, Patrick, you’ve never done that before. Why did you keep going after Hawke came out of his room? It was....awkward.”

It wasn’t that awkward; it was needed. But still, it doesn’t negate the fact that this wasn’t like him at all.

“I don’t know. I just thought maybe you wanted to try something different. I tried to switch it up for you, now I’m getting yelled at. I can’t keep you happy, just always complaining.”

“Pat, c’mon, you can’t be serious.”

“Nic, I try my best to keep you happy, I do,” he says, softening his tone. “But lately I’m just tired of trying. I work so hard for us, then come home to you nitpicking the next thing. It should be easy between us at this stage in our relationship. You know what I expect.”

“What you mean to say is, I should listen to you by now and abide by what you want as far as relationships go and not speak up if something affects me.” My sarcasm is oozing.

“What’s gotten into you lately, babe? I thought we had a good week?” He makes a pained face like my sarcasm hurts him.

I sigh, frustrated, not knowing what to do to make this better. Yes, we had a good week. He finally put some effort into us, but any time I try to address an issue, I get treated as if I’m just nagging and complaining. How can I ever truly tell him how I’m feeling? It’s like I’m speaking with no sound.



“Listen, I’m leaving tomorrow. I don’t want to do this tonight,” he says, wrapping an arm around my waist and pulling my back against him. “I don’t want to leave on a bad note.”

“Pat, I just don’t know anymore...”

“Nic, you have got to be kidding me. Do you know how lucky you are? How blessed you are to have a man who’s working his ass off to support you?”

“They’re things we don’t talk about, things we should get to the bottom of.”

“Don’t start up with this drama again. You know who I am.” He quickly tries to shut me down.

“But I don’t. Not in the ways I should. And you don’t know me in the ways you should...” I linger there, wondering if I should just let it all out.

“I know you. I wouldn’t have had you move here if I didn’t. Now let’s stop this. I’m leaving tomorrow and not like this. This is the end of the conversation.”

He keeps doing this. Negating the fact that I’m trying to express myself. Brushing off whatever I bring to him. It’s like my feelings don’t matter. Not enough to rock the boat, anyway. I can’t do this if this is how it’s always going to be.

Wrapping an arm firmly around my waist, he pulls me back into him. I know in his head he planned to have sex tonight. He assumed that’s what would happen after the living room

incident, like I owed him that. But, I just can't. I'm not in the right headspace. To be honest, I haven't been since Hawke.

His hands get friendly as they drift down my thighs, tracing his fingers up and down the length.

I turn to face him. "We should really get some sleep. We have to be up early for your flight."

"C'mon, it won't take long," he says, urging me on.

*Trust me, I know.*

"I'm sorry Patrick, I'm just really tired," I explain.

He huffs and rolls over to the other side of the bed. Why he's upset? Who knows. Frankly, I don't care. It's not like I've never been in his position. I literally go to bed every night after we've been intimate in his exact predicament.

Luckily, sleep takes us, and before I know it, I'm saying goodbye to him at the airport the following day. It's weird between us, the energy. There's a hesitation, and it's coming from me. He leaves with the same promises to call and text often, but I know now how it's going to be. When he leaves, I go down on that totem pole again, lower than I should. There's something about it that feels like a turning point in our relationship. I'm becoming aware of myself and my needs, and it can only mean one thing. An ending.

I spent the rest of the day working on my laptop, catching up on manuscripts, sending in my work, and editing until my brain literally tells me I need to eat. The rumbling was one

thing, but this lightheadedness isn't helping me to be productive anymore.

Reluctantly, I head towards the kitchen in hopes of finding something quick to eat, then continue working. As soon as I leave the bedroom, I lock eyes with Hawke in the living room. He turns to face me from where he's sitting on the couch. I continue on my way towards the fridge as I see him get up and approach me from the corner of my eye.

I'm nervous. I know myself, and I know I can't resist him. Especially knowing Patrick isn't here now. The temptations are too much for me, and I need to be careful. I'm too confused, emotionally and mentally, and what I'm doing to him isn't fair either.

"Cole?" His voice is soft behind me.

"Yeah?" I answer quickly, not turning.

I grab the makings for a sandwich and lay it all out on the counter.

"Any chance you can leave the house this afternoon?"

My forehead creases as I drop the butter knife. I turn to face him with my mouth agape. He taps his fingers on his jeans, just raising his brows, eyes darting around the kitchen until they fall on me, as if waiting for me to agree.

"Leave the house?" I ask, making sure I heard him correctly.

"Yeah, like in a few minutes."

He says it with zero remorse in his eyes, checking the clock on the stove, then focusing back on me.

He has someone coming over.

“Are you kidding me?”

He lowers his eyebrows. “No, I just need you to leave for like an hour.”

His simple answer, without a hint of empathy, is crushing.

“Wow.” I scoff, putting the makings of the sandwich away.

I can't believe the nerve of him. Asking me to leave so he can fuck around and not feel guilty? Sorry if I make it hard to bring women back to your fuck shack. It didn't matter before he screwed me, but now I guess he has morals. Or maybe it's just that he doesn't want the women wondering about him living with another girl, making it easier to get what he needs from them. Either way, the thought bothers me.

I pack my laptop and everything into my bag to head out but stop, turning to face him in the kitchen where he's leaning back against the counter, just watching me. “You know, that's low. Even for you.”

He stands there with a pained face, and I don't understand it at all. Why are you hurt that I'm being forced to leave? This is such a dick move.

I spend the rest of the afternoon at a coffee shop in town with my laptop. I can't work. I can't think straight. I wait and watch the clock as the hours tick away, knowing my night shift is coming faster than I'd hoped.

I click away on my computer, hitting the google search engine on my screen. I stare at it. Then decide to investigate.

I type the name out on my mission to gain some insight into this situation around me.

*Ben Collins.*

Tons of articles come up with the name. It's quite common, so I narrow my search to the town, Clarkston.

An article pops up immediately with an image attached to it. I recognize the boy. It's the same kid that Hawke had a picture of in his shoebox. The same scruffy, dirty blonde hair with a smile that could break hearts and kind eyes to match. Scrolling through the page, I find a eulogy.

“Ben Collins, the loving and caring son of Darla and Jim Collins, tragically left this world before his time. He was very well-loved and had a passion for architecture. He loved his friends and enjoyed spending time with them at the family cabin. Blasting Phil Collins whenever near a stereo, laughing his unique and roaring laugh, and always showing up for people who needed him, are what we'll miss most. He was our light, our happiness, our joy. He will be missed beyond words.”

I sit back in my seat, absorbing it all. Phil Collins, Hawke's favorite tattoo. Could he have had something to do with his death or the situation surrounding it? Is this why he went to prison? What happened?

I search for the next article to find out what happened when my phone rings, making me suck in a breath. I'm hopeful it's Patrick, maybe calling me to tell me he landed, but when I look at the screen, I see 9-5 Slide.

"Hello?"

"Nic! Hey, it's John. Sorry to bother you at home."

*Ha, if he only knew.*

"It's fine John, whatcha need?"

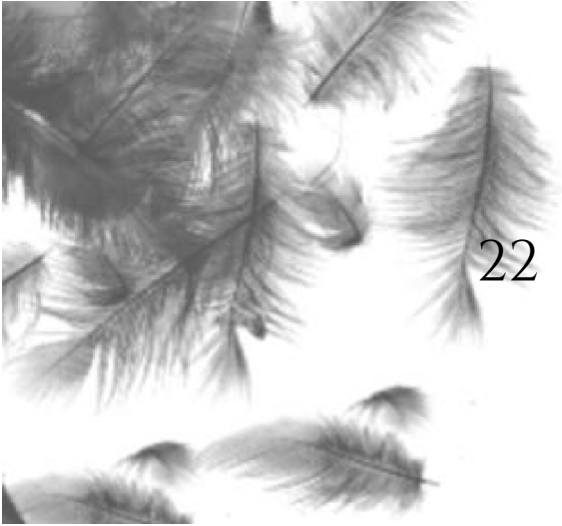
"Any chance you can head in a bit earlier tonight? We've got a wedding party coming in, and if you're available, I'd love the help." He sighs, sounding overwhelmed.

"I got you. I'll be there soon."

"Ah! Nic, you're the best!" he exclaims.

I head straight to the bar from the coffee shop, wearing the ripped jeans and old tied-up *Kiss* shirt I put on this morning. Normally, I'd go home and change, but screw that. I'm not going there. I don't want to deal with Hawke and his slew of women.

I'd rather die.





## WALKING NOT TALKING

**J**ohn and I get started on another busy night. I welcome the business with open arms. Anything to keep me moving and keep my mind off how confused and frustrated I've become between Patrick and Hawke.

“What's got you down?” John asks as he fills up a beer next to me.

I shake my head, rolling my eyes, trying to forget the exact reason, until the reason literally slides in through the door.

Hawke's putting out a cigarette before he strides into the bar confidently with Kid by his side. He runs a hand through his hair, pushing it out of his face before nodding at Kid to save their table.

I glare in their direction and John notices.

“Ahh...roommate issues, eh?” he asks knowingly.

“Something like that,” I grumble.

He chuckles, looking from Hawke to me, then back. “He looks pissed.”



“What’s new?”

“Shit, he’s looking,” John says before widening his eyes and moving away.

Hawke stares straight at me as he approaches the bar. I glare back at him, not backing down from his direct gaze.

He places both his hands on the wooden surface as I take in the view of him in a form-fitting black shirt, his arms covered in those mindlessly placed tattoos, his inky hair styled back perfectly with a few pieces dripping down like they always do.

I fold my arms across my chest at his threatening approach.

“Why didn’t you come back before your shift?” he asks abruptly.

“What?” *What a strange question.*

“Why didn’t you come back before your shift?!” he asks again with an aggressive tone, causing a man next to him to look questionably at him, then me.

*What the hell does it matter?*

“Hawke!” I scold, feeling ridiculous for how he’s making me look right now.

I wave to John, letting him know I’ll be a minute. I need to handle this somewhere that isn’t in front of all the other patrons and regulars.

I walk around the side of the bar, pulling Hawke by his upper arm to the hallway over by the bathrooms.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I ask, letting his arm drop.

“Having a drink. Why didn’t you come back? I asked you to leave for an hour, not the entire day. Why the fuck didn’t you come back?” he asks again loudly.

“So I could see you take out your trash? No thanks.” I scoff, eyeing him condescendingly.

“That’s not—”

He stops himself, grinding his teeth, standing straight, and running both hands through his hair while processing what I said.

“Oh.” He narrows his eyes while nodding as if figuring it out. “So, that’s how it is? Okay, Cole.”

“What else would it be? Using people must be your favorite pastime. Lord knows you’ve done enough of that with me.”

“Oh, and you aren’t using me?” he quips back.

“Excuse me?!”

“Yeah, I said it. You use me. You use me to give you a high, anything to make you feel alive in your miserable, mundane life. But that’s as far as it goes for you in your perfect, calculated little world. Too stuck up to see the truth right in front of you. Too damn blind to open your eyes. Back to assuming again. Guess I should just go ahead and be who you think I am, huh?”

“You’re such an ass,” I whisper through clenched teeth, feeling myself on the verge of tears.

“You used me to get off with your fucking boyfriend. Do you have any idea how much that bothers me?” He growls, leaning over me against the wall.

I swallow, looking from those passionate eyes to his full lips and back.

“Bothers you?!”

He glares at me, through me, seething at the memory of Patrick touching me. He’s jealous.

“His hands on you. Your mind on me. I saw it. Why the fuck you continue to put up with him and his shit is beyond me. I thought I knew you better than that, but I guess I don’t.”

Everything with him has meant way more than what he assumes. I’ve never used him in that sense. If anything, I’ve only fallen more into this undeniable feeling for him. I’m afraid of that truth and he’s pushing it out of me.

He leans in closer with a dark look in his greenish eyes, using a hand to brush my hair behind my ear, making me feel the heat of his touch before he brushes his lips against the shell of my ear. “I just wonder if even after you’re married, you’ll still need to think of me to get off.”

I shove him from me as hard as I can until he hits the opposing wall of the hallway. He hits it with a grunt, the air leaving his chest.

“Piss off, Hawke!” I say before turning and leaving him against the wall.

I stomp back behind the bar and try my best to forget the fact that he’s here, but of course, he and some of his guys all congregate together towards the back, making it clear they aren’t going anywhere anytime soon. I could kill him for what he said. He knows just how to get under my skin, toy with me, tease me, but for the most part, I’m fearful that he’s right.

After helping a handful of new patrons, I turn to John, figuring out where I can help him.

“Hey, Nic, can you take a tray of shots to the back table for me?” John asks, using the register.

He’s as busy as ever after my little “moment” to go talk with Hawke, so I feel guilty for not helping. That is, until I see who it’s for.

My eyes dart over to Kid, who’s leaning against the bar sporting a huge grin. “That’d be great, Nic. Thanks so much!”

Groaning internally, I take the tray and walk it back to the table all the guys are sitting at. I set each shot glass down for them while Hawke leans back in his chair, one arm draped between his legs, the other hooked on the back of the chair with a girl dressed in practically nothing sitting on his lap. He tilts his head back as he watches me wait on him. There’s an arrogance about the look that’s making me want to break something.

I’m hot inside. Hot with anger.

“You’re the best, babe. Here, I bought an extra so you could do one with us.” Kid smiles, pushing one shot towards me.

“Nah, she can’t handle it. She looks like the kinda girl that has a weak gag reflex,” Hawke comments with a flat face, the girl on his lap eyeing me before she giggles.

The guys all laugh at my expense. My eyes narrow as my nails sink into the palm of my hand. He’s such a dick. He’s bitter because I make him jealous. Now he’s taking it out on me the only way he knows how. Embarrassing me.

“I bet she can handle it.” Kid wiggles his brows with flirtation.

I grab the shot in my hand and throw it back in one gulp. I hate whiskey, but you better believe I downed it before them. With my eyes burning into Hawke’s, I slide the empty shot glass until it bumps into his on the table.

“Bring them back up to the bar when you ladies are finished,” I comment with venom on my tongue before turning, leaving them all staring.

I hear Kid laugh, then tease Hawke about something, but I’m long gone before I can hear anything else.

I try to keep occupied, but every time I look up, I see Hawke in my line of sight. Couldn’t they just go to a different bar?! He knows what he’s doing. He knows I see him. His floozy date is getting handsy, and he’s apparently taking full advantage of it. Is he really trying to make me jealous? He’s

insane if he thinks that's going to work to win me over. If anything, it's making me more angry by the second.

They walk to the bar together as he orders her a shot. I pretend to be busy, so John takes their order, clearly not what Hawke wanted. He makes a display of sticking his tongue down her throat, hands scouring over her body, as soon as I become free. It's disgusting and it definitely bothers me more than I'm willing to let on.

I finish the night a bit early. John lets me head out as the crowd dwindles down, insisting I could head back home after hearing about the coffee shop incident and seeing my rage for the roommate who's under my skin.

I grab my bag, checking to see if I have any missed calls or texts, and I see a text from Patrick.

**Patrick: Here**

Here. All I get is a "here". A forced one at that, simply because I "complained" about it. Not to mention the fact that he would've arrived hours ago, but from the time on the message, it appears he just remembered to text me. I roll my eyes, throwing the phone back into my bag and setting it on the counter to clock out.

I look over one last time to see their crew all huddled in the corner, playing darts and sipping their drinks by one of the pub tables. Hawke is just sitting at the table by himself, slumped down, looking down into his drink as his finger runs along the

edge. He appears to be deep in thought. At least that's what I'm assuming. I've literally seen how much he drank tonight, and it wasn't much.

I throw my bag over my shoulder, turning to leave when I'm met with curious eyes from the old jukebox. Kid is looking at me with a cocked head. My heart rate increases knowing he just saw me staring at Hawke. He gives me a little two-fingered salute before heading back towards the guys, knowing I'm leaving, so I give him a little head nod and a tight-lipped smile. It's not like him to be so quiet at my departure, or at any given moment, knowing his exuberant personality.

I brush it off and push through the doors. It's a rainy, chilly night, matching my emotions as I head towards my car. I hop in to start it up, but when I do, it doesn't turn over. It won't start. *Shit.*

I slam my hands on the steering wheel, beyond frustrated, then decide to walk to the bus stop down the road. Maybe I can make the last one on time. I dart out of my car, holding my purse above my head to try and deflect some of the rain, but it's pointless. It's pouring and I'm instantly drenched. *I hate everything about this day.*

As I'm walking along the side of the road, on cue, a car slowly creeps up behind me. I don't even need to turn to see who it is. I can feel it in the way the hairs raise on my arms, my stomach turns over, my heart skips a quick beat.

“Get in,” Hawke calls out from the window of the old Mustang.

“You know, you shouldn’t steal cars. You can get jail time for that,” I spit out.

“Get in the fucking car, Cole.”

“Fuck you.”

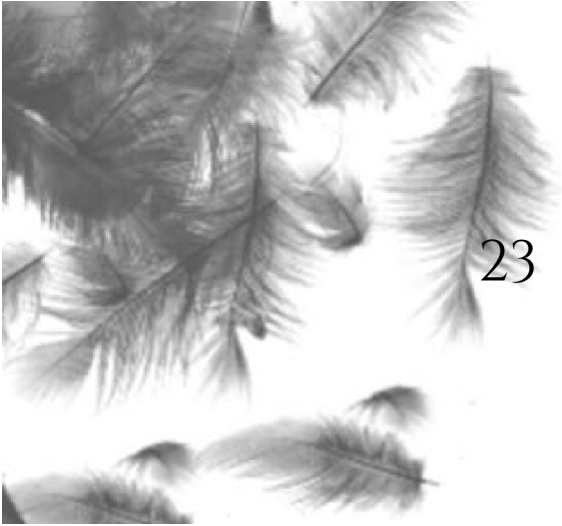
I don’t normally curse like this, but I’m irate at this point. No possible way I’m going to allow Hawke to be the hero of this day.

Nope.

Never.

I’m too stubborn for that.







## THE CAR

The car parks and I hear him slam the door shut, followed by feet shuffling towards me.

He grabs my wrist, spinning me to face him. “Let’s go. You’re not walking home in this rain.”

“Let me go, you asshole!” I yell, attempting to pull my wrist out of his firm grasp.

He doesn’t let go. He pulls me to the car where I place my hands against his chest, pushing back away from him any way I can. We’re wrestling against each other as the rain pours down on us, my hair now drenched as he presses his hips against mine, pinning me in place.

“Get in the fucking car!” he yells, slamming his fist against the top.

His voice startles me, and I pause in place, taking in his angry demeanor.

“No! Leave me alone!”

He opens the back door, wrapping an arm around my waist as he throws me on the seat. I bounce with a grunt at the force

he uses. Brushing the wet strands of hair back out of my face, I turned to see him in the back alongside me.

“What are you doing?!” I attempt to shove him back, the anger coursing through me, but he quickly grabs my wrists, holding me against him.

“You don’t listen!” he growls.

“Don’t you touch me! I hate you!” I scream, feeling overwhelmed and upset at the fact that he’s overpowering me.

He grabs my upper arms and pulls me closer to him, tightening his jaw at my words. The look in his eyes is wild. The rain has his hair piled all over the place while water drips from his locks. His toned arms are wet and slick, and his shirt is clinging to every mound of muscle underneath it.

The emotions are bubbling over. All the confusion, all the lust, all the embarrassment, the regret over the past few weeks...it’s all turning into rage. The words seem to affect him, so I say them again.

“I hate you! I fucking hate you. You’re sick! All that stuff you were doing in there, all this stuff these past few days. For what?! You said it means nothing to you! Quit with the mind games! Leave me alone!” I yell into his face, beating my forearms against his chest.

And I do. I hate him for how he makes me feel. I hate that life isn’t simple anymore. I hate that he is the only one who can set me on fire, and I hate that he makes me truly look at

myself for the person I've become. I hate that I feel raw and vulnerable around him.

“You hate how I make you feel. You hate how you can't stop thinking about me. You hate that the thought of me with someone else drives you wild, but you feel like you have no right to own that. Quit lying to me,” he says in a firm tone, shaking my arms as he speaks.

I lift my chin to him in defiance against all these truths. “It's *you* I hate.”

His dark eyes smolder through me. He isn't put off by my rage. If anything, it seems to only bring more intensity to the situation. His mouth is open and his breathing is wild and out of control, matching mine.

“Yeah? Show me how much you fucking hate me,” he grimaces, grabbing the loopholes of my jeans and pulling me so I slip down, my back now on the seat.

“Stop it, Hawke!” I yell.

He pauses for a minute, trying to catch his breath. There's a deep, dark pain in his eyes. He slowly leans forward above me, arms bracing his dripping frame.

“Tell me you wish we never fucked.” He growls as his hand travels, wrapping tightly around the back of my neck, forcing me to look at him.

I know what he's about to do and I can't stop it. He's making me face what I don't want to face. *Reality*.

I wince my eyes tightly and he squeezes his hand, forcing them open. “Tell me you hate how I make you feel.”

The forceful aggression that’s oozing out of him has my head spinning. I don’t want to like it, but something deep within me craves him. I want him to possess me the way that he naturally does.

His hands travel from my neck to my chest and further down my abdomen as his skilled fingers pop open the button to my jeans.

“Hawke.” My voice is totally breathy and uncontrollable as I lift my hips to allow the pants to come off.

I know what’s happening and I don’t want it to stop. I want to put up this fight, to deny what I’m feeling, but I can’t anymore. I crave him in all the ways I wish I didn’t.

He places his hand over my underwear, rubbing the spot that aches the most. “You want this. I know you do. You need me. Tell me.”

“No. I shouldn’t do this anymore. Not with you. Not like this.” I moan, pushing his hand away from me.

He sits back on his heels and slams the seat of the car with the back of his hand, screaming out, “You don’t know what you want!”

He’s right, I’m attempting this game of acting like I don’t know, when at the moment, all I want is for him to keep pushing me over the edge, to send me off into the deep end,

because I know if he pushes, I'll willingly go. If he doesn't, I may stay locked up in this prison of my own doing forever.

"Goddammit Cole, you drive me fucking mad!" He pulls at the roots of his hair, dragging his hands down his face. "Tell me you didn't want to break something in there watching me with her. Tell me it didn't drive you crazy."

"Hawke." I prop myself up on an elbow, grabbing his shirt.

He was doing all of that just to hurt me like I hurt him every day with Patrick.

"You know you need this. I know you do because I need it too."

He presses himself back on me and begins kissing the side of my neck.

"Hawke," I moan breathlessly, and I can't figure out if I'm trying to stop this or not anymore.

"Kiss me," he demands, grabbing the side of my neck.

He presses his mouth to mine, and I wince in pain. It's a pain of knowing he's what I need. I'm in total denial and losing the fight with each second that passes.

"Kiss me, dammit," he says against my mouth before plunging his tongue between my lips.

He groans deeply as he presses his erection into me through his jeans. His kiss is desperate. He's aching for me as our tongues touch. His hands run over every curve of my face, our breaths meeting each other in the air as we fall wildly, madly

into this cycle. I'm his drug, and his fix is finally getting met. The kiss intensifies and I'm left moaning at his departure. I want more. I need more.

He straightens, looking down at me with heat in his gaze, quickly unbuckling his pants, pulling them down just enough to expose himself. He's hard and ready for me. My mouth drops open at the sight, eyes suddenly heavy with lust. The excitement brewing inside me feels like it's about to pool over. I close my eyes, swallowing down any type of regret that may follow this, and just fall deeper and deeper into the darkness with him.

He tears open a condom with his teeth before sheathing himself, then grabs the front of my underwear, roughly pulling it to the side before lining himself with my entrance and forcefully pushing inside of me.

"Oh, God." I moan at the sudden fullness, throwing my head back against the seat of the car, his eyes on me.

He pulls back, pressing his lips against mine. He's aggressive in his motions. His short, quick breaths, making it seem as though none of this is in his control.

"Lie to me, Cole. Tell me you hate me." A deep groan leaves his throat, staring down while pulling almost all the way out of me, leaving just the tip of him inside.

My hand grips the wet shirt on his back, clawing for it, needing what he's taking away. I hate how much I need him. I hate how he drives me wild with passion. I hate that

somewhere, some deep place inside of me, wasn't fulfilled until him.

"I hate you." I gasp as he drives back into me. "Oh, I hate you so much."

He grabs a handful of my hair from the back, pulling it firmly, forcing me to look up at him while he thrusts into me harder and harder. I spread my thighs to accommodate his body, needing to feel him as deep as I possibly can.

"Oh, fuck," he rasps, pressing most of his weight on me against the back seat of the car.

He feels so good inside me again. Slick, hot, and hard, sliding in and out of my wetness. My entire body ignites with a fire that I've been missing. Shock waves course through me, lighting every nerve ending in a matter of seconds. There's no replacing this irreparable sensation. He's an enigma, the only problem worth solving to me. He's everything I hate admitting to myself that I need.

"Tell me you missed this," he says in a pleading tone that almost makes my heart ache.

I know how much he needed me, just by the way his eyes are barring through my soul.

Gasping at his force, I try to form words. Words that fall breathlessly from my lips. "I missed it. I missed it so much."

I hold him to me, gripping the hair at the back of his head with my fingers. It's as if we can't physically get close enough. The both of us grasping at each other, pulling one



another in, to connect at a level that is more than physically possible.

“Fuck, I need you.” He groans before he presses his lips firmly against mine.

He kisses me like I’m the only thing keeping him here. The only lifeline keeping him alive. My tongue against his soothes him in a way no drink, no drug, no other woman ever could.

“I need you, Cameron.” I pull back, touching his face, making sure the words reach him.

The truth is there for him. I can’t fight it anymore. I won’t deny this to myself. I can’t. There has to be more to this feeling of undeniable need. It’s not all lust.

His eyes search mine desperately, as if trying to determine the validity of this truth.

His forehead presses against mine as we continue to stare into each other, reaching our destination together. I scream out, clawing the back of his neck with one hand, the other gripping his shirt in my fist. I come around him, losing myself in the moment just before he releases with a deep guttural groan. We breathe heavily together, basking in the aftermath of our connection.

It’s then I realize how reckless we were. How easy it was to fall back into this cycle of madness that’s grown between us. I’m literally losing myself in him and the way I can’t refuse this.

His face finds mine, his mouth still parted as he looks on the verge of passing out.

“Cole...” he says breathlessly, searching my eyes for regret, worried that what happened will end like last time.

But, I can't deny what I'm feeling anymore. He's forced me to face it and there's no going back. I reach up, grabbing the back of his hair, and pull his face to mine. I want more. I need more. He's the drug I never knew I needed. The high I never want to come down from. I've fallen. Deeply, irreversibly so.

And we kiss. We kiss while still connected. We kiss until our lips are swollen and used. His hands gently cup my face, memorizing the curve of my cheekbones, the feeling of my nose against his, the angle of my jaw.

The car is now completely fogged up as our breathing slowly regulates. He finally pulls out of me, fixing himself up as I do the same, struggling to put my wet pants back on.

Why can't we stop this? It's so irresponsible, yet feels so necessary. I can't let him go.

Just as I'm falling back to the same routine of getting in my head, he turns to the back window and begins writing something backwards on the fogged-up glass. My brows knit together as I attempt to read it.

*'We just fucked.'*

He turns to face me, a surprising smirk playing on his lips as I playfully gasp at his crudeness. He opens the door, getting out of the back seat and holds a hand out for me. I take his

hand as our eyes connect. There's a softness there, a realization. So much seems to have changed in a matter of minutes between us.

One minute we're screaming at each other in the rain, the next minute we're wildly fucking in the car, the next we're playful.

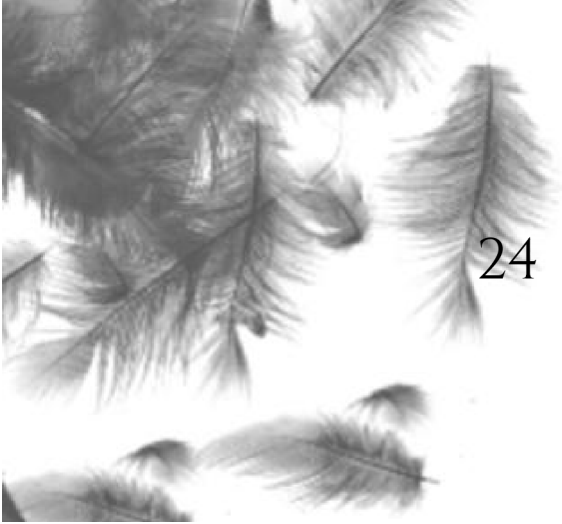
I don't know what happens next. There's no manual for this type of situation. We're mindlessly floating through time and space, recklessly doing whatever we want, no matter who it hurts, no matter how horrible it seems because it feels right to us. It's a terrifying realization.

After getting back into the car, Hawke reaches over and grabs for my hand, pulling it onto his lap. He turns to me, bringing the hand to his lips and kissing each of my knuckles softly. The look in his eyes, piercing and serious, filled with nothing but the weight of his emotions. There's still so much beneath that exterior, but by finally admitting my truth to him, I've gotten under that first seemingly indestructible layer.

I suck in a breath at the unexpected and sweet gesture.

We make the trip back home as I notice a new look in his eyes. A determined look that wasn't there before. He seems so confident and clear all of a sudden, as if now he knows exactly what he wants. The thought of it bewilders me. How can you feel so deeply for the one with all the secrets?

We continue down our dark road together, sinking further into the shadows of our desires, all while the fogged-up 'we just fucked' car cruises through this small, intolerant town.





**A**fter pulling back into the driveway at the house, we both pause for a moment to awkwardly look at each other.

I bite my lip, holding back a grin as he leans his head back against the headrest, toying with his lip ring, looking back at me with that sexy little smirk I've come to love.

We don't know where to go from here, what to say.

"Let's get outta these clothes," he says, pinching the shoulder of my wet shirt.

I raise my eyebrows suggestively.

"Because you're soaked, ya nut. You're gonna get sick or some shit," he replies.

We head inside, where I walk forward, facing the kitchen. The place is dark and cold and definitely void of Patrick.

I feel that pang of guilt stab me in the chest again, knowing I've added to my laundry list of transgressions. Getting lost in my head, my eyes become fixated on the setup before me.

There, at the table, is an array of snacks. I'm talking popcorn, junior Mints, Sour Patch Kids, Mike and Ikes, Milk Duds, Skittles, Butterfingers, Nerds, Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, you name it. Every type of movie theater snack you can think of is stacked on the kitchen table. In the living room, all the blankets are piled up with pillows strewn about, making a massive bed on the floor.

I hear Hawke come up behind me, tossing the keys to the car on the counter, clearly watching me take it in. I clench my back teeth together, wincing as I attempt to hold back the pain.

"I know it's not my place to do this, but I thought maybe a movie night, binging some mafia shit would cheer you up."

I place a hand over my face as tears fill my eyes.

"Hey, I'm sorry if I assumed you'd even want—"

"No." I snifle, interrupting him. "I just hate myself so much. I hate who I am. I assumed you were..."

"Don't. Don't hate yourself. It's okay, Cole. I understand what I've walked into here. You're still in a relationship and I...well, I literally just got here, and I know I don't make it easy." He grins lightly, trying to cheer me up. "You're an amazing person, you are..."

"I just can't believe you did all this. And for me? I was so mean to you." The tears keep flowing.

I can't stand it. I can't stand the fact that the guy who's known me less than two months has done something more meaningful than the guy I've known for years. Buying new

shit is one thing, putting effort into knowing what I enjoy is another.

My thoughts run to Patrick as my eyes drop to the floor. The sick feeling taking over again.

Hawke reaches for me, pulling me into his chest, wrapping his arms around me before lifting my head to face him.

“Cole, stop, I was a dick. I wanted you to feel the pain you made me feel, so I acted like an idiot to fuck with you. I’m literally no better. Plus, if it makes you feel better, this wasn’t the reason I asked you to leave earlier.”

I swallow, nervous to know what the real reason was. I look back up at him, wiping my eyes, waiting for the truth. Praying this wasn’t a date set up for someone else.

“I didn’t want you to be here when my PO came by.” He sighs like it hurts him to admit it.

“Your Parole Officer?”

“Yeah. I just—” He stalls, running a hand through his hair, before grabbing for my hands in his.

I squeeze his hands gently, rubbing my thumbs over the backs to comfort him, knowing admitting this part of himself isn’t easy for someone as closed-off as he is.

“I just didn’t want you to have to ever deal with that side of my life. It’s not who I am, it doesn’t define me, and I didn’t want to put you in an uncomfortable situation.”

My heart breaks in half. I'm just a shit person. Here he is, making plans to try to protect me from his past, something that haunts him every waking moment of every day, then sets up a fun night of my favorite things to cheer me up, all for me to just shit all over it.

"Cam," I say softly, reaching up to touch the side of his face. "You are so much more than a past."

His body visibly sags as if my words alone lifted the weight he'd been carrying. The blue and green swirls of his eyes pour out the torture within him as he looks into the depths of me.

He's questioning if I'll catch him when he falls, knowing that day will come. There will be a time when he'll tell me everything. The time will come when he can trust me with every secret he has. He just hasn't learned that yet.

I tilt my head up, reaching for his lips with mine to give him a sweet, soft, and comforting kiss. Everything about his lips on mine feels like home. The place I need to be when the world around me is falling apart.

"C'mon. Let's get you out of these clothes. You might get sick or some shit." I reiterate the words he spewed off at me a minute ago with a suggestive smirk.

I pull him by his wet shirt into the bathroom. Once we get in there, the playful mood has shifted once again. Things are different now, and as if we're both aware of this, the smiles have dropped and the look of desire begins its takeover.



He removes his shirt, tossing his damp hair in the process, before helping me with mine. I turn, starting the water in the shower as he quickly removes his pants. My mouth drops open at the sight of him standing naked before me. I feel like a virgin all over again, taking in the vision of a man before me for the first time.

I'm blushing. The heat of my face mixed with the need pooling inside of me again is a dangerous setup.

He confidently strides forward, approaching where I'm standing, frozen in place. He slides the straps to my bra down, one by one, eyeing me for a response.

"Hawke." I swallow.

"I'm sorry." He puts his hands up, taking a step back.

"No," I whisper while shaking my head. I walk forward to close the space he puts between us, making him wrap his arms around me. "You just...make me a little nervous."

He cocks his head with an anxious stare. "Why?"

"Because I can't control myself around you. And I'm a pretty controlled person." I grin.

He licks his lips, looking at mine. "Losing control is what you need to set yourself free."

I think about that for a second, but before I can say anything back, he leans down, kissing me again. He licks my top lip with his tongue, then sucks my bottom lip between his before sliding his tongue through to touch mine.

Everything about the way he kisses turns me on. He's so precise in his movements, changing up the pressure from gentle and soft, to forceful strokes of his tongue massaging mine.

He has a half-naked body in front of him, but all he does is hold my face while we kiss, as if he can't get enough of that alone. The way he holds both my neck and the back of my head is his large hands while making it clear that kissing me like this excites him, is enough to have me undoing my pants to join him.

He pulls apart from the kiss, resting his head on mine for a moment. He closes his eyes tightly, then licks his lips before abruptly backing up and stepping into the shower. I stand there, taken aback by his departure. I watch him through the fogged-up glass. He roughly runs his hands through the long hair at the top of his head, running his hands down his face before placing an arm out against the wall of the showerhead, letting the water rain down on him.

He's wearing a blanket of pain again. The bricks that were slowly being removed for me from that wall have stalled. He can't let me in because he's fearful of what may happen if he does.

I don't know what to do. I know what I should do, and that's leave this bathroom. But I can't. I step out of my remaining clothing, kicking my wet pants aside and removing my bra before stepping inside the warm shower.

With my chest rising and falling and the feeling of fainting upon me, I approach him from behind, slowly and softly touching the tattooed muscles of his back. He sucks in a breath at the contact, then turns around to face me.

The water is sprinkling off his back, raining down from his form to me. He parts his lips, searching my eyes for something, anything that gives him some sort of reassurance. I can feel his hesitation.

“You said you needed me,” I say softly, searching his eyes for the truth. “Yet I get the feeling you’re not the type of person to need anyone.”

“I’m not,” he answers quickly.

I bite the corner of my lip, then look away.

“So what is this then, Hawke? What’s happening between us?”

He takes his wet fingers, turning me to face him again.

“I don’t know. But it’s the worst feeling in the world.” The pain in the truth of what he’s emitting is palpable.

“What do you mean?”

He releases a deep breath, moving me so I’m against the back wall of the shower, where he rests an arm against the wall above me, shielding me from the water. His other hand reaches up and pushes the hair back off my forehead before tucking it behind my ear. He holds the side of my neck, his thumb running the length of my jaw, before his eyes connect with mine.

“I’m staring at the only thing that’s got me feeling things after years of feeling numb. The only eyes that have ever made me question myself and who I am in their reflection. You’re right here in front of me, yet we’re just out of reach.”

I wince my eyes, knowing exactly what he’s referring to. He wants me, but is left with the assumption I won’t jump, left with the idea that I won’t fall along with him when he tiptoes himself off that ledge, assuming I’ll just stand there, watching as he plummets to the earth, alone.

“I don’t understand this,” I whisper, speaking my emotions, attempting to process everything.

“You don’t need to. Don’t try so hard to make it make sense. It doesn’t. It’s not supposed to.”

“I need it to make sense.”

“Why? To justify how you’re feeling?”

“Hawke—”

“Listen to me, Cole. Whatever this is between us, is real. Don’t ever let your own thoughts or anyone else’s get in the way of knowing that,” he says, pressing his chest against mine, the look in his eyes filled with a deep seriousness.

I take a breath, my mouth dropping open at the closeness. Yes, I’m a calculated person, but everything about him is a gamble. The part that scares me is I’ve never been more ready to play a hand, not knowing if everything I’ve got on the table will be gone with the flip of a card. It’s becoming more and more worth the risk, just for the chance to win him.

“You told me in the car that I don’t know what I want.”

“I don’t know that you do.” He shakes his head, looking back and forth between my eyes, sadness exuding him.

Our faces are inches apart as he gazes from my eyes to my lips, hanging onto my words like his next breath will only come by the next few off my tongue.

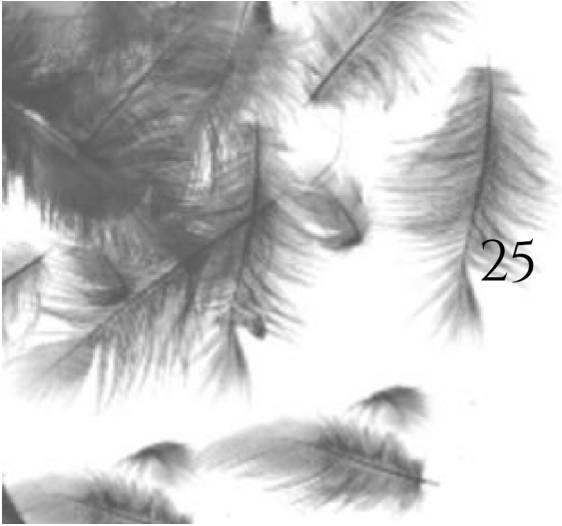
“But, I do. I want you.”

My bottom lip is quivering as I say the words. I’ve never felt so nervous, so scared, so vulnerable, so open in such a way. I feel as if I’m stripping myself of the body I was born into, shedding all skin and bone until my beating heart is the only thing left open to him. Exposed and waiting.

His face holds relief but is quickly replaced with pain as if a realization has come over him. He pauses, furrowing his brow, before tightening his jaw.

“You don’t even know me.”

He turns away from me quickly, allowing the water from the showerhead to reach me and warm the chill of what the words he spoke have just done.





## GETTING IN

I wash up, then exit the shower.

His words, while cold and off-putting, aren't enough to push me away. Not now. Not after everything.

I get into something comfortable, a pair of heavy, oversized sweat pants paired with a crop-top sweatshirt to match. Throwing my wet hair into a bun, I walk out into the living room in search of Hawke.

The living room is dark and empty, leaving me to wonder if he left. Maybe it's too much for him to open up to me. He's scared of his feelings, just as I am, but for different reasons.

I pass the empty kitchen, then knock softly on the door to his room. It creaks open so I peek inside, but it's dark and void of him.

With a frustrated sigh, I lean my head against the door frame when my phone alerts me to a message. I walk over to where I set my bag on the table, opening it up and pulling out my phone. It's a message from Patrick. Instantly, I feel a sense of nervousness.

**Patrick:** Just got word that your car is still sitting at the bar. What happened?

You've got to be kidding me. Someone around town notified Patrick about the whereabouts of my car? My stomach feels like it drops thirty stories as I go over my steps, wondering if anyone saw the interaction between Hawke and I down the street from the bar. I could literally vomit.

**Nic:** Yeah, it wouldn't start. Hawke was at the bar with his friends, gave me a ride home. I'll have Marty from the shop take a look at it tomorrow.

That should cover the situation a little bit, right? I anxiously await a response.

**Patrick:** You have to take care of your stuff so this doesn't happen. Tell me what they say tomorrow.

Unbelievable. I roll my eyes to the back of my head, huffing out in anger. There's no, *are you alright? Or I'm glad Hawke was there to give you a ride, or I'll make sure to call the shop for you and have them figure it out.* No, it's my fault it happened, my responsibility to figure it out. I'm fine to handle it on my own, but it would be nice if I had a partner who cared enough to attempt to help me.



Then again, who am I to talk?

I hear the door behind me open, so I drop my phone. Hawke is closing the door, shrugging off his jacket. I get an immediate whiff of smoke, connecting the dots to where he just was.

“Hey,” he says, dropping his coat on the back of the chair near the door, staring at me with a solemn face.

He looks drained. Emotionally drained, as if he’s been having an internal battle and is finally at the point of breaking. It pains me to see it.

“Come here,” I demand, watching him stand there, shirtless, with his hands in the pockets of his sweats.

He strides over to where I’m standing, biting his bottom lip while watching me with a cocked head. I throw a bag of Skittles at his chest and he catches it quickly, looking down, then back at me with a confused face.

“Sugar up. I’m gonna need you awake. *Ozark* isn’t going to watch itself.”

I grin up at him while he holds the Skittles to his chest with an easy smile, wiping away the previous seriousness.

It’s like an unspoken moment of truce. We don’t need to figure everything out right now. He needs me to revive him, just like he was planning to cheer me up with this night of just being together, just hanging out, as friends who need each other’s support. Now is when we enjoy this alone time we have together. I’m not letting him get away that easily.

We grab handfuls of the goodies he bought and bring them over to the blankets, setting up all the snacks in the center. We laugh, we talk about light topics of conversation; we throw popcorn into each other's mouths. The energy is amazing. Our vibes are totally in sync. We're both being indirectly flirty and having fun, carefree, and I truly feel that our night has come full circle.

Hawke dusts his fingers of popcorn salt, sitting back against the base of the couch in the heap of pillows, looking at me with what I can only describe as admiration.

Maybe people just don't know how to take a guy like Hawke. The rough exterior is barricading the kind heart inside. Inside is a soft soul, a sensitive one, one he's taken years to build that wall around. I'm sure his life has provided little opportunity to showcase that, but I see it. I can see it in the subtle way he looks out for me. He's caring and empathetic by nature.

"So, tell me something honest," I say. "It can be anything, just has to be real."

He tips his head back against the couch, looking at the ceiling while thinking. I take the opportunity to admire his throat and Adam's apple. He's ridiculously handsome in such a masculine way.

"Well, I didn't quit my job. I actually got fired."

"Hawke! What? Are you kidding? What happened?!" My jaw drops open as I lean forward to hear more.

“To be honest, they wanted to switch me to first shift, meaning I’d work normal hours during the day. I told them I didn’t want to, and that I was going to stay on third and the guy threatened to fire me if I didn’t comply. So...yeah.”

“Wait, what? Why wouldn’t you want to work normal hours? Third shift sucks.”

He rubs the back of his neck, wrinkling his forehead in the cutest way, looking from me to the wall behind me and then back. He doesn’t want to tell me.

“To be honest, I didn’t want to give up our time together.”

I stare at him in disbelief.

“If I worked first shift, I’d never have you to myself, and I just couldn’t do it,” he says with squinted eyes, putting his hand in front of his lips and chewing the tip of his thumb, watching me for a reaction.

“Hawke,” I say, almost scolding him.

He gives me a weak little shrug, as if he can’t help the fact that needing time with me means more to him than losing his job. Because I work from home during the day, he made it a mission to get a job working all hours of the night just to ensure we could spend our mornings alone together, sipping coffee and watching gangster flicks, even if it meant he’d be drained and ridiculously tired. My heart is expanding so much inside of my chest I think I might explode before him.

“Being able to just kick it with you, the past however many weeks, has become my saving grace.”

I scoot up closer to him, settling between his outstretched legs, my hand resting just above his knee.

“What do you mean?”

He sighs, looking at my hand before his fingers toy with the tips of my fingers. The feeling is sending butterflies to the pit of my stomach.

“You’ve kept me from destroying myself more than I already am.”

I’m not going to push him, but I get the sense that maybe being with me has helped to get him out of his own head, focusing on something else besides whatever heaviness that’s bogging him down. I have a hard time believing anyone truly and actively wants to get to know Hawke for who he is. He’s the bad-boy, the dangerous one with a record, used for a wild night of fun and partying. Maybe the fact that I keep trying to know helps him to see his worth?

He brings my hand up to his mouth, softly kissing each one of my finger pads. My lips part as my chest rises and falls at the sensation that seems to be a direct line to my center.

“You’re up,” he mumbles against my pinky pad.

“Huh? Oh, yeah...of course. Um, something honest...” I bite the corner of my lip and decide where I want to go with this.

“Something real,” Hawke reiterates, waiting and watching.

I let out a breath and say the first thing on my mind, “I’m terrified of losing you.”

I said it. It's true. It's honest. It's real. When Patrick comes back, things will change between Hawke and I. No matter what the situation is upon his return, there will be a turning point, and I'm terrified that if I go about this all wrong, I'll lose him. He'll shell up and never let himself open up.

Hawke winces, then swallows, staring at me the entire time. His eyes dart back and forth between mine. Pulling my arm towards his chest, he pulls me to his lap, my legs straddling him against the bottom of the couch on the floor, knees on both sides of him. Pressing my lower back until my pelvis is flush against his, he then gently cups my jaw with both hands, resting his head against mine.

"Please don't," he says just above a whisper, answering my statement.

I pull my head back a little to look into his eyes. There's such a need there. A need I want nothing more than to satisfy. He doesn't want to lose me, either. He's been thinking about it, how things will change when Patrick comes back.

"Hawke, I—"

He leans forward, pressing his lips against mine, capturing my words into the kiss. His hand snakes around the back of my neck while the other wraps around my lower waist. I feel him press into me with his hips, and I can tell he's hard.

I moan against his lower lip, sucking his lip ring between my teeth, then freeing it as his lip snaps back. He rests his head back against the seat of the couch, eyeing me curiously.

I dip down to his neck, placing open-mouthed kisses all along the pulsating vein. With his chest rising and falling, he swallows, almost as if it makes him nervous.

“Are you alright?” I ask softly, looking him in the eye again, running my hands through the hair at the top of his head.

His hands settle at my hips as he looks up at me with desire flowing out of those ocean eyes. “I’m not alright. I’ll never be right again.”

Everything about him is so momentous, so significant, so weighty. Everything inside of me wants to lunge out, trying to grasp anything that can connect us on a level unknown to me. How is it that simply looking into another’s eyes can bring you a type of nostalgia from a past you’ve never known, a terrifying comfort that doesn’t feel earned yet? I feel at home with him in a way I’ve always tried to find before this.

He studies my face before sliding his hands up my hips, up my back, underneath my sweater, pressing his palms to my skin, softly dragging until reaching my neck. He pulls me back to his lips, needing mine on his to feel complete again.

“You do something crazy to me,” he says between kisses, his hands finding the edge of my sweater and pulling it up.

I pull back from the kiss to allow him to take it off. He removes my bra, unclasping it from behind, letting the straps fall free down my arms, leaving me exposed, feeling vulnerable in the light. I immediately cross my arms over myself.

“Cole, don’t. You’re so beautiful,” he whispers before running a hand from the side of my neck down my chest, his arm between my breasts, and placing his palm directly over my heart.

He kisses me again, holding his hand there in the most intimate touch. His other hand grabs mine and places it on his bare chest, against his heart as our tongues dance above them to the increased tempo.

I’ve never felt more connected to someone than I do to him at this moment.

Our kiss continues until I feel faint with lust. I’m so totally consumed by him in every way. There’s an unspoken connection we share, and it’s more powerful than anything I’ve ever felt.

I roll my hips forward into his lap, needing to be closer, earning a breathy groan from him. Slipping to the side, I remove my sweatpants with his help and return to the warm place on his lap, now wearing nothing at all.

His large, veiny hands find my exposed thighs and run their way up my entire frame. My skin tingling with every touch, the sensation giving me chills. He inhales a breath and lets it out when his eyes finally reach mine, seemingly overwhelmed.

“It just never stops,” he says softly, running his thumb over my bottom lip.

“What’s that?” I question, cocking my head.

“Every second with you makes me need another,” he says, as if he’s pained by the thought.

I pause, my heart aching in my chest.

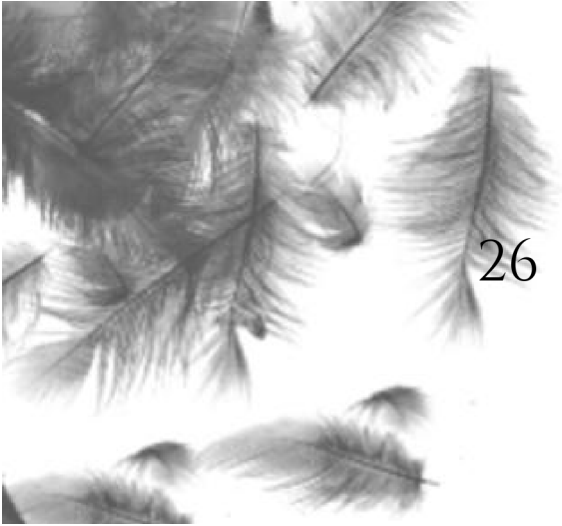
I reach between us, running my hand slowly down his chest towards the tented area in his sweats. While staring directly into his eyes, I pull his pants down with his help until we are finally pressed up against each other in only the form we were created.

“Never stop,” I whisper against his lips.

“Never stop what?” he asks, trailing his fingers up and down my back.

“Needing me,” I say, before we fall back into our kiss like we never left it.







## NEVER CLOSE ENOUGH

I'm so overwhelmed with emotion.

Something about this man beneath me speaks to a part of my soul that's been left untouched until him.

"I need to be inside you," he murmurs into my neck, littering kisses all along my chest.

"Cam, please," I beg him, running my fingers through his hair.

I continue rolling my hips against him, the feeling of us being so close yet not connected, driving us both mad.

"I don't have anything out here." He licks his lips, searching my eyes.

I understand what he's referring to. Insinuating I need to get up off him so he can grab what we need to make this happen. But I'm intoxicated by lust, drunk in need, and I ache to feel him, with nothing separating us.

"I don't care," I whisper, fingers twirling the tips of his hair, grinding against him again.

“Cole...” he says cautiously, knowing we shouldn’t.

“I need to feel you,” I whisper against his lips.

“You trust me?” he asks, leaning back to look at my face, scanning it for something, anything, that might make me pull back.

“I do. I mean, I’d hope you’d stop me if this was a bad idea.”

“It’s a bad idea,” he says with a light grin.

I roll my eyes at him, smiling lightly back.

“I’m on the pill, if you’re wondering.”

He’s still panting as I slowly grind myself on him during our quick discussion. The thought of being inside me with nothing making the wheels turn in his head.

“Okay,” he whispers, seemingly nervous.

Without knowing it, he’s helping me fall, reckless and wild, with no inhibitions. Everything I was, calculated, cautious, afraid, is being thrown from my entity. He makes me tap into an unknown part of myself I’ve never reached. A strength that comes from letting go.

“I’ve never done this before,” he swallows.

I gaze at him, listening to him admit something I never expected.

“Me either,” I admit.

His eyes light up with surprise and confusion. But it’s true. I’ve never experienced this with Patrick before. If anything, it

would definitely have crossed the *clean and Catholic* line. The little bit of latex makes him feel as though he's not sinning and sending himself on a clear path to eternal damnation. But with Hawke, we're both willingly diving into the depths of Hell together.

I reach between us, gently wrapping my hand around him. He sucks in a breath, looking down, then back into my eyes with an unsure face, his chest heaving with breathlessness.

I love this side of him. The seriousness, the truth, the part of him that tells me what's happening between us is not what he's used to. He's opening up to me, telling me this means something, that what we have between us isn't regular.

I lean up onto my knees, steadying myself above him as he lines himself with my entrance. He looks up at me with the kind of respect you'd give a queen that was holding a knife to your neck. He knows I could kill him with one cut; end him beautifully with the vulnerability he's offering, but admires my power over him nonetheless.

He brushes himself against my wet center, making us moan in unison. The feeling of the most intimate part of him touching me with no barrier is making me ache for this moment of pure connection.

We eye each other as I begin my descent around him, sinking down onto his thickness. It's achingly painful, this angle, how hard he is, and the fact that there's nothing but our skin touching. It's the most beautiful, raw, crashing together of two individuals, needing to be one.

He grabs the back of my neck, his mouth dropping open as he attempts to keep his eyes open on me. He lifts his hips up gently while I sit back onto his lap. I moan loudly, feeling an arousal I've never experienced, reaching the base of him, settling for a moment to adjust.

It's different than in the car. The car was wild, hungry, aggressive. This is slow, precise, passionate. I lift and lower myself onto him, my excitement dripping down his length, making his thickness easy for me to swallow deep within my walls.

"This feels right," I whisper, catching my breath. "You and me."

His eyebrows knit together, searching my eyes in disbelief, before he licks my top lip, finding his way into my mouth again.

"This is how it was supposed to be," he says between kisses. "You in my arms, me, deep inside you."

I take my hands, interlocking fingers in his, pinning them back against the couch, and bracing myself as I slowly slide him in and out of me. My heart is beating out of my chest, seeing him stare at me with those eyes on fire.

It's a terrifying realization, knowing nothing will come close to comparing to how I feel in this moment. I can't lose him. It's now a rational fear of mine. I'm falling for him, in all the ways I don't want to.

He bends his knees up, giving his heels some leverage as he thrusts his hips into me. Loving all the ways this position is making me moan, he can't stop staring at me. Completely observant, enthralled by my sounds, my faces. Appreciating the chance to be the one to bring me pleasure.

His hands pull away from mine, needing to touch me. Massaging my breasts in his palms, he runs his thumbs across my sensitive, aching nipples as I roll my hips into him.

“Fuck, you feel like nothing I've ever felt.” He groans, grabbing the flesh of my backside in his large hands, roughly pulling me down onto him.

“Hawke,” I cry out as he fills me, again and again.

The sensation has his eyes rolling back into his head. I claw at his chest, feeling the urge to release, the spine-tingling stirring of the orgasm at bay.

“Yeah, baby, let go.” He groans, tightening his jaw as he watches me lose control.

I scream out, wrapping my hands around the sides of his neck, gripping him tightly as I fall into the intensity of my orgasm.

He pulls me flush against his chest, wrapping both arms behind my back, sealing us together as he drives into me. I fall apart around him, letting the fireworks behind my eyes take over my vision as I succumb to the beautiful, numbing sensation.

Shuddering into me, he continues until his thrusts get sloppy, his hard form wilting beneath me. I feel the warmth of him filling me, the sensation of the wetness dripping out around him. It's one of the most erotic, most provocative sensations, one I'll be thinking about long after we're done.

With his chest heaving like an Olympic runner finishing his marathon, he drops his head back against the couch, pulling me to his lips.

The kiss is soft and sensual. Even after the passion, he's still delivering.

"You're killing me, Cole," he says, finally pulling away from my lips, earning a grin of admiration from me. "There are no fucking words."

Eventually, after our lips are yet again swollen from endless kisses, I hop off him, grabbing a towel from the bathroom to clean up before getting comfortable in our sweats again.

He pats the space next to him on the heaping pile of blankets and pillows. I curl up into his warmth, my cheek against his chest and his arm around me, our legs intertwined. Cuddling is something we know how to do, and well.

Hawke is continuously touching me, my face, running fingers down my arms, combing my hair through his fingers. I can tell he's memorizing all of this for a time he might not have it. The thought of him mentally taking notes in this moment to the fullest, with the knowledge that it may never happen again, kills a piece of my heart.

“What’s this mean?” I ask, running my fingers over the tattoo on his rib cage that looks like some sort of molecule.

He sits up a bit to see which one I’m rubbing, then grins, laying his head back against the pillows.

“That’s my attempt at keeping myself functioning through the dark times in my life. It’s a dopamine molecule.”

“I love that,” I whisper, still running my finger over it, silently wishing he’d never got to the point of needing it. “And this one?”

I point to another one near it that looks like an old, decrepit skeleton of a dead rat, flat on its back.

“That’s got double meaning. For one, it’s the prey I’ve conquered, metaphorically and physically. I mean, my last name is Hawke.” He grins with a slight shrug. “But it’s also a representation of how I feel about rats.”

I won’t pretend I didn’t just see his jaw flex at the mention.

“You have so many,” I say softly, touching a few others.

I admire the collection before me, a man with his story written on his skin, only the lucky ones who get to read his pages.

“This is my favorite.” He points to the Phil Collins outline, the one that I’ve really been wondering about.

“I got it for Ben.” He turns his head, slowly connecting his eyes with mine, and I feel him making the choice to open up this deep wound for me.



I make soft circles over the tattoo, curling into him more, as he turns back to the ceiling before talking about it.

“He loved Phil. So strange for a young guy to have such an obsession with Phil Collins, but Ben did whatever he wanted to and everyone loved him for it. Even said they were related when I first met him and I believed it. Damn kid.” He chuckles at the memory.

My heart feels like someone is squeezing it in their fist, watching him talk about his friend, especially knowing he’s passed on.

“Ben was my best friend. Not a day went by where he didn’t make me laugh. He always found a way to pick me up, especially on those days when I couldn’t do it myself. We understood each other on a different level. He saw me for who I was, not for what I could do for him. He was the closest thing I had to a family after my father passed.” Hawke swallows, staring into the ceiling fan, and I feel the weight of this friendship to him.

“After his death, I fell apart. I closed myself up, becoming numb to everything and everyone around me. I had to, to survive. I had to, until you.”

He turns his head to face me, looking sad and entirely vulnerable at his own admission. I grab for his hand in mine immediately, holding it to my chest, against my racing heart. Snuggling into his side as far as I can, I want him to know how much letting me in means to me, how much he means to me.

“I’m going to end things with Patrick,” I say, running my fingers along the inside of his palm, before turning to face him where I’m laying.

He stares at his hand, watching what I’m doing while running his tongue along his teeth, thinking.

“Don’t do that for me,” he says cautiously.

“It’s not just that. It’s everything you’ve made me realize about myself.”

He studies my face while I mentally recite everything that’s wrong with our relationship.

I sigh before saying, “I just have to figure out how to go about this.”

“I understand,” he whispers before brushing the back of his hand against my cheek. “It’s not going to be easy.”

“I know.” My voice cracks as I speak, biting the inside of my cheek at the painful thought.

“Hey,” he says, sensing my pain and sitting up to turn me to face him. “It’s okay. Everything will be okay.”

I wish life could be easy. I wish I could just call Patrick up and say, *guess what, it’s over*. But the reality is, this guy is all I’ve known for the past few years. My life is unfortunately intertwined with his.

I stupidly invested all that I am into a relationship that was never meant to work out. I ignored the signs, ignored my own thoughts, thinking I was overreacting and being crazy. He was

great on paper. Should be great in real life too, right? I worked so hard to make us work and now I'm left with nothing but the regret of failure.

I will need to make arrangements, plan to find a place in this small town to live, because as soon as the truth comes out, I know where I'll stand. I'll be on the curb. But what about Hawke? I can't be the cause of him not having a place to live. I can't tell Patrick the truth about Hawke and me because he doesn't need any more setbacks in this life he's working hard to correct.

I don't want to make his life worse; I want to make it better, any way that I can.

He lays back down, pulling me into him and wrapping a blanket up and around us. We lay together on the floor in the pile of pillows, falling asleep with our arms and legs intertwined, never seeming to get close enough.

We'll never get close enough.





**T**he next morning, I wake to the sound of light breathing. I had to orient myself for a moment, feeling like everything that had happened yesterday was a dream.

It's funny how a few quick moments can drastically change the entire outcome of your life, causing everything you thought you knew to turn upside down. One decision leads you into another life, in an entirely new direction. Anyone who says they can't control their own fate has never tried.

I hadn't tried before Hawke. I was sucked into the belief that the power was out of my control and that I should consider myself blessed and lucky to be where I was and let that be that.

By no means am I saying I'm not lucky. I'm healthy, I'm alive, I have the freedom of choice. But that's where the power lies. I have choices. Many. Choices I need to make to find myself, and what I do with that will be monumental.

Hawke stirs next to me before sighing and pulling me flush against him again, pulling the blanket over me. I smile to

myself, loving the fact that he's doing this in his sleep. It's natural for him to nurture.

I lean up above him a bit, staring down at his relaxed face, his pouty lips begging to be kissed. Pressing my lips against them, I feel the cool metal of his lip ring. I pull back and grin at his sleeping face. I'm enjoying indulging in this without him knowing.

I lean over to the side of his face, brushing the inky hair away from his forehead. I just barely touch my mouth to the shell of his ear, whispering words from a favorite poem by Jonathon Muncy Storm that made me think of him, "You're my calm in the soul, crazy in the flesh."

I leave a soft kiss on his earlobe, then find his lips again and get another fix. He inhales a breath, then slowly begins moving his lips against mine, waking up and figuring out what's happening.

"Mmm," he hums against me, making my heart skip a beat. "Busted," he whispers in a cracked tone. "Now you know how I felt."

I break out into a smile, remembering the time he kissed me and woke me up after cuddling. He couldn't help himself, and the idea he was thinking what I'm thinking, warms me all over.

He blinks his eyes open, looking at me through squinted lashes. His forehead wrinkles as he looks around the room.

"What time is it?"

“Nine,” I say, looking at my phone.

Yep, no more messages, no missed calls. As if I didn’t exist at all. It’s honestly angering me more than anything else. I’m not even sad about it anymore.

“Shit,” Hawke says abruptly. “I gotta run.”

He sits up quickly, standing to run a hand through his hair, pulling up the sweats that are hanging off his hips, making me feel a tingling ache in my core. His shirtless form never fails to get me excited. He bends over and begins folding the blankets from the floor.

“I got it. Don’t worry about it. Just do whatever you need to do,” I say, grabbing a blanket from him with an easy smile.

I have no idea where he needs to be or why, but I’m assuming maybe it has something to do with a new job.

He ignores me, folding until all the blankets are put away and the pillows are piled back where they belong, clearly not letting me do it myself. Quickly changing into a pair of jeans and a new t-shirt, he slips on his boots, grabbing for the keys to Kid’s car, or what used to be his.

“I have a couple of things to do today, but will you be around before work tonight?” he asks, walking towards me.

“Um, oh shit. Yeah, I go in early tonight, so no. There’s some poker tournament at the VFW today and many of them head to 9-5 straight after. I told John I’d open.”

He licks his lips, looking down to the ground, then back at me, frowning.

“What time do you work till?”

“I’ll probably get done around nine as long as it’s not too busy. Most of them crash early because it’s an all-day event.” I shrug.

“Alright, I’ll be there later,” he says, looking at me with a grin pulling at his perfect lips.

“You will?” I ask, matching his grin.

“Of course, I’ll need to see you,” he answers, like it was crazy to assume he wouldn’t.

I can’t contain the smile that he puts on my face. I shouldn’t ever try.

“Well...I guess I’ll see you later, then?” I bite the corner of my lip.

I can’t help but be a little disappointed. I thought maybe we’d have the day to spend together.

He notices my sudden shift in energy. Gazing at my lips, his tongue toying with his lip ring while watching me. He grabs my waist, pulling me into him so we’re flush together.

“I can’t wait to see you,” he whispers, still staring at my lips.

“You’re seeing me now, silly,” I smile, my heart racing again at the closeness.

“And I miss you already,” he says in a serious tone, pressing his forehead against mine.



His hands wrap around me, one behind my back, the other at the side of my neck, his thumb at the edge of my jaw, tracing the line.

“Last night was amazing,” I mutter out, then mentally slap myself for sounding so stupid.

“All of yesterday was amazing,” he replies, staring deeply into me. “But everything with you always is.”

I suck in some air, feeling faint at his words. He makes me feel so rare, so incomparable. As if my being in his life has changed him. No one has ever made me feel so important, my existence so crucial for their survival.

He dips his head down, as if he’s about to kiss me, but stalls suddenly to check my eyes for permission. I nod as he finally presses his lips to mine softly and sweetly before kissing my forehead. He rests his head upon mine again, as if knowing he has to go, but hanging on to this moment as long as the moving speed of time will allow.

After his departure, I spent a few hours cleaning up the house. I wash dishes, thinking of him. I wash a load of laundry, thinking of him. I make coffee, thinking of him. He’s the only thing on my mind, his presence now captivating my entire consciousness. It doesn’t seem healthy. I can’t get him off my mind and yet I can’t seem to get in Patrick’s at all.

I’ve thought about calling him, but why? So I can feel like I’m pestering him again? He can call me if he wants to. He’s the one that left. As soon as he comes back, we need to have a serious talk about where we go from here, how we move

forward, separately. I'm nervous just thinking about it because I know in my heart it won't be easy.

I spend the rest of the afternoon working on sending some documents for a final draft I've been editing to the publishing house, while curiously wondering where Hawke is and what he's been up to. Sitting back in the chair at my desk and taking a sip of tea, I hear a knock at the door, startling me.

Strange. Hawke wouldn't knock, nor would Patrick. No one comes here besides us three.

I make my way to the door, opening it, and seeing a large, burly man holding a clipboard in front of me.

"Good morning, Ma'am!" he says in a perky tone. "Just dropping off. Need a signature."

He's not holding a package, or any mail at all, for that matter. I cock my brow at him as he continues smiling at me.

It's then that I notice my car parked in the driveway behind him. It's being delivered. From the bar?

"O-oh, yes, of course," I stutter, having no clue how it got here.

"Needed a new battery. Mr. Hawke said to have it here before three for ya." He smiles a tight-lipped smile while I sign the paper, noticing the name of the shop stitched on his uniform.

*Mr. Hawke, huh?*

I feel that thing you don't want to feel in your heart again. That strong tightness, that inability to breathe properly, insinuating something that shouldn't be. I try to hold back my grin before handing the clipboard back to him and saying goodbye.

I stand there with my arms crossed, leaning against the open door, staring at the car, the cool morning breeze sweeping across my face, doing nothing to cool the warmth burning inside of me.



Work is busy.

It appears this poker tournament had a great turnout this year. The bar is crawling with fresh faces along with the old, most of them already on their way towards passing out early. I can't help but gaze longingly at the door, waiting for him to come. I know I'm being stupid for doing this, but I can't help the excitement that I feel every time that door swings open at the chance it might be him.

John comes in a few hours later with a big smile. This guy is just always genuinely so happy. It's infectious to be around.

"Nic, Nic! There she is!" he declares, walking around the back of the bar, giving me a little side hug. "How are ya darlin'?"

“Good, it’s busy as hell today,” I say, nodding towards the commotion of people.

“I know. You should’ve called me. I could’ve come in earlier to help.”

“Eh, ain’t nothing I can’t handle.” I wink at him before the door opens again.

It’s insane. I feel his presence before I see it. The hairs on my arms raise and I get instantly anxious, yet calm at the sight of him. It’s the strangest feeling, one I’m clearly not used to.

There he is, in his black distressed jeans, loose black t-shirt clinging to his form, his tattoos, the perfect accent to the entire look. Hawke’s hair is slightly slicked back again with those pieces that drop forward, hanging into his eyes, his tall, statuesque form making the people around him seem so insignificant.

Kid walks in behind him as they make their way to the table in the back. Passing through, Hawke turns his head, connecting his eyes to mine. His hard face breaks into a shy half-smile while a piece of my heart breaks off and drops into the pit of my stomach.

We are in on our own little secret and I’m completely turned on just knowing that not even twenty-four hours ago, he was inside me. He runs his hand through his hair, before licking his lips as his eyes gaze at me flirtatiously. I bite the corner of my lip, and sigh as he talks to Kid.

“You guys seem to be getting along again, huh?” John’s voice snaps me out of my gaze with a startle.

“Uh, yeah...we’ve been getting along fine,” I spit out quickly, turning to stir the ice in the cooler that doesn’t need to be stirred.

He leans against the back of the bar, crossing his arms with a questionable smirk, staring at Hawke, then back at me.

“I think he has a crush on you,” he says as Hawke looks over at me from the seat he’s sitting in, making me feel flush.

He’s leaning back in his chair, an elbow on the back of it, one of his legs splayed out casually while he chews on the tip of his thumb like he does, staring at me like he’s envisioning all the things he wants to do to me later.

“That’s preposterous,” I reply to John, still staring back into Hawke’s eyes, unable to peel them away.

“I mean, that would explain the anger. He was fighting his feelings for you, probably hates seeing you with Patrick, wishing it was him holding you late at night. That’s gotta be awkward, eh?” He laughs jokingly before pushing off the bar and grabbing some freshly washed glasses and stacking them.

I could just die.

“Shut up, John.” I playfully push him in the chest as he continues laughing.

Hawke’s eyes narrow slightly at the touch as he sits up in his seat watching us. I flutter my lashes, feeling a little

overwhelmed, before shaking my head at the conversation and returning to work.

John and I work amazingly together as we always do, shuffling back and forth, filling drinks for each other, putting drinks on tabs, taking payments while the other mixes up cocktails. I go to make a rum and coke for someone when the coke from the fountain runs out.

“Shit,” I whisper to myself. “John, I gotta connect another coke. I’ll be right back.”

He shoots me a thumbs-up as he leans over the bar, trying to hear another guy over the loud music.

I make my way to the back hallway to the supply room. Opening the door, fingers grasp around my upper arm, pushing me in through the tiny, dark space. I gasp before I see who it is. I turn to face Hawke leaning over me with a playful grin, as he helps me into the small closet area, closing the door behind him.

He presses his lips against mine forcefully, finding my tongue immediately. I moan, falling back into the opposing wall while his hands cup my face. I run my hands along his lower back, finding my way beneath his shirt and touching his warm skin as we continue the kiss. It’s so necessary, this need to touch him, the need to taste him again. He pulls back, seemingly out of breath, before smiling his perfect half-grin again.

“Cole, what are you doing to me?” he asks before placing soft, sweet kisses all over my face.

I grip his shirt in my hands, pulling him into my body, needing to feel that part of him against me again. He presses himself into me, pinning my hips against the wall. I lean into him, licking the side of his neck, finding a small area of skin just above his collarbone and suck, dragging my teeth roughly. He groans deeply, letting his head hang as I leave a mark.

“Fuck,” he says breathlessly, pressing his erection into me, lifting the edge of my shirt, and finding the skin above my hip.

“Hawke, I gotta get back out there.” I smile as he kisses my neck.

He groans, dropping his face in the crook of my neck.

“I know. I just couldn’t help it. I missed the taste of you.” He traces his lips along my jaw.

I pull him back a little by his shoulders so I can look at him. I cup my hands around his neck, thumbs along his jaw.

“This morning, you left to get my car fixed?”

“Of course, you had to get to work today,” he says, like it was idiotic for me to think he wouldn’t.

I sigh, gazing from his lips back to those sweet, soul-crushing eyes.

“Thank you. So much. I can’t—”

“Cole. Stop,” he interrupts. “I’d do anything for you.”

My stomach flips as I feel the butterflies of his words unleashed inside of me. I stare at him in awe, letting it all sink in.

“C’mon, let me hook this up for you, then you can get back out there,” he says, taking the box from behind me.

We both walk out at different times, him a minute before me, to make sure we’re not caught by anyone looking. I smile to myself, hopping back behind the bar, when I realize no one did as I continue filling drinks and taking orders.

I pour up some shots for a group of older men when I hear a slight commotion coming from the back corner. Hawke’s corner.

“Guess we’re drinking with scum today!” a man, who’s clearly inebriated, yells.

My head snaps up at his words. He’s looking at the table where Hawke, Kid, and a few of their other friends are sitting. He just sits there, staring at the guy with narrowed eyes, his body relaxed with his chin tipped up, his brows knit together, clearly not entertaining him.

“Fucking junkies everywhere!” the man yells again.

John is on the other end of the bar helping some customers over there, oblivious to the commotion, so I make my way over to the disruption. Hawke sees me approaching and an immediate look of anxiousness fills his face.

“Waste of fucking space. Gotta keep animals like you locked up,” he says, directing his anger at Hawke.

My mouth drops open at his disrespect as my eyes travel between him and this man.

“Sir, you need to leave,” I say sternly, approaching his side.



“What?” He turns to face me. “No, fuck no!” he yells into my face.

Hawke snaps, standing up, sending his chair flying backwards to place himself between us abruptly, staring down at the man dangerously. He suddenly looks so intimidating and threatening. A far cry from the soft, gentle guy who just met me in the back room.

“Kid, get her out of here,” he says calmly through a clenched jaw, eyes never leaving the man in front of him.

Kid gently grabs my upper arm. “Come on, let’s let them handle this.”

He walks me back towards the bar when I take his wrist in mine, twisting his arm around backwards to free myself from his grasp.

“Ah! Damn girl!” he shrieks.

I march back towards the man who’s in Hawke’s face, approaching the side of them, ready to push him out of the door myself if I have to.

“How’s it feel to be a literal piece of shit?” He growls at him with a disgustingly smug smile.

I can’t take this anymore. He’s baiting him, degrading him while knowing Hawke can’t do anything about it. I’m assuming he knows who he is by the way he’s talking down to him. He clearly knows his story and the fact that he went to prison.

The look on Hawke's face is enough to break my heart. I see his pain; I see his anger. He narrows his eyes, clenching his jaw so tightly with his fists curled at his sides. He's irate and emotionally distraught, but in the position where he can't express that.

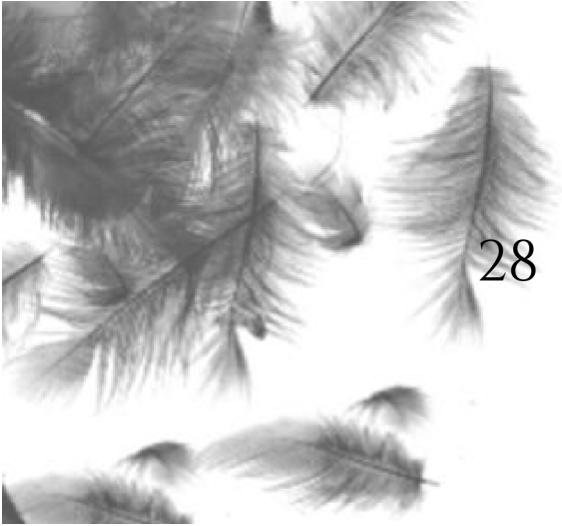
I gently place my hand on Hawke's shoulder, hoping to bring him some sort of calm, but he flinches and abruptly dodges my touch, scaring me slightly. I suck in a breath and back off, suddenly intimidated myself.

"Say it, I *fucking* dare you," Hawke threatens through his teeth at the man, his chest heaving in anger.

"Oh, yeah? What are you gonna do? *Kill* me?" he replies with a knowing face.

A knowing face with a word that sends an immediate chill down my spine.

The kind of chill that shakes me to my core.





“**W**hat are you gonna do? *Kill me?*”

I can't get the phrase out of my head. Why would he say it like that? It was like he was insinuating Hawke had killed before. I can't imagine he'd be capable of something so horrible, so vicious. It doesn't seem remotely possible. Not the guy I've come to know.

Shortly after the man got in his face, the tension was insanely high and I was legitimately terrified that Hawke would snap, but he never did. He stood there in the face of the insults, letting them bounce off his tough exterior like a shield he'd formed from the tragedies of his past.

He was so strong, holding it together with his fists shaking at his side when I knew all he wanted to do was break. He knew what the consequences were for slipping up, even if he was in the right. I was in awe of his restraint.

John ran over from behind the bar, breaking up the scene with his loud, stern tone. He kicked the drunk idiot out along with his few friends who were getting rowdy, too. He's going

to be a great dad one day with that voice. He intimidated me, even in his specs and Crocs.

Hawke turns to me, knowing we're still being watched by everyone as the incident caused a bit of a scene.

"I'm sorry, I...I didn't know it was you that touched me—"

I forget the mental place he's still in, always needing to protect his back. Never knowing who's attacking next. Five years in prison will do that to you, I'm sure.

"It's fine Hawke, I shouldn't have intervened."

"Let's go, man. Head to the cabin instead." Kid comes up beside him, slapping him on the back. "You don't need this shit."

He turns to him, running his hand against the back of his neck before turning to face me again.

"I guess I'm gonna go," he says, lingering there for a moment.

Kid walks towards the door as I look down at the floor, then back up at him.

"Yeah."

I'm so confused. My heart hurts for him and his situation, yet something about it all terrifies me. How can you tell if you really know a person? Is it how they make you feel, or is it what they show you? Is it action, or is it emotion? Every time I think I know who Hawke is, I get struck with the cold realization that I don't really know him at all. I don't want to

dig into his past. I want to trust him. But can I trust he's not withholding certain things that would scare me away?

"You alright?" he asks softly, before reaching out his hand for my face.

He quickly pauses, curling the hand into a fist before pretending to scratch an itch, forgetting where he is.

"Says the guy who was harassed by some asshole who knew you couldn't fight back. I'm so mad for you," I grumble, folding my arms tightly across my chest before glaring towards the front door.

He rests his hands on top of his head, sighing while looking at me with a somber expression, almost appearing sad.

"What is it?" I ask softly at his strange demeanor.

"I just, well, I thought maybe you'd..." he stutters, then shakes his head, stopping himself.

"What? You thought I'd be scared of you? You thought I'd listen to that guy? Take his word for who you are?" I ask, questioning what it was he was thinking.

He opens his mouth, but the words don't come out.

"I'm not afraid of you, Hawke. I know you'd never hurt me. And I can't even begin to imagine what you've been through —"

"Hawke! Marion's here! Let's ride out," Kid calls out, interrupting our conversation from the door.

He turns to hold up a finger while Marion pops her head in through the door. It's that chick that was at our house that night. The one who had her tongue down Hawke's throat. The idea of them all going to the cabin together bothers me. I'm instantly feeling a tinge of jealousy. This is such a messy situation.

I blink with a bland face, remembering the scene as Hawke turns back to face me. His face studies mine curiously, as if he's trying to figure me out. I get the sense that he doesn't really want to leave, but can't exactly explain to Kid why he'd want to stay.

"Well, I should go..." I point a thumb over my shoulder at the bar, interrupting the awkward moment.

He brushes up beside me as if walking past, but interlocks his pinky with mine. Facing the door with his mouth by my ear, he whispers in a deep, demanding tone, "Later. Me and you."

It's all he says before walking past me and heading out of the bar. A burst of excitement tingles my insides, lighting a fire deep within. Four little words from him can change my entire attitude, like the flip of a switch.

Later that night, I get off around nine-thirty, finally making the trip back home. As soon as I get in the car, my phone rings.

Patrick.

I rest my head back against the car seat for a moment. Unsure of what to do. Do I answer it? Do I ignore it? Do I throw the phone through the window and drive off across the country until I run out of gas?

I decide to answer it on the last ring.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Nic,” he says softly. “How are you?”

I take a deep breath, calming my nerves.

“Um, I’m good. Just got off work, heading home.”

“So you got the car fixed? Everything was okay?”

“Actually, Hawke took it in for me. It needed a new battery. He paid for it.”

I’m not even pretending not to be snarky with my response. Hawke took care of it. He took care of me when he wasn’t around, in more ways than one.

“Really?” he questions in disbelief. “That’s surprising.”

“Yes, *really*.” I roll my eyes, shaking my head as I turn onto our street.

“Well good. Glad it’s fixed.”

My eyes narrow at his response. What kind of man is okay with another man taking care of their woman for him? He literally doesn’t care. Doesn’t care that Hawke paid for it. Doesn’t care that he stepped up to help. Nothing.

I remain quiet, not even knowing what to say.



“Everything else alright? You and Hawke getting along okay? He’s not giving you any trouble, is he? Sean told me he saw a few new cars on the block, thought maybe he was having a party or something.”

“Patrick, are you kidding me?” I scoff.

Of course. That would explain it. Sean, his older brother by a year and a half. He also works in the family business but clearly didn’t go on the trip. No, he’s just staying around town, spying on the house, watching my car’s whereabouts. He’s a prick. I hate Sean.

“Just making sure he isn’t messing the place up for you,” he comments.

“He’s been fine,” I say, clipping it short, as I park the car and sit back into the seat.

“Alright, just checking. You home now?”

“Yep, just pulled in. I’ll wave to Sean.”

“Not funny,” he responds. “But seriously...I miss you.”

As mad as I want to be, there is a small part of me that’s just sad. I’m sad about what I’ve done to him. I’m sad about how this is playing out. I’m sad about an ending that is on the horizon.

“Do you?” I ask, seriously curious.

“Of course, Nic. I know it’s been hard lately, but when I get back, I promise everything will be better.”

Ugh, God, I don't even know what to say. I squeeze the steering wheel in my hand, closing my eyes tightly.

"But I should get to bed. One more meeting tomorrow morning and then I'll be on my way home to you."

"Okay," I whisper. "Well, goodnight."

"Goodnight babe. I'll see you soon."

With that, he hangs up. I smash my forehead into the steering wheel, hating everything that is my life. I hate that I can't say anything. I can't tell him over the phone. I don't even know if I can tell him at all. It isn't just my situation that's at risk anymore and that makes everything even more difficult.

Walking into the dark house, I flip on the lights and throw my bag and phone on the kitchen table. I immediately head to the shower, letting the hot water be the healing touch I need. Standing there beneath the scalding heat of the showerhead, I silently hope for answers, hope for clarity. But nothing happens. It's just another shower for a guilty person who's seeking resolution in places she'll never find.

Changing into some leggings and a large oversized t-shirt, I let my hair air dry after combing it out. I walk out to grab a glass of water from the fridge when I'm surprised by the silhouette of a person sitting at the kitchen table.

"Jesus Christ!" I scream out, seeing Hawke. "You scared the piss out of me!"

He's leaning back into the chair with an arm over the back, the tips of his fingers on my phone on the table, a strange look

in his eye.

“How was the cabin?” I ask, not sure about the energy between us at the moment.

“Lame as always,” he answers somewhat coldly.

His hand hovers over my phone for a moment before setting it on the table next to it. “Patrick forgot to tell you he loved you.”

His eyes snap up at mine for a moment, and I feel like I’ve been hit with a brick to the gut. I take a breath, swallow what feels like glass in my suddenly dry throat. I grab the phone, seeing the message from Patrick that must’ve popped up while he was sitting there waiting for me to get out of the shower.

“He called when I was on my way home from work. It’s not what you think—”

“Cole, stop,” he says, interrupting me while standing.

I look around, desperately searching for the words right now, but I don’t even know what to say. He’s hurt. I can physically feel his pain. After everything he’s been through tonight, now this.

He walks towards me as I anxiously look up at him. His gaze travels from my eyes to my lips and back, as if suddenly, because of this text, there’s a barrier between us that wasn’t there before. He’s contemplating even touching me now.

“You don’t need to explain yourself,” he says softly.

The way he's just standing over me, so close, yet seemingly miles away, breaks me.

I grab the bottom edge of his t-shirt, pulling him to me before I wrap my arms around his waist. "But I do."

The move shocks him, as his stiff form slowly molds around mine, his heart pounding against my ear.

"I do need to explain. I don't want to hurt you. I don't even know if I am. I don't know what I'm doing," I say, exacerbated, looking up at him, my chin on his chest.

"Come here," he says soothingly, bringing me over to the couch to sit down with him.

He sits back on the couch, opening his legs for me. I move into the space, curling into him as he wraps his arms around me comfortingly. Trailing with the tips of his fingers, he rubs my back softly.

"You're not—" he stutters, trying to find his words. "You're not hurting me. I understand where you're at with this, not that it makes it easy. But I know it takes time to figure it all out."

I turn to look up at him, leaning back into the crook of his elbow as he holds me. Being close like this, touching each other, is such a calming and comforting place. I hated not being here a minute ago. I hated his hesitation to touch me. I never want to be back in that place.

"Remember when I told you that you don't even know who you are yet? And that you hold yourself back, but I'll be here

when you figure it out?" he asks softly, running soft circles with his fingers on my thigh.

"I do," I reply, remembering that moment between us in the car on the way back from the concert.

"Well, you're figuring it out," he admits proudly. "I'm here. And I'll be here. Just...thought you should know."

He's basically telling me he's not going anywhere. He's waiting for me. Waiting for me to grow, to become who I am. He's the net that's set to catch me when I fall.

I turn to face him as he lays back, eyeing me for a response.

"I'm terrified of hurting you," I admit truthfully. "I just need time to sort it out, but I will."

"I'm a big boy, Cole. I can withstand a lot. I'd withstand more than what I probably should for you."

"Hawke—"

"Just...don't worry about me," he interrupts.

He pulls me up to face him. We're inches apart again, our eyes reflecting each other's, seeing the soul inside, knowing it, and finding our lost home again.

"Wreck me, shatter me, destroy me, be the ruin of me. I don't care, just make me feel again," he whispers against my lips.

"Cam," I whisper back, wincing at his words.

I grab his face in my hands, running my thumbs over his bottom lip. I rub the ring in the middle, then slowly inch

closer. Pausing, I look up at him for approval, and he gives me a little grin and a head nod like I did to him this morning.

I press my lips to his and immediately I'm able to breathe again. He's the source of all of my calm, the creator of my happiness, the inspiration I've always sought but could never find.

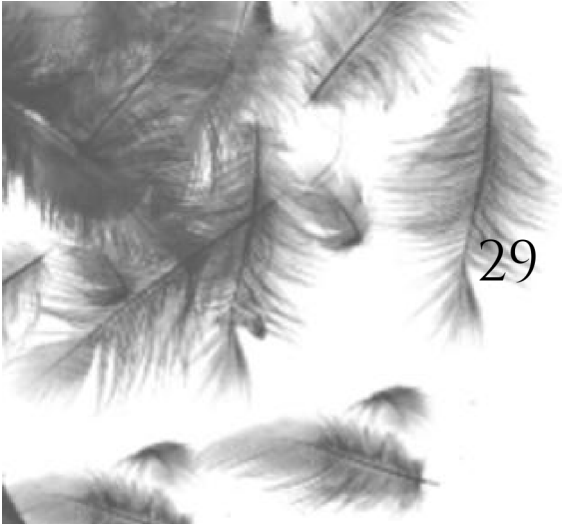
He groans in approval, slipping his tongue inside my mouth. Every kiss with him feels more erotic than sex alone. It's so intimate and sexy how he works his tongue. It's him communicating his emotions, his feelings through the power of his kiss alone.

One thing leads to another and before I know it, I'm on my back on the couch with him hovering above me again. He looks down at me with his hair falling into his eyes, his muscular arms bracing himself just above me, his breathing already labored. We're back to this without a hiccup, back to needing more than we ever seem to be able to get from one another.

"What are we doing?" I ask with an easy grin, running my fingers through a piece of hair in front of his eye.

He smirks back at me, studying my face beneath him before his face turns serious. "We're losing ourselves in each other."

I swallow at his words, knowing each step we take, we fall a little bit further. Leaning down, he licks his lips before placing them on mine. He presses his weight on me, letting me feel all of him as we get lost together in our playground of darkness and desire.





“I’m sorry.” I flutter my lashes at him, biting my bottom lip as my fingers trace the scratches on his chest.

“Please.” He scoffs beneath me. “These wounds are worth it.”

I eye the bite marks, the row of hickeys I left along his collarbone and shoulder, remembering the heat that was last night.

“I’ve had a decent amount of sex in my life, but nothing... nothing compares to this shit right here.” He points his fingers to my body, scrolling up and down with a look of disbelief.

I blush while straddling his lap, his back against the headboard and his hands now massaging my exposed thighs, the morning light sneaking in through the window.

Things got a little wild last night. I’ve never experienced anything like it. He taught me like the eager student I was, trying new things that set my insides on fire. We were exploring one another, finding out what made each of us tick.



He was so amazing with me too, giving me little bits of praise, telling me how good I was doing, how I was driving him wild. His deep, raspy tone while telling me he was going to come inside me sent me so far over the edge that my eyes were rolling to the back of my head in pleasure.

We were addicted. Our new drug, our insatiable appetite for each other. It was never enough, we just couldn't get close enough. Our bodies synced together like we've been connecting for years.

At one point, I was on top of him on his bed while he held my hands behind my back, restraining me while bringing me to the brink of orgasm. The sensations became so intense I broke free of his hold, grabbing onto his chest, and raked my nails down the tanned, tattooed skin, leaving marks in their trail.

"I think you've brought out a new side of me." I chuckle, slightly embarrassed.

"Nah, it was always there, just not being utilized," he declares, shaking his head. "What a fucking shame."

I bite the corner of my lip, blushing again at his words, before grabbing his hands and placing the palms against mine.

"Cameron Hawke," I whisper, measuring our hands.

"Cam and Cole," he says with a shy smile, eyeing my little hand against his.

"Why don't you ever go by your first name?" I ask curiously.

He sighs, looking down at our connected hands before speaking. “My dad’s nickname, while he was in the Navy, was Mouse. They called him that as a joke because he never seemed to live up to his name in their eyes. They were horrible to him. Especially when he slowly became weaker and weaker, not knowing that he was fighting his own battle with colon cancer the entire time.”

I sit there, listening intently to his story as I slowly weave my fingers through his.

“When I was ten, we moved from Virginia Beach after he was discharged for medical reasons. He brought me here to focus on his health, his treatments. He actually went into remission for years before it came back again, but he couldn’t keep up the fight. The last thing he told me was to never let anyone define what they don’t understand, and that no one can characterize who you are but you.”

I squeeze his hands, holding them against my chest as my eyes wince at his father’s dying words.

“He was the strongest man I’ve ever met. I decided I’d embrace the name for my father and hunt through life like a hawk. Always went by it. Not that it helped me. I was lost without him, and then after Ben, I was gone for good. Led astray by the wolves who took advantage of that. Not many people even know my real name, besides attorneys and all that.”

“I do,” I say softly, feeling beyond lucky to know this intimate side of him.

“Yeah, you do.” He grins back at me then drags his tongue against this lower lip, looking at mine.

I lean forward, capturing his bottom lip between mine, slowly sucking on it until it springs back, making him smile.

“And what about your family? I know you mentioned your sister, but what about your parents?” he asks, bringing our conjoined hands up to his lips, rubbing my knuckles against them while looking at me with his brows raised.

I take a deep breath and let it out. “Well, it’s just us and our dad now. They divorced after my dad cheated on my mom with a younger woman whose name just so happens to be Nicole. It, along with other things, destroyed our family.” I pause, thinking of the pain of losing my mother, then quickly brush it away. “He’s actively trying to bring her into our lives.” I shake my head in disapproval.

“Shit,” he grimaces, seemingly now understanding my hatred for the name.

“I was so mad at him,” I say, looking down at our interlocked fingers. “For cheating...”

I feel like a bit of a hypocrite, granted my situation is different. This isn’t a marriage, but the underlying principle is the same.

His eyes go back and forth between mine, reading me. Understanding me without needing to talk.

“Sometimes you can’t control it...” he says softly, studying my face, running the backs of his fingers against my cheek.

“These feelings.”

Today ends the ease of our secret connection. We’ve been playing house, so to speak, but reality is about to slap us across the face. This was an easy escape; having Patrick out of town. Everything else that follows today will be difficult. I’m feeling anxious. Nervous for his return. Everything will shift. The entire dynamic Hawke and I have created will change. I need to be extra cautious going forward.

“I just don’t know how to go about this.” I breathe out a big puff of air.

“You just have to do what feels right to you, whatever that decision may be.”

He says it as if knowing he might not be a part of what feels right to me, as if there’s a chance that I won’t choose him, as if he’s already preparing himself for that scenario.

We sit there together, me on his lap, his hands on my face, and we study each other, pulling everything we can out of these seconds that seem to run faster when we’re together. I know every tiny freckle on his nose; I know the way his eyelashes curl, and the tiny specks of brown within his teal and green eyes. We sit there with music playing in the background and just appreciate each and every minute we have together, knowing there is a limit to this, knowing it’s going to be ending this afternoon.

His hands wrap around the sides of my neck, running his thumbs over my bottom lip. His face turns serious as he studies the curve of my smile.

“Don’t lose me in the madness,” he breathes.

My heart aches at his words.

I shake my head as if to tell him that would be impossible.

“I know what he does to you. He gets in your head,” he explains, licking his lips while looking at mine. “Just be careful who you trust.”

His words hit a nerve. He’s giving me a warning of sorts, as if predicting a fallout.

“You’re saying I shouldn’t trust him?” I question, needing some clarity to his suggestive words.

His jaw tightens as he swallows, holding back something from me. I get the feeling he knows something but can’t tell me. He’s doing that thing again, where he looks deep into my eyes, hoping I’ll just figure it all out.

His eyes fall down to my lap, then behind me toward his desk. The desk with the shoebox of packed away memories of Ben.

“What happened between you two?” I whisper cautiously, studying his face for a reaction, needing answers.

I know just by the look in his eyes, the words he uttered to me when we were on the couch weeks ago were regarding me. *One day. One day you’ll learn the truth, and it’ll change everything.*

With a sickening feeling in my stomach, I’m jolted into pure panic mode when I hear keys opening the front door.

Hawke's eyes dart towards the door, then back at me, before jumping into action and helping me off his lap.

"Fuck," he mutters silently.

I run to the corner of the room, both hands covering my mouth, wearing only the oversized t-shirt I had on yesterday.

*Pants. Where are my pants?!*

I rack my memory, realizing the pants are on the floor by the couch where Hawke peeled them from my legs.

*Oh my God. This is it. This is the end.*

Hawke's wide eyes tell me everything about how he's handling this. He throws on a pair of sweatpants, locking his door quickly. I can hear Patrick on the other side, walking in through the door, dropping his bags by the table.

"Fuck!" I mouth to Hawke.

He looks at me with his knuckles to his mouth, his eyes searching the room. He finds a pair of his basketball shorts, throwing them at me to put on.

My heart is racing and I literally feel like everything around me is getting hazy. I'm losing feeling in my legs.

"Listen to me," Hawke says calmly and quietly. "I'm going to go out there, and you're going to sneak out of this window. I'll tell him you went for a run, and distract him, then you'll come in and run to the shower immediately, okay?"

My chest is heaving as his hands hold my upper arms, his face directly in mine, making me look at him.

“Okay?!” he says again, desperately.

I swallow down the bile, tempting its way up, nodding.  
“Okay.”

He walks me to the window, slowly opening it up without making a noise. I can't help but feel like the complete whore that I am at the moment. I'm reminded of the first time I met Hawke and there was another woman sneaking out of this same window.

With his hands helping me down, he holds on for a moment longer, making me look at him in the room again.

“Cole, you got this,” he says, his eyes looking determined, yet worried at the same time.

I nod silently, then duck off until I hit the trees nearby towards the back of the house. Once I'm hidden behind the brush, I tie my shirt back tight and roll up the shorts so they fit me better. Shoes.

*I'm not wearing shoes.*

As I'm on the verge of an entire breakdown, I remember the pair of mowing shoes I left outside on the porch. Taking a deep, unsteady breath, I make my way to the sidewalk and begin walking around the block, heading towards the front of the house again.

My hands are shaking uncontrollably. I can't imagine the conversation Hawke is having with him. I wonder if he's nervous, if he's worried about me. It's then I remember he

wasn't wearing a shirt, only pants. The hickeys, the scratches, all on display.

“Oh, fuck my life.” I bend over on the sidewalk, having a difficult time breathing, when a car drives past. I raise my hand and wave with a forced grin, as if just bending over to catch a breath from this shoeless run I'm on, not the fact that I'm about to lose the contents of my stomach because I'm a cheating slut who was almost caught.

I hear Hawke's voice in my head again. *Cole, you got this.*

Running my hands down my face, I put one foot in front of the other and make my way back. Patrick's car is parked in the driveway, the sight of it like a punch to the chest. I slip into the green-tinged sneakers lying by the door, thankful I decided I could mow without Patrick. My shaking hand grabs for the door handle, pushing it open.

I'm sweating, beads of sweat accumulating on my forehead, actually appearing as if I was working out. My worried eyes scan the kitchen, finding it empty. Nearby in the living room, I spot the guys sitting and talking on the couch. Hawke's still shirtless.

“Babe! There you are,” Patrick says, getting up from the couch.

Hawke's eyes dart towards me, confidence behind his glance. I can hear his voice in my head again.

“Hey! You're back! Sorry, just went for a run. Let me clean up.” I smile, then dip into the bathroom quickly.



I shut the door, leaning back against it and sliding down to the floor. I'm breathing like I competed in a triathlon. Attempting to calm myself, I hear Patrick start talking about Colorado. Letting out a small sigh of relief, I turn on the water and get into the shower.

Walking back out into the living room after changing, Hawke's eyes find me first, making my stomach flip. Patrick traces his glance and turns to face me, getting off the couch.

"Hey, baby," he says with a smile, approaching me and pulling me into his arms.

"You're home early." I smile back, then give him a hug.

I see Hawke over Patrick's shoulder, where he's giving me an unreadable stare before pulling back from the embrace.

"I wanted to surprise you. My morning meeting got canceled, so I switched flights. I was hoping to wake you up with some breakfast in bed." He grins, pointing to the kitchen table which has a rolled-up coffee shop bag on it.

"Aw, that's sweet of you." I force a smile, feeling awful.

"You feeling alright? You look kinda pale," he asks, placing the back of his hand on my cheek.

"Yeah, I'm just a little dizzy, is all. I shouldn't go running without something in my stomach. Silly me."

"Well, here, come sit down." He guides me over to the couch, sitting me down next to Hawke. "I'll get you a bagel."

I've never wanted to be anywhere else so bad. I'm the worst person in the world. I'm so caught up in this web of lies and tangled emotions.

Hawke leans forward, his elbows on his knees next to me, staring at Patrick while he whispers to me, "Just breathe, Cole."

I suck in a deep breath, then sigh it out, plastering on a fake smile as Patrick comes back with a loaded bagel.

"Thank you, so much."

"Of course, Angel." He grins, looking between Hawke and I. "So, can you believe this guy? You see his chest?!"

Patrick shakes his head in disbelief with a smile on his face as my face drops entirely.

*Vomit. I'm going to vomit.*

"What happened?" I ask like an idiot, keeping my eyes on the bagel, refusing to look at Hawke, knowing if I do, I might crack.

"A crazy night, by the looks of it!" Patrick says, laughing, as my eyes peer over at Hawke.

Hawke pinches the bridge between his nose, shaking his head while chuckling lightly. I can tell he doesn't want to divulge. He doesn't want Patrick asking about it at all.

"It was wild." He smirks, looking down at the floor, running his tongue along his teeth.

“Reminds me of you.” Patrick nudges me with his elbow, leaning in towards my face, nuzzling me.

*I want to die.*

“I should get going.” Hawke says abruptly, standing from his seat on the couch.

“Got some interviews today?” Patrick asks as Hawke’s eyes narrow slightly.

I can tell he’s annoyed by the question, but he’s holding back.

“Yeah, a couple. I’ll get outta your hair, let you two spend some time together,” he responds, making my heart sink.

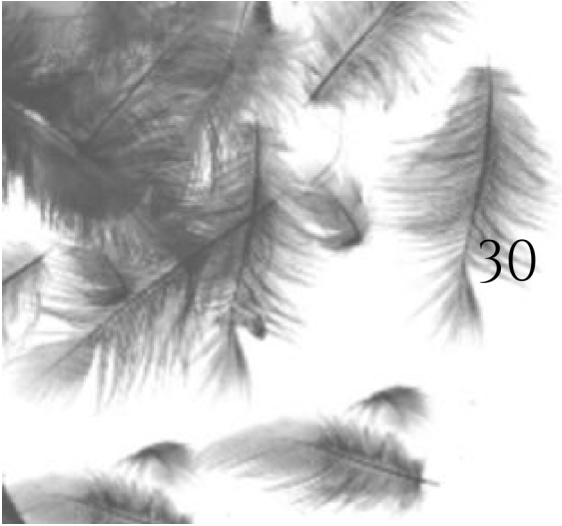
I don’t want him to leave, yet this is entirely uncomfortable for me having them both in the same room.

“Alone time.” Patrick smiles, wrapping an arm around my waist. “Just what we need.”

I glance at Hawke as he makes his way around the couch, but he doesn’t look at me. He leaves the room, heading for the bathroom, never turning back. The last sight I see is his reflection in the bathroom mirror, raking his hands down his face before the door closes.

Something about this moment makes me apprehensive of Hawke’s willingness to go along with this for the time being. I’m already afraid of losing him and everything we’ve built together. We’ve opened up, found a level of trust, and I can’t go back.

For all that he's said to me about understanding and waiting until I can figure this out, a part of me worries that the only thing that makes him feel will ultimately be his undoing.





The next day and a half was practically unbearable. Hawke made it a point to steer clear of Patrick and me since his return for obvious reasons. It's physically painful not seeing him around and I'm incessantly wondering what he's thinking or what he's doing. After the two nights we spent together, it seems like he's forgotten about me, or is actively trying to. He's been completely absent, and it pains me in a way I've never known.

Patrick kicks his shoes off, getting comfortable on the couch, finally finding the time to spend with me after needing to go back into the office again today to finish reports from the trip.

I've tried talking to him since his return, tried explaining that things are off between us and not headed in a good direction, but it's like every time I open that door, he willingly shuts it, stating that now is the wrong time to talk about it. There's never a good time.

"Come over here, Angel. I missed your smile this morning." He pats the space next to him on the couch with a big grin.

“We’ve got lots of *Survivor* to catch up on.”

I swallow, licking my lips while looking down at the floor, before getting up and sitting closer to him, the guilt still radiating off me.

“Listen, Patrick...I’d really like to talk to you about something.” I start with a shaky voice.

I’m twisting my sweatshirt in my sweaty fingers, clearing my throat that feels full of nothing but sand.

He turns his head, looking at me with furrowed brows, figuring out what I’m doing. “Nic, please, don’t start. I literally just got home for the day. I want to relax, hang with you, not to have to think about any type of drama. I’m exhausted.”

“It’s not drama, Pat. These are legitimate concerns that I’m trying to voice to you, but you won’t listen to me.”

“What concerns could you possibly have? You are living the dream. I work hard for us, so you can sit here and go after your dream of writing and bartending. You don’t have to worry about anything. I literally pay all the bills. Hell, you can’t even afford to be without me at the moment.”

I close my eyes, sitting there with what I knew was going to be a mountain before me to climb. I take in a large breath, attempting to do this again, when he startles me.

“Look! I told you, Colby wouldn’t make it!” He laughs, patting my thigh, watching the TV, clearly disregarding my entire message.

*God, he just isn't getting it.*

“Patrick, please, we really need to—”

“Nic, c’mon, not now.” He brushes me off again, kicking his legs onto the table before him. “Whatever it is, can wait. Let’s just enjoy this. Here, this one’s for you.”

He hands me another donut he grabbed for us on his way home from the office, popping one into his mouth for a bite, eyes still on the screen. I set the donut down on the table and sink back into the couch, crossing my arms across my chest and sighing loudly.

“Also, I was talking to my dad, and he mentioned that they’re hosting a family brunch on Thursday and want us to attend. I told him we’d be there.” He smiles as my stomach clenches.

I can’t be at this family event with him. Not when I don’t even know what I feel for him anymore. His family is literally the worst, most powerful, influential family in this small town. Not being there is going to insinuate something bad, yet being there is going to be physically painful.

“I told Sean you would make your famous cheesy potatoes. He’s been begging to try them after I told him how phenomenal they were.” He pulls me to the side of him.

I offer a light smile, even though Sean is literally the last person I’d want enjoying my potatoes. I stare aimlessly into the TV, feeling such a sense of entrapment in every way possible.



I'm not sure if it's from the overwhelming amount of stress that I've been internalizing or the sleepless nights I spent with Hawke, but before I know it, I'm dozing off on the couch. I fall into a deep sleep on the other end of it, while Patrick continues watching *Survivor*.

I wake to soft voices and humming around me before I even open my eyes, still in a haze.

"Yeah, think we'll order in. She's cooking for my family tomorrow, so I'm sure she won't want to tonight."

"Tomorrow? What's tomorrow?"

"Family brunch."

"Oh..."

"You heading out?"

"Uh, yeah, I guess I am."

"Alright, later."

I hear the door slam, causing me to sit up and fully wake up.

"What was that?" I ask, rubbing my eyes, finding myself on Patrick's lap, his arm resting over me, his hand rubbing circles on my ass.

He must've put my head on this pillow on his lap after I fell asleep next to him.

"Hawke. He came back a bit ago. Just left with Kid."

My heart drops into my stomach when I realize he saw me here, in this position with Patrick. His words, still in my head as I replay their conversation. He told Hawke I was making

food for his family tomorrow at the brunch. My heart is aching at the thought. I need to tell him it's not what he might think it is, because at the moment, it looks like we've made up and all is well again. But that's far from the truth. The truth is, Patrick is denying me the ability to even talk to him by actively avoiding my concerns.

"Where did they go?" I ask abruptly.

"What? Why? Who cares? Probably the cabin to do whatever foolish stuff they do there." He scoffs, distorting his face while he shakes his head.

I glare at him, then get up and head towards the shower.

"Where are you going, babe?" he asks to my back.

"Work," I reply simply.

He sits up, throwing an arm around the back of the couch, turning to face me. "I thought you didn't work tonight? I was hoping we could spend some alone time together."

The way he says it, I know what he's insinuating. We haven't done anything physical since his return. I didn't even sleep in the same bed with him last night. I told him I fell asleep on the couch after getting caught up in some new show. Truthfully, I was waiting up until Hawke's return. A return that never came.

"I do work tonight. I switched a day with John last week, not that you would know or remember," I snap at him, then immediately feel guilty.

Obviously, he wouldn't be able to know my schedule or remember because he's been on the road. But this aggression and pent-up anger are coming out in unplanned ways.

"Don't get snarky with me," he says sadly. "I don't even know why you still have this job. It's a little beneath you, Nic. It's not even necessary."

Once I get to the bathroom, I slam the door at the comment. It's supposed to be a compliment, I get that. But the idea that being a bartender to him is beneath his status and his assumption of mine makes me want to bartend the rest of my life just to spite him.

I think about people like John, needing to do this to make more money for his growing family while going to school, and am saddened by the carelessness in his response. Patrick just doesn't get it. He's never been in a position where taking a job like that was a necessity. I take a deep breath, stabilizing my shaking hands on both sides of the counter. I'm about to implode. I feel it coming.

I eagerly get ready to leave the house without another word to Patrick, who's since fallen asleep on the couch during my shower. Clearly, our little squabble hasn't bothered him enough to withhold a nap.

I stand there above him, watching him sleep. I hate that I can't just be an awful person to him. I hate that I can't stand up to him the way I want to. I hate that he's right. I can't afford to be on my own if I wanted to. The money from the little dive bar truly isn't that much, and the editing gig was

more of a shoo-in for attempting to build my own career in writing one day. Becoming so dependent on Patrick since this move hasn't helped me at all in this situation. I'd need to move back home, but the thought of leaving Hawke distresses me even more.

I swallow down my tears, knowing what I've done on the exact spot beneath him with Hawke. I rake my hands down my face, feeling the weight of how messed up my life and situation is at this moment.

Arriving a bit earlier than I'd normally be there on a Wednesday night, I walk into 9-5 Slide to a mild crowd, ready to take over the rest of the shift for John.

He's hosting a little dinner for his girlfriend and her friends, so it was the least I could do to pick up the rest of his hours, especially after he covered for me for the concert.

"Hey, John." I huff, dropping my bags on the bar, tipping my head and giving him a weak smile.

"Oh no," he says, immediately surveying my mood. "What happened?"

I sigh, then pick myself up, bringing my stuff behind the bar. "Just drama, and lots of it."

I don't exactly want to divulge the situation. I'd hate for John to think of me as low as I think of myself.

"Spill it. Let it all out. I'm here to listen," he says, leaning against the bar with his forearm, crossing his legs at the bottom, getting comfortable.

I shake my head, looking at the row of bottles on the wall adjacent to him. “I can’t.”

His brows lower as he studies me, before standing and moving in closer. “Is everything okay, Nic? You’re kind of scaring me. You’re not in some sort of trouble, are you?”

“No, nothing like that. I just...I just have things I need to figure out,” I say, biting my bottom lip.

“Are you thinking of breaking up with Patrick?” he asks softly.

I wince slightly at the mention of it.

“You are,” he says knowingly. “And you’re scared of how it will all go down.”

I look up at him, my eyes telling him the answer he’s looking for.

“Aw, Nic,” he says, pulling me into his side for a hug. “That’s tough. Especially knowing that family. I’m not even originally from here, but I know the kind of power they seem to have over this little Podunk town.”

“Yeah.” I sigh, licking my lips.

“It’ll be alright. I’m always a phone call away. Shit, if you need a place to crash, let me know. Anna would love it if you’d come over and hang out with her,” he says with a kind smile.

“Thanks, John, I seriously appreciate it. But you get outta here! Go have fun tonight.” I urge him out of the door with a

forced grin.

“One day at a time, girl. You got this.” He winks, grabbing his stuff. “You gonna be alright?”

“Yeah.” I nod confidently.

“That’s my girl!” He high fives me, making me giggle and roll my eyes. “I’ll catch ya later. Call if you need anything!”

I think of that as an idea. Maybe I could crash with them until I found something more stable? The thought of asking to move in with them seems a bit intrusive, especially since they are so close to having their baby. Who wants a new roommate while welcoming your first child? He’s just too nice.

John finally heads home for the night as I begin my shift. I help a few customers, do a lot of cleaning, and anxiously await who may or may not come through those doors.

I’m constantly looking towards the front door every time I hear it creak open. I can’t help but to hope Hawke comes in here tonight. The bar is a place I know I can count on for conversations with him without the guilt or worry of getting caught.

A few boring hours later, the door opens and I see Kid walk in. Immediately, my stomach gets the nervous butterflies, looking for a certain man to follow him in. A few more of their guys come in and take their normal seat at the table near the back.

I wait, hoping he’s outside smoking, when Kid approaches the bar.

“What’s up, lady?!” he says excitedly, running his hand through his wild, disheveled blonde spikes.

“Nothin’ much. What can I get ya?”

“Besides a chance, I’ll take a Jack on the rocks.” He smirks, waiting for me to catch on.

I roll my eyes at his forever attempts to flirt with me before turning to get his drink.

“Where’s your buddy?” I ask, needing to know where Hawke is.

“Which one? Hawke?” he asks, as if I would actually want to know where any of his other friends are. I don’t even know them.

“Yes, Hawke, where is he?”

He props his elbow on the bar, cocking his head to the side with a mischievous grin. “Why do you wanna know?”

“Oh, please, stop. He’s my roommate. And he’s always hanging around with your ass for some reason. Why not tonight?”

I’m getting frustrated now. Where the hell could he be? He doesn’t have a car and Kid is here. I’m really getting worried about him, especially after knowing what he saw on the couch today and the fact that he never came home last night. My pulse is practically pounding to the beat of the jukebox.

“He’s at the cabin. Or was, last I saw.”

My first thought is he's there with Marion, doing things to forget me. The thought literally feels like a knife to the chest.

"Oh," I comment, trying to remain cool. "There a party tonight?"

I'm fishing for information, just hoping he gives me something to work with.

"Nah," he responds blandly.

Thanks for the help, Kid, *really* appreciate it.

"Ooh, a date?" I smile, acting like I'm excited about it.

He tips his head, looking at me curiously with a weird, mysterious kind of grin on his face. I feel for a moment that he knows I'm acting and the need to swallow has never been more apparent.

"Nah, nothing like that." He shakes his head. "But there are a few people out there. He's probably on his way to drinking himself into a coma."

"What?" I question abruptly, feeling a level of anxiety throughout my body.

"Yeah, I don't know. He's acting all weird and wired out. He picked up a bottle of Henny to head to the cabin, then as soon as we got there, told me to run here to meet Toad."

Goddammit. He can't afford to get in this kind of trouble.

"Guess he's finally letting loose again, ready to party with your boy! So, here I am, with you, and Toad." He nods his



head towards the guy I've come to know as Toad on the other end of the bar, the dealer.

“Ah, I see.” I nod, acting as nonchalant as possible before changing the subject to distract him. “Well, you guys want a round of shots? On me.”

“Ooooh, girl, you always know the way to my heart,” he says, grabbing his chest.

“Free liquor? You aren't hard to please,” I snort.

His smile drops. “I meant acts of kindness.”

I bite back a smile as I grab a round of shots. Walking alongside him, I take them back to their table, trying my best not to worry about Hawke.

“You know, if you ever dump that bible humper, I really think we'd hit it off,” Kid comments as we walk.

I take the opportunity to smack him in the back of the head.

“Damn, girl! See?!” His shock slides into a mischievous grin. “I like that shit though...”

“Enjoy,” I tell the table, setting the shots down in front of them, then retreat back to my place behind the bar.

I count the last hour of work by the second until it's finally time for me to close up. I can't stand not knowing what they are doing. Kid and the other guys left shortly after meeting up with Toad and I can only imagine what kind of trouble they are all getting into back at the cabin. I get into my car and immediately make my way there.

I have to talk to him. *I need to see him.*





## COLD HARD TRUTH

I have a hard time finding it. I barely remember how we got there the last time. After taking a few wrong turns, I turn around on some back country road, before finally finding my way again. It's confusing as hell out here and it doesn't help that it's pitch black outside.

I finally come across the country road sign for the gravel road leading to it. Driving through the winding pathway, I pull up, putting my car in park next to a few others.

I lightly knock on the locked door, the icy breeze of the night chilling my bones. My pulse pounds wildly at the idea that I'm not even wanted here. I don't even know who owns this cabin, to be honest. This was a stupid idea.

After getting no response, I back down the stairs, keeping an eye on the door, until finally turning and walking down the gravel driveway to my car again.

"Cole?" Hawke's hoarse voice calls.

I turn immediately at the sound, the ache in his tone already hitting home.

“Hawke, what are you doing?” I ask, making my way to him.

My pace quickens as I walk up the stairs to where he’s leaning against the door frame of the opened door on his forearms, just barely holding himself up.

His black, inky hair is all disheveled and his black jeans are open, barely hanging on to his slim hips. His lack of a shirt, showcasing those randomly placed tattoos and rippled abs, makes me suddenly queasy. Why is he half-naked? The reason I can assume makes my stomach churn with sickening displeasure.

“I’m celebrating, what are you doing?” he slurs slightly, clearly messed up on something.

Celebrating? I can smell the alcohol on his breath, but feel like there’s more to it than that. His pupils are like saucers and his eyes seem oddly focused.

“Hawke,” I whisper, looking over his form sadly, then returning my gaze to his.

“Nic,” he whispers back, mocking me.

I hate how he calls me that. I’m not Nic to him, I’m Cole. His coldness is sending shivers down my spine. This isn’t the man I’ve come to know.

He stumbles backwards, fumbling towards the kitchen. I follow him inside, tucking my hands in my jean pockets and peeking around the corner, seeing a group of a few people in

the living room. There's rock music playing and a couple of people appear to be passed out already.

"Whose cabin is this?" I ask, slowly making my way towards him.

"So many questions, never any answers," he mumbles, falling back against the counter, finding his bottle of Hennessy, which is only a quarter full, lifting it to his lips and taking a long pull of the pungent liquor.

I roll my eyes at his behavior. If anything, he's the one withholding all the answers.

"Hey! There's my girl!" Kid announces loudly from his seat in the living room as Hawke scoffs.

His arm is around some girl, and she's lazily laying into him. The rest of the people there turn to face me, sending questionable looks my way. I notice Marion in the group and instantly feel sick.

"Can we talk?" I ask Hawke, grabbing for his upper arm.

He pulls his arm away from my touch, as if it burns him.  
"Talk? About what?"

"Cam, please," I beg quietly, grabbing his hand in mine.  
"Can we go to a room for a second?"

The group is staring at us, silently talking and smirking as we converse. Marion's eyes narrow at us and I know just how weird this must look. I don't care anymore, though. I need to try to get through to him somehow.

His tense stance slacks at the feeling of my hand in his. “Fine,” he says, shaking his head.

We walk into the room where he goes and plops his unsteady form down onto the lounge chair in the corner. He’s holding the Hennessy by the neck of the bottle, hanging it over the side of the chair as he lays spread out on his back, staring up at the ceiling.

I see a pair of women’s underwear lying on the floor between us. My eyes stare at them as my throat tightens, wanting to cry, but holding back the pain. He snaps his head up, waiting for me to talk, then notices why I haven’t said anything.

“Ah, yes. How perfect.” He scoffs, throwing his head back again.

It’s all adding up. His shirtless form, the underwear, the drugs, the alcohol.

“I know what you’re wondering. Yeah, maybe it’s Marion’s,” he says after setting the bottle down. He props himself up on one elbow. “Maybe we just fucked.”

He shrugs like the statement didn’t just send a knife through my heart. I blink my eyes profusely, trying to take slow, steady breaths to keep from crying.

“Maybe after we fucked, she fell asleep on my lap on the couch while I rubbed her perfect fuckable ass as we planned a family brunch.”

He talks with venom in his tone. His words, cutting deep. Now I see it. He's doing this to make me feel his pain, and believe me, I feel it.

“So that's it? You see one thing and assume something about me and that's it, huh?” I ask, my brows knit together in anger.

“Just takin' a page outta Nic's book. Judge first, ask questions later.”

I grind my teeth at his ruthlessness. Narrowing my eyes while he stares at me from the chair, he takes another pull, never breaking the contact.

*He's hurting.*

I can feel it in the icy way he stares at me.

But this is wrong.

“You fucked her? Seriously?” I ask, my voice breaking at the last word, even though I'm trying to keep it together.

“What if I did? Would that matter?” He cocks his head. “It's not like I'm not single. It's not like you've chosen me, or ever plan to.”

“That's not true at all.” A tear slips from my eye and I quickly wipe it away. “It's not like that.”

He catches on to the fact that I'm crying and his face softens, his shoulders sagging a bit. He has to know that I care, that this hurts me, just as I know Patrick affects him.



He takes a deep breath as we sit in the silence together. The small, hanging clock ticks on the wall, killing me slowly with each second that passes.

“I didn’t fuck her. I didn’t touch her at all, or any other girl, for that matter. Kid was in here with someone. I’m just really fucked up.” He scoffs, pointing at himself, messing up his hair before slouching back into the chair.

“You’re better than this, Hawke. I won’t stay to watch you self-destruct with your liquor and your drugs. I just can’t see this,” I comment, turning to leave. I just can’t support him destroying himself like this, it’s breaking my heart.

I’m hoping he’ll come after me, praying he’ll stop me from leaving, give me some clarity to the fact that he actually wants me here, and that he doesn’t want to go down this hole by himself, but is willing to climb out with me.

“Cole, wait,” he says, stumbling to get up from the chair.

I pause near the door, my hand gripping my forehead, my keys in my hand. It’s all so heavy.

Sometimes I wonder if I’m even worth the pain, and that maybe he’d be better off without me and my bullshit tipping him over the edge, if the stress in dealing with me is something he really needs right now. He has some deep underlying problems, a darkness he can’t seem to find his way through, and it’s clear by this bender that my messed up situation isn’t helping that.

“Cole.” He meets me at the door, running a hand through his hair, not knowing what to say or do. “I wasn’t—” He pauses, raking both hands down his face before taking another step closer. “I wasn’t trying to self-destruct.” His tone softens as he swallows and places his forearm on the door behind me, closing it, blocking me with his tall frame.

I release a sigh at his closeness, feeling everything all over again just by his form above me alone. I want to reach out and touch him, to soothe his every ache, to mend the broken pieces that make him.

He moves slowly, bringing a shaking hand up to my face where he gently traces my cheekbone, trailing down to my jaw, his eyes never leaving my lips. There’s a pain in his gaze, a longing for something so close but just out of reach.

“I was trying to feel numb again,” he speaks softly, before removing the shaking hand from my chin, curling it into a fist, and dropping it by his side.

The sentence alone breaks me. He was trying to feel numb again. After years of feeling nothing but numb, I come into his life to make him feel. Feel things he isn’t used to feeling, feel things that break down his wall of strength, only to leave him unsure of what to do with that. He’s caught. Just as I am. Resorting back to old habits just to numb the emotions he wasn’t anticipating.

I reach up, brushing some of his hair back and out of his face. The face that looks like it’s been put through the wringer.

He looks pale, the dark circles under his eyes, never more present.

“I don’t want you numb,” I whisper, looking between both eyes. “Ever again.”

He closes his eyes tightly, resting his head against the door behind me, his large hand snaking its way up and around the side of my neck. His nostrils flare as he breathes heavily through his nose.

“I can’t stand the sight of him touching you.” He hits his other fist against the door above me while pinning me to it with his other hand around my neck, his forehead moving to mine. “It drives me mad.”

“I know,” I say, placing my hands softly and slowly on his chest in an attempt to calm him. “I know, baby, that wasn’t what it looked like. Trust me.”

He scoffs.

I wrap my arms around his solid frame, pulling his warm skin up against mine, looking at him with a plea in my eyes, a plea that tells him my truth.

“It’s not, Cam. I’m going to end things. I am.”

“As much as I want that, I just can’t see it happening.” He swallows, shaking his forehead against mine, our lips both parted, inches apart.

“I’m trying to be honest with you,” I declare. “Throughout this.”

The sentence causes him to wrinkle his forehead in confusion, then a chuckle, before pulling away from me. He runs his hands through his hair, extending his fit torso before me, releasing a heavy sigh.

“Honest?! You want to be honest with me, but don’t even know why I went to jail. There’s no honesty here. If you knew, you would have no need to be honest with me. You’d be gone. And that’s honest.”

I can’t tell if it’s the drugs or the alcohol making him act out like this. I’m almost wondering if he’s about to spill everything to me. I’m secretly hoping he does.

I approach him again, my hands extending, searching for his waist, pulling him back into me, missing the feeling of his warmth against me.

“Your past doesn’t define you, Hawke. I’ve told you this. You can’t let it hold you back.”

He cocks a brow at me humorously before scoffing and looking down at the floor, flexing his jaw. “It’s holding me back, Cole. *Every fucking day.*”

The definitive tone he uses clues me into the fact that he’s seemingly tied down, backed into a corner, unable to defend himself. I don’t even know how to comfort him, but I know I want to. I know that he’s more than whatever is holding him hostage. He deserves better; he deserves so much.

“There’s got to be a way. A way for us to figure this out. Together,” I beg, moving in towards him again. “Don’t lose

me in the madness.”

I reiterate the words he spoke to me before Patrick’s return, hoping they reach somewhere deep inside. A place that wakes him up to the reality before him. The reality that I need him like he needs me. His eyes find mine and he winces before roughly placing his mouth on mine.

I kiss him with everything I have, proving my need for him, hoping he feels it with every stroke of my tongue against his. Slowly, I wrap my hands around his neck and jaw before he grabs onto both of my wrists, pulling back from the kiss, taking them off him. He holds them between us cautiously, panting through parted lips.

“You know, I feel like I’ve found part of myself inside of you.” He begins, moving his hands from my wrists to my hands, holding them before placing them on his chest, the beat of his heart pounding through me, feeling like we are one again.

“I’m just staring right at it. It’s right here in front of me, in every breath of your lungs, every beat of your heart, every blink of your gorgeous eyes.” He looks softly from my eyes, to my nose, to my lips, and back again.

His soft expression suddenly turns hard and cold. He drags my hands down away from his body, letting them fall to my sides again. “But I just can’t afford to lose anymore of myself.”

I close my eyes tightly at the pain he’s admitting, feeling it deeply in my core. He doesn’t want to feel anymore. It isn’t

worth it to him when whatever he knows about himself becomes known to me. He's so sure I won't stick around.

We're both putting part of ourselves out on a limb. We're tiptoeing our way, but both unsure of taking that last step. We know we'll fall, but will we fall together? Will someone hold on at the last minute, watching the other come to their end?

I swallow down tears, my mouth opening to try to inhale some form of oxygen to keep me standing. It all hurts so much.

"I'm no good for you, Cole." He speaks coldly, his eyes dark and void of any emotion.

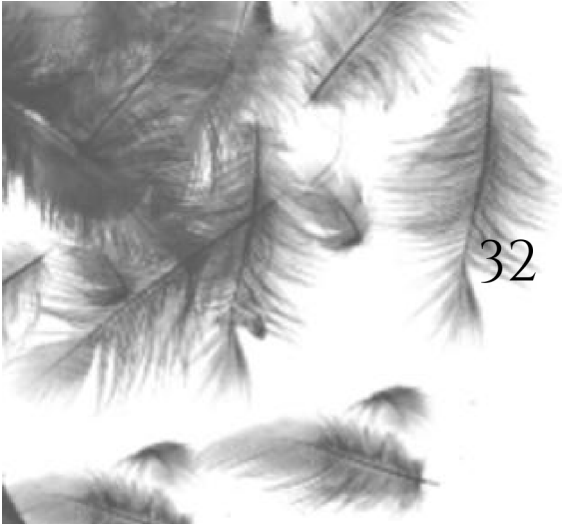
"No," I choke out with tears in my eyes, "You are. You're good. You're good for me."

I reach up, grabbing for his face, running my thumbs against his bottom lip. I can't stand that I feel like I'm losing him to himself, losing him to this nightmare of tragedy he's endured before me. I want him to know I don't care. I want him to know I'm here, and feeling as if I couldn't let him go, even if I tried.

"I'm a convicted murderer."

The sentence makes me pause; the words, sending a chill through me, deep into the depths of my bones. He drops the words out of his lips like they're nothing. My heart feels as if a sharp object has just speared through me. I'm having trouble taking in air.

His eyes stare into mine, emitting nothing but truth. Nothing but cold, hard truth.







“It’s not true,” I say, shaking my head in disbelief.

“It’s true. Look it up. It’s everywhere,” he states with a shrug.

There’s no possible way this empathetic, caring, emotional individual would have done something like this in cold blood. I just don’t believe it. I can’t imagine that it’s even close to being possible.

“I don’t believe it. You couldn’t...there’s no way,” I reply breathlessly. “It can’t be that simple. There’s more to this story.”

“Does it matter? On paper, this is who I am now. I can’t change it, Cole. I’m a fucking murderer.” he admits as he goes and sits on the edge of the chaise lounge again, dropping his head in his hands.

I stare aimlessly, taking this all in while shaking my head in disbelief. He’s been waiting for me to find out, assuming this would be the end-all, the reason I leave this fling of ours and

never look back. I'm pure to him. Too pure to handle the heaviness of what this entails.

"Hawke, you aren't what a document says you are—"

"Cole, it doesn't matter anymore! You can try to say it's not who I am, but you're wrong! There's no going back! Someone is dead because of it!" he yells, startling me.

So much of what he's been through has been internalized. How did this happen? Who did he kill and why? Who has he been able to talk to about this? Who could he confide in? How did he handle going to prison at such a young age by himself? Locked up with bad people, really bad people. Not the kind of people who help nurture you into the man you want to be.

I take a deep breath while he gets up, pacing the room, attempting to cool himself off. My heart breaks for this man before me. I don't want to push him, especially while he's messed up on alcohol and God knows what else.

"I'm too fucked up for this shit right now." He shakes his head, sitting back down on the edge of the seat, his head dropping back down into his hands.

I walk closer, but when he speaks, it stops me in place.

"It's too much for you, Cole. You don't have to tell me. I know that it is."

The finality in the way he speaks breaks me. He has no idea what I'm willing to do to keep him in my life. The thought of him not being part of it is devastating. I've never felt the way I feel when I'm with him before, and I know in my heart I never

will again. His past doesn't define him, and none of this is enough to push me away.

I silently drop before him, my knees hitting the plush rug beneath the chair.

"You should go," he says softly. "Patrick will wonder where you are."

Kneeling before him, I gently grab his wrists, pulling them down away from his face, making him hold his head up and look at me questionably. His hair falls into his bloodshot eyes, the red lines making the greens and blues pop out in remarkable contrast.

Even like this, he's so beautiful to me. Beautifully broken, but fascinatingly striking nonetheless.

My eyes focus on his, staring through him. He tips his head slightly to the side as it hangs, the pain emanating from his eyes never more present. He's ready for me to leave, ready for the moment he's been getting numb for. He waits with the saddest, most definitive look about him, knowing this is it. This is the part where I leave.

I crawl up between his legs, holding his face between my hands, running my thumbs over the cheekbones that have never seemed so pronounced until this moment.

"Fuck Patrick," I reply.

His eyebrows twitch as he stares in disbelief.

"As much as maybe you hoped this would scare me away, it hasn't and it won't. I know who you are. I know your heart.

You're an amazing man, someone who's seen the worst in this world and still has the ability to fight your way out. And it's not too much for me, not at all. You're everything, Cam, and there isn't one person on this earth that could convince me otherwise."

He swallows, his head still in my hands, the roll of his throat and the increase in his breathing telling me so much. His mouth drops open as his eyes wince together tightly, before his forehead falls against mine again.

We breathe the same air between us, the seconds that tick by on the clock, now teasing us with their quickness.

"Let's get you out of here," I whisper, pulling back a bit, my eyes searching his with a hopeful expression.

His chest is rising and falling in nothing but pure relief from the response he never expected. He nods softly, his eyes suddenly appearing hopeful.

I tilt my head up, brushing my lips against his as he nods again, waiting for me to kiss him. I press my lips to his softly at first, then harder as I close my eyes, pressing myself into him.

"Where are we going to go?" he asks softly, pulling back from the kiss.

"Anywhere," I whisper against his lip ring.

He eyes my face, rubbing his thumb along my cheek.  
"Okay, let's go."

We leave the house with faces of confusion following us. Driving away from the cabin, Hawke instructs me to go somewhere he knows.

He leans back into the passenger seat, slouching lower into the chair as one hand hangs onto the side door, the other reaching back to the headrest peculiarly.

“Are you alright?” I eye him, watching as he adjusts his hips again.

He groans. “Yeah, just starting to really feel this shit.”

His head drops back as a blissful grin forms. He’s so attractive, even when this shouldn’t be an appealing time. Watching him enjoy the feelings of the drugs inside him actually makes me curious to try.

“What did you take before I got there?” I ask, suddenly concerned.

“Molly,” he says, rolling his head over to look at me.

*Ecstasy. Jesus.*

He shows me this old dirt road, a pathway that takes us to this small turnaround that must’ve been a lookout point in someone’s lifetime. There’s a bit of a clearing amongst the ragged brush, where you can see for miles between the trees by the moonlight alone.

“Cole, I need to touch you,” he demands as I put the car in park.

He's rubbing his hands up and down his jeans methodically, and running his tongue over his lips.

“Are you sure we shouldn't—”

“I need to feel you *everywhere*. Fuck, I feel so good.”

“Hawke, wait,” I say, taking off my seatbelt and turning to face him.

He looks at me with those dilated eyes, his full lips parted. My curiosity is completely piqued.

“What? What's wrong?” he asks, suddenly overly concerned.

My grin turns into a curious smile.

“You wanna try?” he asks, reading me like always, cocking a brow with a look of disbelief.

I shrug a little and continue smiling.

“No. No, hell no. I won't be the one to bring you into this.”

“Hawke, shut up. I'm a grown woman who's becoming myself. Let me be me.” I smirk confidently.

He stares at me for a while, unsure of what to do.

“I have another one on me. But you can't take the whole thing. Gotta start small.”

I bite my bottom lip. “Okay.”

He doesn't move, just eyes me curiously, clearly telling himself this is a bad idea.

“I said okay! I want to try, and I know I’ll be safe with you.”

His eyes hold an appreciation for the words spoken, but it’s the truth. I know he wouldn’t let me try anything that would hurt me. If anything, him being here while I experiment is the safest place to be. I know he’ll protect me while I allow myself to let go for once.

“It shouldn’t take long to kick in,” he says, finding the pill and breaking it in half for me. “Open your mouth.”

I stick out my tongue for him. He stares at me intently, then leans forward across the seat and licks it soft and slow with his instead.

I moan as the lick turns into a kiss.

“I’m sorry. Fuck.” He tightens his jaw, adjusting his jeans.

He gives me the pill as we listen to music together for a while, waiting for my high to hit. Our hands connect on the console as Hawke continuously runs our palms together, dragging his fingers down the length of my arm and back.

“You’re so soft. I just love your skin against mine.”

My heart beats faster as I begin to feel the pill take effect. I close my eyes and begin breathing through my mouth. I can feel his eyes on me now.

“Come here,” he says, holding his hand and backing the seat as far back as it can go, making room for me in his lap.

I climb over the console with his help, sitting on his lap, my back against his chest. I start to feel panicked at the rate of my heart until he begins soothing me.

“It’s okay, don’t fight it. Let the feeling take over. Sink into it.”

I mimic his breathing, the feeling of his chest expanding and contracting behind me, assisting in that. His hands slowly wrap around me, one running down my thigh, the other snaking its way up between my breasts, resting on the side of my neck where his thumb rubs in slow circles.

His mouth is next to my ear, breathing soft, warm breaths against me. His pillowy lips wrap around my earlobe, lightly sucking on it, making me release a breathy moan.

“Oh God, that feels so good,” I say, angling my neck to him.

He drags his teeth along my earlobe, then licks up the side of my neck with his tongue, leaving wet, open-mouth kisses along the length of it. The sensations are becoming like small bursts of fireworks exploding within me. Every lick, every touch, every moan reverberating through me feels explosive.

“Jesus, Cole, I want more. I need more.” He sighs, pressing his erection into my ass. “It’s so good.”

His hands find the button of my pants.

“Yes, Cam,” I breathe, as he opens them to make room for his hand.

Slipping his fingers beneath my underwear, he finds my sweet center, running his middle finger along my slit. My hips



lift, meeting his every stroke, aching to feel full. He plunges his fingers into me while holding me tightly to him with his hand firmly wrapped around my neck. My mouth drops open in pleasure and I moan while resting my head back against his chest.

“So soft,” he whispers, pulling me to him while pressing his hardened cock firmly between my ass. “So fucking soft.”

I fully give in to the sensations, losing all track of time, all inhibitions, everything. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else doing anything else with anyone. I'm right where I need to be and couldn't care less about the repercussions. Every caress of his hand feels like tiny orgasms shooting through me again and again, the warmth spreading across me, pulling me into utter bliss.

“Are you alright?” he asks, his fingers inside me, thumb softly circling my clit. “You feel okay?”

It's amazing he's still checking on me while clearly under the influence of this as well, but he's just so cautious with me and I love that.

I gently pull his hand free from my pants, sliding them down and off my legs before turning around to face him, my thighs resting on both sides of his as I straddle his lap. I place my hands on his shoulders as his hands find my upper thighs. He's looking up at me, his dark eyes filling with desire once he catches a glimpse of my dilated pupils.

“I feel amazing,” I declare, running my hands through his hair, loving the soft sensation against my fingertips. “You feel

amazing.”

I’m energized, empowered, filled with butterflies in the pit of my stomach. There’s an overall sense of euphoria spilling down each of my limbs, down into my fingers, down into my toes. I stare down at Hawke, feeling so connected to him in ways that are totally unknown to me, like the Universe has ultimately tied us together by every fiber of our beings.

He just stares at me in awe, constantly running his hands up and down my exposed legs. I have the urge to rub my lips on him, so I do. I run my mouth up his neck as he looks at the ceiling, exposing his throat to me. Licking the length of his Adam’s apple, I trail my tongue over to his ear where I suck on his earlobe like he did to me. He thrusts his hips up, screwing his eyes closed tightly while groaning loudly, the sound sending electrical impulses shooting through me.

“Oh fuck...”

I sit up higher on his lap, finding his face and looking down upon him, ready to devour him. He opens his eyes, his brows raising, awaiting my next move.

“You just keep surprising me.” He stares up at me, his mouth dropping open slightly as I roll my hips to meet his.

I smile devilishly at him, enjoying the flames of our fires surrounding us.

“You’re the purest, dirtiest little thing.” He grins, his eyes narrowing in on me. “A saint with the lips of a sinner. A woman who owns her demons.”

“Let me own you,” I whisper, my lips inches from his.

I stick my tongue out for him, waiting. He quickly licks my tongue, then savagely attacks my mouth with his own before pulling away and finding my eyes again.

“Trust me, baby, you do.”





*I'm on fire.*

The inside of my body burns with desire, demanding this man beneath me in order to survive. I can't withhold any longer, and by the look of it, neither can he.

“Cam.” A moan escapes me as I continue grinding my hips into him.

His hands slowly find their way up my thighs and around to my ass, clawing at my skin between his fingers firmly, before softly running up to the top of my hips.

“I've never felt anything so smooth.” He smiles with that lazy, blissful grin and it takes everything in me to not lick his entire face like a sex-crazed maniac.

I find the edge of his shirt, pulling it up. He sits up a bit so I can remove it, his hair becoming disheveled in the process and falling into his eyes again, making us both laugh. I quickly take my top off, then draw my hands to my back to remove my bra.

There are no inhibitions, only the need to feel his warm skin against mine. I feel like I'm floating on a cloud of velvet and pillows, the need to immerse myself in these sensations never more present. His face turns serious, his eyes darting back and forth between my body and my eyes as he watches me undress.

He swallows, licking his lips again as his mouth drops open at the sight of me topless in only my underwear before him. We touch each other, running our hands over our bodies, living for the feelings, the deep emotions that come with it. I roll my eyes into the back of my head as he cups my breasts in his large, needy hands.

"You're beautiful," he says, placing kisses all along my chest and neck. "You're unbelievable, and you're mine." A moan escapes me at his need to claim me as my head hangs back, basking in pleasure.

"I need you." Dropping my head down to face him, the desperation is evident in my pleading tone. "I want you inside me. I need to feel you everywhere."

We're both falling into our own euphoria at each other's touch. Losing ourselves to the gratifying excitement of these chemicals firing away inside of us.

"It's going to feel better than anything you've ever felt," he whispers, looking into my wild eyes, pulling me by the back of my neck to his mouth.

Our tongues mesh together, sliding back and forth forcefully in a devilish tease as our chests seal, rubbing against each

other. I've never felt so awakened and present. I'm totally living in the moment with him, finally enjoying my downfall, the release of inhibitions, the becoming of me.

“Have you done this before?” I ask, not even caring about the answer at the moment.

“Never.” His eyes are wide with wonder and excitement. “I just already know.”

He reaches around my thighs as I scoot up further onto his chest so he can undo his pants, pushing them down his thighs just enough to do what we need to do. He pulls himself free of his boxers with a slight grunt, and I slide my underwear to the side, angling myself for him. His chest is rising and falling with a quickened speed, his eyes locked in on mine, as he brushes himself against me before pressing the swollen head of his cock into me.

I hold on to his soft, warm chest, rubbing my thumbs over his nipples, causing him to hiss through his teeth as I sink down onto him. Every inch that I take in feeling like an explosion of endorphins and adrenaline within me.

“Fuck, I can't—” He drops his head back against the seat, closing his eyes, as his hands fall to the side. “I can't take it.”

“Oh God, Cam.” I moan breathlessly as I glide up and down his hard, slick shaft. “This is amazing.”

Once I reach the base of him, feeling him deeper than ever before, I adjust to the thickness and begin moving faster. The warmth and immeasurable sensation of us connected has me

crying out as I find my pace. His facial expressions and the sounds escaping his throat are the sexiest thing I've ever seen and I will do anything to keep him looking like he's immersed in the best experience of his life.

"You're doing amazing," he praises. "Open your mouth for me."

I part my lips, sticking my tongue out slightly as he places the two fingers that were just inside of me onto his tongue. He quickly sucks them, then places them in my mouth.

"Taste yourself. You're so fucking sweet."

I suck on his fingers as I continue swallowing his thick cock in my walls, sending shock waves of pleasure through him. He can barely keep his eyes from rolling into the back of his head at the sensation of being inside me in two different ways.

He grabs for the back of my neck, pulling my forehead down against his as he continues thrusting his hips up into me, filling me with his hard, velvety cock. "Fuck, you make me feel so alive."

I love this feeling of enjoying something so new, so erotic, and so wild with him. I love that I make him feel those same things, that together, we're in the depths of our own darkest desires, spiraling completely out of control.

"You've awakened me," I reply. Running my tongue over his lip ring, I find my way into his mouth, kissing him with my entire body before pulling back to look at him again. "I see



everything now, so clearly. Like I've been asleep my whole life until you."

We're totally rolling on our high together, exploring these newfound sensations as we continue connecting in the most exhilarating way. I can't get enough of him. My heart, my soul, everything aches to be the one for this man. I've given in now. I've let go entirely. I'm here and I've made my decision. I've fallen into the only thing I've tried to deny myself. But I won't deny myself this anymore. As much as it doesn't make sense to me, I know somewhere deep in my heart it's right. We are right.

"Cole," he whispers, trying to get my attention.

I've sealed my eyes shut as the sensations electrifying throughout me become too much to bear while I ride him, my sex rippling with pleasure at every roll of my hips to meet his.

"Baby," he comments again, wanting to say something.

I blink my eyes open to find him watching me.

"Tell me you love me," he demands, his emotional eyes staring through me. "It's okay if you don't...you don't have to mean it. I just want to hear you say it."

My eyebrows draw together in confusion. I feel the pain, the agony, the heartbreak burning through his soul. As much as I'd like to believe it's simply the Molly talking, I get the sense that it only released his insecurities, his needs. He's desperate to be cared for, so much so that even me lying to him would satisfy this primal need to be loved.

“How could you ask me that?” I question, feeling horrible for what he’s going through.

He places his hands above my hips where his fingers claw into me, lifting me up and driving himself deep again with a guttural groan in his throat.

“Just tell me, tell me you love me,” he says again, pleading with me.

“I won’t lie to you, Cameron.” I sink down onto him again, causing his eyes to squint as his lips part open.

“I just want to know what it’s like, just once.” He pulls me down to him, kissing me, his tongue running the length of mine, while his legs bend at the knee, giving more leverage to push up into me.

There’s no coming back from this.

“I love you,” I whisper the words after I pull away from his kiss, looking down at his chest.

He thrusts into me harder, making me gasp with a quick burst of pleasure, then tips my chin up to face him.

“Look at me,” he says breathlessly, but with urgency. “Cole, look at me when you say it.”

We’re colliding together with such a force now that my eyes are watering. I moan and cry out as he continues to drive into me, pulling me down onto his lap again and again, the bottom of my thighs slapping against the top of his. With his hand around the back of my neck, he pulls me down onto him, holding me tightly in place, planting himself deeply into my

walls while we stare into each other, waiting for the phrase he so desperately seeks.

“I love you,” I say the words, finding his soul beneath the surface of his ocean-like eyes, and it changes me. “I love you, Cameron.”

I can't describe the feeling. It's terrifying, it's amazing, it's real, and it's so completely raw. I feel stripped of everything that I am because my truth is now exposed, even to myself. I love him, and I can't explain it. It doesn't make sense to me, but I guess it's not supposed to.

He looks at me with the saddest, most appreciative expression. I don't know the last time he's ever heard someone say they loved him like this. Maybe never. He trusts me enough to let me in, to show me how much something like this means to him, how everything before this didn't matter, because now he's seen love. He's seen the truth in my eyes and now he's drowning in it.

He looks in amazement at my lips as if he could see the words on my truth-telling tongue. He gazes into my eyes, stilling for a moment to catch his breath.

“Cole, I love you.”

The words fall from his lips so easily, almost as if they weren't intentional, but they are.

I feel myself begin to spasm around him and I know it's only a matter of seconds before I fall. He sucks my bottom lip, rotating his hips, stirring himself inside me, making me feel so

full in every way. I cry out, bracing myself with both hands on the sides of his neck, our foreheads together as the electrifying feeling stems through my entire body.

“Oh, God, I feel it, it’s happening,” I moan.

“Yeah?” he breathes.

“Yeah, I’m there,” I cry out.

“Oh, yeah. Let go around me.” He groans, driving harder into me as I reach my orgasm. “Come for me, baby. Fall into it.”

I start to shake, embracing the explosive orgasm that literally takes over my body as I feel him shudder beneath me. Finding my lips and keeping them connected, he loses himself in me with a breathy groan that leaves his throat as the muscles in his abdomen contract. His mouth opens as his eyes seal shut. I feel the warmth of him deep inside me. He continues the motions, the slippery wetness intensifying between us knowing that no condom was used.

“Cameron,” I whisper breathlessly, holding his face between my palms, the numbing sensation taking over.

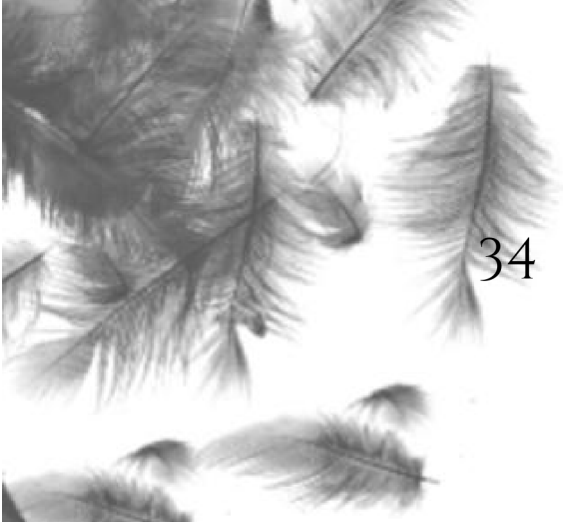
He drops his head back against the seat, gazing at me with half-lidded eyes, his chest billowing. We’re both basking in the aftermath of our pleasure.

“I told you I wouldn’t lie to you,” I whisper to him.

“I love you too, Cole,” he answers with a lazy half-grin, his palm against my cheek, thumb brushing along my cheekbone.

“I do. It doesn’t even make sense to me how we got here, but I do.”

We are both in so deep, too deep. The depth we’ve succumbed to will drown us in darkness, both of us willing.





**H**e holds me in his arms as the sun rises beyond the rolling hills of fog. We just sit together, hands holding one another, our fingers softly sliding apart, then back together as we stare into eyes that reflect us.

Tonight was one of the most amazing nights of my life. I've never known a person who can pull so many emotions out of me. Someone who can make me feel awakened to the chance at a new life. A different life. One filled with love and openness, one filled with acceptance and hope.

His hands and eyes are doing that thing again. It feels like he's studying me, memorizing this moment. Cataloging it into his brain for the day he won't have it in front of him. I can't stand it.

"I love you," I whisper, running my hand through his hair, playing with it between my fingers.

His eyebrows draw together as his forehead wrinkles. A pained expression that shows me everything he's feeling.

“I’ve never said it to anyone before,” he begins. “Never felt this. I’ve never heard it fall from someone’s lips when they were looking at me like you are now.” He swallows, his throat bobbing while looking back and forth between my eyes.

“I love you. I love you, I love you.” I repeat it again and again, needing to fill him up with all the times he’s never heard it.

He smiles, biting the corner of his lip before placing them softly against mine for a sweet, sensual kiss.

“Is this real? God, I feel like I’m dreaming,” he whispers, running his fingers softly along my cheekbone, down to my jaw and lips.

“I know the feeling,” I reply, warming with the familiar tightness in my chest.

“How do we climb back down from our cloud?” he asks, looking around at the fog surrounding us in the hills.

We are in our own little world up here, hidden in the trees, looking down at the dark reality that lies beneath us, just waiting to wreak havoc on what we’ve so recently found.

“We do it together,” I say, grabbing his hand in mine.  
“Together.”

He looks nervous, anxious, unsure, knowing it won’t be easy.

I’ve been gone all night with him. I don’t even know if Patrick knows I’m not home. My phone is empty, without



messages, without calls. He could very well have been sleeping while all of this occurred.

I make the trip back home with Hawke riding next to me, his hand in mine. We pull into the driveway, seeing Patrick's car. Taking in a shaky breath as I exit the vehicle, I walk into the quiet house with him on my heels. I don't think Patrick's even awake yet. I didn't plan how I would explain us walking in together, but truthfully, I kind of hoped he just sees us so we could get this all over with. How horrible is that?

But he isn't up yet. Hawke heads to crash in his room for a while, lingering by his door before he does, waiting for a kiss. My heart flutters nervously as I give him a quick kiss. He smirks at me adoringly, not wanting to let go of my hand as I slowly pull away.

I immediately get into the shower, reluctantly washing away the memories of the night. If I could bask in the smell of Hawke all day, I would.

After exiting the shower, I walk out into the bedroom Patrick and I share, gasping as I see him sitting at the edge of the bed, his elbows on his knees, face in his hands.

*He knows.*

"Oh, my God, I didn't know you were awake," I comment, my heart racing in fear.

He sits there for a moment, looking at the floor, then drops his hands, looking up at me with a straight face that slowly slides into a grin.

I'm terrified, feeling the iciness of his look travel up my spine, and I'm sure it shows.

"About ready to head out?" he asks with an upbeat voice.

"Um, huh?"

"The family brunch. Why don't you finish getting ready and I'll get some coffee going."

Does he know I came in late this morning? Did he hear me with Hawke? Did he see us? Did someone else see us? I can't gauge what's happening right now.

"Oh, yeah...okay. Perfect," I stutter out, trying to keep my cool whilst figuring this all out.

After drying and curling my hair and getting into a comfortable sundress, I try to apply my light makeup with shaking hands, contemplating how I'm going to go about this. I don't have any sort of plan, no speech prepared, nothing.

It's all happening so fast.

I walk out into the kitchen, nervously biting my bottom lip as I turn the corner, surprised to see both Hawke and Patrick sitting at the kitchen table together.

Patrick sees me first, and his face lights up with a smile at my appearance.

*He must not know.*

Hawke sees Patrick's face change and turns his head, leaning back from his seat to look at me. Patrick gets up, walking closer for a hug, but all I see are Hawke's narrowed

eyes taking me in from head to toe. He sits up in his seat, seemingly uncomfortable, as Patrick's hands wander from my lower back to the bottom of my ass, cupping where the skin meets my thigh.

I swallow nervously, watching Hawke's fist curl into itself, before Patrick pulls back and I plaster on my fake smile.

"I've got the ingredients for the potatoes in the car. Figured you could just pop them in over there while everything else is cooking," he mentions, grabbing my purse for me that's hanging on the chair where Hawke's sitting.

He leans forward so Patrick can retrieve it as we exchange an awkward glance. I'm showing him the pain in my eyes for this situation. I have to get out of this.

"Pat, I'm feeling a little off. Maybe I can make the potatoes and just head home for the afternoon? I think I'm coming down with something." I touch the back of my hand to my forehead, wincing my eyes.

"Nice try, Nic. You're not getting outta this one that easy." He rolls his eyes, chuckling as Hawke glares at the back of his head, the tension in his face more than evident.

I have unfortunately used this excuse before to not hang out with his family. I'm screwed.

"Your throat hurt? Kinda sore? Mine's been a little sore, kinda dry too." Hawke grabs his neck, clearing his throat. "Must be something going around."

He's trying to help me. *Ugh, I love him.*

“Kinda, yeah...” I nod, agreeing.

“Nic, please.” Patrick scoffs. “We don’t have to stay long, I promise.”

He grabs my hands in his, giving me a sweet smile.

“I just need to wash up real quick, then we can head out. Gimme ten minutes.”

He gives me a quick peck on the cheek while Hawke glares from his seat at the table. Finally hearing the shower start up in the bathroom, I breathe a sigh of relief.

I walk over to the counter where the coffee pot is, bending forward with my forehead against the cool surface as the coffee continues to drip next to me.

I hear Hawke approach me from behind.

“You alright?” he asks quietly.

I sigh against the surface, then straighten, turning towards him. “Yeah, I’ll be fine. This is just...just, I don’t know. I’m sorry.”

He looks down at me through the dark locks hanging in front of his eyes, moving in closer to wrap his arms around my waist. His hips pin me in place against the counter. I know we’re pushing it, pushing our luck by doing this with Patrick literally thirty feet away, but it’s uncontrollable at this point.

“I had to come back out of the room and make sure you were alright. I knew he wasn’t about to let you off the hook with this family brunch shit,” he comments, his hands

traveling from my waist to my hips, over the curve of my ass to the same place Patrick's hands just were. "Plus, I couldn't wonder what his hands were doing to you. I had to know for sure."

"Cam." I wince slightly, hating that it hurts him so much, when in reality, Patrick's touch means nothing to me anymore. Not compared to his.

"Tell me you're mine," he whispers, leaning in closer, running his lips against mine.

I suck in a breath at his ability to make my stomach feel like I'm dropping twenty stories with the slip of a few words.

"I'm yours," I breathe with confidence.

The door to the bathroom opens as we immediately pull away from each other, Hawke grabbing for a cup out of the cupboard, me opening the fridge and bending over, trying to breathe while anxiety cripples me in half.

I hear the door to our room close so I know he's in there changing. I stand up, turning to look at Hawke with a worried face, showing my stress. He shakes his head, running a hand through his hair, looking over at me.

"It's fine, he didn't see," he says under his breath, practically mouthing the words.

I have to stop this. I have to clear the air between Patrick and I. I need to be honest with him, but how honest, I haven't yet decided. He can't know it's Hawke. I can't risk him getting

kicked out on his ass while he's trying to pick himself back up. It's a strange situation I'm in. We're all in.

“Ready, babe?” Patrick asks, walking towards me in his mint green zip-up sweater with his khaki slacks on, his hair parted on the side and slicked back.

It's peculiar how even for family, they all feel the need to present themselves by getting dressed up. I look down at my dress quickly, wondering why I've always felt the need to impress these people. With Hawke, I could wear a black plastic garbage bag and he'd make me feel like the most exceptional person in the room.

Your insides don't matter to these people. It's the outside that counts; the appearances.

Hawke leans back against the counter with his cup of coffee in hand, eyeing us like, well...like a hawk.

“Enjoy the place to yourself for a few hours. Call up your wild thing, show her a good time.” Patrick wiggles his eyebrows at him.

I wish I could slap the scowl off Hawke's face, but he quickly changes his expression himself. A sexy grin pulls at his lips before he licks them.

“She showed me a good time. Last night.” He runs his hand along the back of his neck, tilting his head to the side.

Patrick laughs. “Man, I don't know how you do it. So many women.”

I'm so uncomfortable standing here for this conversation. I don't want to look Hawke in the eye from behind Patrick, but I can't help it. My eyes slowly drift upward and lock onto his.

"Nah, there's really only one," he says, looking directly at me.

I swallow, looking down at the floor as I take in some oxygen to survive.

"No shit, eh? Finally locking it down?" Patrick asks, pausing with his hand on his hip, astonished.

"Crazy, right? She's fucking incredible, though. Wild as fuck, drives me crazy," he continues, a twinkle in his playful eyes. "I'm in love with her. It's insane."

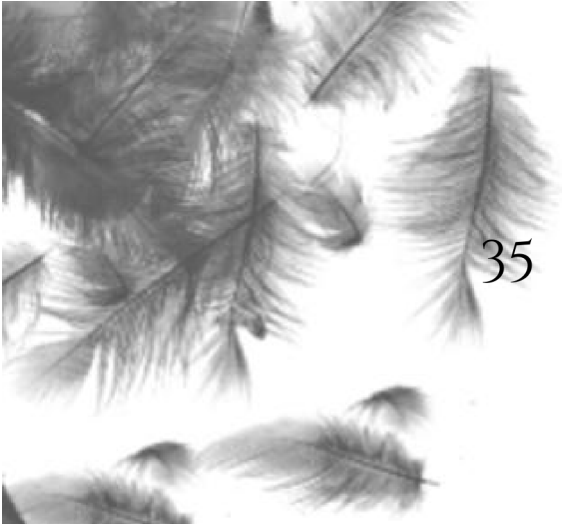
"Incredible." Patrick sighs. "Well, you should bring her by sometime. We could all have dinner one night," he offers as my mouth drops open behind him.

"I just might," Hawke responds with a knowing grin.

"Alright, well, we're heading out." Patrick gives him a little wave, then heads out of the door.

I grab the knob, going to close it, while taking one last look at Hawke against the counter. I lick my lips, trying not to smile at his words. He leans his head back confidently, looking at me through his sexy eyelashes while playing with his lip ring.

Butterflies everywhere with that look. I'm so in over my head with this guy. In over my head with this whole situation.







## BRAZEN BRUNCH

**T**his couldn't be any more awkward.

We get to the family brunch at his parent's house. It's an enormous house built on an old horse ranch with over fifty acres of land, a private pond that boasts nothing but exuberant wealth over the rest of the civilians living in this small town. There are two large iron gates that open for us upon arrival as we drive up the winding driveway to the massive renovated farmhouse that awaits.

His father is standing at the top of the stairs on the large wraparound porch, waiting to greet us. Patrick and I exit the vehicle with the bag of groceries in hand. It's funny how with all this money and help, they still like to act like a potluck somehow grounds them and makes them more normal. It's truly odd.

Patrick's father, Dean, welcomes us with hugs at the door, quickly throwing an arm around his son and showing me to the kitchen with the rest of the women. This is how it is. The guys go off and have their cigars and whiskey and the women find the kitchen.

I greet some of the ladies with a polite smile, saying hello as I place the ingredients for the potatoes down on the kitchen island to prepare. They continue their discussion about a woman named Joyce being upset over not getting the lead vocal in the church choir when Patrick's mother, Linda, walks in. She smiles her charmingly bright smile, her perfectly styled hair thrown into a gorgeous twist with a few strands hanging out, with her matching beige ensemble fitting her petite frame effortlessly. Approaching me, she gives me a big hug, immediately asking about work and what's going on in my life.

As much as I appreciate her sudden and apparent interest in my life, I know better than to assume she's not judging me for my life choices. Telling her I work at a hole-in-the-wall bar for fun doesn't exactly fly with their family.

The other women talk about the devotional club they attend every Wednesday night, and Linda informs me all about it with enthusiasm before telling me I should definitely join them next week.

I keep a tight-lipped smile, nodding, and agreeing, when I know in my heart I'll never make a devotional class. I'd rather burn in the depths of realistic hell than fake a life with plastics.

I truly can't believe I spent so much of my life wishing Patrick's family would accept me. All I ever wanted was for him to propose to me so we could make things official and finally feel like I belonged. But I never belonged here. I'd

never fit in with the likes of them because I'm not like them at all.

“Nicole, dear, won't you grab the homemade coleslaw and bring it out back with me? I'm setting the table now,” Linda says, taking two trays of freshly baked buns out towards the door.

I ignore the fact that she calls me Nicole and bring the oversized crystallized glass bowl out to the table.

The elongated, chippy, white-painted wooden table, the farmer's market flowers in vases along the center, the table runner made with burlap and lace—every bit of this setup belongs on a magazine cover. It doesn't even look real. If I hadn't made some of the food, I'd think those buns were made of cardboard.

Patrick smiles at me as I approach him and his brother talking nearby with some sort of mimosa drink in hand. I can't say I'm excited to see Sean at all. The prick was literally spying on my whereabouts while Patrick was out of town. I'm still heated about that.

“Babe, come here! You gotta hear this.” He ushers me over with a grin, pulling me to his side once I'm near. “Sean went to the city last night and actually got to meet Neil Lambright.”

“Who?”

“Neil Lambright! The author of *My One Chance At Faith*? You should know him; you're familiar with books and authors,” he declares, as if I should know him. “Well, anyway,

he was holding a reading of his new book last night and Sean got to talk to him and take pictures.”

“He’s an amazing guy,” Sean adds, as if he knows him personally now.

“Ah, that’s great.” I force a smile at Sean, then back at Patrick as they continue talking about this Neil guy who is *apparently* the new big deal in the Catholic community.

Pretty soon his mother is ushering everyone to the table to begin the brunch. I sit between Patrick and his father, his brother Sean directly across from me as his mother runs to sit between Sean and a few of the other women who are here with their husbands as well.

They start the meal with a prayer, then we begin eating with light conversation.

“The potatoes, babe—phenomenal,” Patrick declares with a mouthful. “Aren’t they amazing, Sean?”

“Haven’t tried them yet,” he replies, looking up at Patrick from his plate. “Nicole’s potatoes.” My eyes connect with his and a sly expression overtakes his face. “From what I’ve heard, *everyone* loves them.”

His eyes narrow at me slightly as he grins. I stare back, trying to interpret the double meaning behind his statement. He made it awkward as hell, insinuating something sexual. Is he being the disgusting pig that he is? Or does he know about me and Hawke?

“Oh honey, they’re fantastic,” his mother comments, interrupting my thoughts while trying them.

“So, how long have you two been together?” an older woman with short, curly hair across the table asks.

“Coming up on three years now,” Patrick answers, nudging into me lovingly.

“I see a big wedding in the future, Linda.” The lady grins at her. “I’m sure you’re excited.”

I feel like I’m being choked by an invisible hand. Breathing is difficult as I listen to them plan my future without me.

“Oh, we definitely are.”

The conversation quickly flips over to work as Dean and Patrick discuss the business dealings with their account in Colorado. By the way the conversation is going, I can tell his father is really pushing for him to take over the account and potentially grow the company statewide. Patrick discusses the city as his mother has a keen interest in property value in the Denver area. They’ve clearly had the discussion about us moving there, and I’ve not once been asked what I think.

“But what would you do with the house, then?” Sean asks his father.

“We’d probably just sell it. See if we could get any type of return on it, it’s not like it’s been really well kept.” Dean scoffs.

“Wait, are they talking about our place?” I whisper to Patrick.

He opens his mouth to say something, then twists his lips and doesn't.

"But don't you have an agreement? Isn't *he* supposed to get it?" Sean asks his father, leaning forward.

Dean sits up in his seat, clearing his throat while adjusting the collar on his button-up shirt. "That doesn't really concern you, Sean."

I sit there, listening intently as they discuss things I'm clearly unaware of. What agreement? And who is *he*? Hawke?

"I've heard things," he comments, tilting his head to the side, eyeing Patrick's father.

"Well, don't listen to gossip," Patrick adds in, not looking up from his plate.

"I can't believe you're about to give that junkie his house back. He doesn't deserve it. After what he did?!" Sean's voice becomes louder.

I clench my jaw at his words. My face flushes with heat from the anger that's building. I can't sit here and listen to him bad-mouth Hawke anymore.

"He's not a junkie." I roll my eyes, trying to breathe calmly before I snap.

"Sean, honey, let's not raise our voice at the table, please," Linda begs with a sweet smile and light chuckle, clearly uncomfortable with this happening around her guests.

“It’s really not your place to discuss,” Patrick speaks, looking from his father back to his older brother again.

“Whatever. How you two can just let him off is beyond me. How you can live under the same roof as a murderer is crazy in and of itself.” Sean scoffs, pushing back away from the table.

“A murderer?” A woman sitting on the other side of Linda gasps.

My gaze narrows in on Sean, sending nothing but knives and daggers in his direction.

Patrick seems anxious. Nervous in his demeanor. He’s continuously fidgeting with the silverware next to his plate as the conversation continues.

“That’s enough now,” Linda scolds, attempting to nip this conversation in the bud.

“It was the right thing to do,” Patrick says through gritted teeth, scowling at Sean, then exchanging an odd look towards his father again.

I’ve heard that statement before. The right thing to do. But the right thing to do by whom?

“He’s a drugged-out junkie who murdered his best friend! A kid who actually had a bright future ahead of him. He was messed up out of his mind and crashed his car. It literally doesn’t get any worse than that. There’s no right thing to do but leave that dumpster fire to burn!”

*Murdered his best friend? Ben? Vehicular Manslaughter?*  
My chest is rising and falling as my eyes dart around the table. Everyone is looking at Sean, shocked, except for Patrick and his father, who are looking down at the table.

“Like, who does that? His best friend? Killed in the seat next to him because he wanted to be doped up like the addict he is? He deserves to rot in hell,” he continues.

I stand abruptly from my seat, my chair falling behind me in the process. All eyes are on me now as my fists roll tightly into my hands, the nails about to break skin. I’m practically blowing smoke through my nose. I can’t take it anymore.

“I won’t sit here and let you talk about him like that.” I direct my anger at Sean, turning to scowl at Patrick for letting this go on.

Patrick’s head snaps up at me from his seat, cocking a brow at my statement.

“I’m just stating the facts, babe. He’s a washed-up loser who’s not only dangerous but reckless. He shouldn’t be given any handouts,” Sean comments, cooling down a bit at my outburst.

“This is ridiculous,” I announce to the entire table. “For all of you who preach about being Christian and Catholic, to then sit here at your fancy dinner in your fancy house, trolling on people whose lives aren’t as privileged as yours, judging people who may have made bad decisions or mistakes when they had no help or guidance, you’re truly the worst. It’s literally disgusting to me.”



I'm backing away from the table when Patrick grabs my wrist firmly.

"Sit down, Nicole," he grits through his teeth.

I rip my hand away from his painful grasp, rubbing it with my other hand, shaking my head at him in disapproval.

"I've had enough of this," I state, feeling overwhelmed.

His parents look at me in disappointment as if I was the root of the problem here, but I don't care anymore. This isn't it for me, these people, this place. This isn't a home. It's a display. A sickening display of wealth and status with no substance underneath.

I need to go find Hawke.

I stomp back towards the house, finding the keys to the car on the counter, willing to take Patrick's car and just leave him to figure it out. As soon as I get to the car, I start it up as Patrick runs towards the window, aggressively tapping on the glass. I stare forward, gripping the wheel with white knuckles before reluctantly rolling it down. I don't even look at him when he starts talking.

"What was that all about, Nic?!"

"I can't do this anymore Patrick," I say, my heart racing, the beats practically pounding out of the middle of my chest. "It's not right. None of this."

I'm not only referring to the situation, but to us.

He leans forward, his hands gripping the door frame above the car window. “You’re just stressed. I know you’re struggling with the idea of things changing, but I promise you it’s for the best.”

“Pat, you never even talked to me about moving. It’s like I don’t even have a say in our future.” I sigh, exasperated. “I mean, Jesus, did you not even notice where I was last night?!”

It’s all coming out; I’m losing control.

“I know you slept on the couch again. I just assumed you needed a little space to get your head right.”

“My head right?!” I scoff at his ludicrous assumption that I need to get it together.

He doesn’t even know I wasn’t home.

“Let’s just calm down, go back inside, apologize for the outburst, and continue on with lunch. This was supposed to be a special day.”

“Special? Bad-mouthing your roommate, who is supposed to be your friend, while discussing what to do with the house? Selling it out from under him? I’m confused, Patrick. What happened? There’s something you aren’t telling me. What happened between you two?”

He looks down at his feet before looking back up at the house with squinted eyes from the sun’s direct exposure on him. It’s as if even the sun is putting him on blast.

“Some things are better left in the past where they belong.”

I shake my head. It's not good enough.

"No. Not this," I reiterate. "Not this."

"Get back in the house," he says calmly.

"No." I move to put the car in drive, but stall when his fingers grip the edge of the car window.

"Get back in the house, Nic," he demands through his teeth, clearly annoyed.

"I'm leaving. Have Sean give you a ride."

"GET BACK IN THE HOUSE, NIC!" he screams, grabbing for my wrist on the steering wheel.

He opens the door, pulling my arm, attempting to remove me from the vehicle. I twist my wrist, removing his grasp from me as I stumble out of the seat onto the gravel driveway, then push up off my heels back against the car, a look of complete shock and hurt taking over my face.

"Patrick!" his father yells sternly from the house.

Immediately, tears fall from my eyes. He's never once screamed like this before; he's never once touched me so roughly that he marked my skin with his grasp. His father steps out from the door, walking down the porch towards us. He grabs Patrick's arm, slowly pulling him away from the vehicle, whispering something into his ear.

Patrick looks defeated and entirely upset, but nods his head, looking back at me with a sorrowful face as I get back into the vehicle. I watch as he walks towards the house where his

mother is waiting with her arms crossed by the door, the wrinkles on her forehead never more present compared to her previously poised face.

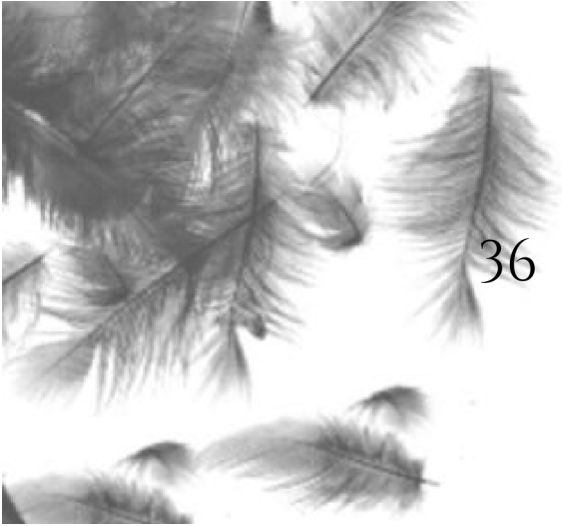
Dean leans down to the window of the car and a chill runs down my spine at his calm and cool demeanor. He's a powerful man for a reason.

"I think it's best if you go now." He nods, dismissing me, clearly upset at me for this disturbance.

"That's what I've been trying to do," I retort with a snippy tone.

I glare at him as he turns back towards Patrick, wrapping an arm around him and patting his shoulder as they walk back inside.

Their whispers continue like little leaves tumbling through the wind, leaving tiny piles of decaying life all around. It's more than obvious now that Patrick and Hawke's stories are somehow intertwined. There are some deep secrets hidden beneath the superficial surface of the most prestigious family in this little Podunk town. As for how deep, I'm bound and determined to find out.





I head for the house in search of him. I have to find him. I have to talk to him. I've picked up on the cues, the subtle hints floating around me almost begging to be grabbed, begging to be known. It's all become so clear to me.

I know Patrick will be at his parent's house for a while. There's no way he'll be leaving there anytime soon after that. He's not the type to chase me, nor will his parents allow that. I know it, which is why I ran.

*I need to talk to Hawke.*

I know the truth in my heart.

I burst through the door, my eyes scanning the kitchen, then the living room, to find both empty and void of him. My stomach gets a sickening feeling that maybe me leaving for brunch with Patrick was too much for him to bear. What if he needed to find a way to feel numb again?

I check his room and find that empty, too. I'm beginning to lose all hope until my senses come into play and I hear running water in the bathroom. I run for it, opening the door to

the dimly lit space, seeing his outline in the shower behind the semi-fogged glass. He's in the shower, wearing his clothes beneath the water, as if he stepped into there not even thinking.

His forearms are against the wall, holding his head in his hands as the water pours down the back of his neck. I don't even need to ask. I know what he's doing. He's drowning out the pain of not knowing what's happening, what I'm doing, or how it's all unfolding. More than likely assuming the worst. It's not as if his life has given him much opportunity to see things with a glass half full. He's awaiting heartbreak, like an injured animal awaits death. The thought, inevitable to him. He's letting the rain of the showerhead beat down on the back of his skull, drowning out the endless thoughts that plague his tortured mind.

I step into the shower alongside him, letting my hair and dress get drenched with the residual water pouring off his tall frame. The water is cold, almost as cold as the intentions of those who left him to ruin in his own dismay.

His head turns towards me as he sucks in a breath at the sight of me.

"Cole? What are you—?" He straightens, running a hand through his hair.

He takes a step towards me as I take one towards him. I feel his pain as I study his eyes, going over the words Sean said at the table and getting an overwhelming feeling of protectiveness and possessiveness over him.

“What happened? Are you alright?” He licks his lips, looking at me with his brows furrowed and his mouth dropping open.

I just stare at him. The pain in my heart overwhelming me. Everything I’ve ever said to him, how I treated him when he first came here, all of it coming full circle. Of course, he thought I was like Patrick and them, because I was. I was a judgmental, stuck-up bitch who treated him like shit without even trying to get to know the man beneath the tattoos and the bad boy appearance. The gentle, loving man beneath the surface.

“It’s over, isn’t it?” he breathes, his eyes emanating pure sadness and defeat. “You’re staying with him. You’ve chosen him.”

My mouth drops open at his statement. I’m in shock just hearing him assume that, after everything we’ve been through.

“Fuck, I knew it. I fucking knew it.” He runs his hands through his hair, bending over at the waist, grabbing the wall for support as breathing becomes difficult for him. “Shit, it hurts. It hurts so bad.”

I shake my head, grabbing for his wrist and pulling it to me.

“I can’t lose you, I can’t. Cole, you’re everything to me now.” His chest is heaving, his breaths becoming short.

“No, Cam. No. That’s not it at all,” I say, squinting, as the water droplets hit my face. “I left.”



His eyes turn hopeful as he stands back up again. “You left,” he repeats the words, looking at my hand on his wrist in disbelief.

It’s then that he notices the marks. He pulls my wrist up to his face to inspect them.

“What the fuck is this?” His deep voice turns into a growl.

“N-nothing—”

“He hurt you?! He fucking touched you?!”

“Cameron, stop, please! Just listen for a second,” I plead, interrupting what will surely turn into a beat down. “I know.”

His face contorts as the water continues to drip off his perfectly round lips. “You know? You know what?”

I shake my head, wincing my eyes, not wanting it to come to this. I know the wound I’m ripping open; I know the scar I’m cutting back into, the flesh of a past that never fully healed.

“You didn’t kill Ben.”

He immediately stiffens at the name, his face becoming stone-like.

“It wasn’t you, was it? You weren’t the one driving, were you?” I ask, reaching for his chest, the wet t-shirt clinging to his skin.

He starts slowly shaking his head back and forth, pulling away from me slightly to gauge the look in my eyes.

“Don’t fuck with me, Cole. Don’t you do this to me,” he warns, distress obvious in his tone.

He’s barricaded behind his wall. The one built over years of trauma, years of being on his own. Finally, there comes someone willing to peek through his holes, offering him a comforting hand to hold, one he’s not quite ready to accept. He’s like a wild animal, non-trusting of humans after a lifetime of knowing human nature. I can’t even blame him.

I offer my hands to him, holding them out as I lick my lips, the tears that have formed in my eyes blending into the water pouring down my face.

“It wasn’t you,” I whisper, knowing.

“Please, don’t.” His voice cracks as he remains frozen in place, gazing at my open hands, afraid.

“You didn’t kill him,” I repeat, needing him to hear me say it, hoping that if I do, maybe he’ll finally begin to believe it. “I know you didn’t.”

I place my hands on his face, and he winces at the contact. He’s backed into a corner, finally facing this.

I run my fingers through his hair, pushing it off his forehead before trailing them down his cheekbones and along his jaw. I hold his face in my hands, staring up at him as he gazes back at me. “It wasn’t your fault, Cameron.”

“It was my fault,” he reiterates, trying to convince me, but I know better.

“You were there, and maybe you convinced yourself you could’ve changed something, but you didn’t drive that car. You didn’t kill him. They did.” I’m crying as I speak the words, waiting for him to respond and accept what I now know to be the truth.

He’s tied into this, paid the price for something someone else did. I see it all now, see the way their lives are intertwined. The subtle glances between Patrick and his father at brunch spoke volumes.

His arms begin shaking by his side, then his whole body shakes. His eyes close tightly as he drops his head down.

It’s then that he falls apart.

He falls to the shower floor, raking his hands down his face as he sobs. He lets it all out. Years of emotional trauma, trapped beneath his tough facade. He’s finally breaking free and releasing everything that’s been needing to come out.

I fall with him, wrapping myself around his trembling shoulders, holding him together and whispering softly how it will all be okay, telling him I’m here for him.

We sit like that for what feels like forever—the silence between us; eerily serene. He clutches onto me, his fingers gripping into the skin of my shoulders as if his one chance at the life he wants is sitting here at the bottom of this shower with him, about to dissipate into thin air like the future he’d once hoped for. His tears fall, the pain of that event leaving him with each and every drop that runs free.

I pull back slightly, turning the water off before brushing the inky, wet strands of hair out of his eyes. I cup his face in my hands, gazing at him, needing his eyes to find mine for some comfort, wanting him to see the truth in them.

“I didn’t kill him,” he finally cries out. “I didn’t fucking do it!”

He throws the back of his fist against the wall of the shower, grunting in anger and frustration. He pulls at the roots of his hair, screaming, the agony in his voice breaking my heart.

“I know, Cam. I know.” I nod, crying as I listen to him finally admit this truth.

“He was my best friend.” He falls apart again at the memory, his reddened eyes holding his endless torment. “I held him in my arms as he bled out around me. He took his last breath, looking me in the eyes. I see it. That image, every night.”

“I’m sorry,” I cry out, wrapping my hands around his head and pulling him into me to hold his cheek against my chest, needing him near my heart. “I’m so sorry.”

There’s nothing I can say to take his pain away. I can only listen and be here for him, holding him against me as I rock him back and forth, comforting him, understanding the truth that’s been hiding deep within him for so long.

It’s taken so much for him to get to this place right here, in my arms, releasing it all.

After a moment, he takes a few shaky breaths, sighing it out before laying his head against the side of the shower. His face appears hollow, like reliving the memory had brought the ghosts to life again. His eyes are swollen from crying, the circles beneath them telling a story of tireless agony. We're both just sitting here at the bottom of the shower, drenched in our clothes, not caring about anything or anyone around us but each other.

"We have to go," I whisper, grabbing his hands in mine. "We have to get out of here."

I help lift his broken form from the shower floor before we change out of our wet clothes, Hawke hanging his from the shower as I quickly throw my dress into the wash.

Getting into some comfortable sweats, we quickly pack an overnight bag in silence, get into my car, and leave. I'm not even sure where we're going, but we're going there together. Tonight. There isn't a plan, but we can't stay here and risk Patrick coming back.

"If you head over to Brockton, there's a motel off highway nineteen," he informs me as I take a left towards the next town over.

We find the motel he was talking about, a cute little place that's tucked away in a secluded wooded area off the old highway road. A perfect hideaway spot.

Hawke pays in cash for the night as he's given the keys to the room. We walk in, dropping our bags on one of the queen beds, standing there for a moment to finally breathe.

It's been a long day and while there's so much more to uncover, I think we're both so used up and spent emotionally.

He sits on the edge of the bed, his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands, raking them through his locks before biting his bottom lip and looking up at me with heartbreaking pain. I stand there, a few feet from him, giving him some space to reflect, when he reaches out an arm for me.

"Cole," he says softly, some hesitation in his tone.

I walk towards where he's sitting and plant myself on the floor between his legs, looking up at eyes that are unsure.

"How did you find out?" he asks softly, his eyes pinching in the corners.

I shake my head, closing the space between us, cupping his jaw in my hands. "I didn't. I just knew."

He swallows, closing his eyes tightly, a wave of overwhelming gratefulness washing over him.

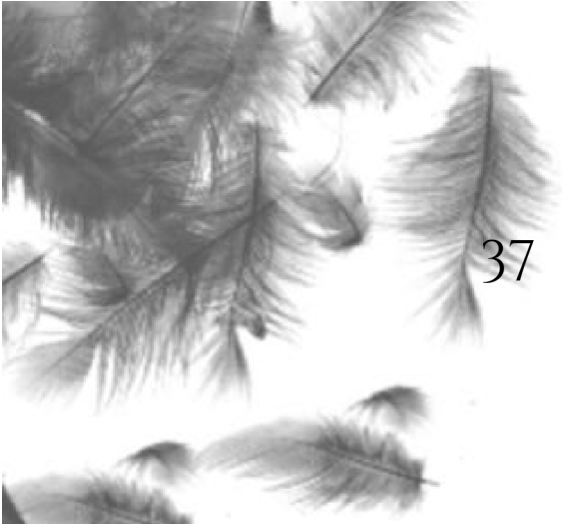
I grab for his hand, pressing his palm to my heart, then press mine to his. He sighs, his brows knitting together, holding back tears. He licks his lips before leaning down and sealing them to mine. I kiss his top lip, then his bottom, then the corner of his mouth, before he presses his mouth firmly on mine. The kiss quickly turns passionate, our mouths and tongues comforting, healing, needing.

All of this time, he's been looking through me, willing me to know his deepest, darkest secrets. Hoping by some small amount of faith that I'd figure it out. The pain and torture of

needing to keep it all in when I'm sure all he wished was to let it out, telling me everything.

There's more to unravel, more to dig out of the grave, but at the moment, I want to focus on healing him, showing him my love, and showering him with my support when he's spent years fighting this alone.

He's always needed me, just as I've needed him. I'm finally here, where I belong, and I'm never letting go.







**W**e're here now. Alone in this hotel room with the space to be wild in love, the freedom to be ourselves.

I lean up onto my knees between his thighs as our kiss continues, our lips and tongues moving together flawlessly, showcasing our desire, our uncontrolled need for one another.

“I love you, Cole,” he whispers between kisses. “I love you with everything I am.”

“I know.” I wince my eyes, feeling every bit of that love. “I know you do.”

Our emotions from the heavy topic have turned into passion. I want to erase his bad memories by providing new ones filled with my love for him and who he is. I want him to feel wanted like he never has before, want him to feel needed the way he is.

My hands travel from his knees, up his thighs, as he holds my face to his, kissing me softly with his pillowy lips.

I grab for the hem of his t-shirt and slip my hands beneath it, feeling his hard, warm abdomen against the tips of my

fingers. He drops his hands, reaching behind him, and takes his shirt off in one swift pull.

I litter his chest with soft, wet kisses, gently trailing my tongue down the deep cuts of his muscles that lead towards the tented area beneath his sweats.

“I want to kiss you,” I whisper against his skin.  
“Everywhere.”

His mouth drops open as he plants his hands behind him on the bed, watching me with submissive eyes.

I pull at his sweatpants, stretching the elastic out as I reach inside to find him fully erect inside his boxers. I flush at the discovery that our kiss excites him as much as it does me.

He hisses as I palm the base of his growing length.

“Ah, Cole,” he whispers in a hoarse tone.

I gaze up into his eye before angling his cock to my mouth. I softly kiss the tip, then drag my lips down to the base. His legs stretch out, his heels digging into the floor as I lick up the side of his velvety shaft, my tongue traveling over the veins shooting up along its length.

He falls back onto his elbows, groaning up at the ceiling as I begin slowly sucking, taking him into my mouth deeper and deeper until I take as much as possible, wetting every inch of him.

“Can I, ugh...” He stalls with a breathy groan. “Can I touch you?”

I nod, keeping him deep in my mouth.

My saliva wetting his shaft allows for my hands to effortlessly glide over the rest of him. He takes one of his hands and gently scoops up my hair, holding tightly as he bobs my head, showing me what he likes.

“Fuck, Cole, you’re so good at this.”

Hearing him give me praise makes me want to do more to drive him wild. I give him my throat as he pulls my hair tightly, holding me in place while he drives into me madly.

After a minute of letting him take control, I choke on this length and need to push back to stop him in order to catch my breath.

“Shit, baby, I’m sorry,” he says quickly, leaning forward to cup my face.

“No,” I shake my head, taking a breath before swallowing.  
“No, I like it.”

“You like it?” he asks with a cocked brow and a curious grin pulling at his lips.

“Yeah.” I look up at him, my lips wet and swollen from use.  
“It excites me.”

He stares at me for a minute, almost in disbelief.

“Show me,” he demands.

He helps me up off the floor, laying me down with my back now on the bed. Pulling my sweatpants down, I’m left in my thong and oversized t-shirt. Yeah, I didn’t exactly plan a super

sexy outfit, given the circumstances, but he doesn't seem to mind.

With my bottom on the edge of the bed, he kneels down where I was. His hand runs over my stomach, slowly dragging it up under my shirt and over my bra while his eyes stay focused on my face. His thumb flicks over the sensitive nipple, making me arch up into it.

The fingers of his other hand lace through the front of my underwear, pulling them to the side. I feel slightly exposed and vulnerable with his face literally right there, inches away from my wet and eager sex.

He takes both hands, spreading my milky thighs wide, before sliding his finger along my pooling arousal.

“Jesus, you do love it.”

He groans at the sight of me bare before him as he dips his head between my legs, making me gasp at the feeling of his tongue on me, his hair tickling my thighs. The sensation of his warm, wet mouth paired with the cool feeling of the metal ring in his lip is sending me into blissful overdrive. His expert tongue licks the length of me, lapping up everything I have to offer him. I clutch the sheets in my hand, the other gripping the hair at the top of his head, my eyes rolling into the back of my head as he continues the beautiful torment.

Gently sucking my clit between his lips, he inserts two fingers, causing me to cry out. He massages his fingers into me while flicking his tongue in all the right places. I moan and

writhe beneath his touch as the amazing sensation begins to build.

“Cam, stop, I’m gonna...”

“Come,” he answers for me in a demanding tone. “Come, and then do it again.”

I lose all sense of control, submitting to his tongue, and let go around his fingers, squeezing onto them internally, feeling the pulsating wave of pleasure roll through my core as I orgasm. His relentless tongue continues until I’m begging him to stop the sweet, sensitive torture of it all.

I’m completely out of breath, numb in the face as I try to keep my eyes open enough to see him above me.

“You’re so beautiful when you let go,” he says before dipping down and kissing my neck.

My breathing regulates as I cup the back of his head, my fingers threading through his hair as he licks and sucks the side of my neck, hovering above me. His hand cups my breast as he groans into my neck, toying with the nipple.

“God, you’re perfect and don’t even know it,” he whispers before finding my achingly erect nipple with his lips.

He sucks on the soft tissue, dragging his teeth lightly before pulling back and releasing it. He swirls his tongue around it, repeating the same motion as I moan at the pleasure it brings me. How I can be ready for more is beyond me, but it just never ends with him. The more I get, the more I need.

I reach down with my other hand, finding his painfully stiff erection in need of his own release.

“Come here,” I whisper, backing up.

We settle ourselves in the middle of the bed as we remove the rest of our clothing. He falls between my thighs again, his arms bracing around me as he gazes into me.

“Show me your scars, Cameron,” I say while my fingers caress his cheekbone. “Let me be the one to see them all.”

The energy shifts as his eyes grow serious, his lips hovering above mine. The overabundant need to prove that our love is real and right has never been more our mission.

“Fuck, I love you,” he breathes, gazing back and forth between my eyes.

He closes the space between us, his lips gliding across my lips, then rests his head on mine as he pushes himself into me in one swift motion. My back arches as I gasp, accepting him into my walls.

He’s so ready, so achingly present with me in this moment, so in need of everything I can offer him, and I’ve never been more alive because of it.

I close my eyes tightly as my arms wrap up and under his, holding onto his shoulders for support as he drives into me.

“Open your eyes,” he demands, grabbing my chin with his thumb and forefinger.

I open my eyes to see him above me—his broad, tattooed chest, his hair hanging, just barely obstructing his vision. I peer down at his rippled abdomen to the place where we connect. I watch his muscles flex as he thrusts himself into me, the base of his shaft shiny from the aftermath of my orgasm still dripping from me onto him.

He presses his thumb against my bottom lip until I part my mouth so he can pop it in. Placing it on my tongue, I do what I know turns him on; I suck on his finger as he continues pummeling into me; the force becoming stronger now.

“I love being inside you, everywhere.” He groans, the sounds of our skin slapping against each other filling the room.

I feel the tightening start up again, the most beautiful, tingly sensation that climbs up my spine.

“Cam,” I warn, gripping his flexed arms.

“You’re close,” he states knowingly, slowing his motions. “I’m close too.”

He lays his weight on me, then rolls so we are both on our sides, still connected. He wraps my thigh around his hip as our movements turn into a slow and steady speed. I cup the side of his neck with my palm as he finds my lips, massaging his tongue along mine while his thrusts keep delivering electrical waves of pleasure.

We rest our heads together, gazing into each other’s eyes, feeling the immense love pouring out of one another.

“Oh, Cam, I love you,” I cry out as he studies me, his thrusts becoming stronger now. “I need you. God, I love you.”

“I just can’t get close enough,” he says, driving deeply into me until he’s filled me completely, stalling to stir himself, reaching the deepest part of me. “It’s just never enough.”

His hands scour my body, his fingers clawing into the flesh of my thigh on his hip, the deep groans leaving him telling me he’s losing control.

“Tell me it’ll always be us,” he whispers against my lips.

I moan against him before opening my mouth for a kiss, capturing his lips, my kiss answering before I do. “Always, forever.”

We stay locked in our kiss as he powers into me, the cries from my mouth muffled by his lips against mine. I lose myself to the electrifying sensation, my sex rippling with pleasure, my body convulsing as I feel myself squeeze around him, pulling everything I can from the experience.

His groans intensify at my orgasm, and with a few more thrusts, he releases himself into me as his fingers dig into my back, holding me firmly to him while he fills me. He shudders as his chest heaves before his head falls back against the bed with his eyes closed.

A grin toys with the corner of my lips, watching him come down from the ultimate high, the one he’s always searched for but couldn’t find, the one thing that seems to numb him while simultaneously making him feel exhilarated and alive.



His eyes open, seeing my tender face above him. I run the backs of my fingers along the side of his face as his hand cups my neck, his thumb running along my bottom lip.

“You know I can’t live without you now,” he states softly.

The seriousness in his eyes tells me it’s more than true, almost terrifyingly so. It’s only terrifying because I understand it completely. I don’t know how I’d ever survive another day if I didn’t have him here, in the flesh, with me. The thought alone makes me feel a dejection I’ve never known.

“You’re my calm in the soul, crazy in the flesh,” I utter the words of my favorite poet to him again, this time with him conscious.

His smile widens at the poem, his face seemingly nervous at the mention of it as he toys with his lip ring.

“What? Why are you looking like that?” I ask, getting all self-conscious for actually saying it out loud.

He looks down at his chest between us, then back into my eyes. It’s then that I see it.

The words inked onto his skin, across his chest. It’s barely visible between all the other tattoos, but there it is. Etched onto him, over his heart.

I touch the words, my mouth dropping open in confusion.

“What? When? How?”

“I heard you that morning. You whispered the words into my ear when you thought I was asleep, and I knew then that

you loved me in the same crazy, uncontrollable way that I love you. When I left that morning to get your car fixed, I stopped at my guy's shop. Knew I needed it on me, forever."

"Seriously?" I'm in total shock.

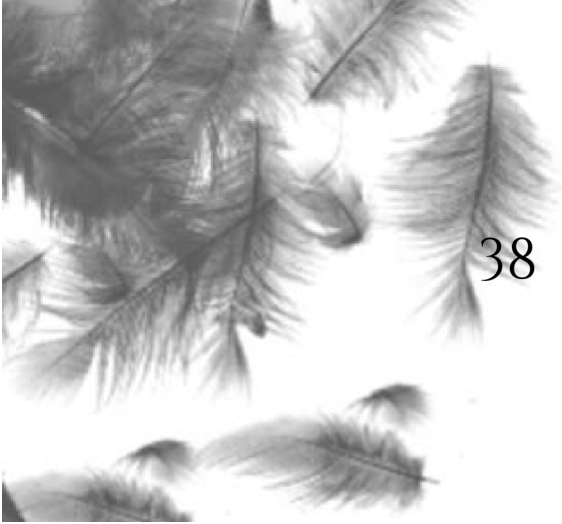
How did I not see it until now? How could I not have known he heard me? My insides stir with a deep, understood love.

"You wanted me to show you my scars? Well, you're covering them, Cole. All of them."

The pressure gripping my heart is a feeling unmatched. He inked me into his story even before knowing if I'd stay, needing to permanently cement something he couldn't believe for himself was real.

But it is real. All of this.

*Us.*





I wake up to Hawke sleeping on my chest. The way his body drapes over mine, his head on my chest, his arms wrapped around me, is heartwarming and heartbreaking in the same sense.

This broken, sweet man clings to me even in his dreams. I can't wait for him to finally realize he's it for me. The day he finally feels his heart and his secrets are safe with me will be my happiest.

I stroke his hair, combing through it with my fingers, cradling him tightly to me. I want nothing more than to hold and comfort him, loving him every second I'm given. We sit like that for at least an hour while he sleeps. I don't want to move. I don't want to wake him out of his blissful slumber, but it's out of my control when my phone rings on the desk nearby.

His head pops up slightly, his squinted eyes looking for the sound. I shush him and press his cheek back against my chest, running my fingers through his hair as I let it ring and ring.

*I know who it is.*

He sighs against me, relaxing again for a moment, squeezing me between his arms, releasing a tiny groan before popping his head back up.

“He won’t stop until he knows where you are,” he says with a raspy tone.

I look down at my fingers still threading through his hair, swallowing uncomfortably.

“You’re right,” I whisper.

Hawke sits up, leaving the warm space beside me. He heads towards the side of the bed and changes into his jeans before sitting back down on the edge, facing the wall. He rakes his hands through his hair, resting his elbows on his knees.

The sight breaks me.

I grab the sheet, clinging it to my body, as I walk to the other side of the bed, changing into my clothes for the day. Amidst yesterday’s chaos, I didn’t realize what I was grabbing, so I put on a black t-shirt and flowy mini skirt and quickly fluffed my mess of hair. At least my chucks match.

I crawl to him across the mattress, scooting closer to throw myself around him, draping my arms over his, firmly pressing my front against his back.

His hand comes up, holding my forearm to him, embracing my hold. I litter him with kisses along his neck and on his ear before whispering, “I love you and you alone.”

He sighs again, turning to face me with a weak grin.

“I know, baby. It’s not that. I know how you feel, how you’ve felt. It’s just...everything else you don’t know,” he says, reluctantly looking up into my eyes.

He wants to tell me. He needs to tell me. Especially before going back to face Patrick. I feel the heaviness of this moment. The pain and regret in his eyes. I know he wishes he wasn’t the one to tell me, but it’s time I find out about the things he said would change everything.

“Tell me, Cam. Tell me everything that happened that night.”

I can tell he’s reluctant, but he needs to, for me to finally understand. I’ve come this far alone, figuring out that it couldn’t have been Hawke who killed Ben. He’d never act so reckless when it meant someone he loved was involved. But the rest, I’d never know unless told by someone who was there, in the flesh, the only witness telling the truth of the entire event. With a deep breath, he unleashes it all.

“Believe it or not, Patrick and I used to hang out—not by choice. I always thought he was kind of a prick, but Ben always told me to give people a chance, to not be so hard on him, that it was bad for me more than anything. Ben was literally the nicest guy I’ve ever known. He connected people wherever he went. He always saw the good in everyone and brought it out of them when he was in their presence. He was so vibrant, so positive, so full of energy, everything I’m organically not.” He scoffs at the last part, making me smile.

“He sounded amazing,” I reply with a sad smile, wishing I’d had the chance to meet the special guy that makes Cameron light up the way he does when he talks about him.

“After a football game one Friday night, we all went out to their family cabin to celebrate him playing his first varsity game.”

“Wait, *the* cabin? The one you guys still go to?”

“Yep.” He nods. “After everything that happened, Ben’s parents gave the cabin to his older brother, Mark. Signed it over and everything. They didn’t want it anymore after losing him. Too many memories, I guess. But his brother moved out of state and some of his friends rented out the place. It’s kind of just a party pad now.”

“Sad,” I say without thinking.

“It is,” Hawke responds, looking sorrowful. “Ben wouldn’t like it.”

I clutch his hand in mine as he continues.

“Anyway, we went to the cabin, partied it up. I mean, we were kids at the time, trying to hang with the older crew. We drank, I did coke, got fucked up, Ben was drunk...”

I see his face holding the pain of the memory he’s spilling onto me. His breathing becomes shallow as he stares down at this little tear in the blue-colored carpet next to the bed. I stroke my hand down his back, attempting to soothe him the best I can.

“W-we were out most of the night. Ben’s mom was calling him nonstop, knowing he was with his brother and probably getting into trouble. Patrick was out there with some of the other football guys, but after realizing they were too drunk to leave, he asked Ben if he could get a ride with him.”

“But wasn’t Ben drinking?”

“Right, and so was I. We were in no position to drive and we knew it. We’d planned to just crash there, but Patrick came up to us while we were outside by ourselves having a smoke and started begging Ben to head out early. He was hounding him, told him he’d drive his car since he hadn’t been drinking, saying he’d drop us off so he could get home for his curfew. He was freaking out about it.” Hawke’s eyes narrow at the floor, remembering.

My jaw tightens hearing this story, already knowing how this is about to play out. Knowing Patrick and knowing his family, I can imagine him on the edge of paranoia for making the mistake of being stranded at a cabin party, leaving himself vulnerable, selfishly doing whatever it took to get home. A sick feeling takes over me, paired with a wave of anger that is uncontrolled.

“Ben, being the nice guy that he was, asked if I was cool with leaving early since we came there together in his car and he was my ride, promising me he’d find some girls for us on a different night. He was always thinking of others before himself.” A tiny grin pulls at his lips.



I smile slightly at the idea of a young Hawke scouting for girls with his best friend, before my smile drops at his sudden pause. He takes a breath, seemingly trying to calm himself while he stares at the little tear in the carpet again, almost needing to focus on it. Needing something to remove the horrifying visuals his mind is playing out before him. His mouth opens to talk, but he stalls for a moment, the seconds feeling heavier than before.

“I made the biggest mistake of my life by agreeing to go. I should’ve put up a fight, told Ben to stop being a fucking people pleaser. Anything to make him focus on himself and what he wanted to do for once. But that wasn’t him. He was the guy that would do anything for anyone...and Patrick fucking knew it and took full advantage of that.”

His eyes connect with mine, looking deeply into the part of me that knows that side of him exists too. It’s all so obvious, sickeningly so. I feel where this is going, and it’s giving me an aching cold chill down my spine.

“We get in the car, Patrick driving, Ben in the passenger seat, and my fucked-up ass laying down in the back. A few miles into the drive, I started to question how sober Patrick actually was. Mind you, I was lit, and yet...I could still tell shit wasn’t right.”

“What was he doing?” I question, grabbing his hand in mine again, weaving my fingers through for some sort of support.

“He was swerving a bit, went over the median for a second, then hit the hazard strips, making that loud noise under the

tires. I remember hearing that.”

“He was drunk,” I state, shaking my head in disbelief.

“I don’t know for sure. I didn’t see him drinking at the party, but I also wasn’t watching. No one saw us leave together because I was outside smoking at the time.”

“So no one could confirm that he left with you guys and that he was driving,” I state, knowingly.

“Exactly.” He nods, licking his lips.

He pauses again, letting out a shaky breath, and I feel the next part of the story is the part he wishes he could forget. The part that destroyed a piece of him he’ll never get back. *The part where he lost Ben.*

“It’s okay, I’m right here,” I whisper, leaning in closer to him.

Cupping his face to plant kisses along his cheek and jaw, I hold him tightly while rubbing his arm.

“It just happened so fast,” he whispers, his stare never faltering. “So fast that I’m not even sure how we got there. The next thing I remember is the car swerving out of control. It threw me into the space between the front and back seats. The car—” He pauses, closing his eyes tightly.

I grip him harder, kissing his shoulder.

“The car hit something and flipped. I remember being airborne at one point before hitting the roof and getting knocked out in the process. When I came to, I was alone in the

car. Somehow I was alright. Banged the fuck up, yeah, bleeding from my head, but I was able to get out. I crawled my way through one of the broken windows in the back, looking around for them.”

I quickly wipe away the tears that are falling from my eyes. I can visualize everything in my mind as he’s telling me the story; the agony of it all hurts me too.

“I saw—” His voice cracks as he stops himself, pinching the bridge between his nose to let out a breath. “I saw Ben laying over by a tree. He had been thrown from the car, had a deep gash on the side of his abdomen, and his head was bleeding. He looked...he looked like...” He pauses to catch his breath again.

“It’s okay,” I whisper again, shaking my head, not needing him to continue.

“I ran to him, picked him up, and held him as he was struggling to breathe. I lied to him and told him it would be alright, that I’d get help, but his eyes told me he knew he wouldn’t make it. Somehow he’d already accepted it.” He bends over into his hands, breathing through the tears, his hands shaking, before running them through his hair and cursing. “Fuck.”

“I’m here, it’s okay, it’s okay,” I continue whispering, holding onto him as he grips my arm, needing to hang on.

“He died in my arms, Cole,” he cries out, the anguish in his tone echoing the unfairness of it all. “I always wondered what

his last thoughts were and as sad as it is, I think he was more worried about me than himself, even as he lay dying.”

He loses himself for a moment, wincing his eyes in pain at the memory of that last look. A look of concern for the friend he knew best. Ben was dying and worried about Hawke. Worried about how he'd take it. How he'd be able to move on without him, almost like he knew Hawke would fall apart on his own and head down a dark trail of deep suffering and loss. The thought tells me all I need to know about who Ben was to Hawke—he was the brother he never had. The only family that looked out for him, someone who cared for who he was so deeply, was gone in a second.

“I wish it would've been me. It should've been me. Ben was good, a better man than me.” He shakes his head, curling his fist and pressing it to his skull, attempting to withdraw the hurt.

After a minute of getting himself together again, his sadness slowly phases into something else entirely. Anger. A deep-rooted anger that's been so deeply repressed.

“I saw him, standing there on the road, out of the corner of my eye.”

He doesn't even need to tell me who. I know he's talking about Patrick.

“He just stood there, watching. I screamed at him at the top of my lungs, wiping the blood out of my eyes to look at him in his. I demanded he go call someone, go do something,

anything, but he was just frozen in fear. Fear of knowing what he'd done.”

This is the part that has Hawke tied to Patrick in ways he wished he never was. The part that's holding him hostage in a situation out of his control.

“Patrick killed Ben. He killed Ben and fled the scene.”





## SPINELESS BEINGS

**T**he anger and betrayal radiating off Hawke is palpable at the moment.

He gets up off the bed and begins pacing, dragging his hands down his face.

“A fucking murderous coward.” He growls before punching his fist into the wall, making me jump. He does it again, then leans his forehead against it, dragging his hands down the wood-paneled surface.

I let him get it out, the pain, not even trying to calm him. He needs to let this out, needs to vent.

“I’ve never told anyone about this before,” he says, his nostrils flaring, hands visibly shaking as he turns, falling back against the wall to face me. “I just assumed it’d die with me. I couldn’t, with the agreements and all.”

“The agreements? An NDA?” My mouth drops open as I gasp at my disgust. “They had you sign a non-disclosure agreement?!”

He walks closer to me again, finally calming down and sitting on the bed next to where I'm planted.

“Patrick stood there and watched it all. He watched me fall apart over Ben. Saw everything. Then, as quick as it happened, he left.”

“He left,” I repeat the phrase in almost a whisper, feeling short of breath, feeling the truth like a punch to the pit of my stomach.

“He jetted outta there, ran away. Left the scene, left me there, clinging to the body that used to hold my best friend. I had nothing at that moment, no one to help me, no one to tell me what to do next.”

I bite my bottom lip, unable to hold back my tears at the pain he's been through alone.

“I wish I knew you then, I wish I could've been there for you. I wish I would've known.” I cry, feeling his torture, aware of his suffering.

He wraps his arms around me, pulling me into his chest and smoothing the top of my hair down. He holds me for a moment as I release my own hurt for his story.

“You know, you remind me of him in that way.” I hear his heart pounding as he speaks softly, the deep hum of his voice through his chest calming me. “There's a part of you that's always thinking about me and my feelings, somehow always understanding what I'm going through and who I am. You see



the truth in people, even when you were taught not to. *You saw me.*”

“I see you,” I whisper, running my fingers over his face, kissing his lips softly. “*I see you.*”

A hint of an admiring smile pulls at his lips for me, and I see the relief spread through his body when he sighs, continuing with the story.

“It didn’t take long for them to find us. They booked me immediately, took me in for questioning.”

The thought of him being so young and vulnerable after going through such a traumatic experience, then thrown into questioning, as all of this fell upon him, kills the deepest part of my heart. *He had no one.*

“They tested me, found alcohol, drugs. It didn’t matter that I told them Patrick was there. They didn’t believe me. Why would they? I was a drugged-out junkie to them, looking for a way out of accidentally killing my best friend.” He shakes his head, grinding his back teeth.

“Didn’t they at least follow up and look at Patrick as a suspect? Didn’t they question him too?”

“They did, but his father pulled a team together real quick in his defense. He made up an alibi, which his father confirmed. Their story was that Dean picked him up from the party and he had Patrick home at the time the accident happened; his mother confirmed it too. It was their word against mine.”

“Jesus Christ,” I say beneath my breath, shaking my head in disbelief. All of them. All of them were in on this.

“His father convinced the guys at the station to let him talk to me, to ‘help’ me and be my advisor, taking on the role of the savior to the fucked-up kid in need of saving. He promised me he’d take care of things for letting me take the fall. Told me he’d get the best defense attorney around to get me off with a slap on the wrist, probation in exchange for a shit ton of money to keep quiet. I’m talking hundreds of thousands of dollars, Cole.”

I shake my head, seething with anger. “Unbelievable, that’s why...that’s why you told me you don’t need money.” I suck in a breath, feeling lightheaded. “They paid you off.”

“I was young and dumb. I figured I’d never get out of the situation anyway, at least not by what he told me. Agreeing to be quiet and take the money, do some community service, it just seemed like the only option at the time. He threatened me. Told me without his attorney’s help to get a lighter sentence, I’d be in prison, possibly for life, and that there was no way out.”

“So what happened then? Why didn’t they get you off like he said?”

“Because he never had the intention of getting a team together for me. I was left with a public defender who seemed to know less about the system than I did. I got charged with vehicular manslaughter, and was given a quick five-year sentence like it was nothing, from a judge who didn’t even

look me in the eye. Just dismissed my case and moved on to the next.”

“Hawke, we have to set this straight. They need to pay,” I state, anger emanating from my tone. “We can’t let them get away with this!”

He looks away from me, licking his lips in frustration. “While I admire your tenacity, there’s nothing that can be done. They’re powerful people. They don’t pay for anything besides the checks they write.”

“I’m so disgusted.” I rush, shaking my head. “I can’t believe you’ve been holding this in. And the house? They took control of that too? The only thing you had from your father?! I can’t believe I was living there, with the idea that—”

I stop myself from continuing. The thoughts of the future I’d had in mind are now tarnished with lies and deceit, all at the cost of Hawke and the misfortunes he’d endured. It’s sickening.

I’m up and pacing now, pulling at the roots of my hair, trying to understand how someone could be so unbelievably cowardly and cruel. To take someone’s life and then use another as collateral. I feel like I’m going to be sick. I thought I knew Patrick, but I didn’t know him at all.

“They offered to buy it before I served my time, knowing I still had part of the mortgage left over from my dad’s passing and couldn’t keep up with the payments while I was locked up. There was a clause in the agreement that I’d get the house

back to ensure I'd keep my end of the bargain in the NDA throughout my sentence.”

“So you moved back in to ultimately regain the rights, to get your name back on the deed?”

“That’s the fucked up part; my name’s been on it the entire time. Everything was done under the table.”

Both of them are simultaneously trapped in completely different ways. Patrick’s been playing nice because he knows at any point in time, Hawke could kick him to the curb, unleash his lies to me, and open the floodgates to the past. Hawke’s been stuck under their family, being watched since his release, making sure he’s a good boy who doesn’t talk.

This is why Patrick was secretly planning our move to Colorado. To escape. This is why he’s been working so hard to leave town, still under the wing of his father. They thought they could make it seem like they sold the property back to Hawke, so no one would question it.

I stand there, in the middle of the motel room, staring at the floor, racking my brain for answers, for some way to get one over on these cowards who made a kid take the fall to keep their name in gold. Christians my ass, these people are straight from the depths of Hell itself.

My phone rings again as I walk over to the table. I pick it up, ready to see Patrick’s name and tell him to fuck off forever, when I see John’s instead.

“Shit, it’s John,” I comment, looking up at Hawke nervously before answering.

“John, hey, what’s up?”

“Hey, Nic, I need a favor,” he asks abruptly, sounding out of breath.

“Yeah, of course. What is it? Is everything alright?”

“No, not really,” he says, sounding stressed. “Anna’s having some pain in her abdomen. We’re not sure what’s going on yet, but we’re on our way to the hospital. I’m supposed to work the late shift tonight. Any chance you could fill in? I just don’t know how long I’ll be here and I want to—”

“John,” I interrupt him. “Say no more. Of course I’ll cover for you. You need to be there. Please, just keep me posted. I’m hoping it’s nothing serious.”

“Oh Nic, thank you so much. I’ll definitely let you know what we find out.”

After saying goodbye, I turn to face Hawke.

“Shit,” I say.

He stands, approaching me. “You’re going to need to go back to the house, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, I wasn’t even thinking. The keys to the bar are there.”

I take a moment to look through my phone, seeing a stockpile of texts from Patrick. Tons of ‘I’m so sorry’ and ‘I know you need time’ messages. He’s ridiculous if he thinks I’d

ever take him back after how he treated me at his family's brunch. There are fingerprint bruises still on my wrist from his grasp.

"Well, you're not going alone," he states with venom on his tongue, knowing I'd be walking into the lion's den.

"I might have to. I mean, how do we do this?" I ask, sitting on the edge of the bed now, sighing. "We can't show up there together. He can't know about us. He'll call your parole officer. He'll do something to get you locked up again! I can't let that happen. He can't take you away from—"

"Cole, shhh, come here, come here..." he says calmly, pulling me into his lap on the bed, wrapping me in his arms with the unwritten promise of never letting go. "Just breathe, baby."

I can't lose him to Patrick. I won't let him win. Hawke soothes me until I'm able to speak rationally again.

"I have to drive back, but I can't leave you here either, you don't have a car."

"Actually," Hawke says, looking at the time on his phone. "Kid will be here any minute to fix that problem."

"Wait, what?"

Kid is coming to save us? The thought is hilarious.

"Kid's dropping off a bike for me."

"Do you really think now is the time to take up cycling?" I twist my face.

He laughs at my question, the first time I've seen a genuine smile in days since diving into his past. I feel butterflies throughout my body at the sight. "Not that kind of bike, babe."

I flush with embarrassment, or maybe it's the fact that he called me *babe*.

Like clockwork, I hear the roar of an engine outside the door. I look at Hawke as he raises his brows with excitement, smiling at me.

Kid knocks on the door, as Hawke lets him in. There he stands, all six feet of his dangly frame, his disheveled bleach blonde hair spiking all over the place with his tattoos covering nearly every visible inch of him, his goofy grin topping off the entire idiosyncratic look.

"There she is! I'm here to save you, girl," he says with his own brand of swagger. He tips his head, narrowing his eyes at me flirtatiously as he licks his lips.

"Dude," Hawke snaps. "Fuck off."

"Damn, bro, chill. It's called a joke." He laughs hysterically to himself. "Besides, I see she's taken...again."

He frowns, leaning an arm against the door frame, looking defeated as he glances back and forth between us.

I chuckle awkwardly, shrugging off the obvious. There's no bible humping me, only Hawke.

"Eh, I knew y'all were a thing long before you did. The way you were looking at him at the bar, the way he kept staring you down like a psycho. I knew y'all had to be fucking on the low.

It's sexy as fuck though, all that sneaking around." He wiggles his eyebrows at me and I can't help but scoff with a smile.

"You're a bad girl."

Hawke rolls his eyes, speaking exasperatedly, "The keys?"

"Right here, man." He tosses them to him, along with a rolled-up plastic bag.

"What's this?" he asks, opening the bag.

"Gloves. For like, the vibrations and shit."

"You bought me motorcycle gloves?" Hawke smirks, looking down at the bag, then back at Kid in disbelief.

"Thanks, man."

He gives him a man-hug, patting him on the back, and I can tell their relationship is unique. Kid, while always remaining totally aloof and crazy looking, is someone who genuinely has a kind heart. The kind of person you always stay close with, even if you live different lives. The kind that has your back while you're in prison, putting money on the books, or so he's told me. You hang on to those people, because there aren't many of them.

"So, you're dropping off a bike? That you bought for Hawke? How are you getting back?" I ask Kid, confused by this scenario at the moment.

I don't have any idea what the plan is, but I'm here, going along with it.

"Nah, I bought it from his uncle. Time I got my own ride, put some of that money to use." Hawke grins, peering at the



bike parked in the lot behind Kid. “Always wanted a classic Harley.”

“You ride motorcycles?” My mouth is hanging open as my eyes dart back and forth between the two of them. Shit, if I wasn’t turned on before, I sure as hell am now.

“Oh, and I don’t need a ride, if that’s what you’re asking.” Kid smirks at me. “I’m meeting this chick in the room over.” He points his thumb to the right.

My eyebrows raise as Hawke shakes his head. “This guy will never be monogamous. That life is not in his blood.”

“Monoga-what? *Fuck no!* Too many beautiful women in this world, and I want to try them all. Especially you, the forbidden fruit.” He looks at me with a devilish smile, waiting to see if I take the bait.

“Get the fuck out,” Hawke says abruptly, roughly grabbing Kid’s arm and pushing him towards the door.

He laughs his signature hyena laugh as he’s being shoved out, pressing back against Hawke to peek his head into the room one last time.

“I’ll be right over here if you need me, or wanna listen to what I can do to a woman, ya know...if you’re curious.” He makes a kissy face.

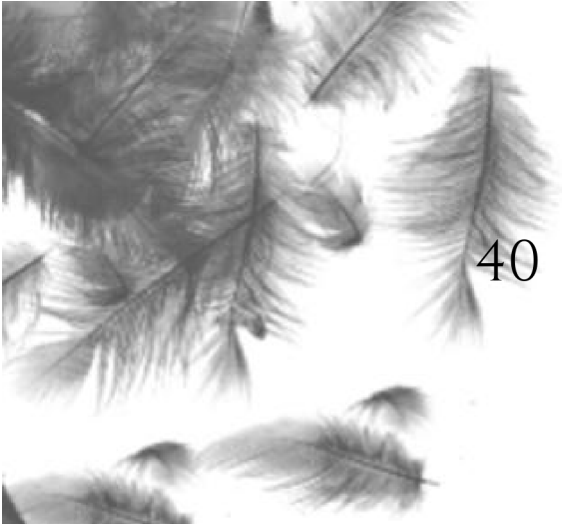
Hawke yanks his arm, pulling him out of the door once and for all.

I bite the corner of my lip as Hawke approaches me, a protective look in his jealous eyes. The look alone gives me a

tingling sensation between my legs. I like when he gets upset at Kid for hitting on me. I want him to keep doing it just to see him act out. I must be crazy.

He flexes his jaw muscle, grabbing my waist and firmly pulling me into him. I suck in a breath at his sudden forcefulness, enjoying the feeling of his hard, warm body against mine again. Cupping my jaw, he looks down at me, eyeing my lips, then back to my half-lidded lustful eyes. I'd do anything he told me at this moment. I'm totally smitten by him. My heart is his alone.

With inches between us, he speaks in a low, husky tone, "Let's go for a ride."





**N**ever once growing up did I envision myself on the back of a Harley, riding through the wind, clutching onto a man with a lip ring, covered in tattoos.

Yet here I am, doing what feels right, with the man that I truly love. Not the kind of love that's expected or planned, but the wild, uninhibited kind. The kind you deny and deny until it slaps you in the face and tells you your truth.

We're just riding along on the highway, testing out his new purchase, forgetting our current problems. I clutch myself to him, after his strict instructions to hold onto him tightly, wrapping my arms around his waist and gripping his shirt in my hands to his enjoyment.

Watching his forearms flex under the ink of his tattoos, and how his large strong hands extend as he grips the handlebars beneath his gloves, has me tingling between my thighs. Even the way he started it up so effortlessly. Okay it wasn't that hard, but still, he's insanely attractive to me.

It's exhilarating, zipping through the wooded roads, feeling like we're in our own little world. I'm riding on a high as he

takes it up a notch, going over the speed limit to test it out. I squeal with delight against him, getting a jolt of adrenaline coursing through my veins as I feel the vibrations radiating throughout my core.

He's a natural. He told me he used to ride a bit when he was in high school and that he always wanted his own one day. But the way he rides...it looks like he was born to do it.

He drives up to an old gravel rest stop, slowing down before turning back into the little wooded area. There's a small building for a bathroom and some picnic tables nearby. It's a beautiful stop, one that many people probably never take the time to visit, because why would they? It's off the main highway. It's the kind of rest stop for truckers needing a quiet night's rest.

He stops the bike, resting his feet on either side of it to stabilize us before shutting it off. I remove the helmet he helped me put on, readjusting his large leather jacket down my shoulders a bit, running a hand through my unruly hair.

"Did you like it?" he asks with raised brows, turning to face me.

I blow air through my lips, shaking my head with a smile. "I loved it."

"Wanna drive?"

"Hell no!" I shriek before laughing. "I'm terrified."

"Was the ride alright?" he asks, suddenly nervous he took it too fast.

I swing my leg over the bike, hopping off the back as he watches me, remaining straddled on it.

“It was. It helped me forget things for a moment, but then again, I always forget all my problems when I’m with you.”

He smiles shyly at me, and I love what words like that can do to him. He needs to hear more of it.

“However.” I saunter over to him, closing the space between us. “I’ll be honest, I was hoping I could ride like this...”

He sits up straight, letting go of the handlebar, watching as I swing my leg back over, straddling the bike again, only this time facing him. I wiggle my hips against him, rubbing my crotch onto his lap as my exposed legs wrap around his thighs and hips, my arms encircling his taut core beneath the loose shirt.

His lips part as he watches my every move. I lift my chin to face him with a confident grin.

“Uh, yeah, I’d end up killing us both.” He swallows as I roll my hips against him. “And I’ll never let you wear a skirt again while riding. It’s fucking reckless. You could’ve been burnt or skinned up. If anything happened to these perfect legs...I don’t even wanna think about it. This was fucking stupid.”

His tone is angry, more at himself, as his hands run slowly up the length of my exposed thighs, over the material, until he finds the top of my hips where my waist curves in. His fingers slide up and under my t-shirt, gripping the skin there as he firmly pulls me into him and thrusts his hips up.

Yes, we are currently dry humping on his motorcycle.

“It’d be worth it.” I bite the corner of my lip, grinning.  
“Come on, let’s fuck on your motorcycle. There’s no one around. It’d be so easy to just slide it in.”

He stares at me like he’s seen a ghost. His mouth is hanging open as he raises his brows, blinking in blissful confusion before knitting them together.

“Who are you?” he asks cautiously, as if he’s never seen me before.

I giggle at his seriousness. “I’m Cole,” I announce proudly.  
“Yours.”

“Fuck. I’ve turned you into a bad girl.”

“Hmm, no. No, I think you just made me realize what I like.” I lick my lips, leaning forward and eyeing his.

“Yeah?” he asks with a breathy tone, his eyes growing darker by the second.

My chest rises and falls more quickly between us. “Yeah.”

He puts the kickstand out, leaning the bike into a stable position. With one hand, he scoops my hair up behind me, holding it tightly in his grasp and pulling roughly, making me gasp as he forces me to face the sky.

“And what is it that you like, exactly?” he asks forcefully, his eyes inspecting my neck, my jaw, my lips, pulling my hair tightly while preparing his strike.

I swallow, feeling my pulse pounding through my neck, exposing all of what he does to me.

“Do you like it hard and fast?” he asks, licking up the side of my neck, making me moan. “Or soft and slow?”

The way he’s talking while taking his time and toying with me is sending me into a spiral. I feel my arousal between my legs, wet and ready for him just by his words alone.

“Hard and fast,” I say breathlessly, almost unsure of what that might mean with him.

He sucks on a spot on my neck, running his teeth along my skin before finding my earlobe and biting down on it, making me squirm against him.

“Good, cause we don’t have time for slow and soft.”

“Cam,” I moan in anticipation, feeling my panties get wet.

He loosens his grip on my hair, pushing the back of my head down to face him again.

“Undo my pants,” he commands, looking into my eyes.

I do as he orders immediately, my fingers fidgeting with the button, feeling his stiff member beneath the fabric of the jeans he put on this morning. I open it, pulling the zipper down and apart, and look back up at him for the next order.

“Good. Now lean back, pull your panties to the side.”

I lean back a little, holding myself up with one hand on the bike while he holds me by the waist. Who wears a little loose mini skirt while riding a motorcycle? A girl who apparently



had plans to fuck her man on it, that's who. I roll the soft material higher up my thighs, teeth sinking into my lower lip as I peel my white underwear to the side, showing him what he does to me.

“Fuck,” he whispers beneath his breath, eyeing my glistening center, slick from arousal. “You're so bad.”

He gazes from my wetness to my eyes again. There's a darkness in his stare. A darkness that excites a new part of me, a naughty side of myself I'd never tapped into before. He makes me feel alive and bursting with an electric energy, ready to take on the world and everyone in it. He empowers me without even knowing it.

“Up.” He gives me a light head nod, his tone demanding. “I want you to sit on my dick.”

I lean back up as he stabilizes himself on the seat.

“Take it out,” he demands, his voice low. “And spit on it.”

I blink quickly while taking a breath, reaching into his boxers, and letting his erection spring free. I look back up at him quickly, then back at his massive cock, feeling flushed at the sight of the drop of pre-cum on his tip. I spit down onto him as he watches in delight.

“Now rub it all over.”

I do as he says before he picks me up at the waist. I wrap my legs around his torso, the heels of my boots digging into his back.

“Put it in,” he demands, our mouths inches apart. “Slide down it.”

I reach behind me, pulling my underwear further to the side as I line myself with the head. He grips my shoulders, pulling me down onto him, pushing the crown through, then roughly shoving the rest of his length deeply into me.

I cry out at the sudden burn of my walls stretching around him. I’m still not used to his size, and by the watering of my eyes, it shows.

“Oh, fuck yeah. I love you taking my whole cock.” He groans, wincing while eyeing my face, watching as I react to his force. “You like it?”

Closing my eyes tightly as my mouth forms an “O”, I nod, unable to speak, sitting still as I accommodate his width.

He takes a few breaths, tightening his jaw. “Now hang onto my shoulders.”

I do as he says, gripping his shirt between my fingers as my arms wrap around his neck, our chests pressed firmly against each other. With his hands up and under my skirt, he claws at my ass, pulling me into him as he thrusts himself deeper and deeper into me.

“I want you to scream,” he says, as he lifts me up and down his thick length. “There’s no one out here to hear you. Scream for me, Cole.”

I can feel him harden even more inside of me as I cry out at his force. I’m bouncing up and down on him, using my arms

as leverage around him. My slick arousal is making the pain subside, and the pleasure of him penetrating my walls relaxes me.

After thrusting for a while, I feel him getting frustrated. In this position, he can't do what he needs to do. He can't do what his body is telling him. He can't fuck me the way he needs.

“Lie back,” he demands, pushing my back down against the bike.

Looking down at where we're connected, he groans. “Look at you, creaming all over me.”

He rubs my clit with his thumb, spreading my arousal all over, causing me to pant. Bringing his thumb up to my mouth, I suck on the digit, making him shudder, his dick rock hard inside me.

“Grab the handlebars behind you with both hands,” he demands.

I do as he says, reaching behind me to hang on for this ride.

“Tell me to stop if it's too much,” he warns before slowly wrapping both hands around my neck.

My breaths are choppy as I anxiously await what's to come. He holds me in place by my neck, standing and readjusting himself. Slowly, pulling almost all the way out of me, he looks down at my body, clenching his jaw before slamming into me.

I scream out at the intensity when he begins fucking me. He holds my throat, thrusting into me with hot, slick strokes,

slapping against the part of my clit that's not covered by my wet underwear, hard.

The pain of the bike against my back is replaced with the forceful, yet electric sensation of him hitting something deep within me. I feel little sparks fly through me every time he hits it, tiny orgasms again and again. I'm close to coming already, or maybe I already have? I can't tell anymore because this new sensation feels like one orgasm is bleeding into another. I can't tell where one starts and another ends. Everything feels so good.

I've never been fucked before, not until Hawke. The thrill of having a man control me, and submitting to the endless pleasure he gives me at his will, is better than anything I've ever experienced. His firm hold on my neck, a new arousing stimulant.

I scream, curling my legs around his back, needing him deep inside me as I tighten down on his cock, another orgasm racking through me.

"Oh, God." He groans, feeling what's happening.

He stares into my watery eyes as his thrusts get sloppy and slower, before a deep guttural grunt reverberates in his throat, and he loses himself in me.

Catching our breaths, he releases his hold on me, bending forward, licking his lips before softly kissing mine, the change in sensation a welcomed one. His lips mold to mine, proving his love.

“Cam, that was...” I stop to take a breath. “That was so good.”

He sighs, with a lazy grin, before his face straightens, asking, “Did I hurt you?”

“If you did, I don’t know about it yet,” I say breathlessly.

He chuckles at my statement, helping me up and off him and then off the bike. We readjust our clothes, walking towards one of the picnic tables to collect ourselves.

He casually jumps up onto it, turning around before taking a seat on the table, his feet on the bench, as he fishes for something in his back pocket.

Helping me up next to him, he pulls out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. Lighting one up and taking a few quick pulls, he blows it out of the side of his mouth, away from me.

I grin while watching as he puts the cigarette up to his lips again before grabbing it in the middle and taking it away from him.

Loving the fact that he probably thinks I’m pulling a “quit smoking after school special,” I put the cigarette to my lips, cocking a brow at him with a flirtatious grin, and take a pull.

He stares at me for a moment, shaking his head, then pulls it away, throwing it on the ground and stomping it out.

“I won’t let you start this shit. I’ve got you addicted to enough bad habits as it is.”

“Please tell me you aren’t calling yourself a bad habit, Hawke,” I say, cocking my head, hating that it seems like he is.

He shrugs, looking down at the ground, rubbing the back of his neck.

I straddle his lap, placing my thighs around him again, pulling his jaw to face me. “You, my love, are the only habit worth being addicted to.”

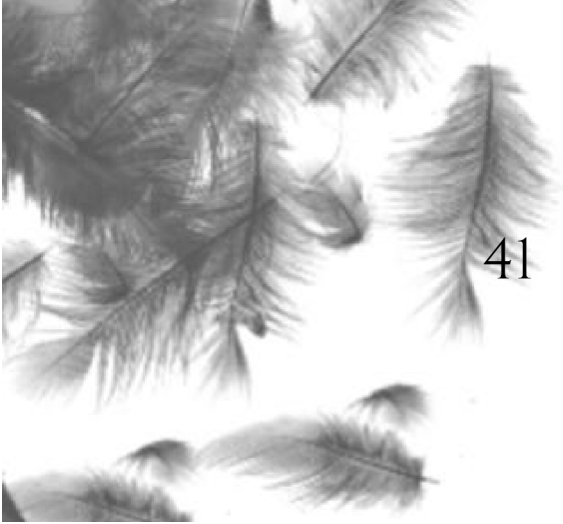
He sighs, his cute cheeks squished in my hands, looking at me with admiration.

“How I found you, I’ll never understand. But the fact that I did, it’s changed me.”

I capture his lips in a kiss, his hands moving up to cradle the back of my head gently as our tongues tangle together in beautiful harmony.

But, our time is up again. It’s time for me to go back to the house, get my stuff, and head into work. I have to face Patrick and deal with this situation the way it ultimately needs to be dealt with.

It’s time for us to go face the things we keep avoiding.





I pull my car into the driveway, hands already shaking, chest already feeling the pressure and weight of what's to come.

Patrick's car is in the driveway, and I know he's waiting inside. Waiting to talk, waiting to hash things out, waiting to figure out which angle to take to win me back over.

I take a shaky breath and enter the house.

It feels cold. Empty. Deprived of the love I thought it once held. Now it's just walls and windows, encasing the lies of the past and the torment of the future.

It's sad to think this was the place Hawke grew up. Had I known that initially, my entire view would've been different. What were his memories of this home? How deeply did seeing us playhouse in the place he grew up truly affect him? The thought irks me in such a painful and heartbreaking way.

"Oh, thank God, you're back." Patrick sighs with relief near the bedroom upon my arrival.



I see him standing there, near the bedroom door, and can barely look him in his eyes. He killed Ben and fled the scene. The sentence keeps repeating in my head like a broken record. He's not the person I thought I knew. It's funny how finding out the truth about someone's character makes that person suddenly repulsive to even be around.

He approaches me quickly, causing me to cower into myself. Hawke grabs my arm quickly, pulling me back and away from Patrick, not even allowing a moment for him to touch me as his body covers mine, protecting me.

Yes, Hawke came with me.

He rode up beside me on his bike. Not for a second allowing me to do this alone. He made it clear he'd never let me go near Patrick without his protection ever again, so here we stand, together, in the face of this confrontation.

Patrick looks at the spot where Hawke is touching my arm, noticing how his body is positioned before me like a shield, then looks back into my eyes with confusion.

"Nic? What's this? What...what are you doing?" He directs the last question to Hawke with an entirely different tone. An angry tone, one with authority.

"I asked him to be here with me while we talk," I say with false confidence.

I'm trying my best to remain strong, but being in front of him again does weird things to me. I'm nervous, suddenly feeling like a child who's talking to their parents after being

caught breaking curfew. I can't stand that I'm so accustomed to being weak around him.

"That's not necessary. Hawke, leave." He dismisses him, not even looking in his direction.

Hawke sucks in an immediate breath, puffing his chest as his eyes narrow and nostrils flare while glaring at him.

"Ca-Hawke...i-it's okay," I stutter, catching myself, placing my arms out to stop him from attacking.

Patrick cocks his head at Hawke's strange demeanor, clearly trying to assess the situation.

"I'm just going to have a quick talk with him. Sort this out, alright?" I ask quietly, turning him by the face to look at me.

Patrick's neck straightens, peering at us intently.

This is hard enough trying to coax the beast that is Hawke down, but I need to have this conversation with Patrick alone. We have to hash out our relationship. *I need to end this.*

"No," he states firmly, looking back at Patrick, not giving in.

I take a deep breath, blowing it out through my mouth as I grab his hand to get his glare off Patrick and onto me.

"Hawke...please," I ask in a calm tone.

"I don't know what you're even doing here. This is between us." Patrick scoffs at our conversation before him.

"She asked me to be here," Hawke says firmly. "She's scared of you, and for good reason. I saw her fucking wrists,

you bastard.”

The tension between the two is building, making me nervous about how this will blow. Two lit fuses meeting in the middle of where I’m seated. Not a good outcome.

Patrick’s eyes fall upon my wrists now, his face changing from anger to remorse.

“Nic, I...I’m so sorry, I—”

“Typical.” Hawke scoffs, rolling his eyes. “Abuse then apologize. Classic.”

Hawke isn’t wrong. It’s what he does. He does or says things that hurt me and apologizes afterwards, buttering me up with flowers or gifts. I hadn’t noticed how bad it was until I left it and saw it from the outside.

“Let’s talk.” He holds his hand out for me, ignoring Hawke altogether. “Please.”

Hawke is seething beside me. I can feel the anger radiating off him just at the thought of us talking alone in a room together. It’s taking everything in this man not to deck Patrick out cold. His self-control has to be one of his more amazing qualities. It’s quite literally unmatched.

I gently touch his upper arm again, the one protecting me, attempting to comfort him without words. He turns to face me, his demeanor physically relaxing a bit at the look in my eyes, telling him this is for the best. He’s reluctant, but he seems to understand.

“I’ll be right outside,” he says, before glaring harshly at Patrick.

His final stare, warning me to be cautious, is the last thing I see before he pulls his pack of cigarettes from his leather coat and walks outside.

Patrick guides me into the room, closing the door behind him as I sit on the edge of the bed.

“Where were you last night? Sean’s been driving all over, looking for you. I was worried sick.”

Of course he was, and still is. I hate Sean. I can’t even imagine the trash he and his family have been talking about me since my “disappearance.” I’m sure Linda is just devastated at how her perfect brunch imploded before her guests. Embarrassment of the century.

“I needed time away from you, away from here,” I respond, already exhausted by this conversation.

“This is ridiculous, Nic. Everything is being blown out of proportion. Can’t you see that? This was just a little argument. I barely even hurt you,” he says, picking up my hand and inspecting my wrist.

I pull my hand away from his immediately, clutching it to my chest. His words weigh heavily on me. *Barely even hurt you.*

“Patrick,” I begin, nervously. “I can’t do this anymore.”

“Nic.” He groans, already not taking me seriously.

“I’m serious. I think it’s best if we just go our separate ways.”

He sits down on the bed beside me and runs his hands through his hair while looking down at the floor.

“Alright, I’ll admit, I didn’t do my best to stop Sean when he was talking about Hawke, I could’ve done better, alright?” he says, as if that one moment is the reason I’m breaking up with him. “To be honest, I don’t even know why you’re so set on protecting him.”

“Patrick, it’s so much more than that,” I say, feeling an overwhelming anxiety as the words fall out of my mouth. “It’s over between us.”

He gets up from his position on the bed, immediately walking over towards the wall where the pictures of us hang. He stands there, hands on his head, just staring at them, before grabbing one off the wall, turning to face me.

“Look at us, happy. Look at your smile. This is us, not all this drama surrounding it.” His voice cracks a bit, and I can tell he’s losing the control he thought he had.

“I’m not happy with you anymore,” I reply bluntly.

“You are happy. You’re blessed—*we’re* blessed.” He catches himself.

I shake my head, looking directly at him. “No, I’m not.”

He stares at me for a minute, his eyes narrowing in on my position on the edge of the bed.

Startling me, he throws the picture down onto the floor with both hands, smashing the frame into tiny pieces, glass shards spreading across the carpet beneath my feet. I gasp at the sudden burst of anger, closing my eyes tightly.

“You *are* happy with me. Your mind is just warped with these...ideas!” he yells, his hands waving wildly in the air before him as he leans down over me.

“I’m not, Patrick.” I get up, walking around him to stand near the opposing wall, away from the glass, away from his controlling stance above me. “But it’s more than just that...”

I don’t know how much I should reveal for the sake of Hawke and the situation he’s in. I’m scared that Patrick and his family will retaliate by taking it out on him, and I couldn’t live with myself if he did.

I stand with my back against the wall, my sweaty fingers interlocked before me, my head raised as I drop the truth.

“I’ve been seeing someone else.”

The air seems to have left the room along with Patrick’s control.

“No.” He laughs, denying it as if he could. “No.”

“I’m in love with him,” I declare, my voice breaking in the middle of my sentence.

He stops in place, glaring at me before stalking towards my position against the wall, the look in his eyes crazy. He’s smiling at me, raising his brows, as if I’ve told him a bad joke, clearly not taking me seriously.

“Is that right? You’ve fallen for someone? Really, Nic? That’s where we’re at?” he asks smugly.

I suck in a nervous breath as he encases me against the wall, his arms on both sides of me.

“It’s over, Patrick,” I declare definitively, staring into his eyes.

He glares at me, inches from my face, his breath coming out hot and heavy.

“No!” he yells, punching his fist into the drywall next to me, the crumbling hole inches from my head.

I close my eyes, turning my chin into my shoulder as my hands shake. I’m legitimately scared of him and what he might do. He feels like a loose cannon.

“WE’RE NOT OVER!” He punches the space again and again, making the hole larger than before, tiny chunks of drywall falling onto my shoulder.

The uncontrolled anger coming from him is terrifying me. It’s like the incident at his parent’s house. As soon as he feels a loss of control, he snaps, breaking things around him. He’s like an overgrown toddler who can’t function without his parent’s discipline.

His knuckles are bleeding as he pushes off the wall, walking to the other side of the room towards the lamp. He swings at it, sending it flying into the wall behind the nightstand, shattering it to pieces and cutting his other hand in the process. Blood drips everywhere.

Fearful tears fall down my face. Before I can wonder where Hawke is and if he's heard the commotion coming from the room, he bursts through the door with his shoulder, not even attempting to open it, breathless as he searches for me.

"Cole!" he says with relief as he sees me standing against the wall.

He pulls me into his arms, quickly placing his hands around my cheeks, scanning my face, neck and body for any marks. Looking around, he sees the hole in the wall, the glass on the floor, the broken lamp. His eyes trail the debris until they land on where Patrick's standing. He charges towards Patrick in three quick steps, grabbing him by the throat and slamming him up against the wall, pinning him there with his strength.

"Hawke, no!" I scream, running towards them.

He can't hit him, he can't do anything, or Patrick will literally demolish him in the courts. I can see it playing out already. I plead with him as his grasp around his neck tightens, causing Patrick to wheeze for air, before slamming his head back against the wall again.

"Let him go!" I beg him, the terror in my tone present.  
"Please! Don't do this!"

It's as if my voice is the only thing that can calm him. Hawke glares into Patrick's red face and his lips tighten, curling inward, probably imagining just what it would feel like to kill him right here and now and how much pleasure he'd get from it, enjoying it to his core.



The saddest part about it is, Patrick knows he won't commit to doing anything, just like Hawke knows he can't. He's backed into a wall, the wall being Patrick's prominent and deceitful family. It'd be so easy for them to obliterate him.

He finally releases him and Patrick falls forward, bending at the waist to catch his breath while rubbing his neck. Hawke's fists curl into themselves at his sides, his arms shaking, the self-control apparent.

"Wait, wait, wait..." Patrick coughs, still bent over, furrowing his brow as he holds up a finger. He's looking down at the floor before his eyes snap up to mine. "Tell me *he* isn't the guy."

Hawke stiffens beside me, and all I can think about is how I desperately need him to remain calm. I'm terrified of what Patrick will do if he knows. I can't lose him.

"It is!" Patrick declares, shocked yet seeming entertained. "Look at him protecting you. From me."

"You stay the fuck away from her," Hawke says through gritted teeth.

"You've got to be kidding me, Nic." Patrick laughs in disbelief. "You slept with him?!"

"I swear to *fucking* God, I'll kill you if you ever try to touch her again," Hawke warns, surprisingly not gaining Patrick's attention.

"You don't see it, do you?" Patrick asks, looking around Hawke at me.

“See what?” I shake my head at him, feeling emotionally exhausted worrying about these two killing each other.

“This was his plan all along,” he says calmly, staring at Hawke as if finally understanding it all. “This was how you got back at me, huh?”

He directs the question to Hawke as I peer up at him, seeing his jaw tighten, his eyes almost pleading with Patrick. The energy in the room has shifted. Where Patrick was on the defense initially, he now seems to be controlling the room again.

“You always wanted to destroy me after what happened, and you finally found a way to do it.” He shakes his head, face in disbelief. “You took away the love of my life.”

I swallow at the pain in his tone, my chest suddenly feeling tight by his assumption that this thing between Hawke and I was nothing more than a revenge plot, that none of this was as real as I thought it was. I’m feeling lightheaded and stumble back into the wall again as I look down at the floor.

“Don’t you believe him, Cole, don’t you do it,” Hawke pleads with me.

My nervous eyes peer from Hawke to Patrick and back to Hawke.

“That’s all this was. He’s a twisted, manipulative man. He used you to get back at me,” Patrick continues.

My mouth drops open as I attempt to take all of this in.

“It’s not your fault, babe. He’s toxic. He’s been wanting to destroy me ever since believing I was the one who killed Ben.”

“W-what?” The word barely slips through my lips like a tiny breath of wind.

“Let me guess, he didn’t tell you? Might as well throw it all out there! Hawke killed his friend. Like Sean said, he was too high to remember, isn’t that right?”

The anger and madness in Hawke’s face is confusing to me. Surely he’s lying. This can’t be true. Surely everything Hawke has told me is the truth...right?

He turns to face me again, his panicked eyes begging for me to focus on him and him alone.

“Cole...don’t. Don’t lose me now.”

“They were the only two people in that car that night, Nic. Everyone knows it. We’ve been trying to help him this whole time.” Patrick continues talking as if Hawke isn’t even in the room. “And here he is, trying to sabotage us for his own sick revenge. Jealousy always got the better of you, didn’t it, Hawke?”

This can’t be. He couldn’t have lied to me, could he? No, it’s not possible, is it? I get a sickening feeling in my gut, feeling like I’ve been hit by a Mack Truck. I’m breaking down internally.

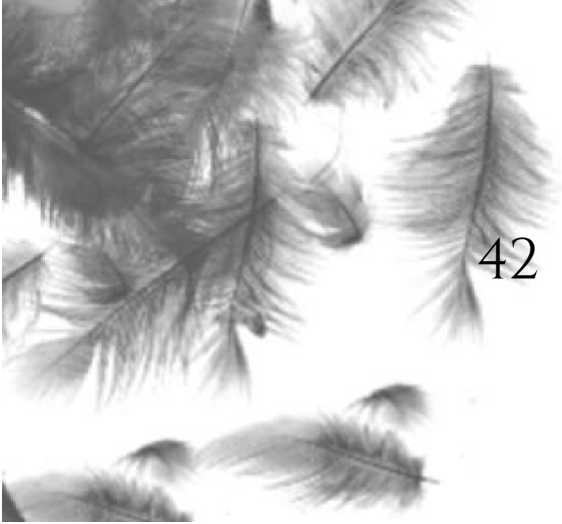
“Hawke...” I whisper through tears, looking at him now, wanting to feel the truth from him like I have before.

“He’s lying, Cole! He’s trying to get into your head! Turn you against me, get you back the only way he knows how!” Hawke yells, looking desperate and terror-struck.

“He’s the liar, Nic,” Patrick comments again. “This had nothing to do with you.”

I don’t even realize it, but I’m backing out of the door. I’m leaving the room, leaving the confusion and cloud of lies that are thickening by the second. I just can’t breathe in here. I can’t focus with both of their eyes on me.

It’s too much, *it’s all too much.*





I grab my old gym bag by the door, quickly throwing handfuls of clothes into it, not even paying attention to what I'm doing. I throw the keys to the bar into the side pocket, hoping there's something in there I can get away with wearing for my shift tonight.

"Nic, get back here and talk to me!" Patrick yells as I leave the bedroom, moving into the kitchen.

*It's too much.*

The lies, the deceit, the planting of misinformation in my head. I can't believe the way he tries to contort, twist, and bend the truth to his liking. He's a narcissist, a manipulative, repulsive liar who feeds on controlling the weak. He's doing everything Hawke said he would. His last sick attempt to exercise dominance over me. I just can't take it anymore. I'm beyond over his tricks. *Patrick is dead to me.*

"Cole, please. Everything between us has been real. You know me," Hawke begs, his voice breaking mid-sentence.

"You know the *real* me."

The idea that Hawke would lie to me about what he's been through is preposterous. A revenge plot? Sure, the idea may have been possible initially, especially after realizing he'd captured my attention the way he so innately did, but to take it this far? To have declarations of love, to expose his pain to me, to show me his scars and where he's covered them with my words? *Impossible*. He's the one who's suffered here, and he's the one who's had to endure the weight of these lies.

Even as he stands here, watching me, anxiously raking his hands through his hair, he's terrified. Terrified to the deepest part of what makes him feel whole around me, knowing he can't lose what keeps him living. He's terrified of losing me, whereas Patrick is simply terrified of losing.

Patrick is resorting to his old ways, doing the only thing he can to try to control me like he has been these past few years, but the controlling abuse stops here. The facts are written across my heart, and I've known for a while who to believe, who I can truly trust.

Hawke is on my tail, circling around the kitchen table, watching me with an anxiousness about him I can't stand to see. He doesn't need to deal with any more heartache in his life, and he'll never need to worry about that with me.

"Hawke, you ready?" I ask, looking up to face him, throwing my bag over my shoulder.

His lips part while he stares with raised eyebrows, as if what I just said hasn't registered. I close the space between us, not giving two shits that Patrick is watching us. I hear Hawke sigh

a breath of relief next to me and it bothers me. It hurts my heart that he worried so much I'd fall into the trap.

“Cameron, look at me,” I demand, grabbing his shirt into my fist and pulling him into me, making sure his eyes lock onto mine. “I'll never lose you in the madness.”

He winces, swallowing down his emotions, as he quickly grabs the back of my head, pulling it into his as he rests his forehead against mine.

It's almost like our own personal handshake, our forehead hugs. It's intimate; connecting us in our own little world, even if only for a moment.

“I love you,” he whispers breathlessly.

“And I love you,” I whisper back.

After he grabs his stuff from his room, we walk towards the door, hand in hand, leaving the house with Patrick calling out after us.

“This is insane, Nic! Just wait till you see what's coming!” he yells frantically behind us as we're walking away. “This isn't over! You're fucked Hawke!”

I halt in my tracks, turning to face him, leaving Hawke stumbling around me in my quick pause. I march back up to where Patrick's standing on the front step with heat in his eyes. We're face to face, and all my insecurities have now left me. I don't see a man I used to love. I see a manipulative liar who cheats his way through life, destroying others in his wake. Now I'm left with nothing but anger and resentment for the



person I tried so hard to care for, a person I attempted a future with, but could never succeed.

“Fuck you, you murderous bitch,” I grumble before decking him as hard as I can in the face with my fist.

Yes, violence is not always the best choice, but I did what I had to do. Hawke can't hit him, Ben can't hit him, so I did what needed to be done. For them.

Hawke runs over immediately, pulling me back behind him by my waist and getting between us, in case Patrick attempts to retaliate.

“You're going down a dark path, Nic!” He calls out, cupping his eye where I left a little cut near the cheekbone. “Trust me, you don't want to do this!”

Patrick's panicked voice fades as I continue walking towards my car, where Hawke checks my fist before gently rubbing my knuckles. He throws his bag into the back of my car, then his leg over his bike, revving it up next to me.

“See you back at the spot,” I tell him, before flipping off Patrick, who's still standing before the door with his fists clenched.

I back out of the driveway, peeling out of there, feeling a lot lighter than I did going in. I feel such a sense of relief. It's freeing. It's over. It's totally and completely over.



Hawke followed me back to our temporary residence, the little hideaway motel, sure to watch for Sean or Patrick in case they were following us. We get back into our room again after paying with cash for another night. Hawke presses me up against the door as soon as we enter.

“You believed me,” he whispers, running his fingers through a piece of my hair that’s fallen between us.

“Cam,” I say softly, running my hand along the side of his face. “Of course I did. I know your truth, your pain, your struggles...”

“But what he said...the revenge, it’s not entirely untrue.” He drops his head against the door above me, disheveling his dark hair. “The party? When I brought you there...”

I remember it like it was yesterday. He had me pinned to that couch in the little study room at the cabin, where I was already feeling things I thought I shouldn’t. I knew he was pushing the limits of our “friendship”, but truthfully, it excited me.

“I know. I know you had a plan. We’ve talked about it. You even admitted you’d never have been able to take it that far. And you know why?”

“Why?”

“Because you’re good. You’re a good person with a pure heart. You’re not like them.”

“I thought for sure he’d pull you away...get in your head, convince you it’s not real, that what we share isn’t as

irreplaceable as I know it is.”

“Nothing can break us, Cameron,” I say definitively.

“Nothing.”

He presses himself to me, hips pinning me against the door, lips finding mine in a mad rush of love and lust. His tongue tries to erase the memories of what happened, erase the idea that he could’ve lost me.

“If I lose you, I lose everything,” he whispers against my lips.

“We can’t ever let that happen,” I say before kissing his top lip and then bottom, gently sucking on his lip ring.

He pauses for a moment, letting me play with his lips, before pulling back slightly, his hands still holding him up against the door.

“Do you know what I wanted to do to him? I wanted to kill him with my bare hands, in front of you, for you, for Ben, for me. How fucked up is that?”

“It’s understandable. It doesn’t make you a villain, Cam. It makes you human.”

“I wanted to tell him nasty things, brag to him about how amazing it feels to fuck you raw, and how hearing you scream my name instead of his made me feel phenomenal. How fucking beautiful you are when you come for me. How he’s a spineless prick who’s never been able to make you come like I can with just one look.”

I chew on the corner of my lip, feeling flushed by his words. They make me feel a tingly sensation between my legs, forcing me to rub my thighs together.

“I’m fucking vile for having these thoughts,” he admits, shaking his head and touching my jaw, his thumb tracing my lips.

“You’re not,” I say, looking deeply into him. “You’re the kind of guy devils tell angels to go talk to to get them to fall, not knowing you’re the type to save them from the depths of Hell they’ve surrendered themselves to.”

“Jesus, Cole...” He tightens his jaw, a tic I know that means he felt that in his soul.

I pull him into me by the waist again, never getting close enough.

“I’m just so happy you’re mine. You’re finally mine,” he whispers, leaning in closer again.

I grip his shirt, pulling him roughly into my chest, loving the feeling of his warm body against mine. His soft, wet kiss sends endorphins shooting throughout my body, my blood pulsing through my veins at a rapid rate.

Pulling back from our sweet kiss to take a breath, I whisper, “I’ve always been yours.”

We rest our heads against one another as his smile lights up the darkest parts of me. We stand there for a moment just speaking without words again, enjoying the peace of just being together until reality hits.

“He’s going to come after me. He’ll call my parole officer. Probably already has. They’ll be looking for me now,” he admits, his eyes filled with a new type of sadness, a worry I don’t feel comfortable with.

A feeling of ultimate betrayal takes over me.

“I should never have told him,” I say, my voice cracking as my emotions come back. “I could’ve prevented you from being in this situation had I not said I was in love with you.”

My face falls into my hands as I cry at the thought of him being taken away from me. Especially now, especially after we’ve come so far. It truly isn’t fair.

“You told him you were in love with me?” he asks, wiping the tears off my face with his thumbs.

“Yeah.” I sigh, feeling miserable. “I mean, he figured out it was you once we were standing together again, but yeah, I told him.”

“Baby,” he says empathetically, pulling me into his embrace, his arms comforting me while gently rubbing my back.

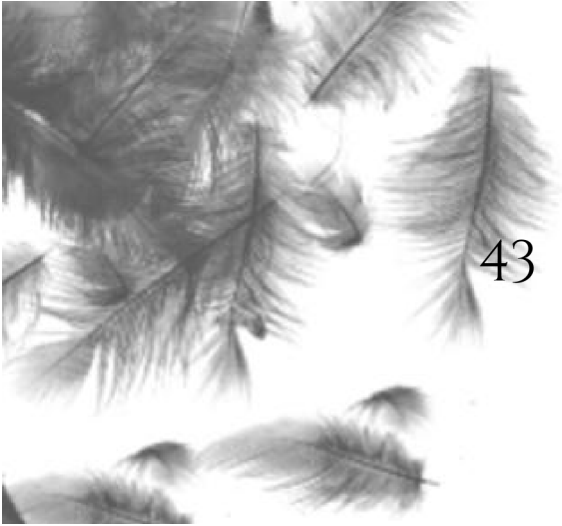
“I can’t lose you, Cam, not now. Not after everything.” I cry into him, fisting his shirt in my hands.

My phone interrupts us as a message comes through. Sniffing, I grab it from my back pocket, pulling it out between us to open the message.

**Patrick:** TELL YOUR NEW BOYFRIEND HIS  
P.O. HAS BEEN CALLED. POLICE WILL  
FIND YOU IF WE DON'T FIRST.

It's time to get a plan into action. We have to come up with something together. Our twisted fate brought us here, but I can't rely solely on that to save us.

Can I?





**E**ven in the midst of chaos, the propulsive rhythm of the train deep within our beings drives us together with cataclysmic force. Is it human nature to constantly fear losing what you've so recently found?

The world around us is crumbling, yet it's hard to decipher where one of us ends and the other begins. Hands on bodies, touching, feeling, melting into one.

The intrinsic need to immerse ourselves into one another, the fear of a future being stripped of us, has our mouths memorizing the curves of each other's lips, writing endless love letters with our tongues.

I find it odd how it can be so silent in the surrounding room, while the loud, thunderous crashing of my heart beats just beneath the surface, the deafening noise filling every part of me, so echoic, concealed by a body so suppressing. The need to translate the feeling reverberating through me into a tangible form is my only mission.

"I need you," I moan as he spreads sweet, wet kisses along my neck. "I can't be in any form of existence without you. I



won't survive.”

Our time is precious because we don't know what we have left. I have to head into the bar, and Hawke needs to hit the road. The plan is for me to go to work as normal, potentially drawing Patrick off his tail, while he hides out by riding into the city until he can get a hold of his parole officer to inform her of the situation.

He's not happy about it. It literally kills him to think of Patrick being able to find me. I had to force the seriousness of the issues, and the fact that if the cops found him, he wouldn't stand a chance. They'd detain him immediately, without question, more than likely finding something to charge him with, tearing him away from me for an indefinite amount of time. That scenario I can not handle.

He faces me from above, his green eyes littered with specks of aqua, illuminating in the most spectacular way. His dark, thick locks of hair, freshly damp from our shower, hang down over those breathtaking eyes. He looks at me with the kind of look that would make any girl melt into a puddle of love. The one that says my survival depends on you. The kind that echoes, you are the most interesting thing I've ever laid eyes on.

His elbows encase me on the bed, our legs intertwined as I gaze up at him. We're hiding in the tiny motel a few towns over, collecting ourselves before we part. With Patrick's resounding message clear as day, we know our clock is ticking

yet we keep stretching the time, savoring pulling every second until the next catches us.

I reach up and touch his lip ring, then run my fingers over his eyebrows and down the side of his face. His eyes close at the sensation and he breathes a sigh of comfort, then opens them again to focus on me.

“You’re making me nervous, Cole,” he whispers softly, his face now holding nothing but angst.

Anxiety is written all over my face. I swallow, knowing what he’s talking about. I can’t help the sick gut feeling I hold deep within me. There’s an ending coming, but to which story, I haven’t quite discovered.

“Don’t memorize me like you won’t see me again,” he says, frowning. “I know that look. I’ve made that same face.”

Tears rim my eyes again as I turn my head to look away from him, the direct eye contact too much for my heart.

“I’m just so...I just can’t, I can’t bear the thought—”

He stops me with his lips, ending my useless worrying for things that haven’t happened yet.

Our kiss quickly intensifies, clothes being stripped from our bodies while our lips stay locked on one another’s, needing each other to breathe.

He settles himself between my thighs, pushing inside of me slowly, every inch becoming more pleasurable than the last, until we are fully connected again like we were never meant to be apart.

Our breathless pants are met with kisses, our fingers intertwined as he holds my hands at the sides of my head, connecting every possible part of our bodies as if it's never enough.

His forehead rests on top of mine, eyes studying mine as he continues the fluid motion, pulling out, then driving himself deeper and deeper, to the place I ache to be filled.

“Nothing can take me away from you. Do you understand that?” His breathy tone echoes his seriousness.

I screw my eyes closed as he thrusts into me again, opening them to find his still on mine. I nod, feeling emotional, as he closes his eyes, dropping his head to the space between my shoulder and neck.

“Nothing,” he whispers, lips against the skin beneath my ear.

I want to believe him, desperately I do, but life doesn't generally work out to be like a fairy tale. Fairy tales were made to be an escape from the unfairness of this world. An escape for the broken, the used. An escape from mortal reality. The reality we keep trying to avoid.

We hold each other in the aftermath of our lovemaking, coming down from the high of what our touch can make us forget.

“You have to go,” I whisper, brushing his hair back off his forehead, feeling the inevitable.

His jaw flexes as his brows furrow together.

“I’ll ride up towards the city, call my P.O. on the way, explain everything that’s happening.”

He hops up off the bed, throwing on a pair of his black jeans. Finding a t-shirt, he quickly throws it over his lengthy torso as the material melts to his muscular figure. Pulling a snap-back hat out of his bag, he throws it on backwards over his hair.

“We’ll navigate this, Cole, we’ll do it. We will,” he reiterates, giving me a tiny, yet hopeful, grin.

I bite the corner of my lip, my heart swelling at the sight of him, still in disbelief that we are here, together, like this. I never thought I could fall for anyone the way I have for him. Sometimes it takes being with the wrong person to show you how truly amazing it can be with the right one.

Our love started in the dark. It was planted in the deepest part of the ground, watered with secrets, nourished through infidelities. And yet, somehow, our attachment grew into something real, reaching the edge of the surface until we pierced through the darkness of the dirt that held us, into the light of a new day. The sight of a future we had never anticipated, now recognized, is ever so fragile.

“I’ve already called to have Kid watch the bar tonight, so if anything happens, he’ll be right there to call the guys, alright?”

“Really?” I ask, cocking a brow, impressed with the fact that he’s already got his crew of guys watching me, protecting me. “Okay.”

He approaches my position on the bed where I'm clutching the sheet to my naked body, nodding, attempting to appear confident and strong rather than as worried as I feel internally.

“Keep your stuff here for now, and call me as soon as you're done with your shift, got it?”

His thumb and forefinger gently pinch the bottom of my chin, tilting my face to his as he waits for my answer.

“Yeah, I will.”

He cups my face, rubbing my bottom lip with his thumb, as he tilts his head to the side, licking his lips, clearly anxious to leave.

“I'm just going for a ride. I'll be right back.”

He says the words as if he needs to hear them himself to set the course of the unforeseeable future. The rate at which my heart is racing is uncontrolled. It's screaming internally, begging for all of this to finally be over, needing that fairy tale to be our reality.

He leans down to kiss me, pressing his lips to mine, when there's a pounding at the door.

I gasp, pulling away, my eyes filling with panic as I clutch the sheet higher up on me. Hawke screws his eyes closed tightly, sagging his head. It's clear we've been found, but by who? Helping me find my clothes as I quickly get dressed, the pounding on the door continues.

“Police! Open up!”

“Fuck!” Hawke curses, tossing his hat to the corner of the room, running his hands through his hair.

“What’s happening?! What do we do?!” I question in a panic.

The pounding continues as my entire body shakes, the terror inside me radiating out. Our plans are being derailed from the tracks faster than our train can catch wind.

“We open the door.” He sighs, looking defeated.

Hawke approaches the door, waiting to make sure I’m fully dressed before opening it.

Immediately, two officers barge into the room, weapons drawn, as Hawke assumes a submissive position with his head down and his hands raised in the air before him.

“Get against the wall!” the officer yells, pointing at Hawke with his weapon. “Hands on your head!”

He walks to the wall, putting his hands on his head as the officer approaches him, holstering his weapon. The other chubbier officer standing watch over me directs his weapon towards Hawke, asking me if there are any weapons or illegal substances in the room as my eyes dart wildly back and forth between them.

“No. No weapons, no drugs,” Hawke answers, turning his head slightly.

“He didn’t ask you!” The officer hits him in the back of the head, causing me to become irate, standing up off the bed.

“Let him go! He didn’t even do anything!”

“Sit down!” the other officer yells, redirecting his weapon towards me, forcing me to sit again.

“Cole, baby, please stay calm,” Hawke instructs with a soft voice, his forehead against the wall.

I swallow down my tears, watching the officer peel each hand off his head, slapping the cuffs on him, placing his hands behind him.

“Got a call that there was a disturbance. Gotta take you in. You know the rules.”

Hawke sighs, banging his forehead against the wood-paneled wall, making an old painting of a sunny day in a flowery field fall to the ground abruptly. Fitting.

“There’s been a mistake. He didn’t do anything. He was with me...” I begin calmly explaining to the officer near me, hoping in some strange world he’ll listen and understand and make this right.

“Sorry lady, your boy is to be detained until we can contact his parole officer.”

“Cole, call Kid and tell him to call Julie for me,” Hawke instructs as they guide him out to the police car.

*Kid, call Julie.*

I make a mental note, tripping over my own feet as I follow them, trying to breathe through the panic attack I’m currently facing.

Tears escape me as I watch them put him in the back of the car, the officer roughly ducking his head, messing up that same hair I was feeling against my neck in a calmer moment just minutes ago.

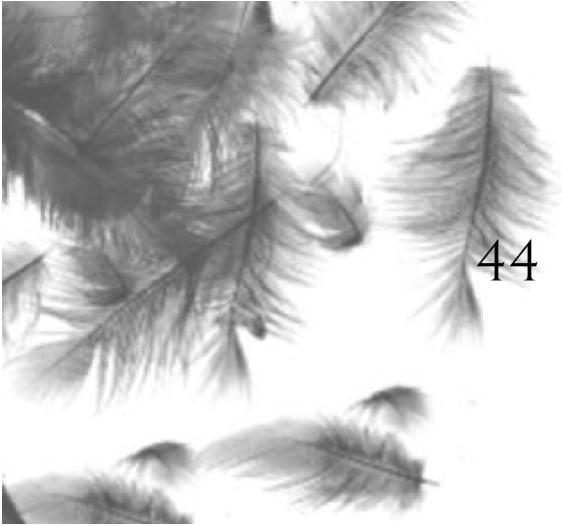
I can't bear to watch this anymore.

Racing back into the room, I grab Hawke's phone off the table in the corner, finding Kid's number with shaky fingers and calling it immediately. I wait as it rings and rings, the wait, a slow and painful torture in and of itself.

"Waddup, bruh?" he answers nonchalantly.

"Kid, it's Cole," I spit out breathlessly. "Call Julie. Cam's in trouble."







## TIMING IS EVERYTHING

I've experienced moments that seem to happen in slow motion. As if time actually slowed down, stretched, so you can process the significance of what's about to transpire. That a whole system of events could be ready to unveil itself, pieces lining up in such a way, showing you that truly nothing is in your control.

It was like a movie scene, one that dragged along to show the impact of what was to come. Time slowed for me when I walked into 9-5 Slide tonight.

As I was running up to the door to let Andrew, our day shift worker, off for the evening, I was met with a familiar face at the entrance.

Walking past, I couldn't help but to take in the man who was leaving at the same time.

His presence sent an icy chill over me like a blanket of discomfort. I'd seen him here before. I remember him, specifically because he was dressed like he didn't fit in with the typical crowd at the bar. Pretty sure I called him "suit-man". I also remembered him because he was the dick that

physically grabbed me and hit on me while I was working that night.

I awkwardly sneak under his arm, looking back as his eyes catch mine, replaying the memory in my mind. The button-up dress shirt, five o'clock shadow, and the peculiar look on his face.

Feeling a tad uneasy at the sight of him, I try my best to brush it off, seeing as he's clearly leaving the bar. I have enough anxiety as it is with current events.

I talk to our new day shift worker, Andrew, for a few minutes, chatting about nothing in particular, until I eventually take over and start the night shift for John.

I can't help but worry about everything and everyone around me at the moment. So much is happening. I anxiously check my phone for a message back from Kid. He told me after he called and left message after message for Julie, his parole officer, that we'd just need to wait it out. I told him that wasn't enough and to keep calling.

More than likely, Hawke would be charged with something, possibly battery. Who knows what they'd make up after Patrick's call. His ridiculous ass couldn't even take a hit from a woman and own up to it. I'd rather I got charged with the crime and take this burden from Cameron, the innocent man of the century.

It's alarming how easy it was for them to assume he'd caused trouble again. The poor guy had been a scapegoat for

their family before, but to add to it because of me was preposterous.

The thought of Hawke in a cell right now, contemplating in his head if he'll be released, makes my blood boil. I need to find a way to get him out. It's time I save him for saving me from a lifetime of my own imprisonment.

I text Kid to try Julie again, wondering if he'd be coming in soon to "watch" over me. I hadn't seen him or his normal crew of guys here yet. Just me, a few regulars, and old Leonard holding down the fort at the moment.

Luckily, it's filled with familiar faces. Leonard is planted at the bar, reading *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, a far cry from the classic literature he's been reading, but such is life. Sometimes you need to dive into the crazy.

I text John, asking how everything is going with him and Anna and the baby, when the bar receives a call.

"9-5 Slide, this is Cole. How can I help you? I answer.

"Cole? That's a new one. Here I thought Nic filled in for me." John chuckles.

I'm immediately relieved to hear his cheery voice and uplifting energy.

"New nickname, kinda stuck." I grin into the receiver, stacking some clean glasses while we talk.

"I like it. But hey, Cole," he starts, using the new nickname like he's been using it for years. "I just wanted to call and let you know everything is fine with Anna and the baby."

I let out a huge sigh of relief.

“Turns out she was having some Braxton Hicks contractions. Everything is good, just starting to actively move along.”

“Oh, God, I’m so happy to hear that. I was nervous.”

“Trust me, I was too. But everything is great. She’s resting at home now, more comfortable, eating some of my homemade chicken noodle soup.”

My lips pull into a grin at the thought. He’s going to be a great dad. He’s already such an amazing boyfriend. So kind and always caring.

“I can come in, finish the night if you’d like...” he offers.

“God, no.” I stop him immediately. “You stay home with her and relax. I’ve got everything covered.”

As soon as I say it, I hear the door open and see Patrick walking in. My heart stops. As if someone placed a ton of bricks on my chest, the inability to breathe hits me.

“Cole...girl, you’re the best,” John continues, talking in my ear. “Hey, did you ever break up with that guy? Patrick, I think his name was? The one with the family who practically owns the town? I was worried about you and never found out what happened between you two.”

“I, uh...” I mutter as Patrick approaches the bar, the look in his eyes confident and intimidating as he takes a seat.

“Are you alright? Like are you safe? Can you at least tell me that?” John asks, seeming worried by my inability to answer.

I can't say anything because the man in question is literally standing there, staring at me with blank eyes. Eyes that scream authority and entitlement. Eyes that tell me any sliver of kindness he may have had within him is gone, destroyed by the infidelities I've burnt him with.

I sigh into the phone, clearly making John even more worried.

“Cole, say something. You're making me nervous,” John continues on the other end. “Just promise me you'll tell me if there's something wrong.”

“Okay, yeah,” I say quickly, sounding as calm as possible.

John hangs up after I've unconvincingly reassured him I'm fine and he should go back to helping Anna. Hanging up the receiver, I realize just how ridiculous this is. I turn and walk up to where Patrick is sitting on the other side of the counter.

“What can I get for you?” I ask with sarcasm.

I'm not about to wither away beneath his scare tactics.

He tilts his head and smiles eerily.

“Well, now that the problem is out of the way, I think it's best if you came back home.”

My eyes narrow at him, my sweaty palms gripping the edge of the bar at the way he just called Hawke the problem. It's

never been more clear what the intention was when the police came to find us. I should've never hit Patrick and given him the opportunity to use that against Hawke. *He's* the real problem.

"No. Never gonna happen," I reply dryly, turning to put some dirty glasses into the sink.

"Nic, c'mon...I get it," he says in a calmer tone. "You had a moment, got caught up in his ways. He's very manipulative. Finding someone soft like you, it was easy for him to mold you and use you to get back at me."

I laugh. I actually laugh a hearty belly laugh, causing Leonard to peek over at us from his book.

"But you can't seriously believe the lies he spews. I mean, look at the guy and look at you. What would a guy like Hawke actually want with a girl like you? You need to come back to what's safe. Come home."

"You're insane, Patrick, clinically insane," I say, scoffing. "You seriously think after everything I've seen, everything I've heard, and with how you've treated me, that I'd honestly ever take you back?"

He just sits there, not knowing what to do, not knowing what to say, because there is nothing he can say. He has no control over me anymore.

"You need to leave," I say definitively, placing both hands on the counter and nodding towards the door.

"I'm not leaving."

“Leave.”

“Nic, enough of this shit,” he says through gritted teeth, standing up as he slams his fists against bar’s surface.

Leonard drops his book, turning his body to face us, watching the interaction curiously.

I stand behind the bar, watching as he slowly comes undone by not getting his way. My mind races with ideas.

“You know what’s funny?” I ask, leaning against the edge with an easy smile. “I was with you for years. *Years*. And I didn’t know what an orgasm was until I met Hawke.”

His face drops. It’s clear he can’t breathe with the truths I’ve released into his air.

“Like, I legitimately had no idea what it was. Never had enough time to have the chance to find out with you. Two minutes is a long time when you’re holding a plank, not when having sex with your significant other.”

His mouth drops open as he stares at me, so I continue whispering.

“In fact, it wasn’t until Hawke fucked me in his bed, on the couch, on the kitchen table, all over that damn house, while you were out of town on business, did I finally realize how phenomenal sex can be.”

The conversation is creating a fire inside of him. I feel it building as his nostrils flare and his chest rises as falls more dramatically. I lean forward, closer to his ear.



“He fucked me so good, I even let him cum in me,” I whisper in his ear, before leaning back with an angelic grin.

That’s the breaking point for him. He loses control. Kicking the stool, he causes it to topple over behind him, creating a scene as the other patrons turn to face us. He grabs my t-shirt near the neck, pulling me across the bar towards him. I’m not even fighting it. Even if he hits me here in front of everyone, I’ll gladly take it for Hawke.

His fist curls into itself as he holds it up behind him, acting as if he wants to punch the shit out of me.

“You evil bitch,” he grimaces between clenched teeth.

Leonard barges over out of nowhere, gripping him by the chest, pulling him off me.

“OUT.”

With a firm grip on his sweater, he says the word with such authority that it startles me. Patrick tries to brush him off, to no avail.

“You should’ve left this alone! Digging up old graves isn’t going to be good for you!” he warns as Leonard throws him out of the door.

He dusts his hands off, closing it behind him, walking back over to me at my position behind the bar.

“You need to be more careful. He could’ve really hurt you,” he says in a protective tone.

I feel a tad foolish for driving him to the point of potentially hitting me just to prove a point.

“I know.” I sigh, blinking profusely, trying to think straight.

My hands are still shaking, and my heart is racing from the exchange. He really could’ve hit me.

“They weren’t kidding about him.” Leonard scoffs, nodding towards the door.

Wait, I’m confused. Who told Leonard about Patrick?

“They?”

“You didn’t really believe they’d let you be here alone, did you?” he continues with a half grin pulling at the lips hidden beneath his overgrown beard.

“What?” I ask breathlessly. “So you know Hawke and Kid?”

I know they frequent the same bar, but I’ve never seen them interact. It leaves me to wonder how much Leonard actually knows about this place and the people around here.

“I’m a big city dog living a small-town life. I hear things, see things. He’s a good boy who’s struggled with things out of his control. But oaks grow strong in contrary winds,” he says with a hint of hope in his eyes.

His statement gives me pause. Even in small towns where the rich and entitled attempt to rule, you find genuine souls. Ones with hearts so real they grow through the cracks, watching, waiting, ready to stand up for what’s right, stand up

for the ones who need it, deserve it. That's the good side of people knowing everything about you in these sheltered towns. The only side that counts.

"That they do," I whisper in response, loving that Leonard has a seemingly deep-rooted respect for Hawke.

He finds his seat again, sipping on his whiskey neat while turning back to his page in *Fear and Loathing* as if the moment never happened.

Sudden panic hits me again as I check my phone to see if Kid has gotten anywhere with Julie. Sure enough, there's a message from him.

**Kid:** Julie's at the station. I'm not sure what that means, but she's there now. I'm heading over in case they release him. I'll get at you when I hear more.

*Dammit. I need answers.*

I continue on with the night, working the next few hours in total limbo, seeing some of Hawke's guys filtering in and out at different times, making my heart warm with a sense of security. The bar finally begins fizzling out. People are leaving and it's about time to wrap up for the evening.

Leonard walks me out, waiting for me while I shut down the register and go to close up.

“Take care of yourself, young lady, and if ya got any sense, you’ll leave this shit-hole town on the next train out.”

There’s a hidden seriousness in his joke. One that tells me with confidence, there’s nothing left for us here. The place has all but dried up with the secrets and lies blowing like sand in a barren desert. Not a sustainable environment for a newly growing love.

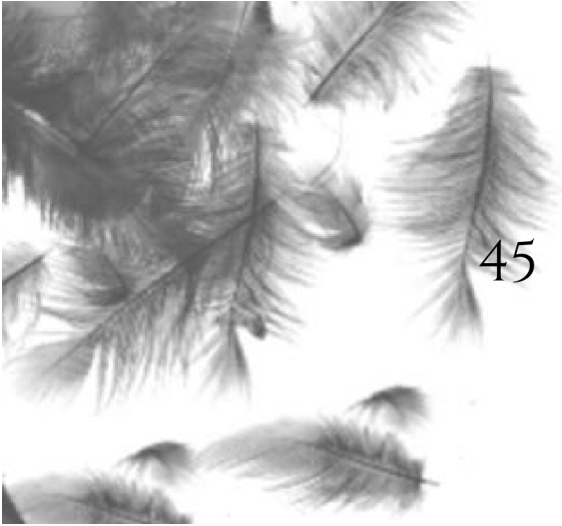
Leonard leaves beside me in his black Bronco as I start up my car to head back to the motel, with the plan to call Kid on the way. I sit there for a moment, trying to remember if I locked the front door. I was so focused on my conversation with Leonard, that I can’t remember for the life of me if I locked it or not. I was working on autopilot, not even thinking while I closed up.

I look around me, seeing an empty lot, void of anyone. Running to the door with my keys in hand, I give it a quick pull to ensure I’m not crazy. Seeing it’s locked, I breathe a quick sigh, feeling stupid for not paying attention, and turn to race back to my vehicle.

I reach to open my door when the front of my chest gets pushed up against my car by a firm body holding me to it.

I gasp, dropping my keys to the ground at the forceful shove.

*Timing is everything.*





I can see the fog from my breath making a small circle on my car window. I watch it expand and contract, growing and minimizing before me. Keeping my attention on something so small and meaningless is the only thing keeping me from entering full-blown panic mode. So I watch it, study it, calm myself as I feel my hair being held tightly, my face sealed to the glass before me.

I can feel his presence behind me as his body presses against the back of mine. It's unfamiliar. It's cold and hard.

"You stay still," he warns in a deep, raspy tone with his hot breath against my neck. "And do what I say, got it?!"

There's literally no one here to help me. Leonard is gone, Kid is at the station, Hawke is locked up, John's at home, and Patrick's...well, who knows. I've never needed saving more.

It's just me and the out of place "suit-man" from the bar, outside against my car that's parked next to the building.

He waited. He came back, waited, and watched until I was alone for his moment to strike.

“W-what do you want from me?” I stutter out the words, trying to remain calm as tears tease the edge of my eyelids.

He lifts my head back away from the car by my hair, turning only my neck to face him.

“I want to remind you that no one says no to me. Not even white trash bar whores like you,” he seethes, before slamming my head back against the glass, my cheekbone burning from the pain.

“Please, please...don’t,” I cry out.

“Take off your belt,” he says in a deep tone, the words instantly making me sick to my stomach.

“No, please...”

“Take off your fucking belt,” he demands again, tightening his grip on my hair.

I fumble with the front of my pants, removing my belt while racking my brain for an idea, a plan to get out of this.

What are the chances after everything I’d been through that something like this would happen? I’d always believed in fate, hoped it would ultimately save me in the same way that it brought love into my life, but this? This is just gruesome. I try not to drown myself in self-pity, but Jesus, what more can I take?

I’m holding the belt in my hand when he rips it from my grasp, tossing it towards the wall of the bar away from me.

I hear the sound of his pants coming undone; the belt opening up as he tugs at the material near my hips.

“No,” I cry out in a hoarse whisper. “Please don’t do this.”

I feel so helpless, so out of control over this horrible situation happening to me. I want to scream. I want to cry. I want to curl up and away from this person trying to hurt me in unimaginable ways.

He appears to be struggling with my pants, so he releases my hair to use both hands. I take the opportunity to turn around, sending a quick knee to his groin.

Falling forward a bit while grunting, I make a run for it. I scream for help as I race through the parking lot, but don’t get far before he’s on my tail. He dives, grabbing for my leg, causing me to fall and hit the pavement, my elbows skinned from the rough landing.

He pulls my leg back and I continue trying to crawl away, clawing at the asphalt beneath me, kicking my legs to release his hold, but he’s just too strong. He overpowers me, climbing up my frame, turning me over while straddling me before sending a violent slap across my face with the back of his hand.

With both my hands in a fist above my head, I swing them forward, landing a hard punch to his gut. He gasps and falls forward but grabs my wrists, rolling to the side of me.

We wrestle around for a minute as I attempt to free myself from his grasp before he wraps an elbow around my neck. He



gets up with a firm hold on me now and begins dragging my flailing body back towards the car, my heels dragging beneath me.

I scream for help again as he pushes me back into position against the car door. Before I get the chance to scream again, I hear the click of a gun at the back of my head. I suck in a breath, unable to breathe, fearful to move, my eyes screwing shut.

“Pull your fucking pants down!” he growls at me, pressing the gun roughly against my neck.

“Okay, okay,” I blurt, my hands in the air before me, shaking as I try to abide.

I pull them down my thighs, leaving myself exposed in only my underwear. I swallow down the pain of the moment, attempting to place myself somewhere else, anywhere else mentally as my tears drown my face, removing myself from the situation about to happen.

A happy memory comes to mind. Sitting on Cameron’s lap as he wraps his arms around me in the car. We’re watching the sunrise as he gently rubs our hands together, weaving our fingers, then slowly pulling them apart before repeating the soft motion again. He kisses my neck and whispers into my ear the magnitude of how much he loves me.

“That’s right. You start listening and it’ll be a lot easier.” The hoarse voice pulls me out of my memory, bringing me back into my terrifying reality. “Girls like you shouldn’t be working the bars alone late at night. Things can happen.”

He grabs for my underwear near my hips, pulling the thin straps down until they sit down around my thighs. I'm bare before him now and know it's over. I can't control what is about to happen to me. I'm about to be raped. The gravity of it all comes down on me as my mouth drops open to breathe, the tears drowning my face.

I'm sobbing as he bends me forward again. I feel him rubbing himself against my backside, making me want to vomit. I instinctively put my hand back to push him away.

"Please stop. I'll do anything else, just don't..." I don't know what I'm offering, I just need to try something, anything.

I feel him grumble something under his breath behind me, gripping my hand and twisting it painfully behind my back, using it as an anchor to hold me still.

I place myself back in that car, being held by Hawke. He brings his hands to my face, holding me before him. He grins, looking deep within me with those ocean eyes encased by those long black lashes, searching deep within me for the home we found in each other.

The man gasps before I feel his body leave mine with a sound I'll never forget. Like a rock hitting a wall, but there's no rock, no wall.

I seal myself to my car, flinching as the man behind me falls to the ground. Quickly pulling my pants up, I bend down to grab the keys I'd dropped. I get in the car, locking the door

immediately. With trembling hands, I put the keys into the ignition, my chest heaving, before starting it up.

The headlights on my car turn on, illuminating the scene before me. I witness a scuffle playing out between two guys in the gravel next to the old brick exterior of the bar. The man who was behind me, now on his hands and knees. Getting his feet beneath him, he dives for the other person. A struggle ensues, fists being thrown back and forth, rolling around on the ground until one of them ends up on top.

I put the car in reverse, turning my head to back out, when I peer towards them again, remembering the guy had a gun and whoever is attempting to save me could be killed.

In the shadows between the light, I see *him*; the sight stopping my heart.

*It's Hawke.* It's Hawke above the man. Hawke, pummeling his fists, beating into him again and again, only the guy isn't fighting back. It's Hawke, on the verge of killing him. *How is he here?*

I put the car into park, opening my door, racing towards them.

“Hawke! Stop!” I yell, seeing the destruction that's about to take place.

As much as I couldn't care less about this man who tried to hurt me, I can't see Hawke fall into ruin again because of me. I'm also painfully aware of the fact that this man had a weapon. There's no way I can leave him.

“Hawke!” I yell again.

I see the gun sitting on the ground near where my car is parked and kick it across the lot, far out of reach.

I run up behind him, watching with wide, worried eyes as he continues to mercilessly obliterate this man. He’s like an animal. There’s no stopping him. He’s lost it. He’s out of control, and before he knows it, he’s going to kill the guy. The muscles of his back flex while he continues his vigorous assault, even though the man is clearly knocked out cold.

“Cameron!” I scream in desperation.

He pauses, with his fist raised in the air, about to strike another blow. His chest is heaving as he slowly backs off the man who’s not even moving. His body is now limp, void of consciousness.

Hawke falls back against the brick wall of the bar, his head tilted back, his eyes barely open as his mouth hangs apart slightly, catching his breath.

“Cameron?! Oh God, are you alright?!” I ask desperately, crouching down next to him.

There’s blood all over him. I scan his head and face, which appear fine, no cuts or bleeding of his own. He’s holding his side and groaning, his face twisted in pain. He doesn’t seem to be able to breathe.

“Cole.” He groans, reaching out for me. “Ah shit, my ribs.”

I lift his shirt, checking his torso, not seeing anything visible, but assuming in the struggle he took a hit to the side,

possibly breaking a rib.

“We need to get you out of here.” I place his arm around my shoulder, lifting his heavy body as the shock of the situation helps me to continue moving.

I get him to the passenger side door with his assistance when he shakes his head to stop me.

“My bike.” He hisses in pain, pointing behind the bar.

I was so mentally not present that I never even heard him pull up.

“Jesus, Cole,” he says through his pain, finally catching his breath, holding my face between his hands, his motorcycle gloves still on. “Baby, tell me you’re alright.”

His broken voice is killing me. The sickening feeling of seeing me in that situation must’ve destroyed him. He’s so angry, yet so soft with me. I nod in his hands, never more thankful for his timing. But this wasn’t random. This entire moment feels planned. There was nothing left to chance. This was set up to break me.

“I wouldn’t have stopped,” he says through pants, leaning an arm against my car, his worried eyes killing a piece of my heart. “I wouldn’t have stopped if I hadn’t heard you.”

“How did you even get here?! What happened?!” I cry, relief finally taking over me. “I thought I was alone. He almost...He tried to...”

I break down into tears as he brings me against his chest.

“I know. But it didn’t. He didn’t,” he says breathlessly, his arms tightening around me. “I’d die before I ever let anything happen to you.”

“Cameron,” I whisper, clawing at the shirt on his chest as he holds me.

I could break down now, I could fall apart at the what-ifs, but we don’t have time for what-ifs. I push him out at arm’s length, looking up at him.

“You gotta get outta here,” I rush. “Now!”

He nods, looking back towards the unconscious man. Walking backwards towards his bike he calls out, “Where?! Where do we go?”

My mind is racing with what to do. It seems one step forward is ten steps back in the world of Cam and Cole. We can’t go back to the motel. We can’t go on the run because Hawke’s being watched closer than ever. It’s clear to me he needs to go back to Kid. He picked him up, and now needs to act like this never happened, and he was never here. I, on the other hand, have to go back to the place I never wanted to return.

He starts up his bike, looking at me anxiously as his mind is working overtime.

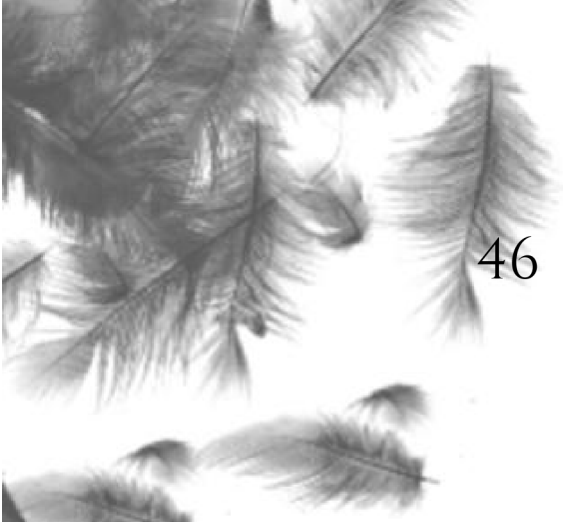
I look back up into his eyes as I make my way around the car and into the driver’s seat.

“Go back to Kid’s,” I call out confidently, gripping my steering wheel as a deep, fighting instinct compels me to calm

my nerves.

It's now or never. I have the power to change this. I have the power to make things right. I swallow down any uncertainty as a wave of bold fearlessness takes hold.

“I have something I need to do.”







**W**ith unsteady hands still shaking from the unthinkable events that just transpired, I pull my keys out of the ignition and sit back in the seat of my car, staring at the house before me.

Hawke went to Kid's like I instructed. Not without a fight, of course. He practically got on his hands and knees, begging me to go with him until we called the police. I wasn't hearing it, though. I knew what needed to be done and unfortunately, the police couldn't make that happen. It's not that I didn't appreciate his concern, especially after what we've endured already. I did, more than anything. His love for me is beyond evident, and I feel it within the deepest part of my being.

But this is bigger than his concern for me. This is bigger than us. This is about bringing justice to the people who deserve it. This is me seeking atonement for the one I love. This is me, bringing down the house high up on the hill by burning it with the flames it's ignited around me.

I quickly called the police from the old payphone right around the corner, letting them know about the man lying

unconscious outside of the bar. I didn't say anything else before hanging up. I didn't have time to explain the details at that moment. I needed to put this plan in motion.

When I pull up, Patrick's car is in the driveway, so I know he's here, probably sleeping like the fucking baby he is.

I knew this wasn't a coincidence. The man at the bar, the threats, the scare tactics. It's asinine to even assume so. This family, these people, will go to any lengths to keep their secrets hidden, especially in the midst of those secrets pending exposure. And yet, no amount of money or fear can keep the truth from surfacing in my presence. The ground beneath me is firm, my feet planted like oak, ready to withstand this storm.

As soon as I open the car door, I make another call to the police from my number before placing the phone in my pocket.

Patrick exits the house at the same time I approach the stairs, making me suck in a breath in surprise. Was he waiting for me? Or was he waiting for the guy I just encountered? The thought literally gives me a deep shudder in my shoulders. The sight of him that once brought me a sense of ease now does nothing but bring me a distaste for everything he represents.

"Either you finally came to your senses with a little push, or you brought me my phone. Which is it, Nic?" He raises his brows, causing me to lower mine.

*His phone?*

*His phone.*

He must've dropped his phone at the bar when Leonard kicked him out, placing him there during the incident.

“You sent that man to me,” I declare, shaking my head in complete disgust. “I can't believe you. You sent him there to do what? Rape me? Torture me? What was your plan?!”

He rolls his eyes. “Quit being so overdramatic. Those types of things can happen when you work in that environment. I've warned you about this.”

His knowing arrogance is setting my insides ablaze with anger and retribution. It's why I saw the man there before, and it's why he grabbed me. It was Patrick's sick attempts to control the situation around him and make me quit the bar through intimidation and scare tactics.

“So you set this up? You sent him there to scare me, not knowing he was going to try to actually rape me. And then, what? Your jealousy got the best of you?”

“I'm sorry, what? Jealousy?”

“Why did you do it?!” I yell at him. “You might've killed him, you know!”

He pauses, tilting his head at me, confused. Of course he's confused, what I'm saying isn't making any sense to him because he wasn't there, but the police on the other end of this phone don't know that.

His face contorts, looking at me.

“I don't know what you're talking about, but I can only hope it worked. Maybe now you'll realize what side you want

to be on. I told you digging up old graves wouldn't be good for you," he states, proving he sent that guy there to fuck with me.

Perfect timing, too. Hawke was locked up at the time, and I was alone, in need of help. Either he hoped I'd come running home into the comfort of his arms, or worse, the guy was planning on keeping me quiet forever. The realization causes my body to shake with rage as I curl my nails into my palms.

He slowly descends the stairs towards me, reaching the base where I'm standing with my keys in hand, chest heaving, eyes set on evil. He takes his hand and brushes some hair off my forehead. I slap it away.

"Do not touch me," I seethe.

He drops his hand, chuckling at my behavior as he puts his hands in his pockets.

"Don't play with people out of your league, Nic. You'll lose every time."

"Out of my league?" I question with sarcasm. "Oh, like Hawke? Was he out of your league? Never quite reaching your elite status, huh?"

"Definitely," he says smugly. "He's far beneath where you could be. Which is why I can't seem to understand why you'd waste your time with this whole defiance act."

*I can't stand this man.* Why couldn't I see this before? Why couldn't I see the true colors of this sick and twisted individual I'd almost locked myself into a lifetime with? Everything

about this family is a facade. The good, wholesome, pure looks are caked on over the deceitful, conniving, arrogant souls beneath.

“If Hawke’s so beneath you, why even offer him a place to live? Why act like you’re helping him when you couldn’t care less?”

“Because it was the right thing to do,” he says the stupid phrase again. “It’s not like he has anything or anyone anyway.”

“Pretty easy to pin a murder on a kid with nothing to his name, huh?” I ask, cocking my head. “Even easier to lie about him hitting you when it was really a woman who gave you that little shiner you’re sporting.”

He laughs. He actually has the audacity to laugh. I have to keep my cool, calm myself, and continue, but it’s getting harder and harder. I need to scale back.

“I don’t understand why you need to keep pushing this. Truly, I don’t, Nic. It’s ridiculous to me.”

I just stand there with wide eyes, shaking my head in disbelief. How can he not understand?

He sighs, looking down at the ground before his eyes reach mine again.

“I really wish we could’ve just forgotten all about it,” he says quietly, his face softening.

I sense a dejection deep within him, a pain in his heart at losing me to something out of his control.

*I need to exploit that.*

I sigh, placing my hand on my forehead, calming myself. “I have a right to know, especially if we have a chance at a future together, Patrick,” I reply in a softer tone, one that reeks of sincerity.

“I don’t know if a future with you is what my family wants for me anymore. Especially after what you’ve done. Sean knew something was going on between you two, but I didn’t want to believe it.”

“But what do you want, Patrick?” I ask softly. “Yes, I’ve made mistakes. Yes, I’ve done things I shouldn’t, but that doesn’t make what we had just go away, does it? What about forgiveness?” I slowly inch closer to him.

“The horrible things you said at the bar.” He twists his face while talking. “I know it’s not your character to do those vile acts. You were acting out in defiance, saying things to get under my skin. I get it.”

“You’re right. I wasn’t being honest. I would never go so far as to let someone take that away from you.”

*I would. I would do it again and again.*

“I know, Nic. And it’s true, I can’t just turn off these feelings for you, as much as your indiscretions tell me I should. You have so much making up to do. So much to prove to me.”

I bite my bottom lip, looking up at him with weak, sad eyes. This is exactly what he needs. A way to maintain control over

me by my need to prove to him I'm worthy of his love. He stares back at me, his arrogant demeanor relaxing some. I know there's a part of him that still loves me and wishes we could go back to that easier time. A time where endless questioning and difficult truths weren't a problem for him.

"We can start by being honest with each other. No one else needs to be present in our relationship but us. Just us and our secrets," I whisper, giving him the sense of security he seems to need to open up that vault that is his past.

He takes a breath, stepping closer to me and taking my hand in his. I let him, as he decides to come clean.

"What happened Patrick?" I ask quietly, pressing myself closer into him.

"I can't take credit for the events after the accident and the way it was handled. That was my father's doing." He looks down at the grass beneath his boots. "He helped finagle me out of that potentially catastrophic dilemma. Either way, what's done is done. There's no changing the past, Nic."

The pain, cracking my heart in half when I hear him call Ben's death his dilemma, almost renders me useless until I find the strength deep inside. The strength for Hawke. The strength for Ben.

"So it was you," I whisper, already knowing. "You were in that car."

"Is this what you need to move forward?" he questions, frustrated.

“It’s what I need, it’s what *we* need.” I nod, agreeing.

He sighs, shaking his head at me like I’m a child asking for more candy.

“Yes, Nic. I was in that car. I was driving, and we crashed. It could’ve been any of us. We were all drunk. Accidents happen, but some futures aren’t worth messing up.”

I stare at him with eyes as wide as saucers. *I can’t believe the prick actually admitted it.*

“Are you happy now? Are you ready to put the past in the past and move on like the rest of us?” he asks, rolling his eyes like this entire event was just some little stain that needed covering.

I sigh, closing my eyes as the tears fall freely and a huge smile stretches across my face. I’ve never been filled with such relief, such happiness, such pure satisfaction of knowing the chains have finally been broken.

Before anything else can be said, I hear the cars approaching. Lights begin flashing around me as the police pull up to the property. I drop his hand, taking a step back to pull my phone out of my pocket, verifying that it’s still on, and it is. I lift the phone to my ear, hearing a woman on the receiver inform someone else that the police are indeed at the location. They heard everything, and now I know it’s been recorded.

“Put your hands in the air!” One of the policemen yells at Patrick, pointing a gun in his direction.



“What?! No...No, you’ve got the wrong guy. Th-this is a mistake, clearly!” Patrick tries to reason with him.

“No mistake here,” the officer begins, walking up to Patrick and attempting to put his hands behind his back.

“We’ve received numerous calls, one of you threatening a woman at the bar, another of you physically harassing her, and then, of course, there’s the man beaten into a coma.”

John must’ve called the police after our conversation, and Leonard, after the scene played out before him at the bar.

And then there’s Hawke. Vicious as hell when he needs to be, to protect me, no matter the cost. Not to mention he was just recently released for another wrongful conviction in which they clearly had no proof. Julie must’ve worked her magic for him. Regardless of how he got there, the truth of the matter is, he totally and completely saved me from that horrible man. *Both* of them, actually.

“I didn’t do that! That’s crazy! I would never!” Patrick cries out as they attempt to grab his swinging hands.

“By looking at your knuckles, I’d say otherwise,” the officer states, grabbing and inspecting his fists.

Sure enough, the cuts from his blowup in the bedroom when he punched the drywall and threw the lamp came in handy. They literally fit the bill as a person who beat someone into unconsciousness.

“That wasn’t me! I’d never defend this...this slut! She had it comin’!”

“Your cellphone was found at the location,” the cop mentions as they continue their protocols. “How you gonna explain that one?”

He’s losing his mind. He’s flailing as the officers detain him, screaming for his lawyers, his father, all things he hopes can save him, but none of it can now. The police have him, and now, they have his confession.

I see another car drive up, and it’s Kid and Hawke. He barely waits for the car to slow before he’s jumping out of the passenger side, stumbling slightly before he gets his feet under him, running to me.

“Cole!” He grabs me quickly under his arm as I wrap myself around him while he scans the space around us, making sure there are no threats to my safety. “He didn’t touch you, did he? Are you alright?!”

“No, he didn’t. I’m fine. Never been better, actually.”

“What did you do? What happened? How did this...?” He trails his sentence, running a hand through his hair, before trailing it down his face as he takes in the police cars, Patrick, and the entire scene.

I turn to face him, gripping his face between my palms, gaining his complete attention. His eyes are worried, confused, yet trusting.

“He confessed,” I say with tears filling my eyes, blinking them down my face as I continue talking, “He confessed, Cameron, and they got it all.”

His face is ghost white as he gazes at me in complete disbelief.

“Sir, stand back please,” another officer instructs as they finish pushing Patrick into the back of the police car.

He pulls me to the side, keeping his arms wrapped around me as we watch it all unfold. Patrick glances back over at me, seeing Hawke now holding my frame against him.

“You son of a bitch! We had an agreement! You won’t see a penny of it!” Patrick yells, completely obliterating himself without the presence of his father to stop him. “And her! Her?! She’s lying! I never touched anyone! You won’t get away with this! When my father—”

His voice gets cut off as the door slams shut, ending the toxic noise invading our ears before they slowly pull away.

I grab for Hawke’s hands, bringing his knuckles to my lips. “Untouched,” I whisper as he cocks his eyebrow. “Your knuckles. The motorcycle gloves.”

Sometimes fate lines it up just right. You have to endure the pain and live in it in order to gain strength, to become indestructible on your own, and fight the monsters you encounter with their own weaknesses. Everything else falls right into place.

Kid runs up behind us breathless, like it was ten miles and not the ten steps it took to reach us from the car. The three of us stand there silently for a moment, watching them take him away, watching as the car finally fades from our vision. I see

Cameron wiping tears away from his eyes, and I know it's Ben on his mind. I squeeze him tightly, feeling every bit of this poetic justice.

Another officer approaches me, getting my information to take me in for an official statement and more questioning. If Hawke will allow it, that is. He's gripping onto me, his arms wrapped around me so firmly, it makes me feel a comfort I've never known.

"I guess I'll be here, waiting for you," he says, turning to hold my face in his hands, looking down at me with such adoration and love that my heart feels like it could explode out of my chest.

"As you should, it's *your* home," I reply with an easy grin.

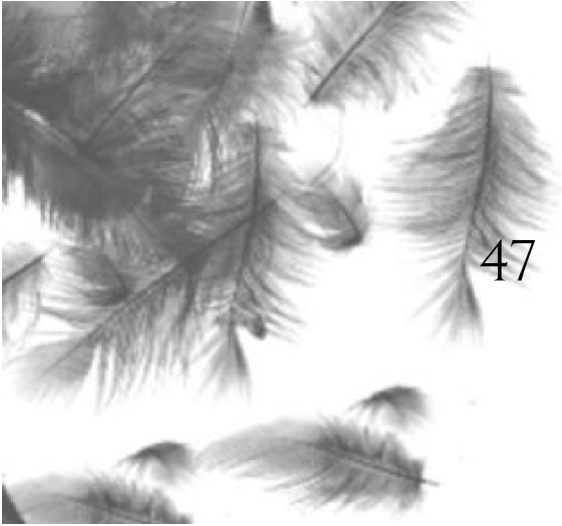
He grips the back of my neck, pulling me into him, our foreheads meshing together as he stares down at me.

"My home is right here," he says with conviction, moving his palm to the place my racing heart resides.

I push up on my tiptoes, capturing his lips in mine for a sweet, soft kiss, before he rests our foreheads together again.

"You freed me from my cage, Cole. You brought me back to life, and you freed me," he whispers in a cracked tone.

"We freed each other, Hawke," I whisper, holding the side of his neck, gazing lovingly into his eyes. "And now it's our time to fly."





## THE BEST KIND OF PAIN

“O h, Cam.” I moan, closing my eyes tightly. “It hurts.”  
“Just a bit more,” he whispers in my ear, his hands gripping my shoulders. “You can take it.”

“Cam.” I hiss before biting down on my bottom lip, taking the pain.

“Yeah, that’s my girl.” His hoarse whisper hits my ear.

“Ah, shit! I can’t take it, I can’t take it!” I cry out, dropping my head back, the pain becoming too much.

“Baby, sit still.” He chuckles while giving me his best calming voice. “It’s almost done already.”

Sure enough, the guy finishes the last line just as I’ve all but given up with my weak pain tolerance.

“There ya go, doll.” The tattoo artist winks at me as he washes it, then wipes it down one last time, making Hawke narrow his eyes at him.

I can’t contain my excitement now that the pain is over. How he has so many tattoos, I have no idea. It’s not for the

weak. That shit hurt.

Walking over to the mirror, I stand before it, checking out my first and only tattoo. It's an all black hawk on the side of my rib, just beneath my breast.

Hawke walks up behind me, smiling with his eyes as he circles around me to take a look.

"I can't believe you actually did it." He grins, eyeing it and then my entire body as a whole, biting the corner of his lip. "That's sexy as fuck."

Yep. Just hearing him admire it makes the pain worth it. I'd endure more of it just to hear his approval. He makes me feel so beautiful, so rare, so unique. Truly the best kind of pain.

"I can't believe you told me not to," I reply, admiring how amazing it looks on me. Like it was meant to be there.

He plants himself behind me in the mirror, his hands holding onto my hips as he continues talking to our reflection. "I just didn't want you to regret it. You know there's a negative connotation around couples' tattoos."

"Hawke," I say, turning to face him. "You literally put my name on your forearm!"

He smiles, looking down at the tattoo. On the inside of his forearm near the elbow, he had me write out Cole in cursive.

"That's different. I'm obsessed with you. It makes sense."

I smack his shoulder playfully, making him show me that beautiful smile of his before wrapping my arms around his

neck.

“Why do you think I got my hawk?” I cock my brow with a smirk, making him smile shyly. “Always a part of me now, Cam.”

“I fucking love you.” He leans down, pressing his full lips onto mine before they travel to my neck. His tongue darts out, licking the spot beneath my ear, making me release a breath from my lips. His lips find my earlobe. Dragging his teeth on the sensitive spot, he whispers, “I can’t wait to fuck you with your new tat.”

I swallow, my pulse instantly racing at the words whispered. My eyes look behind us and I see the tattoo guy grinning at us, clearly seeing my lustful expression. My cheeks have to be a deep shade of red. Yep, time to leave.

We head back to the house again after hitting the grocery store for a few items. Things are different here beneath this roof, within these walls. It’s warmer with just the two of us, but there’s still a lingering energy that doesn’t sit right. Patrick is gone, still locked up and awaiting trial.

Apparently, his father tried to post bail to have him released until his court date, but because of the severity of the crime, he wasn’t offered it. The thought of him sitting there, waiting for daddy to pay his way out, only to find out that a manslaughter charge doesn’t allow bail, makes me feel so warm and fuzzy inside.

His brother Sean came and picked up the rest of his things from the house last week. We graciously had everything



spread throughout the lawn as we sat on the porch, watching with cocktails in hand as he loaded it up himself.

Patrick's charges included a laundry list of federal offenses. Obstruction of justice, fleeing a scene, manslaughter, even his buddy filed charges against him, assuming Patrick was the one who beat him up, so an assault charge to top it off. I filed a restraining order, per Hawke and Julie's advice.

His father was also being charged with obstruction of justice for attempting to pay off and cover up the accident on Patrick's behalf. The way it's all panning out, Patrick appears to be looking at around at least fifteen years with the total charges, if he gets it all. It would be a miracle, but we can hope, right?

Julie dug her heels into this state of affairs after seeing and hearing what truthfully transpired. She had her attorney friends take on the case pro bono in order to nail this family and get Hawke released from his charges. Filings were already made to have his record expunged, removing all prior history from his record, leaving him with the clean slate he deserved.

In the meantime, we're sharing the space in his house like never before, for the first time, alone together.

It's kinda strange to have already lived with your boyfriend before you became a couple. I already know his weird quirks, one being his oddly clean and tidy behavior, just as he knows my incessant need to have fuzzy blankets all over the house.

Living with him is amazing. Waking up together every morning in each other's arms, then walking out and grabbing

our coffee together while watching mob movies. Life couldn't get any better than this. We're living off the money Hawke already had from Patrick's family with the promise of more from the city for the wrongful conviction. It's hilarious how it all played out.

I'm still working towards writing my own novel while maintaining my role as an editor, and Hawke is taking time off to enjoy life and his newfound freedom as we decide our next step together.

"I want pizza!" Hawke calls out from the shower.

"Thank God," I say from the kitchen. "I hate cooking after shopping. I'm so tired."

Hawke throws some sweatpants on, coming out to the kitchen with a towel in his hand, still drying his hair. His broad shoulders still have droplets of water clinging to him like they never want to leave. *I get it, water droplets. Truly, I do.*

He smells like fresh soapy heaven splashed with some sort of cologne that gets my woman parts activated. That paired with the sight of him shirtless, his broad chest and cut arms covered in his infamously scattered tats, wearing loose-fitting sweats with no underwear and a clear outline of his dick? *Yeah, he's screwed.*

"Go cuddle up on the couch, I'll call it in," he says, kissing the top of my head while getting the pizza brochure to call it up.

The pizza arrived about forty minutes later, interrupting our game of strip poker just before my shirt came off.

“Goddammit!” he curses out, throwing his cards. “I’ve never been more mad at pizza in all my life,” he mutters, getting up, leaving me giggling in delight.

We eat while watching *A Bronx Tale* on the couch practically on top of each other, pulling our slices straight from the box.

“I wanted to talk to you about something,” Hawke says, brushing his hands off over the now empty pizza box, before turning to face me on the couch.

“Okay,” I reply, with slight hesitation.

“How do you feel about selling the house?”

My eyebrows shoot up in surprise.

“I mean, I figured at some point you’d want to, but the decision is up to you, obviously. The connection you have to it —”

“I have no connection to tangible things. I have a connection to *you* and you alone,” he rushes.

His sentiment gives me pause. His love and obsession with me is adorable, to say the least.

“I just mean with your father. This was your home before all of this happened. Your attachment to it may differ from mine,” I say softly, climbing into his lap.

I softly drag my fingers from his shoulders down to his chest, touching every ripple of muscle I can before reaching the waistband to his sweats.

He shifts his position beneath me, slouching slightly and adjusting his hips to accommodate me on his lap while his hands find my thighs.

“My attachment is to you,” he answers quickly, without thinking. “Everything else is up here and in here, where it should be,” he says, pointing to his head and heart.

A smile pulls at my lips at his abashed display of emotions, and the sight makes him grin. His eyes narrow slightly while his focus and attention turns to my body on top of his. He toys with his lip ring, a telltale sign he’s thinking about sex.

It’s probably my favorite tic of his.

“I’ve thought about our future, you know,” he comments in a softer tone, drawing small circles on my thigh with his index finger before gazing up at me shyly.

“You have?” I ask, biting my lower lip, holding back my smile. I brush some of his hair off his forehead, admiring him. “And tell me, what do you see?”

This is the first time we’ve really talked about us and plans that we may have. Everything before this was simply about survival. We had no objectives. We had no goals. But now, we’ve been given this opportunity for just that.

“I see you, sitting on the deck of our home off the coast of California, wind blowing through your hair as we watch the

sunset together.” He grabs my waist, pulling me as close to him as he can. “I see you writing while gazing off at the blues, greens, and teals of the ocean. I see me working and doing something I love while helping you with your dreams. I see us being happy. *Really fucking happy.*”

My heart aches. Everything he’s describing and the way he sees it gives me such a blissful feeling. We can be happy. We will be happy. Really fucking happy.

“And babies. Lots of fucking babies,” he adds, cocking a brow with a mischievous grin while squeezing my ass in his fingers.

“Hawke!” I scold, my eyes opening wide in surprise.

The fact that he’s thought about me having his babies tells me everything I need to know about the future he’s seen. It’s us, *forever*. The promise of it all is making my stomach churn with excitement. I want that for us, too.

“It sounds like heaven.”

I sit up straight on his lap, grabbing for the hem of my crop top, pulling the shirt over my head, leaving my hair all disheveled around my face.

He stares up at me, his lips slightly parted before I remove my bra as well. He licks his lips before swallowing as I see the roll of his Adam’s apple. Having control over a man like him is an indescribable feeling. I’m a goddess in his eyes, glowing beneath his wonder.

“See? Didn’t it turn out great?” I ask, covering my breasts, turning slightly as I peel the bandage off the tattoo, eager to take a look and showcase it.

He grabs my hands, pulling them away from my body, leaving my chest bare before him. He bites down on his lip before opening his mouth and finding my nipple. His hands work their way up my thighs, to my waist, to finally cupping both breasts as he toys with my nipple between his lips.

“It’s...fucking...perfect,” he says between kisses.

“Cam.” I giggle. “You’re not even looking at it.”

He touches near the sensitive skin, gently running his fingers by it.

“Trust me, I can’t keep my eyes off it,” he says, kissing near the area, then sitting back as his eyes take me in. “God, you’re beautiful.”

I flush at his words, feeling each one of them travel to the pit of my stomach.

His hand travels to the middle of my chest, resting his palm over my heart as he takes my hand, placing it over the exact same spot on his chest. I lean down, capturing his soft lips with mine. He kisses me slowly, achingly slow. His tongue drags along the length of mine before he angles his head and does it again with more force. The passion between us building, the heat between us, never more evident. What we do to each other is unimaginable. It’s chaotic, it’s wild, it’s nothing short of beautiful.

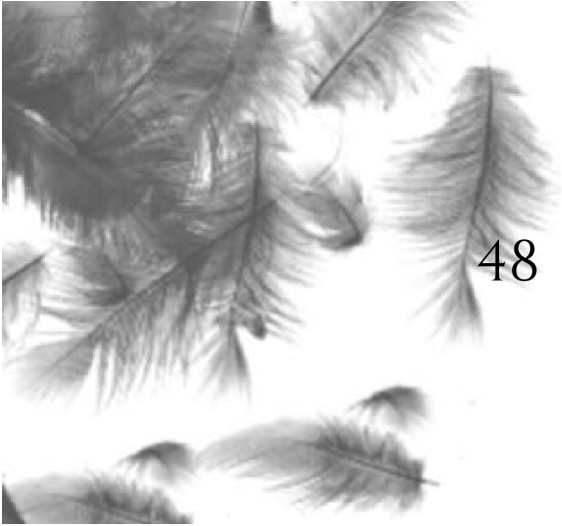
He places both my hands on the sides of his neck, pulling me in closer to him. I feel him eager, hard, and ready beneath me under his sweats. I grind into him, needing him against me, and he releases a breath at the contact.

“I need you now,” I moan between kisses.

His mouth drops open as his brows knit together.

“I got you,” he breathes.

*His promise, all I need.*







**H**e lifts me quickly, hands beneath my bottom, supporting me as we move from the couch to the bedroom, mouths never disconnecting. Laying me back on the mattress, he pulls down my shorts, throwing them across the room before kneeling down at the edge of the bed.

“Hawke,” I moan in anticipation.

His eyes find mine, the moan captivating him, energizing him with his own lust and desire. He loves when I make noises for him, just as I love when he makes noises for me.

“Say it’s us,” he demands, his lips trailing on my inner thigh. “Say you’re mine, all mine.”

His constant need to hear it never bothers me. I want to drown him in my admiration, bury him in endless love.

“Mmm, I’m yours.” I writhe beneath him, needing those lush lips on me immediately. “Always.”

He separates my legs with his hands, his tongue slowly dragging up my inner thigh before finally reaching my clit. His hands wrap around the top of my thighs, holding me in place

as he licks the length of me, making me arch my back at the delicious sensation.

“I love the taste of you,” he murmurs against my sex, driving me insane.

His lips suck and kiss me in all the right places. His lip ring, adding the perfect sensation to the already stimulating experience. Pushing a finger inside of me, I cry out breathlessly. He looks up at me through his fallen black hair, his tongue flicking my clit, before applying a forceful pressure against it. He knows my every tic, just as I know his.

“You’re driving me insane.” I groan, grabbing the bed sheets beneath me with white knuckles, attempting to hold off my impending orgasm.

He’s not having it, though. He loves when I come before sex, making me extra wet for him to slide in where he belongs.

Slowly easing another finger inside of me, he begins sliding and withdrawing them at a steady pace. The feeling of him caressing the place that aches so badly to be touched by him drives me to the point of madness.

I run my fingers through the hair at the top of his head, gripping it, then lifting my hips to meet his tongue.

He groans approvingly, loving when I get rough with him, as my muscles seize up and the orgasm washes over me. My head hits the mattress as I call out to God again and again as he milks the pleasure out of me.

Without missing a beat, he's on top of me, both of us stripped of the rest of our clothes beneath the comforter. Resting his hips between my thighs, he worships the skin of my neck and chest, never seeming to get his fix. I grab the back of his neck, pulling him up to my lips, needing his tongue against mine, moving together in the electrifying way that we do.

"I love you, Cameron Hawke," I whisper, the breath of my sentence reaching his lips.

He watches me intently in the hypnotic way that he does before I feel his tip graze my sex. With his lips parted, he gazes from my eyes to my lips, then back again, as he buries himself inside me. I struggle to keep my eyes open at the welcomed pain of accommodating him. He slides himself deep, eyes wincing, mouth dropping open as he does. We become stimulated by our wild and aching arousal for each other, both of us moaning out in pure bliss at our connection. His forearms give out as he puts his weight on me, forehead resting against mine, chest against chest, as close as we can possibly be.

"You save me," he says in a raspy tone. "You wreck me, break me apart, pick up my pieces, and you fucking save me."

I lose my breath at his statement. I could never feel more connected to another soul than I do with Cameron. I may save him, but he saves me, too. He woke me from a lifetime of sleep, years of walking around without truly being awake. He helped make me the woman I am now by letting me see

myself for who I really am, and who I am in the reflection of those ocean eyes. I break him and pick up his pieces, but he obliterates me, tearing down the thoughts that used to make me, building me up again with my own instructions. He makes me the best form of myself. How could I not save him? He's the only one I've ever known worth saving.

We make slow, sweet, and tortuous love. The kind that makes you feel so much you could implode with how wild your heart beats. I feel him beneath my skin, deep within my bones, and everywhere beneath the surface that's otherwise untouchable. Our souls become so intertwined, locking through our dilated eyes, and direct eye contact that keeps us fully engaged, completely present in one another, consumed by each other. I want to be woven so tightly with him we both forget what it's like to know loneliness. Time. There isn't enough time on this earth for us to ever get enough of each other.

Tears stain my cheeks, and he kisses each of them away as we hold each other, breathless in bliss. We heal each other with the love we're constantly feeling the need to prove. Only we don't need to prove it. Not even a little bit. *How do you prove the intangible?* It's an undefined feeling we embrace and the trust between us, never stronger.

We let it take us to the edge of the cliff as we take that endless step off the ledge together, flying blindly into it, hand in hand as we bask in the feeling of free falling. The promise of forever is written in scars across each other's hearts. Never will there be a love like ours. We fought against it, but it found

us hiding, proving all of this was out of our control. As out of control as it should be.

You don't plan for these things to happen in life, the insurmountable pain, the torture of misfortune, the agony of losing loved ones too soon. You don't expect the forces around you to find a way to make good come of it. We as humans try to grasp for meaning during difficult times, telling ourselves to remain hopeful, that everything is for a reason.

Sometimes those reasons make sense, and most times, they don't. There is always a constant though. *Love*. It finds its way like a weed growing through the cracks of cement meant to hold it out. It's determined to show its beautiful self, even in the midst of the darkness surrounding it. Crazy things happen because of love, unimaginable things that seem too rare to be purely coincidence.

A month later, Patrick was officially charged and locked up along with his father for the crimes they committed. The family name was tarnished in a way that was always deserved. Justice *finally* prevailed, and it was a sweet and beautiful victory for Hawke and Ben. We later sold the house and all of our belongings, including my car. We felt freedom in starting over again with nothing but a couple of bags holding what we owned. There was power in knowing you didn't need anything but each other, despite the future being unknown.

"That's it, babe," I say with a sigh, walking out of 9-5 Slide for the last time. "It's official. I'm homeless and jobless."

He pushes off the wall with one of his boots, where he was leaning with a little smirk on his face. Throwing out his cigarette and stomping on it, he approaches me slowly, his eyes trailing my body up and down, leaving fire in their wake. He brushes a few black strands of hair off his forehead, gazing at me before toying with his lip ring. “Hottest homeless woman I’ve ever seen.”

“Cole, wait!” I hear John’s voice coming from behind me as he pushes through the doors.

It wasn’t easy saying goodbye to him. He’s become such a good friend of mine and instrumental in the changing phase of my life. I’m leaving him on a good note, though. Anna had the baby. A little girl named June. His heart has never seemed fuller and his smile, never so radiant.

“Uh-oh. What’d I forget?”

He chuckles. “Nothing. Here,” he says, handing me a small wrapped item. “A gift. From Leonard and I. A start to your new life.”

He hands it to me with glassy eyes. I love how sensitive and empathetic he is. It’s one of his best qualities. I’m going to miss him and Leonard, and this little hole-in-the-wall bar that became like a second home to me.

“I gotta go back in. I can’t watch you guys leave. I’ll be a blubbering mess and no one wants a crying bartender.” He sniffs before giving me another hug, then shakes up with Hawke.

Hawke approaches me from the side, his hands in the pockets of his leather jacket, peering at my gift. I rip the newspaper wrapping off like I can't do it fast enough. My emotions bubble over when I hold the gift in my hands.

It's a leather hardcover book. On the front, an inscription, 'Redemption'. I wipe my tears away, opening the freshly bound book, smelling the blank pages as I flip my thumb through them.

"Is that the beginning of our story?" Hawke asks softly, wrapping his arms around me, his head on my shoulder, looking down at the blank book waiting to be filled.

I smile to myself, clenching my jaw tightly, then nod through the falling tears.

He squeezes me, gently kissing the side of my head. I put the book in my backpack, tying it back up as Hawke helps me with my helmet. He straddles the bike first, starting it up while holding onto the bar with his firm grip.

We're off to California, heading towards the coast, leaving this little town and all it taught us behind, taking every lesson and moving forward. It's time to start fresh. Time for our chance to live. *Really live.*

Hawke turns his head to me, waiting for me to hop on. I swing my leg over the warmed seat, slipping my hands beneath his leather coat, taking the opportunity to clutch onto his firm chest and abdomen while breathing him in. Leather, mint, and stale cigarettes. Who would've thought this smell would make my heart flutter?

He stiffens, pausing for a moment to take off his helmet. His legs straighten as the goosebumps on his neck become present.

“Unreal,” he whispers in a breathy tone through his lips.

“What? What’s wrong?” I ask, gripping his shirt, trying to turn him to face me.

He chuckles to himself, staring down at something in disbelief. He laughs again and begins shaking his head.

“What is it?” I ask again, confused.

“Do you hear that?”

I try to listen to the sounds around me, but nothing is striking a chord. He turns up the radio on the bike and I get chills that start at the tips of my fingers where I’m holding onto him. They course through my body until I feel completely shook with an unworldly sensation.

The beginning beat always gets me. Like crickets hissing in the grass to the beat of the drums, the guitar strumming those notes you feel deep in your chest.

The song, “In the Air Tonight” by Phil Collins.

Hawke turns to face me with a narrow-eyed smile, his full lips curling into ethereal beauty before me. He knows it, just as I do. He feels every bit of this significant moment, just as I do, truly holding the weight of everything around us. *He’s here with us.*

And then, at the same time Phil sings *he’s been waiting for this moment his whole life*, Hawke ends the phrase along with



Phil while sitting back down, gripping my hands firmly around his torso again, the both of us smiling like crazy.

“Hold on.”

THE END

# BONUS CHAPTER: ENDLESS NEED

\* \*\*This chapter was initially pulled from the book because of thoughts that it may be a tad too steamy, and take away from the character development. However, I held onto it and decided to release it as a bonus chapter. I set this scene after the chapter entitled “The Car”. \*\*

I glare at my boyfriend with a fiery stare, attempting to burn a hole through the side of his head.

This was his stupid idea. His plan to bring all of us together and clear the awkwardness out of the air. The tension he feels isn't simply a hatred between two individuals who have nothing in common and don't get along. No, it's not that at all.

It's a raging sexual tension that burns like a wildfire between two people who do nothing but lust for each other. Knowing it's wrong, knowing that sexual desire is forbidden, but constantly feeling the need to burn ourselves to nothing but ash and smouldering coal, nonetheless.

He's passed out. Knocked out cold into a deep drunken sleep. One too many shots of Patron, clearly. But as I think

about it, it all starts to make sense. This was Hawke's plan all along.

The past few days have been rough for me. Hawke was staying away from Patrick and I again, popping in and out of the house at odd hours, making it almost impossible for us to connect on any level. It was such a confusing time, one I was on the verge of breaking free from. My heart was torn, but in reality, I simply missed time together.

But now, here we are, the near empty bottle sitting on the coffee table before us with the three shot glasses in front of each body, a reminder of the "get to know each other" drinking game Hawke came up with.

Nothing about that game was innocent, like Patrick assumed. The questions started easy. We went around, each person taking a turn. You could answer the question given to you or take the shot if you wanted to remain silent. It seemed Patrick had lots he didn't want to open up about. The tension between the two boys grew into something truly awkward as the silent shot-taking continued.

I answered most of mine, but when Hawke's questions started turning oddly sexual, everything got quiet on my end. Luckily Patrick was phasing in and out of consciousness, unable to pick up on the subtle cues Hawke was throwing at me. His eyes constantly trailing the length of my body, licking that lip ring while gazing at me.

I turn my glare from Patrick who's resting back on the far end of the couch, mouth dropped open, completely gone to the

world, to Hawke who's conveniently settled himself next to me on the long part of the sectional.

My scowl does nothing to deter that cheeky grin he wears on his stupidly perfect face as he attempts to pull the blanket from the back of the couch over us. I toss the soft grey blanket off of my legs, throwing it back at him. I'm stubborn and he's really pushing it if he thinks we can just cuddle in front of Patrick, conscious or not.

He chuckles at my willful attempts to move away before gripping my arm firmly, pulling me over towards him and directly onto his lap. I yelp at the force, attempting to pull my arm from his grasp. He's just too strong and his hands are just too big. I squirm against his lap, trying to shake him off of me, not oblivious to the fact that he's becoming hard beneath me. This is so inappropriate. My boyfriend is passed out at the other end of the couch.

"Let me go!" I whisper, turning back to face him.

His eyes narrow and a devilish grin grows, completely enjoying this situation he's so conveniently created.

"No."

He quickly turns me around again to face away from him, holding onto my thigh with a dominating control.

He's making it harder and harder to deny the root cause of this issue. Our inherent desire that's becoming more and more impossible to ignore.

“I told you to stop this,” I snap at him, looking towards my boyfriend and back at him again. His smirk is gone and a dark look crosses over his eyes. “This. Right here,” I say, pointing between us. “It’s wrong. We have to stop.”

“No,” he answers again, totally dismissing me.

He wraps an arm around my waist, pulling me further into him, my flimsy shorts against his sweats, leaving only a thin film of material between our aching sexes, all too eager to connect again. I close my eyes tightly, swallowing in an attempt to calm my nerves, calm my mind, shit...calm anything in his presence.

Pulling the blanket up and over us again, he leans further back into the seat of the couch, dragging me with him. I shake my head at his relentless mission.

“You never answered my question,” he says, grabbing the remote next to him and directing it towards the TV, searching the channels for something.

I roll my eyes, knowing he can’t see my face, but needing to do it, anyway. “That was the whole point of your stupid drinking game. Don’t want to answer? Take a shot. Elementary shit, roomie.”

He grips into my flesh near my hip with the hand around my waist, disliking my mocking behavior, his thumb effortlessly slipping up and under my tank top, touching more of my skin.

I’ve found I like pissing him off. I’ve never acted like this with Patrick. I’d never talk back to him the way I do with

Hawke. Pushing Patrick's buttons gets me a lecture on Christian values. Pushing Hawke's gets me fucked in the back seat of a car.

"You know I had to do this," he growls in my ear, making his frustrations known. "I had to have you to myself. One way or another."

He kills me when he says stuff like that. It makes me want to just wrap my arms around him and hold him to me. But life just isn't that simple.

He finally finds what he was searching for. A scene pops on the screen before us as my eyes widen in disbelief. I turn my cheek to face him, throwing a questionable glance as he simply keeps his dark, hooded eyes on the screen.

A beautiful woman with curves for days, donning red lingerie, is perched on all fours in the middle of a hotel room bed. A man is at the edge of the bed, completely naked, stroking himself before her, while the other sits back on the couch, watching them with his hand in his pants.

Hawke put on porn after I refused to answer the question of whether or not I'd watched it. That asshole. He's totally taunting me.

I couldn't answer the lewd question with Patrick, eyeing me the way he was. Of course I'd watched porn before. I'm a curious being. But that was one can of worms I wasn't willing to open during the drinking game, or ever for that matter. That stuff stays private with me. A quick swallow of a throat-burning substance was a welcomed alternative.

A gasp leaves me as I see the woman take the man into her mouth. Heat flashes through my body, trailing up to my cheeks where it's obvious I'm blushing, even with only the dim light of the movie illuminating us.

I feel Hawke scoop my hair to the side of my neck, his warm, bare chest surrounding me, strong arms locking me against him, making my body come alive. I'm aware of every ridge of muscle that rubs against me, his delicious woodsy musk with hints of leather and cigarettes that does something wild to my senses. He brushes his lips against the skin under my ear and I'm totally aware of every touch that's sending my heart pounding into the night.

"That guy masturbating on the couch," Hawke whispers in his hoarse, deep tone as our eyes face the screen. "That's her husband."

I take notice of the rings they are both wearing. *What the hell is this?*

"Some guys like seeing their girl get fucked by a bigger cock."

I swallow again, feeling totally parched in the desert that is Hawke's raw sexuality. He squeezes me down against him, running my ass along the hardened ridge of his growing erection.

"Hawke," I breathe. "Please. We can't."

But my pleas go unnoticed as his hands find my thighs beneath the blanket. They slowly trail upward before gripping

the soft part of my inner thighs, pulling me backward until I'm above his cock, my ass resting on his lower abdomen. I turn to look at Patrick again. *God, I'm going to hell for this.*

"He's not waking up," he whispers to me, following my gaze. "No matter how loud you scream."

As soon as he says the words, his fingers find my center. They run over my mound covered in the thin cotton material, slick and wet, as soon as they press against me.

I release a breathy moan as he groans in delight.

"Jesus, Cole..." he murmurs against the back of my neck.

My eyes find the screen again as I watch the man mount this woman, her husband's hand working faster as his pants slide down further, exposing his crude act.

It's all so erotic, so lewd, so insatiably intoxicating. I'm watching another man take his woman while Hawke is taking me in front of Patrick. He pulls my loose shorts to the side and slides a finger along my slit.

"Hawke," I protest again before he fills me with his finger.

My head falls back against his chest, which is rising and falling quicker than before. His other hand slides up and under my camisole, cupping my breast in his large palm. The man on the screen sucks on the woman's nipples, nipping them with his teeth at the same time Hawke pinches mine between his fingers.

My body is screaming for him again, like it always does. Needing him in the deepest parts of me. Craving our



connection like a bad habit that won't let up.

It's all so much. Too much. I'm in sensory overload watching the film while he plays with me, paranoid that Patrick will wake up and see us fondling each other's private parts and dry humping to porn.

Just roommate shit, right?

Hawke eases another finger into me, his thumb circling my clit as the sound of my arousal coats his fingers. The feeling of his erection pressing beneath my ass as he thrusts with each insertion of his fingers tells me he's imagining sliding into my warm, wet center.

"Fuck, Cole," he groans in frustration. "You love watching porn with me, don't you, baby?"

Hearing the words fall off his lips is literally enough to get me on the brink of orgasm. I'm already letting breathy moans escape my lips, giving him all the signs he needs to tell him to keep going.

"No," he says suddenly, removing his fingers and pushing me up off him some.

My mind goes into panic mode. I asked him to stop, but now he's the one stopping it?

"I need inside you," he demands.

My brow arches in confusion. Surely he can't be thinking of doing this right now. Not here.

I feel him adjust his hips behind me, pulling his sweats down just enough to expose himself. I place a palm back on his bare chest, stopping him.

“Hawke,” I warn again. “This isn’t—”

He brings me back against his chest, pulling the blanket up and over us, denying my useless protests while covering whatever he has planned from the eyesight of Patrick. Pulling my shorts to the side, stretching them out, his long arms reach around between my thighs to line himself with my entrance. Before I can say another word, he holds me by my hips, guiding me down onto him.

I feel the thick, swollen head sink in through my walls, the rest of his massive length stretching me the further down I slide, my sex rippling with a pained satisfaction.

We both gasp at the feeling before I feel him rest his head against the back of my neck. He’s trying to hold it together. Attempting to breathe through it. I know he badly wants to grunt and slam into me again. I know how hard it is for him to just sit still when all these electrical impulses are wildly firing away at the sensation of him raw inside me.

“Oh, Hawke,” I say breathlessly. “We shouldn’t be doing this here.”

I’m grasping at straws for a little clarity but with the way my brain is becoming fuzzy, the way the room is now a little hazy, I know I’m losing any control I wish I had.

“I love it when you spout off useless shit with my dick deep in you,” he murmurs against my neck.

I moan loudly as he spreads my thighs with his, gaining access to the deepest part of me, making my lower stomach tighten with pleasure as the feeling of being filled takes over. He quickly wraps his hand over my mouth as a precaution.

“Bite down if you need to,” he instructs, kissing the side of my head. “Now open your eyes, beautiful. Watch the screen with me.”

I didn't even realize I'd closed them tightly at the sensations. I open my eyes just as there's a close-up of the man screwing this woman from behind, slamming relentlessly into her, causing her ass to bounce with the thrusts, while her husband continues watching.

The man is wild. Insatiably wild. It's as if he'd been eyeing his buddy's wife for a long time and finally got the chance to let out all that pent up sexual frustration. He's grunting now, gripping at her flesh, seemingly close. It's insanely sexy.

Hawke has one hand across my mouth, the other pushing down on my clit as he slides up into me, his head resting against my shoulder as both of our eyes are on the movie.

Patrick shifts from his position on the couch and we both freeze instantly.

My eyes are closed, as if the simple act somehow shields me from his wrath, but he doesn't wake up. He just rolls slightly, one of his arms dropping off of the side of the couch,

dragging his knuckles against the floor as he continues snoring.

My heart rate peaks, and now my body is on the anxiety come-down. We sit still, connected, until both of our breaths slowly regulate and we can finish what we've started.

I can feel just how wet I am from this experience. Whether it's the porn, the fact that this is so taboo, or just Hawke's touch alone, I'm insanely turned on. I squeeze his dick inside me as we stay paused in place and he nearly buckles.

"Fuck, Cole." He groans into my neck. "I'm gonna come if you tighten yourself around me like that again."

So naturally, I do it again.

"Ah, shit," he hisses, before reaching up and sticking two fingers in my mouth.

His motions turn aggressive as he drives up into my wetness again and again.

"I told you." *Thrust.* "Don't." *Thrust.* "Do that." *Thrust.*

I moan around his fingers, sucking on them with my tongue, feeling myself spasm around the wide base of him each time he pushes into me to the hilt as we move together.

We're both on fire. The risk of being caught doing something so indecent is our fuel. Panting out of control into his hand, Hawke cups my breast, rolling his thumb over my pebbled nipple, nuzzling his head into my neck again, holding out for me.

He doesn't need to hold out long. Dragging that hand down to my sex, he wets his fingers, coating them with my arousal before making quick circles against my clit.

It's too much. That, the moans and grunts from the people on TV, the way his tongue has now found my ear, licking the length of it. And just the fact that my boyfriend is right here, passed out drunk, so Hawke could fuck me the way he so desperately needed to.

With my body aching for its sweet release, I let go, falling into it, feeling myself begin to spasm around him. He feels it too, because his breaths become quick pants against my neck.

"I'm coming," I just barely whisper as my eyes seal shut, the intense wave of pleasure wracking through my body from my neck, down my spine, to the base of my stomach, to my toes.

Weak muffled cries escape me as he holds me tighter against his chest than before. He shudders beneath my wilted form, pressing so deeply into me as he loses himself with a deep growl into my shoulder right after me.

My breaths calm as his hands softly trace my skin. My eyes dart to Patrick immediately, seeing him still sleeping less than three yards away from us. I slowly slide myself off of Hawke, his still engorged and heavy dick slapping against his taut abdomen as he drips out of me. I hate how much I love that feeling. I also hate how much I love seeing his cock, glistening and wet from me.

I stand before him, fixing my shorts, turning to face him with a little glare. He looks totally satisfied as his lazy, hooded sex eyes find mine before his lip curls into a little smirk.

“Never again.” I mouth to him as he adjusts his sweats back over himself.

He cocks his brow, throwing the blanket off of him, turning the movie off before standing and slowly stalking towards me. His tall frame grows on me as he runs a hand through his black, hanging locks. I can't help but to admire the way his muscles flex as he prowls towards me, watching his dark, lust-filled eyes trace my figure. I walk inside the bathroom as he follows, my back hitting the wall while he shuts the door behind us.

He smirks before grabbing the back of my neck and bringing me to his lips. He kisses me passionately, like he'd been dying to do it the entire time we were connected but couldn't. His tongue softly massages mine, sending chills down my arms. He gently pulls my bottom lip into his mouth, releasing it as his forehead rests against mine. His eyes find mine, and it's so much more than just lust. Deep emotion resides between us in this simple stare, but he swallows it down as his lips curl into a little smirk.

“Again, you say?”

# MY PEOPLE

I've been so incredibly fortunate to have somehow surrounded myself with some of the most amazing people to push me towards the ultimate goal of publishing my work.

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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MOM

PASSIONATE

LIVES TO LAUGH

CREATES TO BREATHE

OFTEN LOST IN ANOTHER DIMENSION



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