

M I A K E R I C K

DON'T LET GO BOOK 1

*i'm not
in love*

I'M NOT IN LOVE

DON'T LET GO BOOK 1



MIA KERICK

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FIRST EDITION



MIA KERICK
GAY ROMANCE AUTHOR
So much passion. So much pain.

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To those who struggle to face their fears.

Methinks thou dost protest too much.



CHAPTER 1



Remi

He is the most beautiful man I've ever seen.

A cluster of chatty art students, each clutching an enormous portfolio bag, obstructs my view of the Adonis leaning casually against the back wall of the life drawing studio. I shuffle several steps to the left. Once in an optimal location for surveillance, I strike a pose—arms crossed, hip slung loosely to the side. The picture of indifference, if not for the craning of my neck.

I fail wildly in my attempt at nonchalance—my inquisitive pose is an applaudable imitation of the paparazzi who once stalked *me*. It's better, now that I've fallen off their radar. A visual arts college student isn't nearly as intriguing as a filthy rich, tragic orphan. But for years after I lost my parents, I couldn't rub my eyes without it making the Garner City Gazette society page. Reporters are among my least favorite people, still I refuse to blush with humiliation that *I'm* scrutinizing this stunning young man in precisely the way *they* scrutinized me.

“Let those seated in the second balcony stare, but, darling, never let them see you sweat.” I've discarded most of Grandmother's cynical and undoubtedly elitist advice, yet I take this piece to heart. As much as I've been trained to pay little attention to the hordes who choose to gawk, I've also learned to offer *nothing* in the way of reaction. Haughty stoicism is the rule for the distinguished upper class.

After a shamefully long reexamination of my subject—though I admit, shame normally falls far beyond the walls of my tightly regulated emotional wheelhouse—I find myself creating a mental tally of his physical assets. *What makes him so pleasing to my discerning artist's eye?*

With my well-honed observational skill, I start by analyzing his basic facial architecture: cheekbones and jawline. Undistracted by his shaggy mop of fair hair, I admit the new student's classically chiseled bone structure would rival that of a traditional Christmas card angel... if angels, in fact, had bones. His nose is also admirably streamlined.

Moving on to his lips... they're not as full as the ones I usually choose to, uh, plunder, but are, nonetheless, finely made.

So caught up in the riveting vision, I'm startled when coyly, with narrow eyes of hazel, the young man brandishes the all-knowing stare of a seer. His gaze slides over me in the manner my fountain pen moves across Smooth Bristol drawing paper—evenly and without faltering. I shiver. *It's as though he's avoiding my introspective appraisal...*

The noisy clunk of a drawing board hitting the studio floor distracts me from my blatant assessment of the new student. Ziggy Gorham, who reportedly fell off his mountain bike descending the steep granite staircase in front of the Garner City Fine Arts Museum, is trying to set up his drawing board. His thigh-to-ankle cylinder cast—fully exposed thanks to a pair of cherry red running shorts—isn't cooperating. None of the student artists near him seem inclined to lend a hand, so I head over to his drawing chair.

“Um, Ziggy, that won't work. You need to balance it on one leg, like this.” I adjust the board, so it rests less precariously on his wiry, uncasted cyclist's thigh. “See?”

“Dude, you're a freakin' lifesaver.” Appreciative of the easy fix, he brushes his stringy hair from his eyes and grins up at me. “Many thanks.”

“No problem.” Ziggy would benefit greatly from the use of common sense. Nonetheless, his appreciation is like chicken

soup for my prickly soul.

Despite how hard I've tried to push all memories of my parents from my head, I can't seem to forget the "to whom much is given, much will be required" lesson they drilled into my youthful mind. And though I'm far from a people person, *this* lesson is part of me.

Yes, I'm a (reluctant) helper.

Once my Boy Scout deed is done, I refocus my attention on the unknown student, homing in on his lithe physique. It screams modern dancer—*can this young Adonis squeeze his ass cheeks together tightly enough to hold a marble between them?* I stifle a snicker. Even with his bland expression, the man leaning on the wall by the studio door is the most stunning human being I've ever encountered. And I'm not one to dish out lavish compliments on a mere whim.

It feels natural when I shake my lanky limbs from their creepy stalker pose and move across the classroom toward him. My plan is to welcome the newbie to class and find out if he's busy tonight.

Among the undergrads at LaCasse College of Visual Arts, I've been able to meet my complicated life's rather uncomplicated ambitions: my painting is unsurpassed, and I enjoy an active (anti) social life. In other words, I indulge in meaningful art and meaningless sex. As a senior, I have *briefly* acquainted myself with every one of the most distractingly beautiful men in attendance, or so I thought until ten minutes ago. And rarely are my advances rejected by other students because *I'm* an Adonis, as well. Being beautiful makes everything easier.

I fight my blooming grin as it may render me approachable to my peers. I refuse to risk emotional entanglements no matter how insignificant. And I chalk it up to having learned my lesson the hardest way possible. At nine-years old.

Drawing the Undraped Human Form is a seniors-only course. The administration is apparently of the mindset that underclassmen are unable to sketch live naked bodies without

drooling. I wipe the corner of my mouth with the back of my hand. *Isn't it ironic?*

Life drawing is at the basis of much art; watercolor is my preferred medium. I'm talented enough to make Grandmother's cheeks pinken at the uninhibited detail of my frequently masculine subject matter. Extracting a blush, and on occasion a flustered sigh, from my stuffy grandmother is an admitted secret pleasure. I slide my hand back and forth across my lips, rubbing briskly at the four-day growth in a further effort to smother my smirk.

The unknown student in the oversized tee, snug joggers, and worn moccasin-style bedroom slippers, launches a counterattack to my closer position. He leans to pick up the army-green duffel bag resting at his feet—an odd choice, as most LCC students are addicted to trendy art portfolio backpacks—and drifts to the front of the room. Without a second glance, he bypasses the scattered art chairs and easels that are directed toward a pewter-gray, left-arm chaise lounge.

When he stops to chat with Professor Santini, frustration sets in—I'll hit on him at the end of class. Sliding my lust to the backburner, I get down to art-student business. Last night was a late one thanks to ceramics major Joey Ramirez—he's exceptionally good with his hands—and this morning, I'm the worse for wear. Choking back a yawn, I place my messenger bag beside a drawing chair instead of an easel.

I retrieve a drawing board from the wooden storage cabinet that lines the wall beneath the oversized window, straddle my chosen art horse, and lean the board against my denim-clad thighs. Muscle memory takes over from here as I finish setting up. After pulling my chin-length hair into the elastic band I'm wearing on my wrist, I'm ready for class to begin.

I glance around the classroom as students file in. Some straddle drawing chairs, but most stand and adjust their easels. Not one of them greets me, which is exactly how I want it. Smiling grimly, I realize that my Adonis is nowhere to be seen. I sniff in uncharacteristic disappointment. He's probably an underclassman who found himself in the wrong studio

thanks to the twisted hallways of the antique Clayton Arts Building.

It's barely October; I can't be expected to have yet acquainted myself with *all* the pretty young men—the freshmen and transfers—who have joined the pretentious ranks of Garner City's top art school. As an overachiever (strictly in terms of art and sex), I'm determined to find him. I'll visit the dining hall for lunch—even gorgeous people have to eat. When I “bump into” my Adonis, I'll buy him a meatball sub and charm him with abundant, over-the-top compliments. Shouldn't be too difficult to get him into bed.

Keep it simple, Remi. And by this, I mean do what feels good. *Nothing* feels as good as creating dazzling art and achieving satisfying orgasms.

It's now past ten, and there's no sign of the life model. This doesn't bode well for the next two weeks, during which we're supposed to work with the same model on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings.

“Good morning, class. As I mentioned last week, we're about to dive into a two-week series with a new-to-us life model.” Professor Santini takes his place in the center of the worn, wide pine floor where a model will hopefully soon pose, putting an end to his introductory babbling. “We'll begin this unit in a traditional manner, starting with gestures. Then we'll proceed to short standing poses.” He wipes his brow to suggest that the model will then be exhausted. According to the grapevine, posing is physically and mentally draining work. I've never given it much thought. “After a break, we'll proceed to longer sitting and reclining poses.”

A live nude model offers art students a variety of poses, so we can best study the human anatomy. I'm ready to see the subject Santini referred to as “(deep sigh) utter perfection.” For a long moment, I hold my breath and gaze with anticipation at the classroom door, hoping the new series model will scurry into the room, displaying extraordinary physical traits that compel me to capture movement and flow and form.

The folding screen in the back corner of the room vibrates lightly. The model must have snuck in while I was preparing for class and is now stripping down behind the screen. The students quickly finish setting up, and then the classroom grows hushed in expectation.

“Our model came to us by means of a lofty recommendation from my colleague, Professor Lois Wilkinson-Ryan, at Garner Valley School of Design on the south side of the city. I believe we’ve engaged an exceptional model that you’ll all find inspiring. *I* most certainly do.” He snickers smugly, as if bursting with a secret, and paces the vacant center of the floor. “We’ll be using natural light today to draw... Tristan Wilder.”

Upon his introduction, my handsome Adonis—AKA nude model Tristan Wilder—emerges from behind the screen, clad in nothing but a chalk-white, terry-cloth robe and those flimsy moccasins. As embarrassing as it may be, I allow the unthinkable: my jaw drops. Then I hear myself sigh—it’s appallingly drawn out and wistful—as my mouth swings wide enough to catch flies, or so Grandmother would say. Chin high, the model makes eye contact with no one as he strides to the center of the room and gazes over our heads at the pockmarked ceiling.

I’m sweating freely as Tristan opens the tie of his robe and allows the thick cloth to fall, though not nearly far enough to satisfy my urgent interest. The graceful shoulders he exposes with admirable nonchalance are defined but lean—they couldn’t possibly have been better shaped if sculpted by Michelangelo himself from a willing lump of clay. When he twists to remove the garment, his action is simple and resolute, lacking in flourish. He drops the robe onto the floor to a chorus of muted gasps and then kicks it off to the side. There isn’t so much as a hint of suggestiveness to his motion. This is *not* a striptease.

And there he stands—all of him for all of us to see.

Although I’m partial to fucking beautiful people, the best subjects for art are often those who society labels as flawed in terms of traditional beauty. Gangly or hairy, scarred or

wrinkled, excessive body fat or not nearly enough of it—all of these are eye candy for artists. I'm *supposed* to see Tristan's body as the abstract subject of my art. And remote as a white marble statue of Apollo in the garden of Versailles, he plays *his* part well. He stands motionlessly—as if already posing—and stares vacantly—as if blind to the hawk-eyed crowd marking him.

Get a grip, Remi. I pull in a stuttered breath. Despite my grandparents' high hopes otherwise, painting is my intended life's work—any passion I'm experiencing *should* be limited to the artistic potential of this model.

Oddly restricted by my shirt's collar, I tug open several more buttons and focus on breathing. Once the unexpected sensation of near strangulation passes, I analyze our subject's attributes: a svelte but defined chest, sculpted biceps, narrow hips, and a leanly rippled abdomen. At this vulnerable moment, I refuse to analyze what hangs, somehow quite subtly, from between his toned thighs.

When Tristan kicks off his moccasins to expose princely feet—the entirety of him finally bare to me... rather, to *us*—I snap my lips shut, desperate to cut short my gasp. The gasp I blame on stunned reverence for the sight before me. *Okay, okay... before us.*

I'm not alone in my shock and awe.

“Oh, God.” A murmur, breathy, yet high-pitched.

“Like, wow.” Wholehearted agreement, less than eloquently emitted in a deep bass.

“Call me, maybe.” *I* am thankfully not the one responsible for this inappropriate request.

Apparently expecting more professionalism from his seniors—even while in the undraped presence of a veritable human god—Professor Santini eyes the class darkly; *he* is the only one in the room allowed to leer at nude models. Clearing his throat, he turns to Tristan.

“Welcome to Drawing the Undraped Human Form. We are very much looking forward to working with you. Students, a

reminder that cell phones must be turned off and stored away until our model leaves the studio at the end of class.” He glances very briefly at Tristan’s nether region before looking up and flashing him a toothy smile. “Shall we begin?”



Tristan

I’M USED to being stared at. I mean, I’m a nude model—it comes with the territory. But that dark-haired dude planted on the drawing chair to my left looks like he wants to do more than sketch me. I’m not too new to this game to know what’s up. The student artist in the preppy button-down shirt would like nothing better than to ingest me dry, without a dab of dipping sauce.

I shudder—hopefully imperceptibly—and immediately regret it. I’m supposed to reflect total ease with my “undraped” body. If I want to continue to score modeling gigs in Garner City’s many art colleges, I need to come off as unflappable. I refuse to sweat or stumble beneath some twisted dude’s hungry stare. Wanting to consume me whole is *his* problem, not mine.

It’s all about professionalism, Tris, I remind myself. Being here—as naked as the day I came into this world—is by my choice, and for this choice, I get paid. Not enough by a longshot, still I receive regular paychecks—or sometimes fistfuls of small bills, collected in a rusty coffee can passed around by a dozen starving artists in a community house basement.

I share this money with my twin sister Tara, who spends it on Jared, Tommy, and Wendy’s food and clothes... and soon their Halloween costumes. Seeing the excitement on the faces of my niece and nephews as they tear apart the costume department at the local discount store makes my sacrifice feel like... less of a sacrifice. And more of a gift.

So why do I feel more naked than usual?

“I brought my own timer,” I inform Professor Santini dully, although we already went over all the details by email. I set the clock for one minute and place it on top of the folded blanket at the foot of the chaise lounge. It’s time to strike the first pose of many.

I turn my back to the class and stand with my legs apart and my knees loose. I lift my arms, so they’re taut—thrust high above my head with my fingers curled into claws—and tilt my torso sideways. For one minute, until I hear the timer’s soft chime, I hold this position. My only movement, the rise and fall of my chest.

Ding. I set the timer again.

For my next pose, I turn to face the class, fold in half, and rotate a foot, so it’s practically sideways on the floor. I grasp the side of my head with one hand and extend the other midair in a pleading gesture. The art students can interpret this bit of dramatics as they see fit. I feel their intense gazes upon me—every inch of me.

Ding. I reset the timer and drop to the floor without resting my butt on it, bend a knee, and tuck the leg beneath me, extending the other and pointing my toe. I support my weight on widespread arms, making sure that my traps, delts, and pecs are flexed. Some artists prefer “less perfect” individuals as models. Since I can’t provide them with much in the way of imperfection, I offer the hard-earned definition of my muscles—I’m something of a gym rat. Life drawing artists are all about anatomy.

“Very nice,” Professor Santini murmurs and licks his lips. I focus my attention on the doorknob.

I *never* establish eye contact with students in a classroom while I’m posing. It’s unprofessional to make eyes at budding artists, or to provide them with an easy opportunity to make eyes at me. In fact, I only meet the gaze of an artist when we’re working one on one—and by their specific request. But *between* each set of poses, I check out the students and connect visually with the instructor. I need to determine the

mood of the room—are the artists satisfied, curious, questioning, bored, frustrated?

By reading the room, I get a better feel for what I need to do next.

And so, as is my habit, I scan the room. Though I'm not posing, the artists continue to study me intently, the way the doctors at the Garner City Health Clinic inspect Wendy's throat for strep. Professor Santini—who has been moving from student to student, offering quiet commentary—makes no specific pose suggestions. He smiles lewdly at me and waggles his furry eyebrows. I sure hope that isn't drool in the corner of his mouth.

My gaze passes over the dark-haired student who seemed to have had such a powerful appetite for me prior to the start of class. He's completely absorbed by the paper on his drawing board. His expressive eyes have lost their brazenness and now look almost dreamy; his wide shoulders are slightly hunched in concentration.

I blow out a small puff of... disappointment? *No, it's gotta be relief.* I'm now mere food for his *artistic* thoughts.

Soon, I'm setting the timer for the last of the gestures. Mild fatigue sets into my muscles, but it isn't yet painful. I squat so my butt hovers just above the floor, as I still haven't spread the blanket. I lean back, my weight resting upon my arms behind me. Then I slide my legs until they're wide open and extended in front of me, wholly exposing my slack privates for public viewing. But instead of fixing my gaze on a designated smudge above the classroom door, I break my own rule and let my eyes wander to the dark-haired student. There's something intriguing about him—he's so dedicated to his art that he's become lost in it. I admire his willingness to surrender himself to the work that clearly means the world to him. I wish I had the opportunity to do the same with the career goals I have pushed aside so I can support my family.

The artist pulls in a deep breath, as if he's preparing to lift a barbell, not a pen.

And *I* study *him* as he glances up from his drawing board, tilts his head to gain new perspective, and fastens his gaze to mine. Before I'm ready to look away, the man's scrutiny morphs from contemplative to crafty. Our stares crash together; still, I don't shy away. I'm not yet finished taking him in.

He is the most beautiful man I've ever seen.

CHAPTER 2



Remi

Under normal circumstances, I'd have already made the simply irresistible move that would have swept Tristan's breath away. Yours truly has serious skills in the hookup game. I have perfected the art of timing and could easily—and seemingly by chance—have run into my Adonis just shy of the classroom door. I would have disarmed him with an alluring smile and invited him for a well-deserved cup of coffee before he hit the road on his way to wherever it is nude models go when they've put their clothes back on.

Tristan, however, is a live model for *my* life drawing class, and there are rules of engagement: Don't photograph models without their permission, don't touch the models to adjust their poses, and *don't* proposition them. My best bet is to hold back on my plan to set up a private meet and greet until his last day working in our classroom, which will be next Friday. Then I can carry out the whole, "you sure look like you could use a cup of coffee... or a beer... or a meatball sub" scheme free of ethical conflict.

After returning Ziggy's drawing board to the cabinet with mine and strapping on his portfolio backpack so he can hobble away with ease, I trail behind Tristan Wilder as he exits the classroom. I pause as he turns right—the wrong way unless he's looking for the creaky staircase that leads to the basement. I sincerely doubt he has any desire to check out the kilns. Tristan takes a few cautious steps before turning to glance

down the hall behind him. His confused gaze meets my helpful one.

In the interest of assisting a fellow human being in need, I approach him. It's the right thing to do and not much of a sacrifice. "Hey, Tristan. If you'd like, I'll show you the door." My heroics know no limits.

"You'll *show me the door?*" he repeats, his expression a study in bewildered symmetry.

I chuckle. "That probably came out wrong." Although it's exactly what I said to Joey Ramirez in my bedroom late last night after our intimate interaction was a fait accompli. "What I mean is, I'll *lead* you to the exit. This place is a mouse maze."

Tristan turns to face me, and even before he smiles—exposing (unsurprisingly) toothpaste-ad quality straight white teeth—I'm again blown away by his regal bone structure. I blink once, and deliberately, in my attempt to collect myself. He is far from the first beautiful boy I've laid eyes upon. In fact, I see one every day in my very own bathroom mirror when I'm brushing *my* toothpaste-ad teeth.

Here's a novel idea, Remi... How about you get a hold of yourself?

Tristan is just another pretty face.

"I appreciate the help," he says, still smiling. "I'd get lost trying to find my way out of a paper bag."

His self-deprecating tone is rich and velvety, eliciting memories of the warm Swiss cocoa my mother served on Friday nights as we settled on the formal couch in the parlor to watch a Disney movie and wait for my father's return from the Remington Plaza Corporate Headquarters. Weekends were reserved for family. They were the very best of times.

My eyes burn, so I shove away the memories. *I'm* supposed to be the one disarming *him*.

Tristan slings his duffel bag over what I now know to be a spectacular shoulder beneath the oversized T-shirt and steps to my side. His clean, soapy fragrance permeates my personal

space. Tristan is several inches shorter than me; I'm not sure why I took this mental note, nor why it pleases me.

"Lead on," he says in his melted-chocolate voice.

We pass the classroom where Professor Santini is locking up. "Ah, Tristan, I see you've met LaCasse College's senior class master of watercolor, Julian Remington III." In deference to the professor, Tristan comes to a stop, forcing me to do the same.

"I go by Remi," I mutter. There's no creamy chocolate in my tone; it's as rough as gravel.

Julian Remington III is gone. He died on the night before his ninth birthday. A night he has managed to largely block from his mind—except in pesky nightmares.

"Yes, of course." Santini corrects himself, but not quickly enough for me to overlook his eagerness to flash my one-time tragic child star status before our new model. "Tristan, meet... just plain Remi," he says rather petulantly, folding his arms across his bulky chest.

Seemingly unaware of who he's been introduced to, Tristan extends his fine-boned hand to shake mine. I take hold of it and squeeze. His skin is every bit as silky as it looks.

"Pleased to meet you, Remi." His careful gaze drops to those tacky moccasins. Maybe he *does* recognize the name of the orphan who made such big news once upon a time... and associates it with the illustrious family hotel chain that I'm one day expected to manage. Not everyone is a fan of sizeable corporate enterprise.

"As am I." I nod and glance at Santini, who leers at Tristan the way he used to leer at me. That is, until I let him know in forthright terms that I was strictly unavailable for interaction outside the classroom. I'm not looking for a father figure, that's for damned certain. "I was just showing the new kid on the block the way out of the Clayton Building maze."

Santini's grin is as slick as his jet-black hair. If he hadn't been a founding member of the prestigious life drawing program, I'm sure the college would rid itself of the man

without hesitation. *What institution of higher learning invites sexual harassment lawsuits?*

“Well, then, lovely Tristan, you’re in good hands—Remi is a senior and could navigate the tangled halls of this building blindfolded. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do, Mr. Remington.”

Which doesn’t leave much, I think sourly. We’re interrupted before I have a chance to again remind him that I go by Remi.

“Professor Santini, are you on your way to office hours? Because I’m hoping you can answer a few questions about my color theory project.” Dacia Mondavi—who lives on the second floor of my downtown building above a specialty olive oil shop and is as close to a friend as I allow in my life—slides between the professor and us. She checks out Tristan more obviously than is necessary, gawking at him from head to toe and back, and then winks at me.

I studiously ignore her eye antics.

“Of course, Ms. Mondavi. If you young men will excuse me...” He allows a last longing look at Tristan. I can’t help but cringe; the man should really practice the “behave appropriately with live art models” advice he preaches.

Tristan and I again start down the hall. “So, you’re a master of watercolor?”

Despite his wry question, when he glances up and our gazes meet, his expression isn’t one of ridicule. Though still wary, it reflects sharp intellect and genuine curiosity. And to my relief, there’s no dawning recognition—I doubt he’s put two and two together regarding my once-famous, if sadly tragic, identity.

“My work in watercolor isn’t bad.” *Look at me, feigning humility.* “And my life drawing is competent, as well.”

“I’d like to see some examples of your life drawing, if you wouldn’t mind.” Another quick glance—too fleeting to analyze. “I’m always looking for pieces to add to my model’s portfolio.”

“When this series is over, you could drop by my loft near the Purchase Street Station and check out my etchings... You know, the drawings I do of you.” I grin sheepishly, which is *so* not me. *Check out my etchings? Is that the best you can do, Remi?* “We could take a look at them over, say, a bottle of wine... or two.”

As we proceed down the hall, Tristan veers widely from my side, and if my peripheral vision has it right, he shrugs. Recognizing his discomfort, I admit to my impatience. This is a rare miscalculation—I’m stellar in the meet cute department: Senior year artist sets his romantic sights on the new student in life drawing class only to discover he is today’s nude model.

Chance encounters don’t get more fucking adorable than that.

Tristan clears his throat, allows the duffel bag’s strap to slide down his arm, and then swings it to his other shoulder. “Uh, yeah... maybe. Or you could show me your drawings at the end of the series. I... I could check them out in the classroom... say, next Friday after class.”

“Of course. That would work too.” I’m pretty sure I just got denied, which only raises the stakes. “The building’s exit is right down these stairs.” I sigh in exasperation, having failed in my effort to entrap Tristan in my web of love.

Make that web of lust. Love isn’t among my expectations or desires.

As we descend the stairs, my lips twist into a classic Remiesque smirk. Because Wednesday is a new day—another opportunity to work my magic on my latest distractingly beautiful target.

We step outside into the shimmering, early autumn sunshine. The leaves on the trees that dot the courtyard are just starting to turn to the brilliant colors that pull so many artists outdoors in the fall, palettes in hand. In my subsequent glimpse of Tristan, who is busy admiring the perfect day, direct sunlight unveils a new facet of his beauty. Not to be dramatic—Grandmother particularly detests theatrics—but his hazel eyes have morphed into translucent jade gemstones.

“Your eyes—they’re dazzling,” I utter, proving that I’m entirely off my game with this young man. *Must I place all my cards face up on the table?*

Tristan looks at me, and though his eyes are molten, his gaze has grown dark. He appears ashamed, as if he knows exactly how seductive his beauty is, and for this he blames himself. “Th-they change, is all—you know, the color.” He is truly sorry for rendering me defenseless with his matchless allure. “It’s just because of the light.”

“Yes, I know that.” With these clipped words, I turn on the heel of my costly Chelsea boot and saunter away from him across the courtyard. For a reason I’d never be willing to admit, I cannot remain in his staggering presence for a moment longer.

“See you Wednesday, Remi,” he calls to my retreating form.

CHAPTER 3



Tristan

By the time I get home, I'm dead on my feet.

After the life drawing class at LaCasse College, I wolfed down a quick salad at the dining hall and took a bus downtown to the Garner Center for Music and Arts where I spent the afternoon posing for Human Portraits in Watercolor Workshop. I held a long pose for three hours, taking short breaks to stretch and drink water. Unfortunately, my choice of reclining pose was awkward—I stretched out on their well-used couch with a towel under my butt, halfway on my side, with one leg bent and the other tucked beneath it. The tucked foot kept falling asleep. And my back cramped up at the end of the third hour, but that's pretty much par for the course.

After the watercolor workshop, I splurged on an Uber and headed to pay-per-class yoga instead of hitting the cheap gym I belong to near our apartment. I needed to get my body and mind back on the same page after spending the entire day offering myself—if only just the view of me—to strangers. For money.

I've got to be in the right frame of mind to face a lively evening at home. Between three needy kids and a sister with a major guilt complex, home-sweet-crowded-apartment is not exactly a center of spiritual renewal *or* a source of physical relaxation. But I wouldn't change it, even if I could. Which I can't, so there's no use dwelling on it.

My family needs me, and I've got all four of their backs.

“Uncle Tris, you’re finally home!” Eight-year-old Jared is always the first to greet me. His habit is to wait for my return in the kitchen alcove’s window seat of our tiny first-floor apartment on the outskirts of the city. The city itself would be more convenient for my work, but here in Brentwood Village there are two parks for the kids and a lot less traffic, plus rent is cheaper. Cheap rent being the critical factor, as I pay for it on my meager modeling salary. “Me and Tommy are, like, starving! What’s for dinner?”

“Your mom hasn’t started anything yet?” I drop my duffel bag next to a mountain of shoes by the door and then playfully bop my nephew’s platinum head with the long, paper-wrapped loaf of bread I picked up at the corner store.

Jared grins. “Uh-uh. Mom’s in the bedroom with Wendy.”

“Wendy isn’t feeling good again?” I ask.

“Nope. She’s got another sore throat.”

“Did your mother take her to the clinic?”

“Uh-uh. Mom says it’s, like, just her allergies acting up.”

Stupid ragweed. I huff in frustration. “I’ll put some water on for spaghetti.” Next stop is the kitchen where six-year-old Tommy is coloring at the table.

“Hi, Uncle Tris.”

“Hey, there, buddy. How was school?” I proceed to fill the large cooking pot with water and turn on the stove.

“Super good—had art today.” He doesn’t look up from his paper, so all I see is the tuft of white-blond hair that sticks up from the top of his head. His hair refuses to cooperate with the comb.

“Cool. What did you make?”

“Didn’t make nothin’ yet. Just started workin’ with the clay. We each got our own lump—mine’s bigger than everybody else’s.” He switches crayons. “Been waitin’ for clay time for almost forever.”

“I know you have.” It’s all he’s been able to talk about since school started. I grab a jar of sauce and pour it into a glass bowl. “Want to help me make garlic bread?”

“Uh-huh—as soon as I finish this pumpkin I’m drawin’.”

When Jared comes into the kitchen, we whip up a quick dinner. “You guys start eating. I’m gonna check on your little sister.”

They’re already filling their faces when I leave for the kids’ bedroom.

“Hey, Tara,” I say softly as I push open the door. “How’s Wendy?”

“More of the same,” she replies. “Stuffy nose, scratchy throat, runny eyes.”

“What we need is winter.”

“A good frost would help with Wendy’s allergies, for sure. But then the dry air messes with her.” Tara slides out from underneath Wendy and stands beside the bed, staring down at her daughter with a frown. “We seriously need one of those air purifying systems that we can’t afford.”

“How long has she been out?” I nudge Tara aside to tuck Wendy’s favorite fuzzy “lambie” blanket around her and smooth my hand through her tangled, strawberry curls.

“She’s been sleeping for over an hour already—this little girl is gonna be up all night.”

“No worries—I’ll stay up with her,” I offer. Between the dark circles under Tara’s eyes and the way her light hair falls in her face, my twin sister looks more worn out than I feel. “You need rest.”

“She’s gonna want you to read to her,” Tara warns, hands moving to her hips.

I smile. “I’ll read her that book she’s so crazy about—you know, the one that keeps repeating ‘it’s bedtime for little lamb.’ She’ll hear it as many times as it takes for her to nod off.”

“The power of suggestion, huh?”

“I sure hope so.” I don’t mind the long reading sessions with Wendy. Children’s books inspire me—almost as much as they inspire her—with their lyrical language and dynamic art. And then there’s the minor detail that Wendy just melts me. “Come on, Tara. Dinner’s ready.”

Tara follows me from the kids’ bedroom to the kitchen. As I fill her bowl with pasta, she drops into a wobbly chair beside our thrift shop kitchen table. “Oh, joy. We’re having spaghetti.”

I don’t miss the sarcastic tone or the implied “for the third time this week.” Still standing at the stove, I stuff in a forkful, so I don’t snap back. Because Tara isn’t complaining—she’s reacting from guilt that she can’t do more to help her family.

“When I get a new babysitting job, or if I’m really lucky an online business job, I’m gonna buy you guys juicy steaks from Artie’s Butcher Shop,” she promises. “And Uncle Tris can cook them on the charcoal grill on Mr. Shahid’s back porch.” Tara’s still upset about losing the ten-month-old boy she’d been taking care of until Wendy’s allergies got so bad she had to quit.

“Pasta fills our bellies.” I offer a positive spin on the Wilder family’s menu limitations. “Isn’t that right, guys?”

“Uh-huh, but have we got, like, any grated cheese?” Jared asks.

“There’s just a little bit left, and we need to save it for Wendy.” Tara’s tone is too sharp.

“Little Wenny won’t eat her noodles without it,” Tommy reminds us. “Right, Mommy?”

Tara nods, a tight frown on her lips, and Jared pouts but doesn’t beg. Financially challenged kids learn the rules fast.

“Well, can I at least have some more garlic bread?” His eyes are as hungry as Remi’s were when he noticed me leaning on the wall at the beginning of life drawing class.

I rub the chills from my shoulders. “You can have my share.” Ripping off a hunk, I add, “Growing boys need as much garlic bread as they can possibly consume—but don’t inhale it.”

“I won’t.” Jared allows a reluctant smile. “Thanks.”

Tara looks at me appreciatively. “Doesn’t your Uncle Tris rock?”

The boys nod enthusiastically as they chew, their mouths stained red with tomato sauce.

They’re more than worth the sacrifice.



Remi

WHEN I GET HOME, Dacia is waiting for me at the top of the stairs, leaning impatiently on the rolling barn door to my loft.

“So, who is he?” she asks as I struggle with the door’s tricky lock and slide the heavy panel to the side.

“Who is who?” I know exactly who she’s referring to, but I wouldn’t be me if I let on.

“*Hello!* The babe magnet you were escorting through the halls of the Clayton Arts Building today. I’d like to rock *his* world.” Dacia never blushes when she should.

“Babe magnet? I guess that makes *me* a babe.” She’s right—Tristan *is* a magnet. His beauty draws everyone in. “Tristan’s a life model for Drawing the Undraped Human Form.”

“*Undraped?* Cool.” She winks at me. “Are you dating him?” Dacia is slightly too interested in Tristan for my liking. “Hmm?”

“That is to be determined.”

“I see.” She nods as if she understands my dilemma—no propositioning the nude model per guidelines of professional protocol. “Is gorgeous Tristan even gay?”

I roll my eyes, impatient with her questions. “That is also TBD.”

Dacia grins and pokes my side with a pointy neon green fingernail. “Well, if he’s not into guys, Remi, do me a favor and send him my way.”

I refuse to honor her suggestion with a reply. “Are you finished interrogating me?”

“For now.” She tosses me a lazy grin and runs her fingers through her magenta bob. “What’s for dinner?”

As if invited, Dacia follows me into my loft. She never gives much thought to what *I* want, which has allowed a tentative friendship to form.

“*Do* come in,” I quip with my usual dose of sarcasm. I’d never actually kick her out, though. I’m the main source of her evening meals.

The Purchase Street loft is the first place that has felt like home since I lived in the Vermillion Place Penthouse a few streets north of here when I was a kid... with my parents. When that living situation ended so abruptly with their untimely passing, I was swiftly shipped off to my grandparents’ nearby estate in Connecticut. From there, I was shuffled from elite boarding schools to exclusive summer programs to college dormitories.

I achieved my first undergraduate degree in business at the elite Gunther University. And then, according to the agreement with my grandparents, I was allowed to pursue a BFA. I relocated to mandatory freshmen housing at LaCasse College of Visual Arts. As a sophomore, though, I left dormitory life behind. I was far too old (and jaded) for the “we’re finally free of Mom and Dad’s stupid rules” party scene that my younger LCC suitemates embraced so heartily. As I’d already turned twenty-one, I’d gained access to a significant part of the trust left to me by my parents, so I used a minor portion to buy the Purchase Street loft. A place where I could, at long last, be alone. Most of the time.

“Dinner? Who said anything about dinner?” I ask with a scowl, dropping my bag onto the charcoal velvet sectional arranged in the loft’s central space.

“Your famished downstairs neighbor did.” She heads to the kitchen area in the loft’s far corner. “Hey! You’ve got a frozen gourmet pizza. It’s veggie—that’ll work!” she calls.

“If you insist.”

“I do.”

My loft occupies the top level of an 1890s industrial building in a sought-after downtown Garner City neighborhood. It boasts floor-to-ceiling windows, rustic brick walls, concrete floors, and exposed beams and pipes, suspended from towering ceilings. As it’s a hard loft, there’s certain coldness to the space, which fits with my worldview. Home is a place to gather my thoughts and steel myself to necessary human interaction. The bonus is there’s plenty of space to work on creative projects. Except for the occasional booty call and my persistent downstairs neighbor’s visits, it’s *not* a place to bond with others.

There’s no heart to this home; it’s a fortress of sorts—towering, empty, and cold. *Like me.*

“I need to get out of these clothes.” After a day at art school, I’m covered in paint and clay and dust. Clean sweatpants call me.

“You do that. I’ll pour the wine and preheat the oven.”

“Make yourself at home, why don’t you?”

“Don’t worry, I will.”

My bedroom is more of a general area than an enclosed room, located against the tall brick wall at the far end of the loft, behind a corrugated metal slider that hangs from a wrought iron bracket. I have no need for a soundproof bedroom—privacy isn’t a concern. I live alone and have no plans to share my home with anyone... ever. Using additional metal panels, I’ve cordoned off several “rooms” that I use for workout space and storage, and several more I will one day turn into an office and a studio.

All the upgrades can wait until I'm ready to fulfill my grandparents' compulsory plan for my future. Or until I can come up with a way to escape this fate. Until then, I live in a bare, unfinished environment that suits me well.

I strip off my jeans, grab a pair of sweatpants from one of the freestanding wardrobes, and pull them on. After exchanging my button down for a clean white T-shirt, I reemerge to find that Dacia has taken my sarcastic advice and made herself at home. She sits cross-legged on the sectional and sips red wine from a long-stemmed glass.

"Let's see the drawings of Tristan."

"You're actually going to ogle *sketches* of the man?"

"You always show me your drawings. Why should tonight be any different?"

I drop down beside her and slide several sheets from my bag. "Well, go ahead then—feast your eyes."

"Oh... oh, nice."

"My technique?" I ask hopefully. In class this morning, I strived to capture the flow of Tristan's body and the pinch of his muscles where they twisted, detailing the essence of action. Although I made no attempt to create a carbon copy of him, his exquisite beauty is obvious in my work.

"Of course—you know your technique is good. But his poses... Tristan's very expressive."

I nod because she's right. I certainly have no complaints. "I think he based some of his positions on yoga poses. At least, he did later in the class with the longer poses."

"He's a smart model too. I wonder if he'll pose for our sculpture class."

"I... I very much hope so." This is more honesty than I'd planned on offering. "It's time to put the pizza in the oven."

CHAPTER 4



Tristan

It sucks when I'm running late for work—tardiness is the ultimate in unprofessionalism. Sometimes, though, it's unavoidable. I had to walk the boys to school because Tara left early to take Wendy to the allergist on the other side of the city, and since none of us have had enough sleep lately, we slept in and got off to a late start.

What it adds up to is that right now, I'm sprinting across the LaCasse College campus, so I'm no more than ten minutes late for class. I sincerely hope the life drawing students will appreciate the added dimension of sweat on my skin, because there's no way around it.

By the time I push through the classroom door, the students are already either standing behind easels or seated on art chairs—gazing in boredom at the ceiling—and well past ready to begin. My attention is drawn to Remi, who stands by an easel, staring toward the door. *His* expression is of concern.

“Professor Santini, I... I apologize for being late,” I blurt, hesitating in the front of the classroom. “I had a family problem this morning.”

“May I suggest, then, that you waste not a minute more of our valuable time with vague excuses?” His voice is sharp.

Feeling as if I've been slapped, I wince. “Yes, sir.”

“Well, go ahead.” He nods at the screen. “Prepare yourself for class... and make it quick.”

I nearly knock over the folding screen in my hurry to yank off my clothes. When I open my bag, I realize that in my mad dash to get the boys out the door, I forgot to take my robe out of the dryer. I'm forced to wrap a towel around my waist—it's that or strut out in front of the class stark naked. I slide my feet into my moccasins and pull in a deep breath, hoping to calm myself before I start to work. Then I step out from behind the screen to face the music.

"Better late than never— isn't that what they say?" Professor Santini asks the class to lighten the dour mood in the room. The students chuckle politely. He refuses to look at me. It's as if I've personally insulted him.

I shrug and let the towel fall to the floor. Then I kick it underneath the chaise lounge and cast my gaze toward the floor as I wait for him to inform the class of his plans. And once again, I feel more naked than I usually do... when I'm naked.

"Today, class, I'd like to try some experimental exercises that will help you recognize your drawing rhythm." The professor walks past me as if I'm not here, stopping by the wall at the far side of the room. "Tristan, of course, is an exquisite subject. So much so that we may be tempted to try to *copy* him on the paper before us. But that is not your task. Your task is to capture the essence of his pose."

I scan the classroom briefly to evaluate the mood of the students. They don't appear overly put out by my tardiness, which is a relief. I allow my gaze to briefly linger on Remi. As he listens to the professor's instructions, a tiny divot forms in the space between his eyebrows. Like he's annoyed.

"This exercise is designed to release you from the unrealistic expectations that drive many artists to hyper-awareness of their every pen stroke." Professor Santini snickers like a magician with an ace up his sleeve. "For the first series of poses, I would like you to capture Tristan's essence without so much as glancing at your paper. You will study the model exclusively and commit what you see to paper, using only the simplest of lines. Focus on your rhythm."

“One minute?” I confirm.

“That’s what we discussed last week, is it not?” he huffs.

Nodding numbly, I set the timer. I part my legs and jut out a hip, and then bend enough to grasp my upper thighs. Loosening the muscles in one leg, I rest its weight on the ball of my foot. This physically nontaxing pose will allow me a moment to calm my frazzled nerves.

Ding. I reset the timer and drop to my knees. I lean back on one arm, curling the other arm around my head. Then I close my eyes. This is a pose that strains my muscles, and I can only hold it for a short period of time. I wait for the chime and move on.

When the series of gestures is complete, I’m distracted by thirst, a result of my long sprint from the bus station to the Clayton Arts Building. “Please excuse me for a moment while I get my water bottle from my bag.”

“What on earth are you waiting for, then? Go.” Professor Santini points toward the screen, and I stumble away. “For the next series of poses, class, I do not want you to lift your pen from your paper. And never stop moving. Do not waste your artistic energy on overthinking.”

I carry the bottle back to the center of the floor, guzzle half, and wipe my mouth with the back of my wrist.

“We don’t have all day, Tristan.” This brisk, impatient version of the professor has caught me off guard. I throw myself into another difficult pose, hoping it will distract him from his need to berate me. Five challenging poses later, my muscles feel the strain.

“Why don’t we take a *very* short break?” Professor Santini finally suggests. “We must make up for lost time.” He shoots me a fake grin.

Having no robe, I pick up the towel from the floor, fasten it around my waist, and suck down the rest of the water in my bottle. I’ll have to wait for the next break to use the restroom, since I’ll need time to throw my clothes on before I head down

the hall. I perch on the edge of the chaise lounge, trying to relax my muscles.

“Hey, Tristan.” Remi approaches, shaking his head. “Santini certainly has it out for you this morning.”

I gaze up at him. He’s truly a handsome man, with gentle, even features that suggest a sweetness I don’t otherwise detect. “Professor Santini has a right to be pissed off. I was late.”

“And time is money...” Remi pulls his hair out of a black elastic band, only to refasten it. “It’s not as if he’s paying you with *his* money, though.”

“I need to carry out what I commit to.”

“You said that a family problem made you late. Is everything fine at home?”

I sigh. “I live with my sister and her kids. My niece has serious allergies and... well, it’s not really an excuse, but *I* had to get the boys to school this morning and so...” My voice trails away into silence, as I’m not one to let myself off the hook when I screw up.

“I think that’s a damn good reason for being a few minutes late.” Remi’s smile electrifies his dark eyes. For a second, I forget to breathe.

“I can’t let it happen again if I want to get more jobs at LaCasse College.”

“I could put in a good word for you... for a modeling job in sculpture class... if you want.” He glances away from me. “I’m on good terms with the professor.”

“That’d be awesome.” I find myself studying Remi’s shoulders beneath the button-down denim shirt. They’re broad—much more so than mine—and are toned but lean. It’s clear he spends time working out but not pumping iron. “You sculpt too?”

Eyes still downcast, his grin shifts until it’s adorably crooked. “Yeah, but not like I paint.”

Since he’s not paying attention to the direction of my gaze, I continue to study him. Remi’s waist is narrow, and his legs

are long and lean. After a moment, though, my searching stare makes its way back to his face. Remi's eyes are his most compelling feature. From a golden glimmer in their depths, I'm somehow certain he knows how harsh life can be. In that, maybe we're the same.

"Tristan," Professor Santini barks. "It's time for five-minute poses."

"I'd better get back to it." I stand and stretch.

"Uh, I was thinking... you probably didn't have time for a decent breakfast, rushing around this morning, as you were."

I fold my arms in front of me and wait for more.

"So, anyway, I... uh, maybe after class, I could treat you to lunch at the dining hall."

"Oh." *A dining hall lunch doesn't qualify as a date, does it?* It's more of a courtesy. "I'm sure that would be okay."

"Okay, then."

"Yeah, okay."

Note to self: *"Okay" has been stricken from conversation in our non-lunch date at the dining hall.*



Remi

PROFESSOR SANTINI IS on his game as far as experimental activities in class, which has left me cold. After our last ridiculous task—to draw the model while grasping a handful of different-colored pencils, allowing us to analyze hand motion and pressure—I'm more than ready to call it quits for the day.

Worse than his overly creative approach, though, is the way Santini harasses Tristan. On Monday, he had been all about lustful leering, just short of drooling. Today, he goes so far as to refuse to look at him. It's hard to believe that Tristan's tardiness is entirely responsible for Santini's radical flipflop in

behavior. My guess is that he is running a power play to intimidate Tristan so he can control him. And there's only one reason he wants to control the pretty young model that I can think of—Santini wants the same thing from Tristan I do.

This idea makes me cringe—I hate to put myself in the same category as my lecherous professor. However, it doesn't discourage me.

I change the subject. “Are you hungry?” I ask as soon as Tristan steps out the classroom door.

“Always,” he replies with a smile.

“Then let's head to the dining hall.” I step back, as it's his turn to lead the way. I admit, however, to an ulterior motive. I want to check out his ass in the snug jeans that cling so well. Which is pure insanity—I've spent the last several hours staring at his ass in nothing at all.

“FYI—I know how to find the door now,” Tristan teases. After he takes a few steps, though, he glances behind him at the classroom door, likely worried Santini will catch us fraternizing. “I can buy my own lunch, Remi.”

As if that will make it less of a first date...

“We'll see what happens.”



Remi

“So, you live with your sister and her kids?” Small talk never seemed so critical—I need to get it right if I want to take him to bed without passing go.

Tristan nods, chewing a bite of the salad I insisted on paying for. “Tara's my twin.”

“I've heard that's a very strong bond.”

“It's the strongest bond *I've* ever shared,” he admits with a shrug.

Interesting. “And Tara has three kids?”

“Yeah. Jared is eight—he’s into sports. Tommy is six—he’s our little artist. And Wendy is three.”

“She’s the one with allergies?”

Again, he nods. Then the sweetest smile appears. “She loves lambs.”

It’s clear he adores these kids. “I have no siblings, so I have no hope of nieces or nephews.”

“The kids are great, but since I live with them, I’m more of a parent than an uncle.”

“Are you comfortable with that?”

“It’s a lot of work.” He doesn’t hesitate to add, “But, yeah, I really am cool with it.”

For a few minutes, we focus on our food.

“Jared’s got a soccer game tonight. I’m supposed to coach because their regular coach is out of town on business.” He sniffs. “That should be a total shit show—I don’t know the first thing about soccer.”

“I do... I mean, I played soccer at my prep school—as a midfielder. And I played club soccer at Gunther University, where I got my first undergraduate degree. I could, uh...” My urge is to help when someone expresses need, but I have a more selfish motive today.

Tristan places his fork down beside his plate and drags his napkin across his lips. “You could... do what?”

“I could meet you guys at the field and... you know, help out.” *Did I just offer to coach a kids’ soccer team?* I haven’t spoken to an eight-year-old since I *was* an eight-year-old... during the last year of my life that I truly belonged somewhere. In any case, Mom and Dad would be pleased at my offer.

“Uh... yeah, I guess. I could use the help.”

Not exactly the picture of enthusiasm, but I can work with it. “Name the field and the time.”

“Dexter Field in Brentwood Village. Five o’clock.”

“I’ll be there.” With cleats on.

CHAPTER 5



Tristan

He drives up to the field in a shiny black Range Rover. I'm sure there's more to the spectacular details of the oversized SUV than that, but I'm not exactly well-versed in cars. Never had the time or the money. There's a small parking lot, which is, as always, close to empty. Most of the kids in the league take public transportation or walk to the field. Remi pulls into a spot—thankfully not at an obnoxious don't-dent-my-door angle—hops out, and trots toward the field where Jared and I are waiting for the team to arrive.

“Hey, Tristan!” Remi calls as he approaches. When he stops a few feet in front of us, he smiles warmly at my nephew and says, “You must be Jared.”

Jared doesn't even say hello. “Our coach couldn't come today, and Uncle Tris knows, like, zero about soccer. The Brentwood Bears—that's our team—are gonna get our butts kicked, like, big time.”

“Before you start whining, maybe you should say hello to Remi.” I tussle Jared's mop of blond hair. “He came all way here from downtown Garner City to help me coach.”

“Hello,” Jared replies obediently. “Do you play soccer, or what?”

“I've played for years—I know the game inside out.”

“So, there's, like, hope for a Bears' win?”

“I'd say so. Come on, let's warm up.”

As Remi jogs out to the field, kicking a ball from the sideline in front of him, I can't help but notice the agile fitness of his lanky frame. Clad in black wind pants, a soccer heartbeat hoodie, and a Red Sox cap, he looks more athlete than artist.

Jared watches as Remi does some fancy soccer moves. His scowl quickly morphs into a grin. "Foot stalls! And like, heel pops too!" Jared knows the names of the tricks Remi is doing. "Holy bleep, Uncle Tris—he just did an around-the-world!" Jared races out onto the field to join him. "Wait up, Coach Remi! Show me how to do those ball tricks!"

As the team members and their parents trickle in, I greet them. When the boys get a load of Remi's skills, they bolt onto the field to get in on the action.

"It seems you brought a friend along to help you coach," notes Mrs. Rivera.

"I did."

"I've never seen Dario so enthused."

"I... uh, know him from work. He offered to help out." I don't go into the specifics of my job unless people ask questions—and then I keep my explanation vague.

"He's running drills on basic skills now, and the boys are *still* paying attention," she adds, impressed. "I think today's game is gonna be very interesting. Your friend, um..."

"Remi."

"Remi's skills put Coach Wells' ability to shame," Mrs. Rivera replies. "Look at how the kids are studying his every move... They're absolutely wide eyed."

"The boys aren't the only ones who are gawking with admiration." Blushing, Ms. Horovitz leans in to join the discussion. "The man is... very attractive."

"Just like you, Tristan," Mrs. Rivera purrs. "Never fear—you're still the hottest soccer uncle."

Lucky for everyone, all *this* soccer uncle needs to do in terms of coaching is pass out juice boxes and granola bars at

the half. Remi easily leads the boys to a three-to-one victory. And he is fair about it, allowing each child to share in playing time.

After the game, he gathers the kids on the sidelines. “Okay, guys. We need to thank the Coyotes for a well-played game.”

“But we beat ‘em, Coach. They’re losers,” argues one of the team’s bigger boys.

“Aren’t we supposed to sing that ‘nah-nah-nah-nah, goodbye’ song now?” asks Dario.

Remi shakes his head. “No. It’s important to show good sportsmanship.” He arranges them in a line with Jared in the front. “We’re going to file past the Coyotes and give them all high fives. And we’ll congratulate them on a good game.”

“We do that after summer league basketball games,” Jared offers.

“Good to know,” Remi says. “Now I’m going to talk to the Coyotes’ coach. Jared, when I give the signal, I want you to lead the team to the middle of the field.”

“Coolio, Coach,” Jared replies, giddy to have been given a leadership role.

To the delight of the observing parents, the boys politely thank the other team. After gushing their appreciation to Remi, the families disperse.

“Good game, Coach Remi,” I say. “I like how you handled the kids. It wasn’t all about beating the Coyotes, but you still managed to win.”

“Tonight was fun, actually.” Remi shrugs. “Didn’t expect that.”

I smile. “I love working with kids too. Someday, I want to be a kindergarten teacher.”

His jaw drops. He leans close to me and whispers, “But you’re a nude model.”

“That isn’t my career goal.”

“Then why aren’t you teaching? Or at least studying at a school of education?”

“Long story.” Not to mention a sob story. “Mostly, it’s about a shortage of cash.”

“I’m interested in your story.” The words seem to surprise him. Remi glances away, as if flustered by his admission. “Can I, maybe, take you and Jared out for ice cream?”

“He hasn’t had dinner yet. Tara will string me up by my toenails if I feed him ice cream before dinner.”

“*Please* can we have ice cream with Coach Remi, Uncle Tris? I swear I’ll eat dinner—like, every bite—even if I put down a whole banana split!”

“And bananas are a healthy food—they’re fruit,” Remi reminds me. “What do you say?”

“Will ice cream before dinner be our little secret, Jared?” I ask my nephew with a nudge.

“You know it!” He pumps his fist.

“Well, go ahead and get in my SUV,” Remi says, unlocking it with the remote.

Jared races for the Range Rover and hops into the backseat. “Like, nice wheels, Coach!”



Remi

HIS TONGUE... soft and delicate... pale pink velvet... licking strawberry ice cream from the cone... emerald eyes closed loosely... dark lashes resting on pale cheeks... authentic and guileless and...

I’m *never* going to get to sleep if I carry on with these wayward thoughts. For a few moments tonight at the ice cream parlor, though, Tristan let his guard down. He stopped being so perfectly composed and let me observe his uninhibited pleasure as he enjoyed the ice cream.

It's an image I can't let go of, and it's not just about sex. It was... rewarding... to be allowed to witness Tristan's delight in something so simple.

I wipe the perspiration from my forehead with the edge of the sheet. There's no reason for me to be getting so worked up. Tristan is simply one more man in an endless, meaningless line of them. Just another pretty face to momentarily distract me. So maybe he happens to have a sweet pink tongue he apparently knows how to use.

This is of no concern to me—at least, not until next Friday when his work at LCC is complete and the ethical conflict of pursuing a classroom life model is over.

I kick off the covers and slide from the bed. If I'm not going to sleep, I should do something useful. *Fold laundry? Hit the rowing machine? Clean the bathrooms?*

I shake away these less than enticing options, already knowing what I'm going to do.

Last night at Scoop of Heaven Ice Cream Parlor, I snapped a picture on my cell phone of Tristan and Jared, both gazing across the table at me. Tristan's head was tilted toward Jared, but he was peering at me with puzzled eyes, taken aback by the evening's turn of events. And Jared's O-shaped lips suggested he was wondering how he got so lucky. *"I won my soccer game and I get a banana split before dinner!"* I'm sure my expression also reflected, "how the hell did I end up in an ice cream parlor with a nude model and his eight-year-old nephew?" We're poster boys for group perplexity.

I snatch my phone from the nightstand and find the photo—I need to see it. To see *him*.

Studying the picture on my phone—likely wearing the dreamy smile of a star-crossed lover—I slide the metal panel that separates the bedroom from the living room to the side and stride with purpose across the loft.

The antique French easel set up by the wall of windows is a foundation of my sparse living room décor. It's massive in size, constructed in solid oak, probably at least a century old,

and would be suitable to display art at a world-class museum. This easel is a prized possession and quite useful—I'm called to draw and paint at the most unlikely of times. Phone still in hand, I snatch a pencil from the tray and sketch on the waiting watercolor canvas.

I don't always sketch my subject before I paint, but tonight, the need to quickly commit my vision to paper is urgent enough to increase my pulse. I can't stop myself from sketching him to life.

Jared is an amazing kid, but his "Uncle Tris" is why I can't sleep... and the reason I can't wait until *this* Friday—a full week before I can set my plan to take him to bed into motion. I know the angles of Tristan's face from hours of observation in life drawing class, but still, I study the picture on my phone. I pledge that I'll capture the essence of his expression, rather than recreate the stunning quality of his beauty, which will require discipline.

I map out his head with a simple circle and then adjust the angle with a brow and hair line. His perceptive eyes... I draw these first. Never have narrow, cautious, dark-green eyes spoken to me as Tristan's do. They're intensely aware and keenly intelligent—without being showy in their brightness or width.

Clad only in boxer briefs, I shudder in the draftiness of the enormous room as I commit the essence of Tristan's eyes to the canvas. I shiver again as I consider the various shades of paint I will one day blend to express their vivid color.

I move on to his nose—straight and slender, unturned in either direction. And the lips I observed with such rapt attention earlier tonight at the ice cream parlor—not full lips, but slim and precise, matching the sleekness of his other features. Then I sketch a finely chiseled brow and jawline.

Before I know it, Tristan is gazing back at me... and though I'm the one who has spent hours this week creating his likeness on paper, it's as if *he* is the one sizing *me* up. Assessing me, discovering what I'm made of.

What am I made of?

Unfortunately for both of us, I don't think I'm made of much. And certainly not enough.

CHAPTER 6



Tristan

Over the past week, Professor Santini has returned to his original lustful demeanor, leaving the frosty behavior behind. I'm not sure which I prefer—both make me uncomfortable.

Once I'm dressed, I sling my bag over my shoulder and head to the classroom door. As it's the final Friday of my work here, I stop to thank Professor Santini for the job, give him my business card, and ask that he keep me in mind for future work.

"Professor, I'm incredibly thankful for the opportunity to model for your life drawing class. I hope you'll consider me for future work." I'm careful to keep about a yard of distance between us. Whenever the man gets too close, he takes the opportunity to pat my shoulders or massage the back of my neck.

"Tristan, you were truly an exceptional model. Your poses showed thought and energy." He takes a long step toward me, closing the established gap. "And, with the exception of one tardy morning, you were a pleasure to work with." He squeezes my bicep familiarly.

I offer him a polite smile. Not too wide and no teeth—God knows, I'm not trying to encourage him. But I need work. The more work I get, the better my family will eat. The warmer the winter coats and boots will be for the kids. The longer Tara

can go without taking in babies with runny noses to care for—which will keep Wendy healthy. “Thank you, sir.”

“Let me take you to the dining hall. We can discuss your schedule over lunch.”

Despite the routine of catching after-class lunches with Remi, I can’t say no to Professor Santini’s offer. I’m here at LaCasse College to work, not to flirt with a hunky student artist. Especially when I have no time or energy for dating. “Of course.”

“Once everyone has left, I’ll lock the studio—meet me in the hallway in five minutes.”

I nod and leave the room. As usual, Remi is waiting in the hall.

“Tristan, your modeling job is finished, so I was thinking, maybe today, I could take you out for a *real* lunch. At a *real* restaurant.” His cheeks are flushed with what looks like a case of raw nerves. “Instead of eating another salad at the dining hall.”

“I’d like nothing more than to say yes, but I can’t.” And it’s just as well.

“You... you don’t want to go to lunch with me?”

“I *want* to go.” Probably way too much. Remi has proved to be easy to spend time with. Always interested in my life, if vague about the details of his own. “But Professor Santini has asked to discuss my schedule over lunch at the dining hall.”

“He wants to share more than lunch with you,” Remi grumbles.

I shrug. “I need the work. The kids want Halloween costumes and—”

“Let me take you to dinner tonight instead. Afterward, you can come back to my place, sort through my drawings, and choose some for your portfolio.”

His smile is unexpectedly sly—I tune in to things like this.

I scan my mind for responsibilities with the kids tonight. Is there soccer? Swimming lessons at the community pool? Haircut appointments? “That’s doable.”

“Great. I’ll pick you up at your place.” He knows where our apartment is since he dropped Jared and me off there after he took us for ice cream. “How does seven sound?”

“Um, I have two more jobs today, and I won’t have a chance to go home before seven. But I can meet you somewhere.” I glance down at my attire—faded jeans and an old sweatshirt. “Somewhere casual—I’m not dressed for anything nice.”

“Do you like Thai food?”

“I like all food.”

He smiles. “Meet me tonight at Kala Kitchen. Know where it is?”

I nod. “Never been there to eat, but I’ve walked past it on my way to The Warehouse Studio. In fact, I’m modeling at TWS for a life drawing class until six thirty.”

“Then I’ll meet you at the studio instead—it’s just a few blocks from my place. Kala Kitchen is right in the middle.”

“That works. Come into the studio when you arrive—there’s a comfortable waiting room. Sometimes the artists keep me a little bit long, and I don’t want you waiting on the street.”



Tristan

LUNCH IS SEEMINGLY the last thing on his mind, though I can’t say the same; I have a long day ahead of me, and I’ll need energy. As I put down my salad, Professor Santini drones on about my inappropriate relationship with Remi.

“As a classroom model, it is highly unprofessional for you to take up with Julian Remington—an LCC student.”

I wipe my mouth before responding. “We’re just friends, sir.” Even that’s a stretch.

“Well, when he looks at you as a subject to draw, it should be without the added dimension of personal feelings. He doesn’t need that kind of conflict.” Professor Santini has pushed his plate to the middle of the table, uninterested in eating. “Julian knows this, as do you.”

“Life drawing class is over.” I have no idea why I’m challenging him—it’s not as if I’m looking for a boyfriend. My life is way too full for that. “There’s really no conflict.”

“You’re interested in future work at LaCasse College, correct? I’m certain you are hoping for a positive recommendation from me.”

“Of course.” This sounds a lot like blackmail—do not continue to see Julian Remington socially if you want to make a living. “I’ll give what you said serious thought.”

“Excellent. I’m glad we’ve settled that issue, Tristan.” Professor Santini smiles the way Jared does when his favorite MLB team wins in a blowout. “I’d like to do some one-on-one work with you, as well.”

One-on-one work is my least favorite type—sometimes it feels too intimate *and* can be risky. Still, I do it because the money is good. “For drawing or painting?”

“Neither. You see, I’ve taken up photography as a hobby. I’d like to hire you as a model.”

“I don’t do nude photography modeling.”

He clears his throat. “I’m sure you’ll make an exception for me.” He flashes yet another triumphant grin.

“I... um, need to think about it.” *I need to think about how to let you down gently.* One day, I hope to be a grade school teacher. The existence of nude photographs of me conflicts with this goal.

Professor Santini slides his wallet from his pants pocket and pulls out a business card. “My personal cell phone number

is on this card, as well as my college contact info. I'll expect a call at some point tomorrow.”

And just like that, my appetite vanishes.



Remi

I PULL open the heavy glass door to the popular art center, The Warehouse Studio. I've attended class here a hundred times, and I know where the life drawing workshop takes place. I cross through the spacious waiting room to a long hallway lined with various types of art studios, and then I make my way to the back of the building. To a private room with curtained glass windows.

Pressing my forehead to the cool glass, I peek through a slivered opening in the dark curtains and see the backs of about a dozen scattered artists, all standing behind metal easels, adding volume to nearly finished drawings. The room is dim, and a tall studio lamp is directed toward the far wall. In the brilliant glow, a graceful male form in a sensual pose is draped across a pile of pillows on the floor. The single source of light casts stark shadows over his body's hills and valleys.

Tristan lies on his stomach, chest pressed flat on a blanket covering the cushions, ass lifted erotically, and legs curled gently beneath him. Arms thrust forward enough to cradle his head in them, much of his face hidden by his shaggy, golden mane.

The sight is exquisite—too much so to find proper descriptive words. For this reason, I give up the search and focus on what I want... because tonight is the night.

I've waited two weeks to seduce this man. Now that there's no longer a conflict of interest at school, there's nothing to stop me from acting on my desire. Surprisingly, I've never waited more than a day—at most two—to make my move on a man I desire. And I don't hold to the three-date rule—wine and dine him three times, and he's fair game to fuck. In fact, I've rarely had three dates with the same man.

My transactional “love life”—in and out with no complications—has never presented a problem. I don’t hide what I want from the guys I associate with. I’m an open book about hookups being hookups. Sexual intimacy is the goal, in and of itself—and the men I date are rarely left disillusioned. With me, they seek simple hookups, as well.

“No complications” is the law I live by—life experience has taught me that heavy emotional involvement is a one-way street to heartbreak. I’m usually very upfront about this but have been less so with Tristan; I choose not to analyze the reasons.

It’s not as if I’ve wined and dined him even once—how complicated could it possibly be at this point? Not very, so I have no worries.

When class ends, Tristan stands and stretches, snatches his robe from the floor, and pulls it over his shoulders. After shaking one foot vigorously, he slides into his waiting moccasins and then heads for a folding screen in the corner. As the students gather their belongings, I step back from the window.

For a moment, I explore a lingering discomfort in my chest—the result of a tiny dagger that has lodged itself into a corner of my tinier heart. Am I uncomfortable with a dozen strangers inspecting the naked form of my soon-to-be lover? *It certainly can’t be that*, my rational brain replies. Because folks would call that irrational emotion jealousy, and it’s impossible to be insecure about losing someone I don’t want to keep.

I shrug, dislodging the knife from my heart. Then I lean against the wall and wait. Three women soon emerge from the studio, sighing in unison. I don’t have to strain to overhear their conversation.

“Today’s model—well, I’ve got no words.”

“I know, Amanda. I couldn’t find even a single flaw. And believe me, I looked.”

Muffled laughter.

“Lord, his body... I’ll admit, I did more than *study* the man’s anatomy.”

I fully relate to their awe. My hope is that after I’ve explored Tristan’s perfectly sculpted body in every way my dirty mind can imagine, I’ll rid my system of this odd obsession with him. He’ll be purged from my thoughts, like each man before him.

“I figured you’d be in the waiting room.” Tristan appears in the hallway, interrupting my thoughts.

“I know where the life drawing class takes place, so I came directly here.” *I couldn’t wait to see you.* “Are you hungry?”

He laughs. I’m not sure what he finds so funny until he replies, “I’m never *not* hungry.”

“Well, let’s head out. I stopped by Kala Kitchen on the way over. They’re going to have a table waiting for us.”

“Sweet.” Tristan leads the way to the exit, and I find myself scrambling to push the building’s front door open for him.

Once we’re on the street, I scrutinize my evening’s date. “You look exhausted.” Never before have I seen his shoulders slump.

“Yeah, I kinda am. Three jobs in one day—that’s a lot on the muscles.”

“It’s surprising to hear that staying still is so taxing on the body.”

“Posing is more than just staying still, Remi.” He glances sideways at me. I can’t make sense of his vacant expression.

“I... I didn’t mean to suggest that your job is easy, Tristan.”

His gaze slides to the sidewalk before us. “Circulation problems are the biggest issue. My right hand and left foot are still tingling. And it can be mentally exhausting too.”

“You must think I’m a complete asshole.”

“Nah. Assholes don’t coach nude model’s nephews in soccer games.” This time, when Tristan sneaks a peek at me, he allows an almost imperceptible wink.

My relief at his excusal of my insensitivity is surprisingly overwhelming. “H-here we are.” Again, I rush to open the restaurant door. *I’m such a damned gentleman... with Tristan.*

Then I march past him to the host stand. “I reserved a table for two under Remington.” Despite how much it pains me to use the name that has caused me to feel so lost, I can’t avoid it. The Remington surname is an immutable fact of my life.

The hostess turns briefly to gather several menus from the tall shelf behind her. “Right this way, Mr. Remington.” She can’t resist stealing an extended glimpse at my alluring companion. I take a chance and place my hand on the small of his back. He may not be mine in the fullest sense, but he’s my date tonight.

When Tristan melts into me, I freeze. The scent of his hair beneath my nose—so fresh, even after a long day at work—and his warm body pressing against my side as if feeding off my strength, are utterly gripping. I step away from him; it’s my only hope at regaining steadiness.

He’s just another pretty face, damn it.

When we’re seated at a quaint corner booth, Tristan cranes his neck to explore the restaurant’s exotic interior. Kala Kitchen is my favorite place to take dates because the atmosphere is what I consider to be dramatically romantic. The lights are low, and the glow emanating from a rainbow of tangled string lights and the many brilliant lanterns lining the ceiling does part of my job in the seduction department. The curry is also spectacular.

“Can I get you gentlemen something to drink?” the hostess asks, still gaping at Tristan.

“How about a couple of Thai beers to start off?” I ask him.

“That sounds like just what I need,” he replies, looking directly into my eyes, as if unaware of the woman staring at him.

When she leaves, I can't help but ask, "You get that a lot, don't you?"

He doesn't pretend to be confused by my question. "You mean the staring?"

"Yes."

"I *do* get that a lot." There's no arrogance in his expression. "But it doesn't mean anything."

"It means you are stunningly beautiful."

Tristan nods in simple acceptance of my statement and then opens his menu. His gaze dips as he studies it, tracing the vertical line of prices with a finger. Finally, he shakes his head. "Do you have any recommendations from the menu—for maybe just an appetizer?"

An appetizer? Is he trying to save me money?

I decide to answer his question with one of my own. "Do you trust me?"

He glances up, and I'm mystified by his obvious wariness. "With a recommendation from the menu—yes, I trust you."

I swallow, probably quite noticeably. "And you enjoy spicy food?"

"Very much."

"Then allow me to choose a few items from the menu for us to share."

Before he has an opportunity to agree, the hostess arrives with our beers. "Your waiter will be right over to take your order," she says... to Tristan.

"Thank you," he replies with a patient smile. It takes her a few too many seconds to tear her eyes from him. When I clear my throat, she excuses herself.

Once again alone, I lift my glass. "To our first official date." If tonight goes as I hope, a first date is the only date I'll need to quench my thirst for this man.

Tristan wraps his fingers around his glass, but he doesn't lift it. "I think... I'd rather be friends." His studious gaze returns to the menu.

His unexpected response shocks me into boldness. "You *are* gay, right?"

Tristan looks past me at the brick wall. "I am."

"Then I don't get it." I plunk my glass down on the table, and beer spills over my fingers. "You like me—I can tell. And your work in my life drawing class is finished—so what's the problem?"

"I really do like you." Tristan is quick to respond. "But right now, I don't have the luxury of living for myself. I'm responsible for my sister and her three kids. It wouldn't be fair to them if I let myself get distracted by..." He sighs instead of finishing his thought. "I *want* to be selfish, but I can't be." His eyes are glassy when he again looks across the table at me.

"I won't distract you from your family."

"You already do."

His words please me—inexplicably so—but it's my turn to sigh. "Okay... We can *start off* our relationship as friends." Tristan won't be as easy to get into bed as I'd originally thought. And strangely, I don't want him to be.

"I can live with that."

I've never pursued friendship with a man I'm attracted to. For that matter, it's been at least a decade since I've pursued a friendship at all. But if Tristan will only give me scraps of his affection, I'll take them—for now. "Great. How about we figure out what to order for dinner?"

"I should let you know up front that I can't afford to eat at a restaurant like this," he says.

"I should let *you* know that your new friend, Julian Remington III, is made of money. When we eat at restaurants, it will *always* be on me."

"I think I need to google Julian Remington III."

He still doesn't know who I am. "Please don't."

"Okay, I won't." Tristan shrugs and then reaches across the table to squeeze my hand. "I'm sure you'll fill me in when you're ready."

"Maybe." In terms of transparency, this is the most I can offer.

CHAPTER 7



Tristan

Before we even have a chance to order dinner, my cell phone rings. “I have to get this—it’s my sister.”

“No problem, Tristan.”

“Tara, what’s up?”

“You have to come home—like, now.” Her voice is shrill enough for Remi to hear across the table.

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“It’s Tommy. He cut his finger trying to sharpen one of his art pencils with the kitchen scissors. He’s bleeding all over the place.”

“Leave Jared in charge of Wendy and Uber to the clinic. I’ll catch an Uber too and be home in less than a half hour to watch the kids.” I’m already on my feet.

“Thanks, Tris... Wendy and Tommy already ate dinner, so just get there fast and calm them down.”

By the time I end the call, Remi is also standing. He has pulled his wallet out of his pocket and is placing cash on the table. “My car is in the lot across the street. I can get you home in fifteen minutes.”

“Oh, God... th-thanks so much.” The idea of Tommy bleeding has me shaking.

“It’ll be okay, Tristan. Let’s go.”



Tristan

AS PROMISED, we're at my apartment in fifteen minutes. Maybe less. Remi follows me as I race through the front door to find Jared and Wendy huddled in the tiny window seat, their eyes wide and scared.

"Uncle Tris! You're here!" Unaccustomed to being left alone, Jared rushes into my arms, doing his best to hold back sobs. "Tommy was... he was, like, bleeding all over the kitchen table! It... it freaked me out, like, totally!"

Wendy toddles to the door in his wake. She holds out her arms to me. "Uncle Tis, Mommy left us all alone!"

Remi steps beside me to comfort Jared so I can lift Wendy into my arms. "Hey, Jared..." His voice is gentle. "Your uncle told me how you took charge of a really tough situation. What a brave kid you are."

Jared straightens up and wipes the tears from his eyes. "Uh-huh. I... I babysat Wendy all by myself... and it's dark out."

"I'm impressed. You're awesome at soccer, *and* you know how to look after your little sister."

"Come on, Coach. Let's check out the blood on the kitchen table." Jared grabs Remi's hand and drags him toward the kitchen. "It's, like, super disgusting."

Remi glances back at me. "I'll clean it up. You take care of Wendy."

"Thanks." I carry my niece through the kitchen and into the living room.

She points at Remi with a chubby finger as we pass by. "Who's dat boy?"

"His name is Remi. He's my friend."

“Emmie!” she calls to him. “My brother Tommy’s thumbkin got bloody.”

Remi glances up at her with a crooked smile. “Don’t worry, Wendy, the doctors will fix him.” He and Jared head for the kitchen.

“How about if I read to you for a while, Wendy?” I ask.

“Just lambie books?”

“As many lambie books as you want.” I settle her beside me on the couch. “Here’s your blanket.” After listening to two stories, she climbs onto my lap and drifts off to sleep.

Jared’s voice pipes up from the kitchen. “Now that you cleaned up the blood and guts, can I show you my baseball card collection?” Jared has recovered quickly from his trauma. “And I got a ball signed by my whole little league team too. It’s from when I hit my first home run.”

“I’m going to need to see *all* of that.” Remi disappears into the kids’ bedroom with Jared, and for a moment, the apartment is peaceful. I close my eyes, exhausted from the long day and the flood of emotions.

Next thing I know, Tara is calling to me. “Tristan, we’re home from the clinic!”

I’m suddenly wide awake. “How’s Tommy?”

“Got nine stitches in my thumb. See?” He sticks his bandaged digit in my face. “Little Wenny, look—Doctor Nancy sewed my thumb back together!”

“Don’t wake her up, Tommy. You can show her in the morning.” Tara leans down to kiss Wendy’s forehead. “It’s bedtime for all little boys who almost chopped off the tip of their thumbs.”

“You mean me, Mommy?”

“Yes, I mean you.”

I adjust Wendy in my arms so I can stand. “Tara, the friend I was with when you called drove me home so I could get here fast. He’s the guy who coached the soccer game when Coach

Wells was out. And he's in the kids' bedroom looking at Jared's baseball card collection."

"Sounds like a nice guy." Tara yawns. "And I'm glad to hear that you got together with a friend—it's been way too long. Sorry I screwed up your night."

"No worries."

"Mommy, think I'll still be able to use clay at school?"

"I'm sure we'll figure out a way—maybe you can wear a rubber glove." She leads Tommy to the bathroom so he can brush his teeth as I head into the bedroom with Wendy. Remi is sitting next to Jared on his bed, looking on as my nephew plays Mario Golf on his Nintendo Switch.



Remi

"THIS KID HAS some serious skill at video games," I say as Tristan tucks Wendy into a white plastic toddler bed.

"He practices enough—he ought to," Tristan replies. "Jared, you should go check out Tommy's stitches."

"He's not gonna be able to play video games with half a thumb." Jared passes the Switch to me. "It's your turn now, Coach."

Once Jared has raced from the bedroom, Tristan says, "Thanks a million for helping out tonight, Remi." If I thought he looked wiped out earlier, it's nothing compared to now.

"It's what friends do for each other." I stand and step toward him. My inexplicable urge is to take him in my arms. Resisting is tough.

"Well, I owe you one... or maybe two, at this point."

"Who's counting?" I ask, forcing my arms to my sides.

"Come with me." Tristan steps into the hallway, and I follow along behind him.

As we pass the bathroom, Jared is rambling to his mother and brother. “And then Coach Remi scrubbed Tommy’s blood off the kitchen table. It was, like, super nasty. He checked out my baseball card collection, my homerun ball, *and* we played video games for, like, an hour.”

“Coach Remi sounds like a cool guy.” A female voice—must be Tristan’s twin sister.

“He’s the super coolest.”

“I have a whole new identity since I met your nephew. I’m now Coach Remi,” I murmur.

“Don’t forget the nickname Wendy gave you, *Emmie*.” Tristan can’t help but laugh. “I should warn you that *she’ll* never forget it.”

Once we’re in the living room, I make an offer I hope Tristan won’t take me up on. “I guess I should go now, seeing as my duty as professional blood scrubber and video game observer is done.”

“Stay and meet my sister.” He pats the back of the couch. “Sit down—I owe you a beer.”

I make myself comfortable against the arm of a couch that is littered with children’s books. I stack them on the coffee table in a neat pile. “So, Wendy likes books about lambs...” Talk about stating the obvious.

“Uh, yeah. And I like them too.” He grabs a couple of cans of cheap beer from the fridge. “I mean, not specifically books about farm animals—I just like children’s books.”

He sits beside me—far closer than most *friends* would—and hands me a can. “You keep surprising me, Tristan.”

“How so?” He takes a long sip, and I do the same.

“You want to be a teacher; you appreciate children’s literature... and you are apparently uncle of the year.”

“You got that right—I need to get him a shiny ‘super uncle’ trophy,” Tara states, emerging from the hallway in wrinkled pajama pants and a baggy white T-shirt. “I have absolutely no clue what I’d do without him.”

“Let me grab you a beer, Tara,” Tristan offers.

“Don’t get up, bro—I’ve got it.” She goes into the kitchen and then quickly returns to the living room with a beer can in hand, stands too close to the couch, and stares down at me. “You are Tristan’s new friend?”

“I guess so,” I reply. Friendship wasn’t my original plan, but here I am.

“*Coach Remi*, it’s truly nice to meet you.” Tara reaches down to shake my hand. “It’s about time Tristan started to put some effort into his social life. I don’t think he’s hung out with a friend since I had Jared.”

“What choice did I have?” Tristan asks. “We were only sixteen, and Mom—well, she’s always been too flighty to give you much help.”

“God knows I got almost zero help with Jared and Tommy from Jared, Sr.,” Tara adds sourly. “And Ryan does even less for Wendy.”

I assume Jared, Sr. and Ryan are the fathers of her children.

“But you have me.” Tristan points to himself with a thumb. “Always have and always will.”

Tara’s sigh is so heartfelt, it would bring tears to the eyes of a more compassionate man. “I’d have never been able to get my high school diploma, let alone my online business degree, without you. Soon, Wendy will be in school, and I’ll be able to get a real job, and—”

“And you won’t need me so much?” Tristan asks softly.

I’m smack in the middle of an extremely personal conversation between siblings. I should excuse myself and head for the door, but I’m too busy analyzing their every word—trying to unravel the mystery that is Tristan. The soft-spoken, family-oriented, nude model who says he wants to be my friend.

Tara plops down on the other side of him and grabs his hand. “Shit, Tris, I’ll always need you, and we both know it.

But maybe when I have a decent job, you can work at a preschool until you get your education degree.”

“I can wait,” he assures her and then turns toward me. “*That* was TMI, huh, Remi?”

“No, not at all,” I say, though his statement is true. I have gained far more knowledge than I have a right to about Tristan and Tara’s difficult circumstances.

Tristan leans toward me and utters beneath his breath, “Now you understand why I can’t make any promises to a man.”

I have never asked him for promises, but I know what he means. *His* life can’t afford complications either.

“No secrets, boys,” Tara demands. “I’m totally starving... You up for turkey sandwiches?”

CHAPTER 8



Remi

“Big boys don’t cry, young Julian. You know this.”

I drag my pillow over my head, trying to block out Grandmother’s voice.

“You are nine years old today. You will act your age.”

“Leave me alone...”

“I will do no such thing. And you need to pull yourself together immediately. Do not forget, you are a Remington—heir to a hotel fortune. You will not fall apart like a fragile ruin.”

“I don’t wanna be here... I wanna go home.”

“You do not get to choose where you will go. I make those choices for you now.”

“I want Mom and Dad...”

“And I want my son—but do you see me wailing over my loss?”

Grandfather wraps his fingers around my wrist and squeezes. “Helen, may I suggest you show young Julian a measure of compassion? He is but a child who has experienced a profound loss.”

“Darling, I will manage this situation, as I manage all family matters.”

The warmth of Grandfather's hand disappears. "Of course, my dear."

"In several minutes, we will participate in an interview regarding last night's tragedy. Young Julian, you are to wash your face, comb your hair, change into the clothes I have laid out on the bed, and put on a brave face. You will then present yourself in the parlor as the proud Remington you have been raised to be."

I wake up in a deep sweat—flat on my back with my pillow pulled snugly over my head—having once again relived the disaster that changed my life on my ninth birthday... in yet another nightmare. *I'm twenty-six years old—shouldn't I have grown out of childish dreams?*

"Big boys don't cry," was Grandmother's sage advice on the morning after my parents' catastrophic passing in a head-on collision with a logging truck on their way home from a late winter skiing trip so they could throw my birthday party the next afternoon.

Grandmother ultimately got what she wanted; I'm a fast learner when it comes to matters of survival. Julian Remington III didn't cry much after that devastating morning. Instead, he began his metamorphosis from Charlotte and Julian II's beloved—and, yes, fragile—eight-year-old only child, entirely capable of being destroyed by loss, into a cold young man who could never be so adversely impacted by heartbreak again.

Call me callous, but I'll never again experience the excruciating pain of loss because I refuse to allow myself the temporary bliss of bonding. *Yes, indeed... I learned my lesson well.*

I toss the pillow to the foot of the bed and swing my legs over the edge. The mid-morning sun shines mercilessly through the loft's oversized windows. I rub my eyes and squint; it's time to face yet another worthless weekend. Being a loner is tolerable on weekdays when I'm busy with classes, but weekends and holidays—meant to be spent rejuvenating one's spirit with family and friends—are depressingly endless.

I grab my phone from the top of the empty bourbon barrel I use as a nightstand. “Lucky for me, Tristan and I exchanged phone numbers before I left his apartment last night.” Alone in my loft so frequently, I allow myself the luxury of speaking aloud. It fills the structure’s vast emptiness with sound.

I dial his number before I give it too much thought. “Hey, Tristan.”

“Remi?”

“The one and only.”

“Uh... hi. Didn’t expect to hear from you so soon.”

“Well, surprise—it’s me.”

The ensuing awkward silence is *not* surprising.

“What are you doing today?” I press on.

“Tara is working on her resumé—she wants to find an online business job. I’m gonna take the kids to the park.”

“Want some company?”

“You actually want to watch three kids climb on a jungle gym?”

“To be honest, I’m all about the seesaws—just can’t get enough of them.”

Tristan laughs. “You know the park we’re going to—it’s on the other side of the field where the Bears so soundly defeated the Coyotes, thanks to Coach Remi.”

“I’ll meet you there.”

“Can’t wait.”

I race to the bathroom to get ready to meet Tristan. I’ll admit to being more excited about watching kids play at a park than for any of my other extracurricular activities, which largely consist of working out and drinking alone. Though if Grandmother had her way, I’d be putting the finishing touches on my law school application essays.



Remi

“YOU GOT HERE FAST,” Tristan calls as I trot to the swing set where he’s pushing Wendy.

“Emmie!” she squeals. “Uncle Tis, Emmie’s here!”

“Hiya, Coach!” shouts Jared.

“You were the guy who walked by my bathroom last night when I was brushin’ my teeth,” Tommy accuses from his seat on the still swing. “Guess what! I cut my thumb and got it sewed back together.”

“You must be Tommy,” I say. “How’s your thumb today?”

“Super bad. Can’t pump on the swing, and Uncle Tris has gotta push little Wenny.”

“I’ll push you,” I offer.

“Can I go super high?” he asks.

“High enough,” I reply.

“Cool beans.”

“Hold on as tight as you can without hurting your thumb,” I warn. Then I stand behind the swing set near Tristan and give Tommy a relatively low-key ride. He seems satisfied.

“I told you Coach Remi was super cool,” Jared yells to his brother as they pass mid-air.

“Uncle Tis, is Emmie your BFF?” Wendy pipes up.

“Well, I like him a lot,” Tristan replies. He doesn’t look at me, but I want him to.

It doesn’t take long before the kids are bored with swinging. They bolt to the seesaws.

“Your favorite playground structure,” Tristan quips with a subtle wink that makes my heart flutter.

We balance Jared opposite Tommy and Wendy and closely monitor the situation until Wendy falls into a coughing fit.

“Mommy says I got allergies real bad, Emmie,” she tells me when I lift her from the swing. “Need juice.”

Tristan races for the army-green duffel bag that’s resting on the ground by a picnic table.

“Or, like, maybe you need a doctor,” Jared adds.

“Don’t w-wanna go to the d-doctor today.” And she starts to cry.

I’m *so* out of my league. “Now, Wendy, don’t go getting your nose all out of joint.”

She stops coughing for a second, tilts her head, and covers her button nose with a plump little hand. “My nose is broke?” More tears.

“No, no... your nose is fine. What I mean is, don’t cry—it’ll just make you cough harder, sweetie. You’ll be fine as soon as you have a sip of juice.”

Thankfully, Tristan reappears with a juice box in hand. “Here you go, Wendy.”

The little girl leans her head against my shoulder and sucks from the box’s straw. “I’m all better now,” she announces after a deep exhalation. I’m not sure why I hug her.

“What’re we gonna do *now*?” Tommy asks, looking at me for an answer. “Jungle gym?”

“You’ll fall off the jungle gym if you try to climb with one hand,” Jared says, “And I’ll fall off too, seeing as I’m, like, so big-time starving, I might keel over.”

“How about we go out for pizza?” I ask the kids.

The kids roar their approval, but Tristan brings them back down to earth. “Uh, pizza at a restaurant is not in our budget this week.” He kicks a rock by his foot. “We’ve got bologna at home.”

“Bologna sucks.” Jared seems comfortable voicing his opinion. “Dang it all.”

“Jared, you know that’s not nice language,” Tristan says.

“Sorry, Uncle Tris, but still...”

“Listen, you guys, *I’m* gonna get some pizza, and I really hate to eat alone.” This *is* true—I eat alone a lot, and it’s never much fun. In a lower tone, I add, “Tristan, like I told you, I’m pretty much made of money, so lunch is on me. I really want to do this.”

“Well, uh...” I can see Tristan weighing and measuring his decision. He isn’t the sort of person to take advantage of a friend. Even one who claims to be made of money.

“It’s pizza, not a lobster dinner,” I remind him. I feel like a lobbyist... and still, I don’t care.

“Then, okay.” He smiles, and I want to kiss him but kissing in a park is against the rules *he* set and the laws *I* live by.

“Woot! Woot!” Jared shouts.

“Woot for Emmie... and woot for yummy pizza!” Wendy joins in.

“W-woot... but... but Uncle Tris, I’m gonna need you to cut mine up into pieces, seein’ as this is my pizza eatin’ hand.” Tommy waves the hand with the bandaged thumb.

“That won’t be a problem at all, Tommy. Now give me a second—I’ve gotta call Tara to let her know the plan.” He takes a few steps so he’s out of earshot.

“Coach, can we bring some pizza home for Mommy?” Tommy asks, tugging on my shirt.

“We’ll get her whatever kind she likes,” I assure him.

Jared wrinkles his nose. “She likes yucky veggies on her pizza.”

“Veggie pizza it is... for your mom. *We* can have pepperoni.” Still carrying Wendy, I walk toward the parking lot by the soccer field. “Come on, let’s head to my SUV.”

“Tommy, like, wait until you get a load of Coach Remi’s wheels!” Jared races off to my Range Rover with his little

brother at his heels. “You won’t believe your eyes!”

CHAPTER 9



Tristan

The kids love spending time with Remi as much as I do, probably because he's as attentive to the kids as he is to me. Yesterday was the best. Remi engaged in a passionate debate with Jared about which soccer position covers the most ground on the field, promised Tommy he'd give him a tour of the kiln room in the basement of the Clayton Arts Building, and earnestly evaluated the fluffiness of baby sheep with Wendy.

I let myself forget about my worries—our shortage of money, Wendy's poor health, the kids' dire need for “butt-kicking” Halloween costumes, and how I'm pushing aside my personal goals to help my family—for a full twenty-four hours.

Since my responsibilities don't vanish just because I let myself stop obsessing over them for a day, this morning I soldier on with my current jobs. After working out at the local dive gym—necessary to maintain the physical shape that keeps me in demand as a nude model—I head to the agreed-upon job with Professor Santini.

I placed the requested call to him when Remi dropped us off yesterday after our pizza non-date. Halloween costumes for three kids will run us about a hundred dollars that we just don't have. A photo session with Professor Santini will take care of that cost. I insisted on the condition that I wear white boxer briefs instead of being fully naked, and he reluctantly agreed.

As is usual for a Sunday morning, there are few people riding the bus. In the nearly empty silence—the only sound the pattering of rain on the bus windows—my gut screams, “This is a bad idea, and you know it!”

But what can I do? I need the work. I need the money. I need to provide for my family.

My cell phone buzzes—it’s Remi.

“Hello.”

“Hey, Tristan.”

“What are *you* doing on this rainy Sunday?” I ask.

“I called to ask you the very same thing.”

“I have a job today.” My belly churns.

“On a Sunday?”

“Professor Santini can only hire me on weekends since he works at the college on weekdays.”

“You can’t be serious—you’re modeling for Santini?” Remi sounds pissed off. “Where are you doing the job?”

“At his house. He lives in an old white colonial on Maple Street, at the edge of the LaCasse campus.”

“I know where that is... Tristan, I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to go there alone.”

“Why not?” I already know the answer. The man drools when he looks at me and can’t keep his hands to himself if I’m within touching distance.

“Um, he wants you... and not just as a model for his art.”

“I can handle him.” *I hope.*

“The problem is *he* wants to handle you.”

I let him hear me sigh. “Remi, I appreciate your concern, but I need this job.”

“Don’t work for him. Come to my place instead. Work for me—I’ll pay you twice what Santini’s offering.”

“Professor Santini expects me to show up at eleven. It’s too late at this point to cancel the appointment.”

“Okay, then.” Remi’s voice is cold. “Have a nice day.” He ends the call.



Tristan

“TRISTAN, PLEASE COME IN.” Professor Santini greets me at the front door. “Thank you for giving up time on the weekend to pose for me.”

“I appreciate the opportunity to work, sir.” He steps back so I can walk past him into the entryway. His stare weighs heavily on my backside.

“Can I get you anything? Coffee? Water?” He hesitates. “A mimosa?”

I follow him to the living room where he grabs a tropical-looking drink from his mantel.

“I *do* hate to drink alone.”

“Uh, no, thank you. I don’t mix business with pleasure.” That should set him straight about my intentions today.

The instructor chuckles. “Point taken, Tristan.” He leads me to a white backdrop set up in the corner of the room and gestures to the lighting equipment. “I picked up this set yesterday. I’m going to pull the shades to control the exterior light source.”

“You really are new to photography, aren’t you?” I ask, hoping to generate casual conversation.

“I’ve done some nature photography, but this is my first endeavor in indoor work with a nude model.” He steps to the window to lower the shades.

“We already talked about that, Professor Santini. I’m going to be wearing briefs.” I sling my bag over my shoulder curtly,

letting him know that this subject is not up for debate. “Where should I go to change?”

“Take your clothes off right here.” His bold stare feels like a dare, but he knows it doesn’t work that way.

“I’d rather get ready in the bathroom.”

After an exasperated sigh, he points. “Down the hall, to the left.”

Once in the bathroom, I admit that agreeing to this job was a crappy idea. Nonetheless, I pull off my jeans and sweatshirt and toe off my sneakers, and then stick everything in my duffel bag. When I’m wearing only my snug white boxer briefs, I pull on my robe, instinctively sticking my phone in its wide pocket, and I head back to the living room.

“To be honest, sir, I don’t do a lot of modeling for photography,” I admit. “Do you have anything in mind for poses? If not, I’ll look directly into the camera and play with face and body angles. And if you want, I can do some of the same poses I do for life drawing class.”

“How about we just let the session unfold?” Professor Santini seems impatient. “Take off your robe.” When he licks his lips, I shudder.

After pulling off the robe and tossing it onto the coffee table, I step lightly across the room to the cloth backdrop. “How should I start?”

“You should start by removing your briefs.”

“What I mean is, do you want to begin with upper body photos or full body shots?”

“Just stand on the damned backdrop, would you?” He glares at me.

I recognize his nasty demeanor—it’s eerily similar to how he treated me on the morning I arrived late to life drawing class. “Of course.” The room is warm, yet I still need to rub the scattering of goosebumps from my arms.

I step onto the edge of the white screen and pose. At first, I look directly into the camera, lifting and turning my head, and

switching poses each time I hear a click. Professor Santini shakes his head and curses quietly—these poses are clearly not what he’s looking for. So, I shift my body about forty-five degrees to the right and use hand gestures to create some variety.

“This isn’t working.” He places his camera on the seat of a wingback chair. “I’m not accustomed to working with clothed models. I find those briefs extremely... distracting.”

“Sir, I never agreed to be naked for the photographs.” The pleading tone in my voice reminds me of Wendy when she’s begging to stay up past her bedtime.

“Your shorts are... obstructing the view of what I want to see.” He flashes a hopeful grin. “And have no fear, Tristan. I do not plan to publish these photos—they’re for my private use.”

That doesn’t make me feel much better. “Maybe I’m not the right model for this project.”

“I’ll increase your rate of pay.” His smile grows sly. “Money’s what it’s all about, right?”

“I’m sorry.” I take a step back. His refusal to stick to our agreement is making me skittish.

“Blast you!” Professor Santini lunges toward me. He grasps my upper arms, squeezes them so hard I yelp, and shakes me briskly. Then he seems to regain control. After pursing his lips and blowing a long breath right into my face, he changes his tune. “You’re right. Let’s set aside the photoshoot for now.”

I nod and twist from his grasp. When I reach for my robe, he again snatches my arm. “What I mean is, maybe today we should focus on pleasure *instead* of business.”

“I don’t think that’s the best idea, sir.” When he finally releases my arm, I grab my robe and retreat a few steps.

“You know what? I’ll fix you one of my special mimosas, and then we can relax and chat.” He leaves the room, heading to the kitchen to make me a drink. “Don’t go anywhere.”

As soon as he's out of the room, I pull on my robe and rush to the bathroom where I left my bag of clothes and bus fare home.

Professor Santini is apparently one step ahead of me. He calls from the kitchen, "The bathroom door is locked. Unfortunately, you won't be able to get in."

"I w-want to put on m-my clothes," I insist. Too bad my voice breaks twice.

"You can put them on after we share a few drinks." The professor steps into the hallway and holds out a glass. "You are far too uptight, Tristan. Drink this—you'll feel much better."

Unsure of the best strategy to get out of here unmolested, I accept the drink from his hand. "Thank you, sir." I concentrate my energy on not trembling.

"I *do* enjoy how you call me sir." Again, Professor Santini licks his lips. "Very submissive." He steps closer and pulls my robe open. "And enticing."

I have no choice but to think on my feet. Out of sheer necessity, a flimsy plan forms in my mind. Next time he leaves the room, I'll bolt for the door. And this is, sadly, the beginning and ending of my genius scheme.

I toss back my glass of champagne in a single swallow, noting a strong aftertaste of vodka—he clearly wants me drunk and agreeable. I then hold up the empty glass. "I'm gonna need another one of these." I force a smile while fighting an urge to gag.

"Thirsty, are you?" Professor Santini lifts his bushy eyebrows. "I'll be back before you know it." Again, he disappears down the hall.

I waste no time in racing for the door. Wearing just a robe and briefs—robbed of my shoes and my pants and my pride—I shove through the front door, dash along the walkway, and out onto the wet street. And though I'm nearly naked, humiliation keeps me warm. I run down the busy street near

the college, which is unfortunately on the opposite side of the city from my apartment.

People stare as I sprint along the sidewalk in the rain. I can't stop to explain—I need to get as far from Professor Santini's house as possible. Once I come to a more commercial area, I slip into an alley and press my back flat against the building's brick wall. Ankle deep in a puddle and chilled to the bone, I pull out my cell phone and call the only one who can help me.

“Re-Remi...” It's tough to catch my breath, as I'm winded from the sprint.

“Tristan?”

“Uh-huh. I... I need some help.”

“What can I do?” he asks without hesitation.

“Can you come pick me up? I'm... I'm in the alley beside College Soup and Sandwich Shop.” I'm shivering badly. Wet, frightened, embarrassed... and afraid.

“What are you doing in an *alley*? I thought you had a job today.”

“I did, but... but I'll explain later. Can you come get me?”

“Yes, of course. I'll be right there. Five minutes, no more.”

“Stop in front of the alley, okay? I'll watch for you.”

“Five minutes.”



Remi

I COME to a screeching stop at the designated place. Tristan races from the alley—damp and barefoot, clad only in his white bathrobe that is wide open and flapping in the breeze.

He jumps into the SUV. “Thanks for saving me!”

“What the fuck is going on?” I can't *not* ask.

“C-can we drive somewhere else to talk? I-I need to get away from here.” This is not the composed Tristan I’ve come to know.

“Of course. Want to go to my place?”

“Um... yeah, if I can borrow some clothes.” He tries to smile but fails.

“Done.” I squeal onto the street and am in front of my building in two minutes. “Here—take the key.” I yank it from my key fob. “It’ll open the door to the building on the street. Go up the stairs to the top floor. You’ll see a rolling barn door—it’s tricky to unlock, so wait for me there, and I’ll let you in after I park.”

Tristan nods and hops out of the SUV. I watch as he opens the building door and slips inside. “I sincerely hope Dacia isn’t paying attention this afternoon,” I mumble.

I get lucky, but in a far different way than usual when I take a guy home. Dacia isn’t standing beside Tristan at the top of the stairs, interrogating him like she so often does me.

Alone and shivering, he mutters, “Holy shit.”

“You’re okay now.” I unlock the door and slide it to the side. “Go in.”

Despite his frazzled state, Tristan does what everybody does when they enter the loft. He stares around him and shakes his head. “This place is freaking huge.”

“It used to be an industrial space. Now it’s home.”

“Is it okay if I sit on your couch? I’m still a little bit wet.” He pulls the damp robe tighter and refastens the tie.

“You won’t damage the furniture.” *Not that I’d care if he did.* “Please... sit.”

He drops onto a corner of the sectional. “Um... do you think I could borrow some sweatpants and maybe a T-shirt?”

“Of course. I’ll go all out and offer you some flipflops too.” I don’t rush away in search of the clothes. I watch and wait, biding my time, though uncertain of the reason.

“Cool.” Tristan’s breathing gradually steadies, but his cheeks still glow—with embarrassment, if I had to guess. “This isn’t how I expected my day to go.”

“You didn’t expect to be sitting half-naked on your new friend’s couch?” Still standing and staring, I offer him a smile he doesn’t even try to return.

“I’d have never guessed I’d be here... like this.” He tucks a foot beneath him and glances toward the wall of windows.

There’s no need to prolong his misery. “I’ll grab you some clothes.”

In my bedroom, I search through my wardrobes for the smallest pair of sweatpants I own. I grab a clean, white T-shirt and a pair of leather flipflops from underneath my shoe rack. When I return to the living area, Tristan is standing in front of the easel. “You’re sketching *me*.”

I forgot all about the drawing of Tristan on the easel. “Uh, it’s from the picture I took at the ice cream parlor. You can have it when I’m finished—for your portfolio.”

“That’s generous of you.” He turns to look at me. For the first time since we met, there’s no wariness in his gaze. “You’re a very giving person, Remi.”

“Not really.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t make you admit it.”

I hand him the clothes. “Hope these work. You can put them on in the half-bath right over there.” I point, but his gaze doesn’t follow along.

“I don’t need to hide in the bathroom to change—you’ve already seen every inch of me.”

I nod and drop onto the couch. “It’s up to you.”

When Tristan pulls off his robe, I scan his body, but not to ogle him. Instead, I look for any sign of harm. “Did Santini hurt you?”

“No.” He steps into the sweatpants and folds over the waistband. They still droop low on his hips, drawing my gaze

to the impressive V-cut abs that lead into his white briefs. Before he pulls on the T-shirt, he turns to me. “You were right—I shouldn’t have gone to Professor Santini’s house.”

“I promise not to say I told you so.” In my estimation, Tristan’s shoulders are ideal—muscular, yet lean. He is clearly strong but is somehow also elegant. And although he insists on being friends, I want to run my hands over the defined lines of his body. I’m tempted to go to him and do just that... when he turns enough for me to notice red fingerprints on his biceps. “That asshole grabbed you.”

“He did, but it didn’t hurt much... It *did* scare me.”

“I’m gonna report him to the college.” My fury at Santini’s aggression surprises me; it feels like a fire burning in the pit of my stomach.

“I wasn’t working for the college when this happened.”

“Fuck.” He’s right. “What did he want from you?”

“I told him ahead of time that I don’t pose nude for photographs. I guess he thought he could change my mind.”

“He couldn’t?”

“Nope. And when he refused to take no for an answer, I said I wasn’t the right model for his project. He didn’t like that idea, and his new plan was to get me drunk. He probably figured I’d relax and strip down... or maybe even, uh, get horizontal with him. Who knows?” His cheeks pinken again. “When I went to put my clothes back on, I found that he’d locked me out of the bathroom where I’d left my stuff.”

Not only is Santini creepy, but he’s possibly dangerous. “So, you bolted in your robe?”

“Yeah. Luckily, I had my phone in my bathrobe pocket. And I called you.”

“What about your wallet? Is it in his bathroom too?”

“I left my wallet at home. I only brought enough cash for bus fare. I left behind my clothes, a pair of old sneakers, and my duffel bag. That’s all.”

“I’ll get them back for you.”

“I can live without them, Remi. I’m sure Tara has an old backpack I can use for work.” He shakes his head. “I’m just glad to be out of there.”

“Santini is too much of a pervert to be in charge of hiring nude models.” *I’ve never seen him as obsessed as he is with Tristan.*

“He’ll probably try to stop me from getting more work at LaCasse College.”

“I know some of the professors—I’ll put in a good word for you.”

Tristan pulls the T-shirt on and sits so close beside me, our thighs press together. “It was a good day when I met you.” His voice is hushed. “You... matter to me.”

When he leans heavily against my shoulder, I feel things I haven’t let myself feel in what seems like a lifetime. Warm things... nurturing things... connecting things. *Dangerous things.*

“Are you hungry, Tristan?”

“You know I’m always hungry.”

“I think your brave escape from Professor Santini’s living room calls for Italian food.” I need to lighten the moment. I can’t let myself melt at Tristan’s sweet, addictive vulnerability.

“Meatballs make everything better,” he replies jovially.

“That’s my philosophy,” I agree and sigh with relief. Today, *I’m* the one who will celebrate an escape—from what my heart wants desperately, but my mind fears so much more. “I know this place that makes the best meatball subs.”

CHAPTER 10



Remi

She calls religiously on the fifteenth of every month at nine in the morning. I sit stiffly on the wingback chair by the window and wait for the October 15th call. As usual, Grandmother is like clockwork.

“Good morning, young Julian.”

“Hello, Grandmother,” I reply. “How are you and Grandfather?”

“We are well, thank you. Of course, we are looking forward to the day our capable grandson steps in to relieve us of the heavy burden of the hotel business.”

I let her hear me chuckle. “You’ll never step back from the business—all three of us know this.”

“True,” she admits, a smile in her voice. “We *are*, however, looking forward to sharing the burden when you join the management team.”

Sharing the burden with me, despite my well-articulated dread of it. “Yes, of course.”

“How are your law school applications progressing, dear?” I’d predicted this would be the first topic on the table for discussion. I’m less than thrilled to be proved right.

“They are... progressing.”

“Early applicants have an advantage,” she reminds me.

“So you say.”

“And dragging your feet will *not* make the obligation vanish.”

“I’m aware.” I clear my throat before adding, “I’ll submit them before the deadlines.”

“Not that I anticipate rejection, but we agreed that you would submit to six schools, correct?” Again, her remark is as predictable as leaves turning crisp and brown before falling from trees in autumn.

“I’m hoping to attend law school in Garner City, Grandmother. It’s home to me.”

“Yes, that cold and barren loft.” She has never recognized the rustic appeal of an antique industrial space. “I suppose you will apply to the law schools at Regent and Mountain Valley Universities.”

“That’s right.”

“There are more prestigious law schools in other cities.” She makes no effort to hide her disdain. Grandmother’s preference would be for me to attend an Ivy League.

“My home is here.” *Tristan is here.*

“Fair enough.” It’s now time for a new topic. This one, she detests. “And is your precious *art* entertaining you as well as you’d hoped?” I can visualize her grimace as she speaks the word for the passion that has distracted me from both personal pain and blind obedience since I discovered art museums in high school.

“Senior year at LaCasse College is intense.”

“Intense...” she echoes, the sarcasm thick. Next on the agenda, Grandmother will issue a threat. “Upon graduation, young Julian, Grandfather and I expect you to begin summer work at Remington Plaza Corporate Headquarters. You will work with us until law school starts in the fall. It would kill your grandfather if you were to renege on your obligation.”

“I know what you expect.”

“Excellent.”

This conversation has nearly run its course. I breathe a sigh of relief.

“What are your plans for Thanksgiving, son?”

I am not your son. “At this point, they’re undecided.”

“Your grandfather misses you greatly.”

To some extent, I also miss him. He possesses a far milder soul than his conniving wife. Nonetheless, he has never possessed the grit to stand in my corner. “I’ll be certain to visit him over Thanksgiving weekend.”

“I hope so. He also misses his son, and you are the very image of Julian II.”

“Mmmhmm.” I’m in no mood to discuss similarities and differences between my father and me. We’ve done this many times before, and I always come up lacking.

“Well, then, I suppose I should allow you to return to your extremely rigorous study of art.” Once again, she makes little effort to hold back her scorn.

“And you to your burdensome hotel business.” I return the favor.

“It is *our* business, my dear.” She sniffs. “It was pleasant to hear your voice, young Julian.”

“And yours.” A lie neither of us will acknowledge. “Give my regards to Grandfather.”

“Of course. Goodbye.”

A call from Grandmother always reminds me of who I am, where I come from, and where I’m going. Instead of heading to life drawing class where I’ll be forced to engage with Professor Santini—who planned to get Tristan drunk and take advantage of him—I climb back into bed.

Lying here, sleepless and agitated, my mind fills with unanswerable questions.

Three years in law school—will I survive it?

How will I endure my future as a hotel executive?

There's another question of a more personal nature that plagues me.

Why am I investing so much time and energy in my relationship with Tristan?

In my experience, human relationships have been nothing but sources of impossible pain. I need to stop pursuing Tristan before he agrees to my advances.

I'm not sure I'll have the strength to walk away if I get in much deeper.



Tristan

LIFE HAS BEEN TURNED UPSIDE DOWN by Wendy's constant illness. When I'm not working, I take the boys to school, soccer, and swimming lessons, make their meals, and do their laundry because Tara invests so much time caring for her. Money is tighter than ever—Tara hasn't been able to find an online job. The kids are begging for Halloween costumes we can't afford if we want to eat anything other than ramen noodles for the next month. I'm exhausted and feeling a little bit down. This could also be because Remi hasn't reached out to me since last Sunday, after the incident with Professor Santini.

"Any word from that office assistant job you applied for at the end of last week?" I ask over bowls of cereal.

"Not yet, which isn't a good sign," Tara replies with a yawn. "Maybe I'll dog sit instead."

"Dog fur won't help Wendy's allergies," I point out.

"Shit, you're right."

"Naughty language, Mommy!" Tommy exclaims. "Little Wenny's gonna start sayin' it now."

"Shit... I mean, sorry," she murmurs.

“Sheet!” Wendy blurts and breaks into a grin. It’s the first time she’s smiled since Monday. Five long days.

“Stop it, Little Wenny!” Tommy fully embraces the role of enforcer.

Tara’s mind is still on business. “Can you take Jared to his soccer game at five, Tris?”

“I can’t—I have an evening job at Garner Valley School of Design. And it’s a long one, so the money will be good. I can’t cancel.”

“I’m not missing my dang soccer game!” Jared shouts. “I’m, like, the best striker we got—the Bears need me to score!”

“Look, Jared—I can’t take Wendy to the field tonight because she’s sick. All I can do is call your friends’ moms to see if they can bring you over to the field.”

“Call Coach Remi. He’ll take me.”

Everybody at the table turns to gawk at me.

“That’s not a bad idea,” Tara says. “Will you ask him, Tris?”

“Uh...”

“That’s what friends are for,” she sings. “Come on...”

“Okay, I’ll call him and let you know what he says.” The worst he can say is no-can-do. And after I pick myself up off the floor from the humiliation of it, I’ll know Remi’s interest in me is casual, at most.

“Cool beans!” Jared exclaims.

“Cool beanies!” Wendy repeats.



Tristan

“HI, REMI.” I *so* do not want to make this call. Remi has done way too much for our family already, and it’s hard to ask for

more. But desperate times call for desperate measures.

“Tristan... hello.”

His tone gives no clue as to whether he’s happy to hear from me. “I, uh... I need to ask a favor.” I might as well go straight to the heart of the matter—there’s no use dragging out the torture. “Wendy’s sick, I’ve got a job... and we wondered if you could take Jared to soccer tonight.”

“Oh, um...” The silence makes my belly lurch.

“I mean, if you can’t do it, it’s fine. But Jared asked for you.”

A tiny gasp. “He asked for *me*?”

“Yeah.” This *was* Jared’s big idea. “He did.”

“Of... of course. I’d love to take Jared to soccer.”

“I really appreciate it.”

“I’m a... a decent friend.”

“That you are.” And a lifesaver of epic proportions.

“Same time and place as last game?”

“Uh-huh. You’ll need to pick him up at our apartment at quarter to five. And don’t be surprised if Tommy asks to come along. My nephews can’t get enough of you.” *They’re not alone.*

“I’m looking forward to seeing them too.”

“Thanks, Remi.”

“Anytime.”



Remi

I END up coaching the soccer game. Adam Wells, the team’s usual coach, begged me. He told me that his son, along with the rest of the kids on the Bears, haven’t stopped talking about Coach Remi and his “freaking awesome ball tricks.” After a

five-to-two win tonight... well, I'll be coaching Monday evening's game too.

On the way home from the game, the boys talk me into grabbing pizza from the same place we got it last week because it "totally rocked." I'm a sucker for pizza, and apparently also for Jared and Tommy, so it was easy for them to get me to yes.

Tara meets us at the door. "My hero! You took the boys to soccer *and* brought dinner."

"It was nothing, Tara." I glance around the apartment in search of Tristan.

"He isn't home yet," she says with a knowing grin. "I expect him in a few minutes."

"Mommy, we got you a veggie pizza!"

"Wow, Tommy—just what I'm in the mood for. Now, boys, go wash your hands—*with* soap." They scamper down the hall—the sooner their hands are clean, the sooner they eat.

Tara grabs plates and drinks as I set the pizzas on the table. "How's Wendy feeling?"

"She's okay. Sleeping again... You know, if I could get a decent job, we could save up for an air purifying system. The doctor thinks it would help her. Until then, we just keep chugging along."

"I have a Leroy Large Space Air Purifier at my loft. I love it." My mind shifts into helpful gear. *How can I help Tara reach her goal?*

"Lucky you," she replies dryly. "Hopefully, we'll be able to get one soon."

The boys race back to the table and sit in what seems to be their usual places.

"Mom, you should've seen me boot the ball! Coach says I got major power!"

When Tara pulls slices from the pepperoni pie to serve the kids, I excuse myself. "I've got to wash my hands too." Soccer

is a dirty game. “Don’t wait for me to start.”

I return to the kitchen in five minutes, just as Tristan is coming through the front door.

“Uncle Tris—I was, like, the superhero of the soccer game! I scored three times!” Jared brags at top volume. The folks in the apartment next door can probably hear him.

“There are clearly *two* heroes in this room,” Tara adds, glancing at me.

Tristan’s gaze meets mine. “Thanks so much for taking Jared to soccer—it really helped.”

“He took me too!” Tommy exclaims, his mouth stuffed with cheese and pepperoni.

“It was fun,” I admit and fight the subsequent sappy sigh. I’m starting to feel as if I belong in this kitchen with this family, which isn’t emotionally safe at all. “Let’s eat while the pizza’s still hot.”

I sit in the chair Tara points to and watch as Tristan drops a purple-flowered backpack beside the pile of shoes near the door. Before sitting at what seems to be his usual place, he explains, “I borrowed one of Wendy’s backpacks... you know, until I get another duffel bag.”

I grab a slice of veggie pizza since the pepperoni is in high demand. “I talked to Santini in class on Wednesday. He said he was going to bring your stuff on Friday, but he didn’t.” In fact, when I asked him about it, Santini had growled, “You know what, Julian? I burned that dirty tramp’s filthy bag and everything in it.”

“No worries,” Tristan says with a small head shake. He clearly hasn’t told Tara about his misadventures with the art professor. “It’s a good thing I like purple flowers, huh?”

Tara is too busy pouring drinks for the boys to notice our stilted conversation.

I lift the can of inexpensive beer she placed in front of me and take a long swig. I’m starting to understand why Tristan

took the job at Santini's house. Life is tough here—every dime counts.

“Mom, when are we gonna get our Halloween costumes? All of the best ninja stuff is gonna be, like, totally wiped out if we wait much longer.”

“Be patient, Jared. Tris and I need a few more days to come up with the cash to pay for them.”

“My job tonight got us close to the amount we need,” Tristan adds. “Next week, we'll go to the discount store and see what costumes are left.”

Grabbing another slice, Jared grumbles, “By then, everything good's gonna be gone.”

“W-we are d-doing our best.” Tara's voice shakes, and her eyes fill with tears. She's clearly wiped out—physically *and* emotionally.

“I have an idea—how about Tristan and I take the kids to my loft for the weekend. That way, Tara, you can get a few solid nights of sleep,” I offer in “Remi, the do-gooder” mode.

What the fuck am I thinking? I'm supposed to be extricating myself from Tristan's life.

“We could never ask that of you,” Tristan replies, his eyes wide with surprise.

“You didn't ask—I offered.”

“Pretty please can we go, Mommy? I won't drink any water before bed!”

“I swear I won't tease Wendy or Tommy—like, not even once!”

“Well, if you take the kids, could I catch up with you all tomorrow?” Tara asks. “I'd miss them too much if they were gone for the whole weekend.”

“You can meet us tomorrow afternoon... at the Halloween Shoppe on Purchase Street.”

“Uh, I don't think so.” Tristan's face turns white. “We don't shop at places like that.”

“The costumes will be a little gift—from me to the kids.”

“No. That’s way above and beyond,” he insists, though Tara’s eyes have lit up.

“How about if we make a trade—Halloween costumes in exchange for a three-hour modeling job,” I suggest. “It would be better to finish the picture I started with you in person as a model, rather than by looking at your picture on my phone.”

“I think that could work.” He breathes a sigh of relief. “Sure, it’s a deal.”

“Yes!” Jared pumps his fist. “I’m gonna have the best costume at the school parade!”

Tommy gets out of his chair to high five me. “Dude, you *so* don’t suck.”

“Tommy, you’re too young to start talking like your big brother. And I thought you were the naughty word policeman,” Tristan reminds him patiently.

“My bad.”

“You mean you’re sorry?”

“Uh-huh. Sorry. Can I have more pizza?” Tommy doesn’t seem all that remorseful.

After we finish eating, I wash the plates and wipe the table while Tristan and Tara pack. Tara empties the boys’ school bags and stuffs them with blankets, books, toys, animal crackers, and juice boxes.

“Babysitter’s survival kit,” she announces as she hands the bags to me.

“I’ve got clothes and PJs for the kids and me.” Tristan pats the full to bursting purple-flowered backpack.

“It’s okay if you forgot to pack our toothbrushes,” Jared offers.

“I didn’t,” Tara replies plainly. “I’ll go wake up Wendy now. Maybe you can go through a drive-thru and grab her some chicken nuggets and fries for dinner.”

“Me and Tommy like french fries a lot too,” Jared adds. “Just sayin’.”

“This guy has the same appetite as his uncle,” I joke, ruffling Jared’s mop of blond hair.

“Two bottomless pits,” Tara mutters and leaves to get Wendy.

“Coach Remi, I never been on a sleepover before,” Tommy tells me.

“I been on, like, ten,” Jared boasts.

“Well, it’s been a long while since *I* last slept over somebody’s house. Tonight’s gonna be fun.” Tristan glances at me with a sweet expression I could get used to.



Remi

THE KIDS ARE crazy about the loft. We let the boys kick a soccer ball back and forth while putting sheets and blankets on the sectional. They’re astounded that they can play soccer indoors. I don’t have much in terms of decoration, so all we need to do is turn the easel toward the wall and keep the ball away from the windows.

“Remi’s ginormous loft rocks!” Jared shouts.

“Yeah, lofts are cool beans!” Tommy agrees.

I don’t have a TV, so we tuck the boys in on the couch with my laptop on the coffee table. Tristan finds a show for them to watch on YouTube, so they can settle down before trying to sleep. Meanwhile, I read this “bedtime for little Lambkins” storybook to Wendy a dozen times.

“Read it again, Emmie!”

“Wendy, Remi read the book over and over already, and it’s time for lights out. We’ve got a big day tomorrow.”

“Uncle Tris, Tommy had better go take a pee, so he doesn’t, like, wet Coach Remi’s couch.”

“Good thinking, Jared,” Tristan replies. “Maybe you should go with him, huh?”

I’m not too worried about a pee-soaked couch because Tristan lined it with trash bags. And Wendy’s wearing this underwear/diaper thing even though she’s “a big girl” who *never* makes “pee-pee oopsies.” Fifteen minutes later, the three kids are draped all over my sectional, either asleep or doing an excellent impression of it.

“This is your life every single day, huh?” I ask Tristan in a whisper.

“Pretty much. Kids are a lot of work.”

“It’s a good kind of work.” I haven’t felt so upbeat in ages.

“It is if you do it right, which means putting them first.” Tristan hunches and rubs his neck. It hits me that he hasn’t stopped running around all day.

“Well, it’s grown-up time now. I have two bathrooms—a half-bath right over there,” I point, “and a full bathroom beside my bedroom. Why don’t you use one to get ready for bed?”

“Thanks. I’m wiped out.” He stretches widely and fetches the purple-flowered backpack.

“I’ll pour a couple of glasses of wine, and we’ll hang out in my room. You can check out all of my drawings of you and choose a page for your portfolio.”

“If I can keep my eyes open.” He trudges toward the half-bathroom, pajama pants in hand.

I change into sweats and an old Gunther University T-shirt, then head to the kitchen to open a bottle of red wine. By the time I get to the bedroom, Tristan is stretched out on top of my bed covers wearing plaid pajama pants, his bare chest golden against my deep gray quilt.

After he props himself up with pillows, I hand him a glass of wine. “I’ve got to warn you... if I drink this, it’ll put me right to sleep.”

“Sleep is the goal.” *Did I just say that?* I have the hottest man in the planet on my bed, and all I want is for him to get a

good night's sleep.

“Can we look at your life drawings of me another time?” he asks, yawning.

“Of course.” I sit down beside him on the bed, and we sip wine in peaceful silence.

When Tristan finally speaks, his voice is just above a whisper. “You’ve made my life so much better, Remi.”

“It hasn’t been a sacrifice.” This is an understatement. The Wilder family makes me feel as if I truly belong somewhere, for the first time in years. And years and years...

“You’re so good with the kids *and* with Tara. Believe me, she can be tougher than Jared, Tommy, and Wendy put together.”

Tristan places his empty wine glass on the whiskey barrel night table on his side of the bed. I put down my glass too. Then I go to the blanket chest at the foot of the bed and pull out a fluffy white comforter. We’re clearly not getting between the sheets tonight, so this will keep us warm. I toss it over Tristan before climbing on the bed.

Lying in the middle of the king-sized bed, our shoulders pressed together, we adjust the pillows and comforter so we’re comfortable. I hear him sigh—the sound is breathy with pleasure.

The question—and the need for an answer—hits me suddenly. “Am I good with *you* too?”

He sighs again. “You’re the best.”

Tristan turns toward me and touches my cheek with his fingertips. The wispy caress leaves me frozen with a raw emotion I’m not at all sure I want to feel. Bittersweet longing or desperate hope... or maybe it’s secret joy. Then he stretches toward me to kiss my cheek.

A single sweet, soft, unforgettable kiss.

“Sleep well, Remi.”

CHAPTER 11



Tristan

Tara catches up with us late Saturday afternoon at the costume shop where the kids are living out their dress-up fantasies on Remi's dime.

"Mom, the lady who works here says this ninja costume is, like, one of a kind!" Jared's eyes are as round as dinner plates. He holds up the costume to show her.

"I'm gonna be a ninja just like Jared—he's a black ninja, and I'm a blue one!" Tommy is always trying to keep up with his big brother. "Little Wenny's gonna be Bo Peep—that's cool too." And he always looks out for his younger sister. Middle-child syndrome, maybe.

"My kids will be the best-looking trick or treaters in the city!" The circles under Tara's eyes have vanished. Thanks to a solid eight hours of sleep, a new woman has emerged.

"Emmie's gonna buy Bo Peep a lambie!" Wendy exclaims. "Gonna name her Bah-bah Lamb Baby!"

"Not a live animal—just a stuffed one to go with her costume," he explains. But I'm pretty sure he'd buy her a live lamb if she insisted.

"You don't have to be sheepish about it," Tara jokes. "Sheepish—get it?"

"Ha. You're a riot."

I haven't seen Tara so lighthearted in ages. I'd forgotten how good carefree looks on her.

“I’ll pay for the costumes and accessories, and then we can figure out dinner,” Remi says.

“But what about my lambie?” Wendy’s cheeks flush. Crying fits usually turn into coughing fits. “Can’t be Bo Peep without my new lambie!”

“We’ll make dinner plans *after* we go to the toy store to pick out Bah-Bah Lamb Baby.” Remi lifts Wendy, who is clutching her Little Bo Peep costume. “Don’t worry, sweetie.”

“I love you, Emmie.” Wendy plants a kiss on his cheek, much like I did last night. I wonder if he looked as pleased then as he does now.

After Remi pays for the costumes, we head across the street to a toy store where Wendy chooses a very fluffy, very pink, eighteen-inch-tall stuffed lamb that I’m certain *I’ll* be lugging around on Halloween night. I’m carrying it already.

“I wanna go back to the loft and play soccer—like, can we eat dinner there and not in a dumb restaurant?” Jared asks.

“If somebody takes Bah-Bah Lamb Baby off my hands, I can go pick up pizzas,” I offer.

“How about burgers and fries? I know a place that delivers,” Remi suggests.

“Burgers—super cool!” Jared pumps his fist.

“No cheese on mine, right, Mommy?”

“Bah-Bah Lamb Baby told me she wants french fries—floatin’ in ketchup!”

“I guess we’ve got a plan,” Tara agrees.



Tristan

REMI INVITES HIS DOWNSTAIRS NEIGHBOR, Dacia, to join us for dinner. He insists that she’d go hungry if it weren’t for evening meals with him.

Dacia and Tara hit it off. Sitting in the wingback chairs by the window, they eat veggie burgers and sweet potato fries. Somehow, they manage to chat over the shouts of the boys—who have created a goal out of a turned-over laundry basket and are taking turns shooting—and the steady drone of Wendy’s chatter about the upcoming adventures of Little Bo Peep. It makes me happy to see Tara laughing and having fun rather than chewing her nails with worry.

Before bed, we let Jared wear himself out on Remi’s rowing machine, while Tommy uses his pastels to create a “ninja-brothers-go-trick-or-treatin’” picture. Dacia reads storybooks to Wendy and her new stuffed lamb.

“Dacia asked if I wanted to sleep downstairs in her guest bedroom tonight,” Tara explains over craft beers at Remi’s kitchen island. “I can take Wendy with me to make it easier on you guys.”

“Not necessary,” Remi replies quickly. “We’ve got this.”

He seems to enjoy having the kids around. “Go with Dacia alone—maybe you can watch a movie that isn’t rated-G for a change.”

“That would be a treat. And then the job search will restart tomorrow morning.”

“What are you looking for in a job?” Remi asks.

“Some sort of office work I can do online from home. I was a top student in my business classes at DeBurgh Virtual University, you know. I graduated with honors.”

“My family—we... we’re affiliated with the Remington Plaza hotel chain.”

Julian Remington III—wasn’t that how Professor Santini referred to Remi?

“Does your company have online jobs available?” Tara asks eagerly.

“I’ll make some calls and find out.”

Tara leaps from the bar stool and throws herself into Remi’s arms. “Oh, God! That would be just... just so friggin’

amazing.”

“Language, Mommy!” Tommy calls from his spot at the coffee table.

“Um, sorry!” she calls back.

“I’m not sure if Remington Plaza has reservationists or other administrators working remotely, but it’s possible.”

“Just the fact that you’re gonna ask means more to me than you’ll ever know.” She hasn’t yet released him from her tight grasp. And he looks kind of euphoric as he holds her against him.

“I’m happy to help.” He closes his eyes.

“Tara, Wendy’s asleep.” Dacia steps into the loft’s kitchen area. “Want to head downstairs?”

“Let me say good night to the boys, and then I’m all yours.” Tara finally steps back from Remi. “Thank you.”

He nods, and as Tara walks away, I swear he murmurs, “Thank *you*.”



Tristan

AN HOUR LATER, the boys and Wendy are asleep on the sectional, and Remi and I are sitting in the wingback chairs near the window, gazing out over the city.

“The city lights are fantastic,” I say. *This weekend has been fantastic* is what I mean.

“I love the view. It makes me feel small,” he replies. “Almost invisible.”

“And you want to be invisible?”

“Tristan, when I was a boy, I was at the center of a very dysfunctional universe.” He drags his gaze from the splendor before us to look at me. “I couldn’t get out of the spotlight.”

“Why were you in the spotlight?”

He tilts his head, as if hoping to better read me. “You really didn’t google me, did you?”

“I told you I wouldn’t.”

“Then *I* will.” He stands, grabs his computer from the coffee table, and says, “Come with me. We don’t want to wake up the kids.” I follow him into his bedroom.

“You don’t have to do this—I don’t care who you are, or who you were.”

“I know that. It’s why I feel comfortable with you learning the truth.” I sit beside him on the edge of the bed, and he opens his laptop. He types “Julian Remington III” and “death of parents.”

“You really want me to check out this stuff?” I ask.

“I do. So, sit back on the bed and take your time. There’s a lot to see.”

I move to the middle of the bed and lean against the sturdy headboard. He hands me his laptop and leaves the room. For the next hour, I read articles, watch news clips, and listen to interviews about the tragedy that destroyed the charmed life of Julian Remington III.

By the time Remi returns, my eyes are burning with tears I somehow manage to hold inside. He needs my understanding, not my pity. “I’m sorry you went through that, Remi.”

He hovers by the bed but gazes out the window, making him seem close to me but at the same time, very far away. “It was a difficult time.” He doesn’t grimace or grit his teeth to help him bear the memory of his pain. He just stares, his deep bronze eyes vacant.

“From your family’s home videos clips, it seems that you were very close to your parents.”

“Yes, they were my entire existence.” His tone is as dull as his expression. “And then, one day, they were gone.”

“When they... *were gone*... so suddenly, your life changed. Drastically, I’d say.”

He sits on the bed, presenting me with his broad back. “I went from having everything to having nothing, although in the world’s eyes, I was still the wealthy golden boy, heir to a lucrative hotel chain.”

“Well, in the interview you and your grandparents did the day after the accident, I saw a distraught child, not a wealthy golden boy.”

Remi nods. “Grandmother insisted that I be stoic in the face of my pain. It’s how I was brought up to behave.”

I shake my head. “Children who endure trauma need to be sheltered.”

“Unfortunately, that wasn’t my grandmother’s philosophy, and she oversaw my life when Mom and Dad passed away. The press chased me throughout my teenage years. I was a big story—photographed constantly—and no part of my life was off limits.”

“That must have made the pain unbearable—always trying to put on a show for the camera.”

“The good news is that the press has given up on me since I distanced myself from the family business. For the past eight years, I’ve focused on my education, which isn’t thrilling to report on. I’m now working on my second undergraduate degree. You see, I struck a deal with Grandmother in high school. If I earned a bachelor’s degree in business, I could then seek a BFA in visual arts. Next year, I’ll continue my education by pursuing either a law degree or an MBA.”

“Why?”

“To prepare me to manage the Remington Plaza Corporation. I chose law school.”

“And after law school, what will you do?”

“I’ll work for the family business.” His apathetic tone remains unchanged. “It is expected that I’ll join the top ranks of its management team.”

“How do you feel about that?”

“Probably the same way you feel about modeling nude for photoshoots—I don’t want to do it.”

“But you will, won’t you?”

He shrugs. “I will.”

“I’m doing work I don’t enjoy right now, but I know that when the kids are older, I can pursue my dream of being a teacher. Remi, you shouldn’t have to give up your entire future to please other people.”

“We do what we must to satisfy our families.”

When he turns toward me, there’s hunger in his gaze. Not the kind of hunger I saw on the day I met him in life drawing class. That day, he wanted to consume my body—it was all about lust. Right now, Remi is starving for the comfort of a human bond. I’m going to give it to him.

I place my hand on his shoulder and draw him back, so he’s pressed to my side. “Close your eyes, Remi.”

He blinks a few times, struggling to do as I say. Finally, he shuts his eyes.

I close his laptop and place it on the night table for safekeeping. Then, I climb onto him, straddling his lap. Surprised, his eyes pop open, but I shake my head once, and he closes them again.

I’m surprised at myself too, as I’m the opposite of a brazen person. But Remi is a paradox that has me captivated. In some ways, he’s the lost boy I saw on the videos online, playing a role he never chose. In another sense, he’s a strong man with a giving heart, refusing to let others struggle.

“What about friendship?” he asks, his voice husky.

“We’re still friends... I just want to kiss you.”

Remi’s mouth pulls into a line, thin and tight. He seems nervous, which is out of character—at least it is for the bold man I first met. As I’ve come to know him, though, I’ve seen a softer side of him. I brush his lips with my thumb, and they loosen.

“Okay, then, my friend,” he murmurs, eyes still closed, “maybe you *should* kiss me.”

I tilt my head, lean forward, and tentatively cover his mouth with mine. The softness of his lips—surrounded by the prickly growth of a four-day beard—speaks to my desire to connect with a man so sweet and caring, yet undeniably masculine.

Intimate contact with a person I’ve come to care for—even trust with my family—sends shudders through my body. Remi wraps his arms around me and rests his hands hesitantly on my back. As our kiss grows deeper, he finds confidence. He pulls me closer; his sureness eases my trembling. When his hands find the sides of my face, he adjusts my head’s angle so he can best explore my mouth with his tongue. I sigh, giving myself over to passion... until Remi’s body grows rigid—and everything stops.

He pushes my face away from his so abruptly, a squeaking sound knocks loose from my throat. “Tell me, Tristan—is this your way of thanking me?”

“Wh-what do you mean?”

“*Thanking me*—for the costumes and the dinners and the coaching.”

“For that, Remi, I can use words. Like, *thank you for helping us.*” Maybe I never said it so directly... and maybe I should have. I climb from his lap and slide off the edge of the bed, still insulted by the suggestion that my affection is for sale. “The kissing is *not* a show of appreciation. Far from it, in fact.”

Remi studies his hands, now clasped tightly on his lap. His face is downcast; making sense of his expression is impossible.

“You don’t trust easily, do you?” I pose this as a question, but it’s truly more of an accusation.

He shakes his head. “I guess in that way, we’re similar.”

Remi is right. All most men see in me is literally *that*, what they can see with their eyes—my surface beauty. And it’s

powerful enough for them to want me without knowing me, which shuts down my ability to trust.

“Sure, I could get almost anybody I want in bed, but sex is momentary fulfillment. If I let somebody into my *life*, it’s gonna be for more than an orgasm. Because *I* have people depending on me, and I don’t have the luxury of falling apart from a broken heart. What’s *your* excuse?”

“You just spent an hour online learning why I have no reason for blind faith in anyone.” He lifts his cold gaze to meet mine. “I don’t know how you can even ask me that.”

And again, he’s right. “I’m sorry.” I take a step toward the bed and pull Remi’s clenched hand from his lap. Then I press it to my heart, so he knows I’m being honest. “I didn’t mean to be cruel.”

Remi sighs. “You couldn’t be cruel if you tried.” Then his gaze softens. “Come to bed.” He pulls his arm back and pats the place beside him.

I’m confused about what just happened between us—whether we’re enemies or friends or something more. I don’t like feeling hazy about a person’s motivation to be close to me. But even if I’m unsure of what *he* wants from me, I’m starting to grasp what *I* want from him.

I pull off my jeans and T-shirt and climb beneath the covers. After watching me closely, Remi follows suit. He rips off his clothes and slides into the bed. When I turn on my side, he curls around my back and kisses my neck softly. Skin touching skin... and tiny, delicate pecks that make me tingle right down to my toes.

Maybe I’m dazed—and a bit perplexed—but I fall asleep with a smile on my face.

CHAPTER 12



Remi

There are so many ways to lose the ones you love.

Gas explosions are rare, but they happen. Buses crash. School shootings aren't nearly as infrequent as they should be. People dive into shallow water. Cancer takes way too many souls. Sometimes a random logging truck skids across the double yellow line and crashes into a sleek black sedan, instantly killing the two occupants. And destroying their only son's ability to love.

As I drive home from Jared's Monday evening soccer game, my thoughts are consumed with disaster scenarios. A tangled web, spun by fear, wraps around my brain, suffocating the new flicker of joy that burns there. By the time I pull into the lot across the street from the loft, my mood is dark. My anxiety is high. My hope, like that fleeting spark, has burned itself out.

I'm risking my sanity by ingratiating myself with the Wilder family—by bonding with Jared, Tommy, Wendy, and Tara. And especially by attaching my heart to Tristan's, which I can't deny is happening. I simply can't let it continue if I want emotional security.

I have no choice in this—I need to be finished with them. With him...

How do you end a friendship? Can you break up with a pal... and his family?

Tristan is perceptive; a cold shoulder should do the trick. And then the Wilder family will be nothing but a sweet memory.



Tristan

THANKS TO A LAST-MINUTE call from Lizzie at The Wining Painter—a paint-and-sip bar that is hugely popular with the many students at the local art colleges—I have a Friday night job. Between helping with the kids and modeling for three classes daily at White River School of Character Arts, the week has been busy.

My work at The White River School is different from what I do at the other art schools in Garner City. In one of the classes at WRSCA, the instructor transforms my face and body into that of an extraterrestrial creature, as the students observe and take notes. This includes skin prep, prosthetic application, incorporation of stencils and tattoos, and the final addition of a wig. I also model nude for Figure Sculpture for Characters and a students' hands-on class called Dead Body Makeup. Morbid, yeah, but it pays the bills.

What has *not* been keeping me busy is hanging out with Remi. He seems to run hot and cold in his commitment to our friendship, or whatever it is that's going on with us. I haven't heard from him since he walked Jared into the apartment on Monday after coaching his soccer game and mumbled a quick good night.

Erratic behavior makes me uncomfortable. It puts me on the same kind of high alert I lived on when Mom was around. Those days are gone—and that stressful lifestyle is a done deal.

I don't have spare time to dwell on hurt feelings. And if I'm honest with myself, Remi's neglect is worrying, and it stings. But after an afternoon spent posing for figure sculpture class, all I have time for is a hurried jog around the edges of the WRSCA campus to loosen my muscles and a guzzled

protein drink on the bus before I begin an evening posing for tipsy artists at The Wining Painter.



Tristan

“HEY THERE, my dearest ghosts and zombies—and I gotta love all you sexy pirates! Aargh! The Friday night you’ve been waiting for is finally here—Almost-Halloween Night at Booze and Nudes!” A few college guys dressed as lumberjacks help to hoist the Wining Painter’s owner, Lizzie McGee—a round-faced middle-aged woman in a tall, black witch’s hat—onto the upside-down milk crate I’ll soon be standing on. “Tonight’s nude is one of your all-time faves—the stunning Tristan W. His costume tonight is, of course, bare-assed Greek god!”

The crowd of about eighteen dressed-up twenty-somethings, seated in a wide semi-circle in front of tabletop easels and glasses of wine, cheers for me noisily. “Take it off, Tristan!”

“Have you got your paints, people?” Liz shouts her question and then burps noisily.

“Yeah!”

“And have you got your booze?” she shrieks.

“Yeah!” The students lift their wine glasses.

“Well, then... drumroll, please...”

The artists drum their paintbrushes on the table.

“Heeeeere’s your nude!” Lizzie, who has clearly already sipped a bit too much wine, points to me with a flourish and then stumbles clumsily from the podium. After making sure she’s steady on her feet, I drop my robe and climb up.

The polite rules of nude-model etiquette aren’t enforced on Friday nights at the Wining Painter. The artists hoot and whistle at me amid what must be a hundred orange and black balloons, some scattered on the floor, but most sticking to the

ceiling. I glance around the room, smiling in greeting. Despite their costumes, I recognize many of the customers from my work in art classes at their colleges. Before I strike my planned pose—a balanced loose-kneed stance, my chin lifted and my arms hanging in soft curves by my sides—several tardy students push through the door, clutching backpacks and full glasses of red wine. They scurry to the only two empty easels, on tables in the back righthand corner of the room.

It's Dacia and Remi, neither in costume. Remi appears as shocked to see me as I am to see him.

There's no real reason for me to feel awkward but tell that to my shriveling dick. I've come to know Dacia and Remi from real life—*clothed* life—and it's weird to be standing in front of them on a milk crate covered in a tacky pumpkin print tablecloth, nearly glowing in unforgiving fluorescent lighting. Among a room full of drunks and a thousand balloons. I glance down at my robe, wishing like hell I could use mental gymnastics to will it to rise from the floor and wrap around my waist. *Wouldn't that be a trick?*

No such luck.

I forgo the “hello, stranger” grin, cast my gaze to the far side of the room—safely above the painters' heads—and focus on the hundred bucks I'm making for posing here tonight.

Thankfully, the room isn't silent, as are most college life drawing classrooms. Lizzie has chosen Chopin's “Funeral March” to kick off this pre-Halloween Booze and Nudes party. It's the perfect tune for my lackluster state of mind. Despite the gloomy background music, laughter erupts in scattered pockets around the room. At least the paying customers are having fun.

At the forty-five-minute mark, I ask, “Could someone please tape me?” My feet are killing from the grooves in the plastic.

A male student in the front of the room bounces to his feet and grabs the roll of painter's tape beside my shabby podium. He carefully marks the position and location of my feet. In my humble opinion, he's overly hands on—running his fingers up

and down my calves—but he’s probably too tipsy for good judgment.

“Thanks, dude.” I hop down from the crate, wrap up in my robe, and then announce to the class, “Time for a short break.”

Lizzie rushes to me with a glass of red wine in hand. “Thirsty, Tristan?”

Normally, I abstain while working—especially when I’m trying to balance on a milk crate—but tonight, I accept the glass. “Very.” Maybe a dull buzz will help me to forget that Remi—who hasn’t called to say hello all week—is in the back of the room, closely observing my naked form. “Thank you.”

“My cousin is here tonight,” she continues. “He wants to meet you.”

“Oh... Of course. I’d be happy to meet him.” *Like I have a choice.*

Lizzie beckons to the very same young man who so eagerly taped my position—and groped me shamelessly on the podium. “Tristan, meet Nate. He works at an accounting firm uptown, but in his secret life, he’s a painter.”

“Being an artist is not such a dreadful secret,” I reply with a patient smile. Nate is an extremely tall, reed-thin, gaunt-cheeked guy in a too-small button-down shirt with a checkered bow tie high on his skinny neck and a pocket protector stuffed with pens. The classic nerd costume, though Nate wears it a little bit too well. I’d never guess he’s a relation of the curvy and free-spirited Lizzie. “It’s nice to meet you, Nate.”

He gazes at me with a dreamy expression I’ve seen many times before on both men and women. “You are... well, Tristan, you are just so incredibly beautiful.”

“Uh, thank you.” *Awk-ward...*

“Head to toe and *every... single... thing...* in between, Tristan. Perfection.” He giggles, as if I could possibly have missed his reference to my nudity. “I’m sincerely honored to have the opportunity to paint you.”

Lizzie beams at us—the triumphant matchmaker—while Nate frosts the cake of awkwardness with his heavy chin drool. *Ugh.*

“I’m also honored, you know, to have you paint me.” I need to get to the bathroom. *And* to suck down this entire glass of wine. But mostly, I need to escape from Nate the handsy number cruncher. “Enjoy the rest of class, Nate.”

“Wait—wait, Tristan.” He snatches the sleeve of my robe, and it slips off my shoulder. “I thought maybe I could take you out for something to eat after class.” Tiny beads of perspiration appear above his narrow upper lip.

“I’m not... so sure... I can.” But I *am* sure I can’t afford to lose this regular gig by pissing off Lizzie. *What to do...* I’m so very *not* interested in breaking bread with Nate.

“I’m sorry, Tristan isn’t available after class—he’ll be sharing a late dinner with me.”

I recognize the annoyingly confident, sexily raspy voice. Remi steps in, once again, to save the day. At first, relief sweeps over me, but I soon think better of it. *Who is he to claim my time?* Remi hasn’t had the good grace to check in once this week—and I don’t play nice with fickle people.

“Sorry, guys, I have to get right home after class—my nephews are expecting me. We have an appointment at the kitchen table to plan our trick-or-treating route.” A good excuse that happens to also be true. “Please excuse me, I only have a few minutes left to use the restroom.”

I step out from between Remi, Nate, and Lizzie, hesitating only long enough to gulp down half the glass of wine. Once I’m in the hallway, I guzzle the rest and head to the men’s room.

When I come out, Remi is leaning on the wall beside the door.

“Let me drive you home,” he says.

“Aren’t you drinking?” I ask.

“I had one glass of wine. I’m fine to drive.”

“Well, *I’m* fine with public transportation.” I tighten my robe and start down the hall toward the classroom.

“What’s wrong, Tristan?” he asks from a few paces behind me. “You seem angry.”

“On Tuesday morning, I called to thank you for coaching Jared’s game. And to see what you were up to this week. I left a message—never heard boo from you.”

Boo—I’m a total Halloween riot.

I refuse to stop walking or to even glance over my shoulder at him. Sure, my pride is hurt, but it’s more than that—I thought we were breaking through each other’s walls. I now suspect Remi’s walls are far too well-fortified for that to ever happen. A warning bell sounds in my head.

“Well, I’m here now. We can grab some food, and then I’ll drive you home. I can help you, Jared, and Tommy map out your trick-or-treating journey.”

I stop just outside the classroom door, finally turning to look at him. Remi’s eyes are wide and glassy. He bites his bottom lip, and his hands swing by his side. Not exactly the picture of a cartoon villain, but also not someone I can afford to let into my life. “No, thank you.”

It’s hard to speak these words, because I want the same stuff he *says* he wants. But I refuse to set myself up for heartbreak. “Hope your painting turns out exactly how you want it.”

CHAPTER 13



Remi

Goal, accomplished.

I set out to distance myself from Tristan and the Wilder family, and I did so with far more effectiveness than I anticipated. It was too easy to stop in its tracks whatever was happening between Tristan and me. The cold shoulder—a mere four days of silence—worked like a charm. I’m off Tristan’s radar. Too bad he’s not off mine.

I’m supposed to be wallowing in relief. *Why do I feel like I lost something special?*

The weekend seemed lonely and endless. I put a huge dent in a half-gallon bottle of vodka over two nights, and then last night—to sober up—I dragged Dacia to Kala Kitchen for Thai food. We ate until we couldn’t manage another forkful, but it didn’t fill the emptiness inside me.

All by itself, the arrival of Monday morning should have whisked me from my bleak existence into the hustle and bustle of classes and (purposefully limited) student interaction. As I walk across campus to the Clayton Arts Building, though, I can’t get my mind off Tristan.

Impulsively, I pull my cell phone from the back pocket of my khakis and make the call. “Hey, Tristan.”

“Remi?”

“The one and only.”

“Uh, what’s up?” His tone is frigid.

I shiver. “I have some news... for Tara.”

“I’ll give you her number—you can call her directly.”

“I also have some paperwork for her to sign. You know, for a job.” This is an admitted stretch of the truth. There *will* be paperwork for her to sign, but I don’t have it in hand. Tara will need to go to Remington Plaza Corporate Headquarters to take care of those details. “Maybe I could drop by your apartment tonight.”

“Jared has a soccer game. Wendy’s feeling better, so we’re all gonna go.”

“Then I’ll meet you at Dexter Park. Five o’clock, right?”

“I guess so.”

“See you then.” I can work with lukewarm.



Remi

AS I DRIVE to the park for Jared’s soccer game, I try not to let myself analyze the specifics of what I’m involving myself in. Of course, whenever I try not to think too hard on a topic, it’s like an invitation to do just that. And facts are facts... Four short days ago, I extricated myself from this tangled web of friendship or romance—or whatever the fuck it is—with Tristan, and I’m now throwing myself right back into the snare.

And I’m wearing a stupid grin because I’m glad—no, I’m thrilled—I’m doing this. I’m happy with Tristan and Tara and the kids. *Could it be that happiness is not as far from my reach as I thought?* Maybe being happy is rather simple: a feeling of belonging, coupled with easy breathing in the presence of others. Punctuated by a constant, possibly ridiculous, urge to smile.

I fit in too well with the Wilder family, stupid grin and relaxed breathing included.

At the risk of quoting sappy romance verse, when I'm with Tristan, my heart pounds. My knees go weak. The hair on the back of my neck stands up. My fingers tingle with the need to touch him.

This is quite obviously more than simple happiness; *could I be falling in love?*

Shit... I wipe the perspiration from my brow because there I go, scrutinizing the minutia of my emotional condition when I'm with Tristan. It's better to close my eyes to those details and plow aimlessly forward.

After pulling into the parking lot by the field, I check my hair and teeth in the rearview mirror. *Not normal Remi behavior.* Something is happening to me. I can literally *feel* my perspective on life changing—loosening and then sliding over the edge of a certain cliff I've managed to avoid for eons and plunging into the abyss. Yes, I care about what Tristan thinks of my appearance. I want him to find me as attractive as I find him.

And I rather desperately want to fix what I broke by ignoring him last week. Because I also care about what Tristan thinks of me as a man. I admit—though it pains me greatly to do so—that I haven't given a single consideration to anyone's opinion of me since my parents died. I care now, likely too much for my own emotional safety. Still, I'm doing this.

I race across the field to join the family that makes me feel like part of the world.

“Coach Remi, you're here!” Jared splits from his team to meet me mid-way to the parking lot. “Like, I knew you'd come!”

“Emmie!” Wendy squirms out of Tara's arms and scrambles after Jared. “Mommy made me leave Bah-Bah Lamb Baby at home!”

Tommy isn't far behind. “But Little Wenny, you can't get your brand-new lambie all dirty before we go trick-or-treatin'!”

I scoop up Wendy. “I’m sure that Little Bo Peep wouldn’t want to take a *dirty* lamb with her on Halloween night.”

Out pops her lower lip. Wendy is the pouting princess, and she’s adorable.

“And sweetie, Bah-Bah Lamb Baby needs to rest up for his big night,” I offer.

“Bah-Bah Lamb Baby is a *girl*, just like me.” *Of course she is.*

“You gonna help Coach Wells at the game today? We’re playing the Meteors, and they, like, totally kick butt.” Jared isn’t interested in Wendy’s stuffed animal woes.

“I’d be glad to lend a hand if Coach Wells wants me to.”

“He does, Coach Remi. He wants to crush the Meteors too.”

Still carrying Wendy, I head back to the sidelines where Tara and Tristan wait.

“Hi, Remi. Thanks for coming to Jared’s game,” Tara says.

“Glad to be here.” I pass Wendy to Tristan, whose gaze slides away from me. “Can I talk to you before the game starts, Tara?”

Her eyes pop wide. “About a job?”

I nod. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Damn right, you can talk to me.”

“Mommy!” Tommy never misses a naughty word.

I lead her a few steps away from the kids and Tristan. “I made some calls and found out that Remington Plaza needs a fulltime evening reservationist. The job can be done remotely, and there’s potential for upward mobility in the company. From what my connection, Robert Lavigne, tells me, what they really need is a third-shift supervisor.”

“You’ve got to be shitting me.”

“I shit you not.”

“Oh, thank you!” Tara once again throws herself into my arms, and I love it. I know I should push her away—as soon as it is socially acceptable—instead, I cling to her.

“It’s not a problem. Not at all.” I glance at Tristan. The no-eye-contact rule seems to be a thing of the past. He stares at me, his expression odd. Not happy and not exactly annoyed—maybe more... puzzled. “You need to call Robert tomorrow morning. He’ll want you to stop by the corporate office uptown. You’ll sign some papers and set up your insurance plan.”

“Insurance? Oh, God. This is a dream come true—I’ve gotta tell Tris.” She pulls away, rushes to her brother, and starts rambling.

When he smiles at her, it’s genuine. A warm rush of satisfaction washes over me because indirectly, *I* put that smile on his face. When Tara shifts her attention to the kids, Tristan takes a few steps my way, stopping close enough for his scent to envelop me like a soapy cloud.

“Thank you, Remi.” He glances up at me. His eyes look stunning. Show stopping. *Everything*.

All I can do is nod, as my throat is clogged with an enormous, extremely uncharacteristic, lump.

“Hey, Coach! The game’s about to start!” Jared waves me over. “You’re gonna be late!”

“You’d better go. The team needs you,” Tristan says.

And I need you. “Uh, yeah. Can we talk after the game?”

This time, he nods.



Remi

THE GAME PASSES QUICKLY, though my need to clear the air with Tristan makes it feel like an eternity. I’m not as focused as usual, and the Bears’ resulting victory is narrow.

“That was, like, a serious close call, Coach Remi,” exclaims Jared after he leads the Bears in the high-fiving line to congratulate the Meteors on a game well played.

“It was, but you guys worked together as a team and came out with the win.”

“We sure as shi... We sure did.” His grin spreads from ear to ear. “You gonna come over to our place for dinner? Mom made meatballs.”

“I’m not sure yet, Jared. Give me a second to chat with your uncle, okay?”

“Cool. Heya, Tommy, check out the cleat print on my leg!” He races off to his brother, and I make my way across the field to Tristan. My lips quiver, revealing my anxiety—this conversation is critical to... to my continued breathing. Not to be dramatic.

“Good game,” he says vacantly, staring at Tommy as he examines the bruise on Jared’s thigh.

“Not as good as it should have been. I was, uh... distracted.”

“Oh, yeah?” He doesn’t ask what drew my attention away from the game.

Nonetheless, I need to tell him. “I’m sorry I didn’t call you back last week.”

“No worries, Remi.” Tristan finally shifts his bland gaze to me. I can’t read it despite my burning need. “There’s no rule requiring daily contact.”

“You’re right.” *I’m really going to do this.* “But maybe there should be.”

Tristan is as surprised as I am by my suggestion. “What did you say?” He stumbles backward.

I grasp his arm to steady him and hold on. “You told me you don’t want a boyfriend... but, you know, maybe we could, like, date each other.” I sound like Jared.

“You’re saying that you want a relationship... beyond friendship?” he asks.

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

“Would this relationship involve dating other people?” Another plain question.

I can’t share Tristan—not his exquisite body or his altruistic heart. “*I’m* not planning on seeing anyone other than you.”

Tristan nods a few times, as he puts it together. *Doesn’t seeing one man exclusively, maintaining daily contact, and admiring him thoroughly add up to the definition of being his boyfriend?*

“Do *you* want to date other men?” Maybe I hold my breath as I wait for him to answer.

“I have no interest in dating anyone but you. But I’ve gotta ask—why the sudden change in the direction of our relationship?”

“It’s not so much a change in direction... as an acceptance of it.” *It is* that simple.

“Okay, then.” When he smiles, it feels like I hit the casino jackpot.

“Can I take you to dinner?” I ask.

“Tara made meatballs.”

“Tempting as that sounds, I want to be alone with you tonight.” I want to celebrate the step forward we’ve taken by candlelight.

“You told me on the phone that you have paperwork Tara needs to sign,” he reminds me.

“That was my weak excuse to see you.”

He smiles sweetly. “Then I’m all yours tonight.”

I sincerely hope he’s all mine for more than just tonight.



Tristan

REMI TAKES me to a fancy Indian restaurant in the city. The food is rich and spicy and totally amazing, but our conversation is stilted, limited to my upcoming jobs and his classes. Neither of us is certain how we fit into this vaguely defined relationship.

As we leave the restaurant, I agree to go back to Remi's loft to spend the night with him. Undeniably a new step for us. I've slept over before but as a matter of convenience. Tonight is a conscious decision to be together.

As we sip white wine on the couch, I notice Remi hasn't done any more work on the portrait of me that rests on the easel. "No progress on the painting?" I ask.

"Well, if I remember correctly, *someone* promised to model for me. For three hours, I believe... in a certain Halloween costume exchange."

"And you've been waiting patiently for this model to fulfill his obligation?"

"I assure you, he is well worth the wait."

My cheeks warm. "I can assure *you* that the model is at your beck and call."

Remi slips the wine glass from my hand and places it on the coffee table along with his own. "Is he at my beck and call for *more* than modeling?"

I place my hands lightly on his bristled cheeks and stare into his eyes. "He is."

He leans forward and kisses me. It's a mild, tentative kiss. "Are we on the same page here, Tristan?"

My best guess is that he's referring to intimacy. "It's been a while for me."

"A while?" Remi's forehead wrinkles. "How long?"

“Years... since before Wendy was born.”

“You truly *are* a dedicated uncle.”

“There’s been no time for me to spend on what *I* want. All of my attention has been focused on them.”

“Until now.”

I nod. “Until tonight.”

Once again, Remi’s lips find mine, but this time with purpose, though he doesn’t part my lips with his tongue. “I want you, Tristan,” he whispers against my mouth.

I don’t know what to say. My life isn’t simple. It hasn’t been for years—maybe it never will be. But I’m a man with needs, and I need Remi, in more ways than one. “Maybe we should go to your bedroom.”

After standing, he helps me to my feet. “We’ll only do what you’re ready for.”

I’m not merely a tool to satisfy his lust. “Okay.” I follow him to his room.

“I’ve always had protected intercourse in the past,” he tells me as we pass through his bedroom door. “And I’m regularly tested, though it’s been a month or so.”

“I’ve only had one partner,” I confess. “I’ve been tested too.”

He freezes. “*One* partner?”

“Uh-huh.” One clumsy partner, one awkward time. Then life got in the way.

“You sure you want to do this?” he asks.

“I wouldn’t be here if I didn’t.”

“Then I guess you should make yourself comfortable,” he says, gesturing to the bed.

“I’d be more comfortable without my shirt,” I tease. Once I pull off my T-shirt, Remi seems drawn to me as if I’m a magnet, and he’s steel.

“You have the most exquisite body.” His large palms curve around my shoulders and squeeze. “I remember when you lowered your robe on the first day of life drawing class. I had to bite my lip—I wanted so badly to see more.”

“I remember the way you looked at me that day—like I was something tasty to eat.”

“I’m not usually so *hungry* for classroom models.”

“There’s just something about Tristan...” I quip.

He’s not distracted by the lighthearted banter. “Physically, you define beautiful.”

When I grasp the hem of his black Henley and lift, he reluctantly releases me. I step back to study his chest—broad and fit and dusted with dark fur. “You aren’t so bad yourself.”

“It’s more than your beauty I’m attracted to, though. It’s... it’s you.” Remi pulls me against him. “You have a gentle soul.”

“I accept what I can’t change and work with the rest.”

“You’re selfless,” he insists.

I shake my head. “*You* are the giving one in this room. You’ve done so much for my family.”

“Tristan, I have more of *everything*—real estate, education, money, opportunity—than I could ever use in a lifetime. Giving costs me little... but you give of *yourself* to your family.” He releases me and pulls back just enough for our gazes to meet. His eyes are glassy, his expression earnest.

“How about tonight we give to each other? And leave everything and everyone else behind.”

Remi blinks away the wetness, grunts his approval, and reaches for the buttons of my jeans. His fingers shake as they work, as if *he’s* overwhelmed by what we’re about to do, where *I’m* as close as a person can be to a virgin without being one. In any case, a few seconds later, I’m standing in front of him stark naked, watching as he drags his wind pants and boxers down his legs.

“Bed... n-now,” he blurts, pulling back the covers. I climb in, and goosebumps spread over my skin. Again, he pulls me to his lean, warm body.

“This is nice,” I say.

“*Nice?* Tristan—th-this is amazing.” He clears his throat and adds in a lower tone, “A dream come true.”

“But these sheets are like ice.” I fake a shiver and smirk. *Why am I trying to lighten the mood?* “You’re gonna have to warm me up.”

“No need to ask twice.” My effort to ease the intensity is successful; there’s renewed confidence in his tone.

In a single swift movement, Remi tucks me beneath him. With his lanky frame pressing my body into the bed, I feel warmer and safer than I have in ages. *Maybe ever.* Instead of going for my lips, Remi uses his cheek to nudge my jaw to the perfect angle and dives into the hollow of my neck.

Something primal takes over both my head and my heart—I need proof I belong to him. And so, I utter something I’ve never even *thought* before. “I want you to... Remi, leave a mark on me.”

My appeal is shameless—completely unlike my usual manner—and I don’t care. I’m not even bothered that student artists will see my love bite... and draw it... and know I gave up all control, if only for a few moments. I want proof of our intimacy. Tangible proof I can feel... and can later see on my skin.

“Are you saying you want me to give you... w-well, a hickey?”

I blush and nod, and soon, the rough bristles of his beard move against my throat. Then all I’m aware of is suction. It thrills as much as it burns and makes me ache for the carnal bliss I’ve pushed aside for so long.

Remi’s lips drift south. My body knows what’s coming... and my nipples tingle with anticipation. They’re next to endure the merciless sucking. And though I don’t want him to

release me from the torture, I squirm wildly at the all-consuming sensation.

He's pleased, and his resulting purr is both sexy and stern. "Take what I give you, Tristan." He sniffs or laughs or gasps; I'm not sure which is responsible for the breathy sound. But after he speaks, he relents and moves on.

Remi is generous with his tongue; my chest quickly grows damp with his rousing effort to lick me into submission. A submission I give, without a second thought because tonight, I'm his.

When he finally crouches between my thighs, he seems to be in his own world. "And now, for my prize..." It's as if he's speaking to himself until his lips curve into a hungry smile, and he directs his next statement to me. "I've seen your cock resting lazily against your leg as a room full of artists ponder its shape. All of us looking; none of us touching." In one hand, he grasps my balls with little delicacy. "Tonight will be different." The fierce tone morphs his words into a warning.

"Go on, then," I urge, still craving concrete evidence of the passion I spark in him.

And he does, starting with a delicate dab at the top of my dick with the tip of his tongue, accompanied by a drawn-out hum. "You taste incredible. Better, even, than I expected."

My dick stiffens further, which is hardly imaginable. He's run out of time, though—my need is greater than his will to warn or tease or draw out the anticipation. "*Please, Remi.*"

Engulfing my cock in an eager gulp, he obliges so suddenly, I gasp. For what seems like an endless moment, his appetite to consume me—in a coarse repetition of rising and falling—refuses to wane. But when *I* start to thrust, he throws me off by changing course. Remi pulls his mouth from me and drags his tongue lightly along the sides of my length. Up and down—with a deliberate lack of urgency—and again and again. A new kind of blissful torture.

"Need to be *in* your mouth," I utter, shocked that I can still verbalize my desire... and astounded that I'm willing to. "*All*

of me, *all* the way in.”

He lifts his head. “Look at me, Tristan.”

My stare is blurry with passion and need, but I manage to focus on his golden gaze.

“Trust that *I* know what you need.” Remi’s gravelly voice is the essence of determination. He kisses the tip of my dick—a tiny, irresistible butterfly kiss that makes me burn—before swallowing me whole. And again, he rises and falls on my flesh.

This is too much. “I’m never gonna last... if you keep... doing that.” My confession is stuttered, as I have no desire for him to stop.

Once again, he pulls off to breathe his reply. “All I want is for you to let go. I want to see you writhe and feel you shudder... and know you’re losing control.”

Remi returns his full attention to my dick. Seeing as he’s giving me every fragment of what I asked for, I return the favor. I leave my inhibition behind and thrust into his mouth, my movements fevered and desperate. Groaning and trembling, I lose myself in him. When I’m on the verge of coming, I twist my fingers into his hair to hold him in place, certain I’d come completely undone if he pulled away. As it turns out, it’s unnecessary—Remi is eager to drink down everything I have to give.

I sigh my pleasure and then ramble, “Shit, wow... that was epic.”

Remi kneels upright now, licking his lips. “It *was* memorable—the way you lost yourself to sensation.”

No, I lost myself to you...

“It’s my turn to see what ‘carried away’ looks like on you,” I offer in a squeaky voice I don’t recognize.

The smug way his lip tugs up in one corner makes me want him even more. “Your wish—you must be starting to realize—is *always* my command.”

“Just lie down and let me get between your legs.”

“That’s not how...” Shaking his head, Remi rephrases, “I’m gonna lean over *you* on the bed.”

He’s taking charge—*more* of what I crave. *How does he know?* “That’ll work too.”

To reward my pleasing response, I receive an honest grin. “Y-yeah, it surely will.”

Remi climbs toward the headboard, positions his knees on either side of my face, and proceeds... to make love to me. He isn’t overly aggressive, nor is he frenzied. He moves smoothly in and out of my mouth, softly groaning his pleasure.

“Tristan, you’re so... so everything... oh, God... baby... I’m here for you...” He releases a breathy stream of confessions I’m certain he’s unaware he’s speaking aloud.

One more time, I run my tongue over the head of his dick to the melody of his blooming moans. When he comes, it’s with a sob, and then a sweet, almost surprised, sentiment.

“You make me happy.”

CHAPTER 14



Remi

I'm all in with Tristan. *All. The. Way. In.* And it's not just about the "in and out" with him, like it has been with every man before. This is different because Tristan is different.

No, *I* am different with Tristan.

I wake this morning with him wrapped in my arms—yes, a new experience for me. I can tell it's new for him too. As soon as his eyes pop open, he stiffens. (Not in the fun way.) He turns back to look at me—I am the big spoon. And after a brief "where the hell am I?" expression—it is disconcertingly easy to read—I see a distinct "oh, my God, what I have done?" in his eyes. If he'd woken up fifteen minutes earlier, he would have seen an exact replica of that look in *my* eyes, but I've had time to let the shock of "we're still in bed together the morning after" sink in.

Even if we're in over our heads, I don't care. I've never been more terrified, but I wouldn't change a thing.

Tristan extricates himself from my arms with an angsty sigh and slips from the bed. With the greatest of haste, he throws on his clothes.

"Let me drive you home," I offer, my tone a touch too whiny for comfort.

"That's not necessary." *His* reply is curt.

"Come on, Tristan. We can grab a cup of coffee and, you know..." *Yes, I beg some more.*

He shakes his head with a fierceness I try not to be insulted by. Tristan probably thinks that since we're not technically boyfriends—neither one of us is ready for *that* official label—transportation home after an evening of heavy breathing isn't a requirement.

“Uh, okay, then. I guess I'll text you later today.”

“Sure thing.” He nods several times and scrambles to the door without looking back.

I stretch out on the bed, trying like hell not to ache from the loss of the warm body in my arms. The subsequent thirty seconds passes with excruciating sluggishness. Tristan probably hasn't even reached the bottom of my building's long flight of stairs—*it's too soon to text him, right?*



Tristan

“HOW WAS LAST NIGHT?” Tara asks as I walk through the door. I could live without her waggling eyebrows. I pull up the neck of my hoodie to hide the evidence of how much fun last night was.

“Dinner was fine, thank you,” I reply.

She laughs. “Shy, are we? It must have been... let's say, *tons of fun.*” More brow waggling. “You stayed all night.”

“Gentlemen never kiss and tell.” I pull off my down vest and hang it on a hook by the door.

“So, there *was* kissing. I thought as much.” She grins. And winks.

“Things are solid with us now—and that's all I'm gonna say on the matter.” I stride past her in the direction of the hallway. “I have a job at noon—need a quick shower.”

“Oh... so, you and Remi got down and *dirty* last night?” Tara is relentless.

“Coach got Uncle Tris dirty?” Tommy—coloring at the kitchen table—is all ears.

I shoot Tara a glare. “No, Remi did *not* get me dirty—he took me out to dinner. End of story.”

“Did he spill his milk, and it dripped all over you?” Tommy persists.

In a manner of speaking, yes, he did. Still, distraction is my best bet.

“Tommy, what are you drawing this morning?” I lean over the table to check out his paper.

“Uncle Tris, Mom said you got to go on another sleepover at Coach’s loft.” Jared saunters into the kitchen wearing his Halloween costume—he’s kind of obsessed with it. “You’re such a lucky dog!”

“A lucky dog?” Wendy races into the kitchen, juggling an armful of stuffed sheep. “I wanna see the lucky dog!”

This conversation is going downhill fast. “Guys, I have to get ready for work. And do you know what I’m gonna buy with the money I make today?”

“A lucky dog!” Wendy shouts. “Can it be a white one with black spots?”

“A sippy cup for Coach Remi, so he doesn’t spill his milk on you no more!” Tommy replies without looking up from his artwork.

“Pizza for lunch?” Jared’s response is hopeful.

“Silky black boxer briefs,” Tara murmurs into my ear. “Or maybe massage oil—”

“You are *all* wrong.” I place my hand gently over Tara’s mouth, stifling further inappropriate—however enticing—suggestions. “I’m gonna buy Halloween candy for the trick-or-treaters who come here. And as you know, the Wilder kids get to split up the leftovers.”

“Get Snickers!” Jared bellows.

“But we *all* like Reese’s,” Tommy whines. “Right, Mommy?”

“Bah-Bah Lamb Baby told me she wants Skittles,” Wendy adds. “They’re pretty.”

“Maybe I can get a bag of each.” I’ve successfully changed the subject from the way in which Remi got me dirty last night.

Wendy lines up her stuffed animals on the kitchen table. “Uncle Tis, instead of candy, could you buy us a puppy named Lucky?”

“Yeah!” Tommy and Jared shout in unison as Tara shakes her head fiercely.

“We’re gonna need to pay big time dentist bills after you kids eat all of that Halloween candy—there’ll be no money left for vet bills,” Tara says. “Now, let your uncle get showered.”

Wendy picks up Bah-Bah Lamb Baby from the sticky kitchen table and wrinkles her nose. “Mommy, my lambie got maple syrup on her paws. Now she’s dirty, just like Uncle Tis.”

There are too many little ears around here for any privacy at all.

CHAPTER 15



Tristan

“Okay, guys...” I say. “This is the last street that we planned to go trick-or-treating on. And you have enough candy to last until the Easter Bunny comes in April.” At this point, Remi is carrying Wendy, and as predicted, I’m carrying Bah-Bah Lamb Baby *and* Wendy’s pillowcase stuffed with candy.

“Coach Remi, will you, like, come back to our place and watch us do our King Kong candy trade-off?” Jared asks. He’s as attached to Remi... as I am.

“What’s a King Kong candy trade-off?” he asks.

“It’s when we stick all of our candy in front of us on the living room rug—there’s enough to fill King Kong’s belly with candy—and we trade so we end up with our favorite kinds.”

“Three little geniuses,” Remi murmurs.

“Little Wenny usually zonks out halfway through the trade-off, so Mommy finishes up for her,” Tommy adds.

“Doesn’t your mother have to work tonight?” Remi asks.

“Uh-huh. *You* can play for Wendy when she crashes, ’kay, Coach?”

Remi glances at me, and I nod my approval. “Sure. And I know Wendy loves Skittles.”

“M&Ms too, Emmie.” She yawns and snuggles against Remi’s chest.

“Well, let’s finish up, then.”

“You gonna make hot cocoa when we get home, Uncle Tris?” Tommy asks, tugging on the sleeve of my hoodie.

“With those tiny marshmallows?” Jared adds.

“It wouldn’t be Halloween if I didn’t.” The kids enjoy our family traditions. Remi’s intrigued smile proves he’s invested in our family traditions too.



Remi

THE PLEA in his emerald eyes melts me. “Don’t go home tonight, Remi.”

The King Kong candy trade-off is a done deal. Hot cocoa with tiny marshmallows has been consumed. Teeth have been brushed, under our close supervision. Two exhausted ninjas and a cranky Little Bo Peep are fast asleep in their beds. And Tara is hard at work for my family’s hotel corporation at the desk in her room.

“If I stay, the kids... they’ll put it together that I’m more than just your pal.”

“Kids aren’t stupid. They already know,” he replies.

“What about Tara?” I ask.

Tristan’s cheeks flush an adorable shade of pink I want to capture in pastel. “Um, she knows too. *Believe me...*”

“That’s not what I mean. Would she mind that we sleep here... you know, *together...* under the same roof as the kids?”

“She’s not a prude, Remi.” Tristan shakes his head. “And it’s not as if I bring home a different Tom, Dick, and Harry every weekend.”

I’m the one who was doing that... until I met Tristan.

“And tonight, we’ll keep things... uh, chaste.” His blush deepens.

“You mean, no moaning or heavy breathing that could easily travel through thin walls?” I finally relax enough to tease him. I had no interest in going anywhere tonight.

“Something like that,” he agrees.

“Is serious snuggling against the rules?”

“Absolutely not.” Tristan rises from the couch. “So now, let me show you *my* etchings.”

“Oh, God... I actually used that line on you once upon a time, didn’t I?”

“You did. I thought it was sweet.”

No lover has ever referred to me as sweet.

As *my* face heats, he says, “Truth be told, I have zero artistic talent. I have no etchings.”

“Well, I have enough etchings for both of us. But I’d sure love to see your bedroom.”

“Then follow me.” He takes my hand and leads me down the hall to a tiny room at the back of the apartment.

CHAPTER 16



Tristan

“Now that Tara is working, I don’t have to support the entire Wilder household all by myself.”

Most nights, I sleep at the apartment because Tara’s job can be intense, and if the kids require attention, I need to be there to give it. Tonight, though, she’s off work. She and Dacia are taking the kids to a movie, and I’m spending the night at Remi’s loft. It feels like a holiday.

“What does that mean for you?” Remi hands me another bottle of fancy beer and sits on the couch close beside me.

“I don’t have to take as many modeling jobs, which leaves time in my schedule to substitute teach at the preschool on the west side of Brentwood Village—it’s called Kid Castle.”

“Teaching at the preschool isn’t as lucrative as modeling, right?”

“Right. Now that Tara is making decent money—thanks to you—I don’t need to bring in as much.”

“*She’s* the one who is working her ass off to make an outstanding impression on her superiors in the company.”

“Tara and I weren’t born with silver spoons anywhere near us, but each of us has a strong work ethic.” I lean in and kiss Remi’s cheek, then I turn sideways on the sectional, flop against his broad chest, and stretch out my legs. “Teaching is what I want to do for a career. My ideal job is as a kindergarten teacher at a public school but working at the

preschool gives me experience. I've created a hundred lesson plans I want to try out."

"Have you put in an application at the preschool?"

"Sure did. I went over to Kid Castle this week. Already heard back from them too. Sounds like they need all the help they can get, so after the background check, I'll be in."

"What about going to school? To be a kindergarten teacher, you need a bachelor's degree."

I sigh. "I can't swing that expense yet. But if Tara's job works out, maybe I can take a class at the community college next semester."

Remi grasps my shoulders and twists me around, so I'll face him. His gaze is nothing short of piercing. "Let me pay for your classes and—"

"No." I place my hands on top of his. "You are incredibly generous, but I need to build my own future. And I'll get it done... in my own good time."

"I-I have more money than I know what to do with." He doesn't appear ready to let the subject drop. "Just think about it, Tristan."

But I will *not* consider accepting Remi's money so I can take classes. He does enough for the Wilder family, as it is. "The bonus is, Kid Castle will let me take Wendy to the preschool on the days I work."

"She'll love that." Remi grins, letting me off the hook. "I have a feeling you'll be taking a stuffed animal or two to Kid Castle along with your niece."

He's right. "I'm supposed to be working in the four-year-old room this Thursday."

"You have no modeling jobs that day?"

"Nope. I'm working at Belmont University on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Life drawing and watercolor—four classes each day."

Remi glances out the window. “I don’t like the whole world gawking at... *all* of you.”

“You know better than anyone that life drawing isn’t pornography.”

“True.” He sighs. “But I wish you were a fulltime teacher already.”

I stand and pull Remi from the couch, so we’re standing and facing one another. “I do too, but not so I don’t have to take my clothes off in public. I made my peace with that—I work for artists who see my body as the subject of their expression.”

“Santini saw you as a sex object,” Remi counters.

“Maybe *you* saw me that way too, at least on the first day I modeled for your class. And many artists probably recognize an attraction to me, but *I* conduct myself professionally... and most artists do too.”

“Most.”

“I can’t change the world. I can only respond to it with proper decorum.”

“I suppose,” he allows.

“I hope you’ll focus on how happy I am that I get to teach again, even if it’s only every now and then.”

Remi pulls me into his arms. There’s nothing like a hug from him, but right now, I can literally *feel* his struggle with surrender. Trying to hold back his concern and... affection, he huffs and then stiffens. But when he finally submits to the power of his emotions, it’s complete.

“You’re happy for me, I can tell.”

Another sigh, this one less pained. “You’re right. I am.”



Remi

I'M STILL DRINKING coffee the next morning when Tristan approaches my easel and stares at the unfinished sketch of him resting there.

“I think you should start over—in *this* picture, you had to cut out Jared. That can't be good.”

“I didn't ‘cut out’ Jared.” That makes it sound so ugly. “I simply focused my artistic effort on you.”

He spreads the Irish wool blanket that Tommy calls itchy over one of the wingback chairs by the enormous wall of windows. Then he pulls off his T-shirt. “If I remember correctly, we agreed on three hours.”

Tristan's smile is sultry; grasping a graphite pencil takes a back seat to other things I'd like to do with my hands. We haven't been sexually intimate since last week when we were alone in my loft. And I didn't make a move on him last night. I was waiting to see if he'd make a move on me, which didn't happen. “We don't have to do it now. Don't you want a day off?”

There's a determined gleam in Tristan's eyes—one I've seen before. He feels obligated to repay me for the Halloween costumes. And it's clear he means business when he yanks off the borrowed pair of sweatpants, kicks them aside, and faces me without even attempting to cover himself.

I lay the unfinished sketch of Tristan on the floor behind me and exchange it for a blank watercolor canvas that leans against the wall. One day, though, I'll finish the ice cream parlor portrait, if only to preserve the sweet memory.

“How do you want me?” he asks, his naked skin golden in the morning light.

“A loaded question, if I've ever heard one.”

“Funny...” He glances my way with narrowed eyes. “The first hour will be payment for the Little Bo Peep costume.”

“*And* for Bah-Bah Lamb Baby?” I ask, smirking.

He tilts his head to size me up. “Um... sure.”

“Then I’m going to expect some extra effort.” I wink, but he doesn’t seem to be aware that I’m teasing him.

“Of course.” As Tristan sits on the blanket-covered chair, I chuckle nervously. He wrinkles his nose. “Tommy’s right. This blanket scratches.”

“The chair is clean. You don’t need to sit on the blanket.”

“It’s okay... I shouldn’t have said anything.” This time, the smile he flashes is somehow both forced *and* utterly composed. He leans back in the chair, crosses his legs, drapes one arm over an armrest—letting his hand hang gracefully—and places his elbow on the other. Then he turns his head to the side, leans seductively, and gazes boldly at me with the eye uncovered by his mop of light hair. “How’s this?”

“It’s certainly a pose with attitude,” I reply.

“Would you prefer something else? I could straighten my legs, open them wide, and let my arms hang by my sides.” His gaze remains fixed on mine. And a practiced, professional demeanor I recognize from life drawing class at LCC distances us. A distance that didn’t exist a few short moments ago.

This is Tristan, the working man.

“Uh, no, I... like your pose.” I clear my throat. “It will work well.” Tristan couldn’t pose ineptly if he wanted to. “But I’m going to focus on your face, so you can cover up.”

Instead of pulling the blanket over his lap, he fixes his disciplined stare high on the kitchen wall and pulls in a deep breath, slipping even further into his modeling head space.

“Look at me,” I say.

“You want direct eye contact?” Tristan’s voice is strangely robotic.

“I do.” My voice sounds odd too—wistful, maybe. Or yearning. When Tristan entered the modeling zone, the connection between us magically vanished, and... and I want it back. But I also want to sketch him, so I can then paint him in watercolor. Which will take far more than three hours of

him sitting numbly in that chair, the wool blanket scratching his perfect ass.

And I'll be hard-pressed to turn over the finished portrait for his portfolio as I promised because I'm going to put my blood, sweat, and tears into this work. It will mean more to me than I ever *intend* to put into words... and will be far too precious to give away, even to him. Not to mention that I don't want to add to the glory of Tristan's portfolio—I'd much prefer he left nude modeling behind. I want to be the only one gifted with the sight of his flawless, naked body.

Want, want, want—what do I truly want from the man seated before me?

I can't answer that—or maybe I simply won't. All I can do in that direction is admit that Tristan is now my muse. He inspires me as no other person ever has. In art... in bed... in life.

I shudder. "I need to grab my knife—my pencils are dull."

"Don't cut your thumb off like Tommy almost did." A friendly sparkle returns to his eyes, and I'm absurdly glad to see it.

"Don't worry, I'm not a rookie."

I'm not a rookie at sharpening a graphite pencil with a utility knife, but I'm a total newbie with whatever is happening in my heart.



Remi

TRISTAN ASKS to take a break about forty-five minutes into the session. I'm ready for a break too. The silence between us is staggering, and I want to reestablish our amiable bond over a couple of glasses of ice water.

"I'll get you a drink," I offer.

"Thanks." He stands, hesitating slightly before heading—stark naked—to the half bathroom. I glance away, as ogling

him at this moment is against the rules.

I rush to my bedroom and snatch a black velour robe from the back of one of the wardrobes lined up against the towering brick wall. Then I race to the bathroom and say, “Uh, Tristan, I hung my bathrobe on the doorknob so you can, um...”

Yeah, he knows why I’m offering him a robe. This feels far more like a stilted work environment than my “date” and I hanging out on a lazy day at home.

“I appreciate it, Remi.” The robotic tone is gone. It’s the voice of the man I’ve come to know and... like. “I won’t have to streak across your apartment again—I mean, what would the neighbors think?”

I smile in relief at his change in attitude. “I’ll be in the kitchen.”

A minute later, Tristan—enveloped in my bulky black robe—sits at the breakfast bar, sipping ice water from a goblet. “I wonder if the kids had fun at the movies with Dacia and Tara last night.”

“If they got Jared a large bucket of buttered popcorn, I’m sure *he* had a blast,” I reply.

“You’re coming to know him very well. And *mmmm...* buttered popcorn sounds good.”

“I’ll make you some.” The words pop out before I have a chance to think.

“Okay, then, we’ll eat popcorn—*after* we’ve finished working. You don’t need your model poking around his mouth with his tongue to get kernels out of his teeth.”

I sigh and step closer to his stool. “That wouldn’t be my first choice, as far as the use of my model’s tongue goes.”

Tristan places his goblet on the counter beside mine. Then he slides his ass from the stool, stands before me, draping his arms around my shoulders. “Would *this* be a better use of my tongue?” He places his hand at the back of my neck and pulls me down into a kiss.

The kiss is deep; all I can do is hum my approval.

After exploring each other's mouths until we're breathless, Tristan murmurs, "I can think of something that would loosen my muscles for the rest of today's modeling session. You'd be doing me a huge favor." His sneaky smile has me unraveling at the seams.

"And what w-would that be?"

"Maybe I could *show* you what I mean... in the bedroom." His gaze is seductive, a shimmering pool of seafoam green. *It's extraordinary how his eye color changes with his moods.*

"Of-of c-course," I stutter.

Tristan doesn't take my hand and lead me to my room—but then, it isn't necessary. He slides his arms from my shoulders, turns, and saunters away. I have little choice but to follow, as I'm drawn to him like a teenager to a warm six pack of beer behind the lawnmower in his best pal's garage.

I stumble over the robe he lets slide from his shoulders in the doorway to my bedroom, exposing his sculpted back, narrow hips, and tight ass. We never made the bed this morning, so Tristan easily slips between the rumpled sheets, spreading his arms and legs wide, as if in welcome. I rip off my T-shirt and yank down my faded blue jeans without so much as a feeble attempt to unbutton them, clumsy in my eagerness to feel his skin against mine. My boxers soon hit my ankles and are then kicked only God knows where.

I can't explain the dramatic mood change that happens when Tristan sighs and glances toward the window. "I-I want you to make..." His complexion pales, a perfect match to his sudden vulnerability. He pulls in a shaky breath and starts again. "Remi, will you make love to me?"

Make love to me... Tristan's choice of words echoes in my head.

Is that what we'll do in this bed—make love?

I've always preferred to think of it as fucking, but that's just semantics, isn't it?

"I will," I say, shoving the quandary from my mind. "Yes, of course... I will."

When he closes his eyes, it feels as if he's shutting me out. I can't tolerate the separation.

"Look at me," I demand for the second time this morning. "I need to see your eyes."

Tristan's lashes flutter before he complies with a single, almost imperceptible nod. When he looks at me, his gaze, though still a delicate pastel, is sufficiently powerful to penetrate mine.

I can't ever let myself love him, but I already need him.

I climb carefully on top of his spread-eagled form, relishing the sensation of his smooth, toned body. "Your skin... it's like silk on stone," I observe, caressing his firm bicep with several fingertips. "Soft but also strong."

Again, he closes his eyes, and this time, I feel relief. Each time I gaze into those endless depths, I fear I'll lose myself.

"I-I want you... *inside* me," he persists.

Though I'm pleased we're on the same page, I need to take this slowly. I need time to gather my wits—to steel my soul—so I don't fall too far or too hard. "There's no rush."

"But I want you now," he adds rather sharply, opening his eyes widely in appeal.

I can't *not* smile. "Eager much?"

Or is he afraid he'll change his mind, given time to ponder?

"Come on, Remi. Let's just d-do it." His voice's pitch rises with each word.

Typically, I don't take orders from lovers, but everything is different with Tristan. "It's okay, Tristan. Slow down... and take a breath."

His gaze softens at my urging, and I observe the obedient rise and fall of his graceful chest... once and then again.

As he offers his trust to *me*—a man so entirely undeserving—I lift myself from his body to take him in so I can savor the moment. I memorize every breathtaking detail of

his open gaze and his velvet skin and the pink flush rising over the fading mark I made on his neck to spread across his sculpted cheeks. When I can wait no longer, I dive in.

I suck lightly on the tender skin in the hollow of his neck, but instead of sliding my kisses down his body as he expects, I move up. Along his jaw, behind his ear, into his hair. *How can a man taste and smell so perfect?* It's as if Tristan was made for me.

"That feels good," he murmurs. "Don't stop."

Abruptly, though, he turns his head. When our lips collide, he opens his mouth. This is a deliberate invitation for me to invade... and I haven't the will to resist. Between his open lips, Tristan's unique flavor is intense and more enticing than I'm ready for. I groan my bewildered pleasure, sink my tongue in deeper, and turn his body with mine as I fall to the side.

"Are we gonna do it now?" he asks.

Again, I wonder at his eagerness. *Could it be apprehension? Or maybe simple fear?* "Relax, Tristan. Let things unfold."

"O-okay." His breathing is too fast. He's practically hyperventilating. "Okay."

"Making love" will be "causing pain" if I don't coax his tense body into relaxation. And so, with all the tenderness I can muster, I turn him onto his stomach and kneel beside him. Once on his belly, he glances back at me with wild eyes. I smile tightly and massage the rigid muscles of his shoulders.

"When I first saw these, I knew I'd never seen shoulders so beautiful." I speak in a low, calm tone. "Michelangelo couldn't have sculpted a better specimen."

He turns his face to the side, so it's flat on the pillow. A tiny smile tugs at the corner of his lips. I'm surprisingly gratified to see it.

My hands drift to his lower back. "And then you let the robe fall..."

As I talk, the fury of Tristan's breathing eases.

“I saw a man so physically ideal I wasn’t sure I could be objective enough to commit his body’s flow to paper.”

Listening attentively but staring straight ahead, he nods.

“Then we spoke. Remember when you were lost in that winding hallway?” I must be careful with how much truth I offer—too much honesty is risky. “Your humility... well, it touched me.” It made me want him in a whole new way.

I fix my attention on the finest ass I’ve ever seen, grasping a cheek in each hand. When I squeeze, he moans his pleasure. And when my squeezing turns into a more provocative caress, he lifts his ass for more.

“Gorgeous and humble... and soon, I learned how deeply you’re devoted to your family.” *Family... my personal kryptonite.*

Eyes loosely closed, his breathing is now steady and shallow. If I didn’t know better, I’d think he’d fallen asleep. Tristan is ready for what comes next—I sincerely hope *I* am.

Leaning to the side, I reach into the simple wooden box I keep on my night table and pull out a new tube of lube and a condom. “You are the picture of sweetness, and I want you very much.” I’ve failed to illustrate with words how drawn I am to him. I’m left with the language of my body to show Tristan what he means to me.

Again, Tristan nods. He then twists his neck to look at me. He’s seeking assurance—something I’ve never felt the need to give a lover. But yes, Tristan is different—and more importantly, *I’m* different with Tristan—so I lean down, kiss the upturned edge of his mouth, and hope to God he feels comforted.

Then I douse my fingers with lube and say, “Sorry if this is cold.” *Have I ever apologized for anything before getting busy with a lover?* I rub my hands together to warm it and then tentatively touch the entrance to his body with a single finger. He lurches violently to the side. “Tristan, are... are you sure you want to do this?”

If he doesn't want to continue, it wouldn't be a problem. We can wait until he's ready... And I'll wait as long as it takes.

"Uh-huh, I'm sure." He slides back into place. "Keep going." A return of the dreaded robot voice.

I cautiously work my way into his body, adding lube as I add fingers. His body writhes into positions that burn into my mind's eye. *Shapes I want to draw.* "You are beautiful." *Beautiful is such a lacking term for how Tristan looks right now.* This sight of my lover—both eager and timid, passionate yet wary—is forever branded in my mind.

"You are too," he grinds out as I press my fingers inside him. "You're the most... beautiful man... I've ever known."

Tears rush to my eyes as I gasp in disbelief. Maybe he's confused... or maybe he *truly* sees me as a man of unsurpassed beauty. All I know for certain is that Tristan is giving himself to me today, and I want to join our bodies together—not merely to be gratified by the pleasure—but so we can exist for a few moments like one being.

I slide my fingers from him, roll on the condom, and squirt lube over my dick.

"Are you ready?" I ask, truly open to any answer he gives me.

"Um... y-yeah." He tenses slightly as I lift his hips so he's on his knees.

"Tell me... if you're, you know, too uncomfortable." I move behind him and line my dick up with his entrance. And then, for a reason I can't define, I freeze. After swallowing loudly, I whisper, "This... uh, this means a lot to me."

"I-I know." His raspy tone is laden with tiny tremors.

I press my dick inside his tight channel—barely several inches—and give him a moment to adjust. I'm panting now—or maybe it's *his* breathing that's so heavy. It's impossible to say. "C-can I keep going?"

“Yeah...” One quick word gives me permission to go to a place I’ll certainly never want to leave.

I push in more, and then more. With each progression, I pause and wait for signs of discomfort. Tristan is still and silent as I work my way into his body.

When I’m inside him as far as I can go, I sigh with inexplicable satisfaction. “I’m in you.”

“You... you’ve gotta move.”

He clenches his ass cheeks, and I let out a groan of pure bliss as the warm vise of his body holds me in place.

“Please, Remi—will you move?” His plea is almost... panicked.

“Uh....” Words have again failed me. I’m so profoundly satisfied to be physically joined with Tristan that the concept of fucking him seems to have escaped my mind.

“*Please...*” Yet another verbal prompt.

So, I push inside him and then withdraw. Just once. He groans—I’m almost certain it’s in the good way. Still, I check. “You okay?”

“I-I’m fine... Better than, even. Keep going.”

With Tristan’s permission—or maybe insistence—I finally get down to business. Gripping his hips, I stare at the lines of his chiseled back, now supported on his elbows. His soft, blond waves call for me to run my fingers through them, but I’ll have to save that for later. And I throw myself into what feels far more like the act of lovemaking than fucking.

Semantics, I remind myself as I thrust. But the sex act has never felt so close to a spiritual experience. My heart and mind and soul have joined my body in this journey.

At the two-minute marker, I’m certain that I won’t last much longer, something I normally pride myself on. Tristan’s so tight—*so everything*—and when he grunts and pushes his ass back against me, I shudder and grit my teeth to stay in control.

This is *almost* a done deal, so I reach around his narrow hip and grip his dick.

“Rub me,” he demands in a gravelly tone. “Just... now, please... *I need...*”

I do my best to match each thrust to a stroke, but I can't be sure I get my timing right. I *am* sure it's good enough for Tristan, because his cock stiffens into a slab of granite. His insides tighten... and it hits me that I've never been in a more perfect place. In mind or body.

We both erupt at once. Knowing Tristan is right here with me—shuddering and panting and groaning—well, it's like a trip to heaven for two. There and back in thirty exquisite seconds.

And then, I think the forbidden words I haven't allowed inside my mind for two decades.

I love you.

Yup. And those three little words race through my mind, a time or ten. Maybe more.

How can this be what I think when I can't ever let myself fall in love?

I'm not in love...

I'm not in love.

I can *never* fucking fall in love.



Tristan

THE WAY REMI looks at me after we make love—well, it *should* scare the hell out of me. It isn't warm or fond. It's far closer to cold and callous... as if he doesn't know me. Or maybe like he wishes he didn't. But it doesn't freak me out as much as it probably should because I've decided to trust him. Trusting in the truth of what he said is part of the deal—and Remi told me what we just did meant a lot.

After gawking at me for a few ice-cold seconds, he hastily rolls off the edge of the bed rather than holding me close. “Are your muscles loosened up, Tristan? Because you owe me two more hours of posing.” A warped giggle rises from his throat.

I refuse to be insulted by awkward behavior that makes no sense after the intimacy we just shared. “Uh, yeah. I feel much better now.”

“Great—I aim to please.” He turns toward the doorway, presenting me with an ass that’s every bit as perfect as he says mine is.

“You did.” But I can be stubborn; I refuse to move until he looks at me again.

Remi scurries to the robe that I carelessly cast away in my rush to get to his bed. He picks it up and faces me, holding it out like a peace offering. His dark eyes—that are *still* not focused on mine—are glassy. Which doesn’t match his lighthearted banter. “Maybe you want to put this on... and uh, I’ll catch you in the living room.”

Reaching for the bathrobe, I refuse to answer.

“Does that sound like a plan?” he asks warily.

“Sure.” I don’t move so much as a baby toe.

He grabs his jeans, pulls them on without boxers, and steps toward the doorway, eyes studiously downcast.

“Remi,” I say softly.

He stops walking. “Yes?” I wish I could turn up the volume on his voice—it’s even quieter than mine. I’m sure this is intentional—another way of hiding.

“What we did—it was really special.”

Remi shrugs a few times, leaving his shoulders up by his ears.

“Was it special for you too?”

First, he huffs—like he can’t believe I asked that question. Then I hear a noisy gulp.

“Look at me.” He’s demanded this of me twice today. It’s my turn—fair is fair.

With an agonizing lack of speed, Remi turns to face me. His eyes are now dry, but there are red splotches beneath them. “What do you want from me, Tristan?”

I take a deep breath and then blow it out as I search for the necessary mindset. Because Remi is clearly off his usual “no worries—I’ve got this” game. And he needs some help. I happen to know how these things work; Jared and Tara try to avoid experiencing their emotions all the time.

“Everything’s okay,” I assure him.

His shoulders drop. “I don’t know if it…” He sighs instead of finishing his thought.

“It is.” I assure him. “*We are.*”

He nods. “Okay.”

I *think* I understand what’s happening. Making love to a person he cares for is uncharted territory for Remi. His behavior indicates anxiousness bordering on awkwardness. And I can deal with this.

“You could use a hug… and so could I.” Truth is always refreshing. I wonder if Remi’s aware of this.

He rushes toward me and nearly faceplants on the bed before pulling me into his arms. “I don’t know why I feel so… messed up.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t overthink it.” I wrap my arms around him to find that he’s shaking. Remi will be okay; he simply needs time to come to terms with his feelings.

“Okay,” Remi says again. His voice is muffled, as his face is now stuffed into the hollow of my neck.

I give him a reassuring squeeze.

“Thanks for, you know…” He lifts his head. “Want to maybe go for a walk?”

Fresh air is almost as refreshing as honesty. “I’d love that,” I reply.

“We can finish the modeling tomorrow morning... you know, first thing. That is, if you want to stay over t-tonight.” His voice breaks like a thirteen-year-old’s.

“I’d love to stay with you tonight.”

When Remi pulls away, the red patches beneath his eyes have vanished, and his smile is *almost* chill. “Sounds like a plan.”

CHAPTER 17



Tristan

“This is the art college that Remi goes to.” Holding Tommy’s hand, I lead him along the pathway that cuts through the courtyard dividing the LaCasse College campus. His eyes are wide with awe. “We’re gonna meet him at the Clayton Arts Building where he takes classes in drawing and sculpture.”

“Cool beans,” Tommy replies. “And it’s where *I’m* gonna take my clay lesson.”

“It sure is... with a professional sculptor.”

Remi has set up an afternoon to spend with Tommy and his sculpture professor, Jillian Stitt, who runs LCC’s Foundation Program—introductory courses in drawing, painting, sculpture, and graphic design. According to Remi, all students must complete the Foundation Program before they select their major, so they have experience in a variety of mediums. And he tells me that Jillian is perfectly suited to run the exploratory program thanks to her enthusiasm for all forms of visual arts. He has also assured me that she’ll be the perfect person to give Tommy some tips.

Remi is waiting for us outside the old brick building when we arrive.

“Coach!” Tommy scurries ahead of me, and when he reaches Remi, he hugs him around the waist. “I told everybody at school that I’m goin’ to college now!”

Remi's eyes shine when he greets Tommy. "Here you are at a real art college. Today, you're going to take a lesson from one of my favorite professors."

"Hi, Remi," I say and lean in for a quick kiss. "I'll leave Tommy with you and wait in the student caf."

"Come upstairs and meet Jillian first." He grabs my arm. "She's always looking for life models, and you'd be perfect for her figure sculpting classes. And don't worry, Jillian's nothing like Santini—she's always respectful."

Remi's brief scowl proves he's still pissed off about what went down with Professor Santini at his house. I blame myself for giving the guy such a perfect opportunity to hassle me. Based on his creepy behavior in the classroom, I should've known better than to be alone with him. "I haven't had a chance to tell you that the owners of Kid Castle called me this morning. My substituting gig there is gonna be *every* Thursday. I hope Professor Stitt's classes won't conflict."

His face lights up. "That's terrific... Still, you should meet Jillian and see what she's looking for, okay?"

Tommy snatches Remi's hand and pulls him toward the Clayton Arts Building. I follow them up a flight of stairs and down a winding hallway to a second-floor classroom.

A tall, blonde woman with bright blue eyes and a warm smile steps out of the classroom. "You must be the talented little sculptor that Remi mentioned." She reaches out to shake Tommy's hand.

"I'm not little, ma'am. I'm six years old."

Jillian releases a spurt of cheerful laughter. "Well, no, you're not little at all."

Remi grins and says, "Jillian, this is my friend Tommy. You'll soon see that he is quite the budding artist. And Tommy, please meet my favorite professor, Jillian Stitt. She likes her students to call her Jillian."

Tommy's grin is even wider than Remi's. "Hiya, Jillian." He offers her a quick wave.

“Jillian, this is my... uh, this is Tommy’s uncle Tristan Wilder. He’s the figure model I told you about.”

“I’m pleased to meet you, Tristan.” She does her best to check me out casually as she shakes my hand. “Remi mentioned that you’re available to model for art classes.”

“Yes... every day except for Thursday, Professor.”

“Please call me Jillian.”

“Of course.”

“How is your December schedule looking?” she asks.

“Pretty much open, at this point.”

“Do you have a business card?”

I reach into the back pocket of my jeans, pull out my wallet, and find a card. “Here you go.”

“Excellent. Expect a call soon.” Jillian glances at Remi and mouths a silent, “thank you.”

“I’ll look forward to it.”

At this point, Tommy is about ready to explode from anticipation. “Can we go inside the classroom now?”

“We certainly can, young man.” Jillian turns to head into the classroom, but Tommy races ahead of her.

“You’d better get inside with them,” I say to Remi. “Tommy is a tad overeager.”

“Who can blame him?” Remi takes my face in his hands. “We’ll meet you in the dining hall as soon as we’re finished.”

“Thanks for doing this for Tommy.”

“I coach soccer for Jared, and I read countless stories to Wendy and her stuffed sheep. I want to do something special for Tommy too.” He kisses my forehead and then looks into my eyes in a way that threatens to melt me.

I glance away. “Have a good time. I’ll be planning lessons for tomorrow at Kid Castle.”

Life is sure looking good.



Remi

LATE THE NEXT AFTERNOON, Tristan races toward my SUV, his cheeks pink, his face split into an uncharacteristically giddy grin. When he opens the door and slides into the passenger seat, I say, “I take it your day at Kid Castle was a success.”

“Oh, my God...” He launches himself over the center console and into my arms. “I’m as happy as Tommy was yesterday at his clay lesson.”

When he pulls back, I can’t stop myself from kissing his nose. “That’s saying something.”

“The kids are so sweet. There *are* a few challenging ones, but I’m used to being with kids, and I think I’ll be able to work with them.”

“How did your lesson plans work out?” Tristan put an impressive amount of effort into them.

“I packed way too many activities into too short of a time, so I could only get done about half of what I planned. At Kid Castle, the focus is on play, and I agree that it should be.”

I pull out onto the street. “Do you need to go straight home, or can we stop for a celebratory drink?”

“A quick drink should be okay. Tara doesn’t start work until seven.”

“There’s a prosecco bar down the street.” I did a little research on my phone while I waited for Tristan to come out of the preschool.

“Sounds perfect.”

He places his hand on my knee as I drive, as if he’s more than just a random guy I’m dating. *It feels like he’s my boyfriend, and I’m not scrambling for an exit.*

“They wanted me to spend today getting familiar with the kids and the way they run things. Next Thursday, Wendy can

join my class. And get this—at no charge.”

I wish, probably too fervently, that being a preschool teacher was Tristan’s fulltime job. *Why does it twist my heart into knots to think of him taking off his clothes in front of strangers?* The concept of life drawing models exposing their bodies to classrooms full of artists never bothered me before. In fact, nude models are integral to my development as a student—and will be essential to my success as a painter.

Looks like I’m a hypocrite—a selfish hypocrite who wants to hoard Tristan’s naked beauty, keeping it all for myself. In any case, his choice of work isn’t my decision to make. I have no claim on him, and thus, no say in the matter.

“Earth to Remi.”

“Ha.” I glance at him.

“You were lost in thought.”

“Nah. I was just trying to remember where the prosecco bar is.”

CHAPTER 18



Remi

Time flies when you're having fun, or so the saying goes. The truth is that I've never believed these kinds of unrealistic adages. To start, I never bought the concept that simple "fun" exists for people like me; my life has been a series of avoidances. By adulthood, I'd become skilled at avoiding the paparazzi's continual badgering, my grandparents' ballooned expectations, and commitment to friends and lovers because it made sense to shun any form of human contact that could possibly introduce complications.

Until Tristan and the Wilder family came into my life.

By the time Grandmother calls on November 15th at precisely nine a.m., I'm starting to play the role of a more fun loving and optimistic person. There's also a saying—fake it 'til you make it. This seems to be working for me. I still struggle with believing that life holds the potential for true happiness, but not nearly as much as I did several short months ago.

"Good morning, young Julian."

"Hello, Grandmother."

"How is college life treating you, dear?" I listen for the usual sarcasm, but it isn't there.

"Very well, thank you. And how is Grandfather?"

"He's the same. Missing you, of course."

"I miss him too," I admit.

“I... would like to compliment you on... on something.”
Grandmother’s voice is tight.

“Oh, really?” *This is unusual.*

“I’m being sincere, son. You helped in the recruitment of an extremely efficient young woman as a night shift reservationist. Tara Wilder is her name. Robert Lavigne can’t speak highly enough of her.”

“That’s good news.”

“Is this Tara someone *special* in your life, young Julian?”
She sounds hopeful.

Too bad I’m going to dash her hopes. “She’s a friend.”

“And nothing more?” Grandmother sighs her disappointment. “I would be quite thrilled if your interest in her was romantic, to be honest.”

“You know I like men.” This revelation didn’t thrill her when I came out in high school. Nothing has changed—to this point, I continue to be an all-around Remington family disappointment.

“Preferring men doesn’t preclude you from enjoying women, as well.”

“Grandmother, I *exclusively* ‘enjoy’ men.” Although she can’t see me, I use those obnoxious air quotes. “I’m friendly with Tara’s family.”

“Is she married?”

“No, but she has three children. I’ve become a source of help to...” I can’t believe I’m volunteering this information. “They matter to me.”

For the first time in years, Grandmother seems to be at a loss for words.

“I’ve coached her oldest son’s soccer team, and I took her younger son to LCC for a sculpting lesson.” I catch myself smiling. “Her three-year-old daughter is adorable.”

“Why don’t you bring them to the Connecticut estate for Thanksgiving dinner?”

“You want me to bring an *entire family* for the holiday?”

“I do... Your grandfather would love to see children running in the hallways of our home.”

“Um... Tara will want her brother to come along.”

“He is welcome.”

“I’ll talk to them and let you know.” I’m entering dangerous “meet the family” territory by taking Tristan to the Connecticut estate for Thanksgiving. *And* by introducing him to my grandparents, although they’ll initially have no idea that Tristan is my lover.

“Well, I expect to hear from you in the next day or two, so the cook has sufficient time to prepare for the holiday meal.”

“I’ll be in touch.”

“Incidentally, Robert is considering Tara for a supervisory role at the company,” she informs me.

“She’ll be ecstatic to hear that.” *I’m* ecstatic to hear it too. A promotion means a raise in pay, which would not only benefit the kids, but could potentially free Tristan from constant modeling so he could spend more time in the classroom.

“It was very nice to speak to you today.” She’s letting me off the hook without stern reminders about application deadlines and future obligations.

“The feeling is mutual.”

“I will speak to you again soon.”

“Yes, of course. “

“Goodbye, then.”



Tristan

I HAVEN’T SEEN Remi so out of sorts since right after the first time we made love. “What’s on your mind? You look as

nervous as little Janie Wilkins when she snatches an extra cookie from the snack platter at Kid Castle.”

“It’s nothing... I’m perfectly fine.” He clears his throat and then rubs his eyes.

“I know what ‘perfectly fine’ looks like. This is *not* it.” I drag him to the half bathroom. “Look in the mirror. See that face? Check out the way you’re biting your lower lip... and what’s up with these lines?” I run a fingertip across his forehead. “Perfectly fine people’s foreheads are *not* wrinkled like accordions.”

“You’re seeing things that aren’t there, Tristan,” he huffs and then grabs my hand, leading me back to the sectional. “Now sit and finish your soup. I have to take you home soon.”

I fold my arms across my chest. “Well, then, call this a hunger strike—I’m not taking another bite until you spill.”

Remi hates it when I don’t eat—he knows I’m perpetually hungry. “You want me to make something up?” he asks in a tone I wouldn’t accept from Jared.

“Sure. Let’s call it that.” I can effectively use sarcasm too.

His sigh is an admission that we’re getting somewhere. “Maybe I’m... you know, wondering what your plans are for Thanksgiving.”

“Well, Tara *tries* to cook a turkey. I watch the parade with the kids. We make turkey drawings out of traced handprints and compare them with last year’s to see how much everybody has grown.”

Remi looks at me darkly, as if waiting for more. *His bad mood is over... Thanksgiving Day plans?*

“If Wendy isn’t sick, we’ll all go to the park after dinner so the kids can run around.” Remi continues to stare at me expectantly. “Oh... and you’re invited.”

Finally, I see a trace of a smile. “You want to spend Thanksgiving with me?”

“It wouldn’t be fun without Coach Remi.”

Remi hops to his feet and strides across the room to the enormous window. And he gets very close to it—close enough to press his nose against the glass. *Strange behavior.*

“You can’t hide *in front* of a window,” I inform him.

“I just want to ask you something... you know... about Thanksgiving.”

“Ask away.” I may have to tickle the info out of him. It works with Tommy.

“First, you should know that my grandparents want to see me on Thanksgiving.”

My smile falls. “I guess I forgot that you have relatives too.”

He replies quickly, “I told Grandmother that I’ve become close to your family. And she said I could invite you to... the Connecticut estate.” He gulps. “Unless you have plans to see your own parents.”

“We have no plans to see our mother.” I don’t even know where she’s living at this point, not that I care. Her lack of dependability traumatized me when I was young, but the scars have faded. I refuse to hold my breath in hope of hearing from her. “Did you say the Connecticut *estate*?”

“Uh, yeah. It’s a huge brick mansion with a half-dozen outbuildings on fifty acres.”

Whoa, Nelly. “And all of us are welcome?”

He nods. “I’m going to invite Dacia too.”

“Do they know about... you and me?”

“Not yet, but I figure they will by the end of Thanksgiving dinner—it’s not exactly a state secret. Especially since the kids know.”

I join him by the window. “You want to take me home to meet your family?” I didn’t see this coming.

“Well, I’ve met yours,” he says.

“That’s because the Wilders are kind of a package deal.”

Remi turns and grasps me by the shoulders. “I want you to come with me.”

“Your grandparents will be cool with feeding *six* additional guests?”

“They have a cook... and plenty of housekeepers. Butlers. Groundskeepers too. You name it. Entertaining one hundred guests wouldn't be a problem.”

“Oh.”

“So? Are you in?”

“I'll have to talk to Tara, but I'm sure she'll say yes. Her turkey always comes out of the oven chewy... like jerky. Tough to swallow. And I *think* she knows it.”

Remi pulls me against him, and as usual, when he's trying to restrain his emotions, he trembles. “Thank y-you.”

“You don't have to thank me for doing something I want to do.” I draw my hands up and down the length of his back. “It'll be awesome.”

And it could be a wild ride.



Remi

THANKSGIVING HAS TURNED out to be something of a wild ride. Grandmother and Grandfather had no idea what they were in for when they invited Tara, Dacia, Tristan, and three young children to share in our typically sedate holiday celebration.

Our guests are overwhelmed by the sheer size of the property, the extravagance of the mansion and its classic decor, and the abundance of servants wandering around, seemingly willing to do anything to increase their enjoyment of the day.

Jared has no problem with the pampering. He eats his fill of fancy appetizers offered to him on silver trays, carried by the somber butler, Henry, and his disciplined staff. After an extended snack time, he boldly asks Henry for a tour of the

“mega-huge crib,” likely in search of a television with a game-playing device. Jared doesn’t find exactly what he’s looking for but is still awed by the number and sheer variety of rooms in the building.

“Mom!” he exclaims to Tara. She’s sitting beside Dacia on a velvet loveseat in the parlor, waiting to meet my grandparents who are still preparing for the day in their upstairs suite. “Get this—they got a screening room here. It’s, like, a real movie theater—*inside* this house! They don’t have a Nintendo, but there’s actually a freaking game room with, like, a pool table and a juke box!”

“Where are Tommy and Wendy?” she asks, clearly uncomfortable with the opulent environment. “I seem to have lost track of them.” She fidgets with her empty mimosa glass. “I should find them.”

“No worries—they’re with Uncle Tris. Them three dropped outta the tour when we hit the library.”

“What caught their attention in the library?” Dacia asks, as entertained as Tara is anxious.

“Wendy started begging ‘Uncle Tis’ to check for storybooks about lambs. If he didn’t say yes, she was seriously gonna start bawling. And Tommy saw this weird sculpture of a dude reading a book, and you know how he is about stuff like that.”

“Your Tommy must be similar in some ways to my grandson.” Grandmother finally makes her appearance in the parlor. She stands stiffly in the doorway beside my beaming grandfather. And as always, Grandmother is the picture of uptight class in her tailored burgundy dress and high-heeled black boots. “Young Julian made that sculpture in high school.”

“Who the heck is young Julian?” Jared never pulls any punches.

“Jared, that is *not* a polite way to talk to our host.” Tara briefly hides her face in her hands before demanding, “You need to apologize right now.”

“Oh, please, don’t worry yourself... I appreciate the quality of directness in a person.” The severe expression in Grandmother’s eyes and the tightness of her narrow lips soften. “Our young Julian is who I believe you have come to know as Remi.”

“*Coach* Remi,” Jared corrects her. “And Wendy calls him Emmie.”

“Emmie, is it?” Grandfather chuckles. “Suits you, son.”

Tara and Dacia stand to greet my grandparents. I abandon my spot in the corner of the room, where I’m leaning against the wall as inconspicuously as possible, and step between them.

“Grandmother, Grandfather, please meet my friends, Tara Wilder and Dacia Mondavi.”

“And me—I’m Jared. I’m a striker.”

Grandfather’s smile widens. “I’m so very pleased to meet our grandson’s friends.” He shakes hands with each of them, holding Jared’s hand longer than the others. “And Jared, you have no idea how wonderful it is to see a young man like you in our home. It’s been years since our grandson ran these hallways.”

“You got the coolest house ever. Is there a bowling alley here too?”

“No, but there *is* an indoor swimming pool—warm enough to swim in all year.”

“Dang. Should’ve brought my swim trunks.”

“Tara, we’d very much like to meet your brother and two other children,” Grandmother says.

“I have a feeling I’m going to need to drag them out of the library,” I tell her.

“No need—we’re here,” says Tristan, who is carrying Wendy *and* Bah-Bah Lamb Baby. Tommy trails along behind them.

Wendy squirms from Tristan's arms to show the book she is holding to Grandmother. "See this book—it's 'bout farm animals."

"No. It's about restoring and preserving agricultural soil," she corrects Wendy with a sour expression.

"It's about cows... Tell her, Uncle Tis." Wendy shakes her head and holds up four fingers. "Look—one, two, three, four—*four* cows." She points to the cover.

Tristan offers a compromise. "There *are* cow drawings on the cover of the *soil* book."

"Spoken like a true diplomat. You must be Tristan." Grandmother extends her hand, which Tristan accepts politely.

"I'm Tristan. This young lady is Wendy, and Tommy's over there in the corner."

"I can draw a cow better than the ones on that book, Remi's Grandma. Wanna see?" Tommy asks.

"Please call us Mr. and Mrs. Remington." Grandmother covers her mouth with her hand, stunned by Tommy's familiarity.

"Mr. and Mrs. R might be easier for them," I suggest.

"That will have to do."

"Want me to draw you a cow, Mrs. R?" Tommy asks, unphased.

"Oh, I suppose so. Henry," she calls to the butler, "could you please find some colored pencils and printer paper for Tommy? Set him up to draw on the desk in the living room."

"Miss Emmie-ton, I wanna draw too."

Grandmother gawks at Wendy.

"Of course, Wendy," I reply.

Our crowd relocates to the living room where a fire roars in the huge fieldstone fireplace.



Remi

DINNER ITSELF IS MORE of a wild ride than appetizers were. Though explosive, it's the most satisfying Thanksgiving Day meal I've shared in at least a decade.

"Not gonna eat that yucky bird!" Wendy is in prime form. "Just mashed potatoes floatin' in gravy! Nothin' else!"

"Little Wenny, the turkey's not stringy like Mommy's," Tommy tells her.

"My turkey isn't *that* bad," Tara says, and all the kids groan. Tristan does too, but without rolling his eyes.

"Can I have more orange potatoes? Them things taste like candy," Jared asks.

The server, who is standing beside the long side table laden with serving bowls, jumps to scoop out more sweet potatoes for Jared.

"Miss Emmie-ton, why can't that poor lady sit down and eat food?" Wendy asks, pointing at the server with a chubby finger.

Dacia breaks into laughter. "The kids sure are little chatterboxes, huh?"

"I think they're lots of fun," Grandfather declares jovially.

"Maybe they should stop asking impertinent questions and concentrate on eating," Grandmother replies. "Now, Tara, tell me about your position at Remington Plaza."

As Tara describes the joys of her recent promotion, I lean toward Tristan. "You look nice today." We haven't had a chance to talk privately since I picked the family up to drive them here. And he does look nice, in khaki pants with sharply ironed creases down each leg and a white button-down oxford shirt. Brand new, I'd say. *We'd* be the ones looking like twins if not for the tight creases in his pantlegs. My pants are wrinkled, as always.

“I wanted to make a good impression.” His intense eyes appear brighter than usual, as if radiating hopefulness.

The truth is, to this point, my grandparents have barely noticed Tristan. The kids have stolen the show, Dacia knows how to get her spicy two cents in, and Tara works for our family corporation, so she has a built-in topic for conversation. Tristan has been background music.

“*I’m* impressed,” I reply with a wink.

“That’s what matters most.” He leans toward me and carefully wipes the corner of my mouth with his napkin. “Mashed potatoes,” he whispers with a shy smile.

“Don’t you gentlemen look cozy?” Grandmother calls us out, a wicked gleam in her eye. “Maybe we should keep our hands to ourselves at the dinner table.”

“Uh, I... I mean, he had mashed potato on his...” Tristan starts to stutter, his cheeks aflame.

I’m about to come to his defense when Jared offers too much truth for a formal dinner. “If you think they look cozy now, Miz R, you oughta see them all cuddled up in Uncle Tris’ bed.” Jared puckers his lips and blows me a kiss. “Right, Coach Remi?”

“They can’t stop smoochin’,” Tommy adds. “No matter how hard they try.”

We all glance at Wendy, expecting additional humiliating commentary, but she’s busy trying to feed her stuffed lamb a spoonful of mashed potatoes.

“So, it isn’t the winsome Tara or the witty Dacia who has stolen your heart,” Grandfather remarks and takes a long sip of white wine.

“Well... uh, Tristan and I are dating.” This clearly doesn’t cover what’s happening between us, but it fills the expectant silence in the room.

“Dating, is it?” Grandmother repeats, lifting her eyebrows.

“Um, yes,” I confirm.

To save the day, Tara leaps into the conversation—and sticks *both* feet in it. “Tristan and Remi met at a life drawing class at LaCasse College. Tristan was the model.” She smiles at her brother with pride.

“Life drawing models usually work nude, am I right?” Grandfather asks. “Young Julian must have seen something he liked.” He waggles his bushy eyebrows, chuckles, and gulps down more wine.

“Grandfather, the kids don’t know that Tristan—” I start but am interrupted.

“Uncle Tris—you take off *all* your clothes and let people draw you?” Jared’s eyes are as round and wide as my grandmother’s autumn-themed dinner plates. “Like, butt naked?”

“Oh, Tris, I’m so sorry I brought this up...” Tara shakes her head. “I’m sorry!”

Tristan says nothing. He studies his grip on the napkin in his lap.

“I’ve seen the drawings, Mr. R. And let me tell you, I liked what I saw too.” Dacia’s comment isn’t helpful.

“Thanksgiving Day has been *quite* informative,” Grandmother quips as Tristan excuses himself from the table and heads for the doorway. “Excruciatingly so, hmm, Tristan?”

I need to say something to put an end to the downward spiral of this conversation. “He is the best life drawing model the college has ever hired. Nobody poses more... professionally. But he *really* wants to be a kindergarten teacher.”

“I hope he intends to keep his clothes on for *that* occupational endeavor.” Grandmother makes no effort to hold back her disdain. “Kindergarten teachers are encouraged to be fully dressed at all times, am I correct?”

Tara stands so abruptly her chair nearly topples over behind her. “None of you appreciates what Tristan does to make money, but I’ll have you know that he does it to support

the kids and me. Until I got the job at Remington Plaza, he *alone* provided a roof over our heads, food, clothes—everything we needed.” She pulls in a breath and continues to ramble, “And he did it by modeling for art classes. *And* he’s beautiful, if you hadn’t noticed. The art students are as lucky to have Tristan as our family is. I will *not* listen to criticism of him!” Tara rushes from the dining room in search of her twin.

“That, my friends, is one heck of a loyal sister,” Grandfather states with a grin.

“But Mrs. R almost made Uncle Tris cry,” Tommy points out, dropping his fork on the edge of his plate and shooting eye daggers at her.

Wendy’s contempt is a match to her brother’s. She points at Grandmother. “You’re bein’ a big bully.”

“Young lady, I was simply stating facts—I am most certainly *not* a bully.” Grandmother can successfully manage a chain of hotels but is struggling to settle a dispute with a three-year-old.

Time to intervene. “Grandmother, Wendy is a child who loves her uncle, and you—”

“Be nice, Miss Emmie-ton! And say sorry!” Wendy cuts me off with her short series of rather reasonable demands.

Wendy can apparently take care of herself in the absence of her mother and uncle. “I’m going to check on Tristan.”

“Smart idea,” Dacia replies. “I’ll try to hold down the fort while you’re gone.”

“*Do* hurry back, young Julian,” Grandfather suggests and drains his glass.

CHAPTER 19



Tristan

This isn't how I hoped "meeting the family" would turn out. I'm locked in a bathroom—completely humiliated. Tara is in tears, sitting on the counter beside the fancy marble vessel sink, and Remi is banging on the door.

"Let me in, Tristan!" he calls.

"Give us a minute, Remi," I reply, considering options of how to escape from this stuffy Connecticut estate.

"Nobody in that room except my grandmother is out to get you." His knocking escalates in volume.

So, she really is out to get me.

"Good to know." I help my sister down from the countertop. "It's okay, Tara."

"But are *you* okay?" she asks, wiping her nose with her fist.

"I'm not thrilled about how the kids learned that I model naked, but I'm otherwise fine." This is something of a lie, as I'm sure she knows. "Time to face the music."

Before Remi makes a second scene here in the back hallway, I open the bathroom door.

Remi's eyes are shadowed with fury, and his hands are curled into fists. "If you want to leave, I understand. *Believe me*, I do," he says breathlessly. "Dacia and I will pack up the

kids' things and meet you and Tara in the SUV. Give us ten minutes."

"That's not necessary." I lean over the fancy sink and rinse my face. He hands me a towel. "I don't want to miss dessert." I do my best to smile, but it's just a meaningless lip gesture that doesn't reach the rest of my face.

"I'm sorry about what happened. I'll call Grandmother from the dining room and speak to her privately about her behavior."

"No. I appreciate you wanting to defend my honor, but that will only make the situation worse."

"I'm gonna quit working for Remington Plaza. If that nasty woman is at the top of the company, it's gotta be a crappy place to put my effort." Tara isn't crying anymore, but her wrath is possibly more dangerous.

"Don't do that, Tara. Your job makes you happy, *and* it takes the full burden of supporting the family off my shoulders."

"How do *you* want to handle it, Tristan?" Remi asks.

"I want to go back into the dining room and say my piece." I return the damp towel to the bar and head into the hallway. Remi and Tara follow, close at my heels.

When I enter the dining room, the dinner plates have been cleared. The adults sip cups of coffee, and the kids lick the whipped cream from steaming mugs of cocoa.

"Uncle Tris, I still love you even if you get butt naked in front of students," Jared says.

"Did you cry in the bathroom?" Tommy asks.

"Bah-Bah Lamb Baby thinks Miss Emmie-ton is a yucky ol' meanie!" Wendy concludes.

I stand near my chair. "Go ahead and sit down," I tell Remi and Tara. Remi hovers by my side for a few seconds before doing as I say.

First, I direct my attention to the kids because what they think of me is what matters most. “You just found out that I model for artists without wearing any clothes. It’s called being a life model... and I want you to know that I’m not ashamed of my job.” Wendy is still glaring at Remi’s grandmother and doesn’t seem particularly interested in what I have to say. The boys are a different story; I have their complete attention.

“Why do you need to be, like, butt naked? Can’t they draw you with clothes on?”

“That’s a good question, Jared. Without models like me, artists wouldn’t be able to study the human anatomy. They couldn’t learn about the way body parts are connected and how people move. A real live naked body teaches artists a lot more than a photograph can.”

“It’s like if I go outside and look at a tree and then I draw it, my picture comes out better than if I draw a tree I see in a book,” Tommy says.

“Yes, exactly. And light reflects differently on the real thing, right? It’s like that with human bodies too. Light shines differently off my skin than off clothing.”

“So, you just stand there in front of the class with no clothes on?” Jared asks.

“Not exactly. I come up with all different kinds of poses—standing, sitting, and lying down. I need to stay perfectly still when I’m posing. Sometimes for a long time.”

“Anybody can stay still,” Tommy observes. “That’s easy.”

“It’s not easy at all. I have an idea. Let’s try not to move for one minute—you’ll see how hard it is. Okay, ready? Go.” As I count quietly to sixty, the boys struggle not to fidget.

My experiment seems to work. “That’s not as easy as I figured, Uncle Tris. Under my arm got itchy, and I couldn’t scratch it,” Tommy says.

“But don’t you get embarrassed?” Jared asks. “And cold?”

“Usually, the classrooms are kept pretty warm when a model is there. And yeah, I did feel embarrassed when I first

started, but I reminded myself about how important my job is for artists who are learning how to draw and paint and sculpt the human body.”

“Sculpt?” Tommy’s ears perk up. “With clay?”

“Uh-huh. And even cartoonists need life models like me.”

“Cool beans. What’s for dessert?” Jared seems to have moved past the concept of naked Uncle Tristan.

Tommy isn’t quite finished with his questions. “When we get home, can you be my life model? I wanna make a clay statue of you—butt naked.”

I shake my head. “Only grownups can be... and use... naked life drawing models, Tommy.”

“For what it’s worth, I wouldn’t be the artist I am today without life drawing models like your uncle.”

I smile at Remi, thankful for his support.

The kids return their attention to their mugs of hot cocoa, and we fall into an awkward silence.

“How about if Tara and I take the kids outside to run around a little bit before dessert?” Dacia asks, probably to let Remi and me have a few minutes alone with his grandparents.

“Yeah! We brought our soccer ball—let’s practice ball tricks!” Jared is already on his feet.

Tara and Dacia herd the kids from the room.

“Dinner was super great!” Tommy yells on his way out the door.

“Paulette, you are excused—for the moment,” Grandmother tells the servant, who promptly makes her exit.

When it’s just the four of us, the mood in the room grows bleak.

“So, young Julian, am I to understand that this gentleman—the nude model who wants to be a schoolteacher—is your partner?” Mrs. R asks, staring at her grandson.

“Like I said before, we’re dating.”

“I see,” she replies.

I wish I did. It feels like we’re boyfriends, yet he sticks to “we’re only dating” fiction.

“You know, we had far different expectations for who you’d choose to be with.”

“Speak for yourself, dear. I find Tristan delightful.” Mr. R. sends me a wink.

Mrs. R glares at her husband. “We *are* quite pleased with Tara’s work at the Remington Corporation. She is a bright and efficient employee. I see her going very far with the company.”

I can’t help but smile because the woman is right on the money about my sister.

“Among many other things, Tristan paid to educate his sister,” Remi informs them.

“That was extremely generous, Tristan. You are certainly willing to sacrifice for those you care about,” Mr. R. says. “I hope you’re gratified that Tara’s education is being put to good use.”

“I am, sir.”

“I suppose we’ll have to wait and see what becomes of you as a couple—or, as young Julian says, two men who are dating.”

This is when I finally admit the truth. Remi’s insistence that we’re merely dating stings. We’re boyfriends, partners, lovers. Soon, I’ll need confirmation of this.

“However, in my experience,” she continues, “people from such vastly different economic circumstances do not often flourish together.”

“Money isn’t the only important factor in a relationship, Grandmother.”

“No, but financial background often reflects social class, which *is* a critical factor. The manner in which one is raised affects fundamental beliefs, as well as life expectations.”

She has a point, though what I see as the biggest difference between Remi and me is *not* our view of money or status. It's our level of devotion to family.

"I suppose, as you said, we'll have to wait and see," I agree.



Remi

"YOUR GRANDMOTHER—SHE'S A TOUGH ONE," Tristan says as we pull on our jackets to join Tara, Dacia, and the kids in the huge yard beside the mansion.

"I probably should have warned you." The air is cold but not frigid—perfect for running around outside with the kids.

"Your grandfather is kinda sweet," he adds.

"Yes, he is. But he backs down to Grandmother—and always has." He never defended me when it meant opposing her.

"After your parents passed away, your grandparents raised you?" He grimaces as he asks the question. It *is* rather painful to imagine a heartbroken child being raised by a pair with so little compassion.

"I lost everything when Mom and Dad died." A trip from heaven to hell in one short day. "Once my grandparents became my legal guardians, I spent most of my time away at boarding schools and summer camps."

"I think I understand part of your pain." Tristan takes my hand. "Our mother was what we called flighty. She was here and then gone, you know? Mom wasn't mean spirited or coldhearted, but she wasn't dependable. I'm not gonna lie and tell you it didn't mess up my head when I was a kid, because it did. Constant broken promises and unmet expectations. So, Tara and I committed to our twin bond. We've never let each other down."

“I wonder whether it would have been different if I had a sibling. Maybe we would’ve looked out for each other.” And maybe I wouldn’t have ended up as a sworn loner, unwilling to give my heart, even when I so desperately want to.

“You’re a caring person, and you belong in a functioning family. Look at how quickly you’ve become a part of *our* family.”

“The kids and Tara and you... You’re all great. It was easy.”

“But, Remi, I’ve got to mention something that’s been bothering me.” Tristan stops walking, yanks his hand from mine, and his stare seems to go through me. Chills race up my spine—their source is raw fear. “Every time you say we’re ‘dating,’ it leaves me feeling kinda hollow.”

It takes me a second to catch my breath. “Dating is what we agreed upon.”

“It feels like so long ago when we decided that.” He shakes his head and glances into the distance to watch the kids play. “So much has changed.” Tristan wants something from me—most likely, an assurance of my commitment to our relationship.

The chills spread until they cover every inch of my skin. And I can’t control my shivering. “I guess we’re gonna need to t-talk.”

“Not here... not now.” When his gaze returns to mine, it’s soft, not piercing. “But soon, okay?”

“Yes, soon—I promise.” Sensing my anguish, he again grasps my hand. As always, physical contact with Tristan warms me. And a new acceptance warms me too. Thanksgiving Day, spent with my controlling grandmother and passive grandfather, has helped to explain my

inability to connect emotionally. I haven’t arrived at a *complete* understanding, though. I’m not yet ready.

“Is your grandmother still insistent that you work for the family company?” Tristan asks.

Relieved at the change of subject, I reply, “Three years in law school and then a career at Remington Plaza Corporation is the plan.”

“This is *your* life and *your* future. There comes a time when you have to live it for yourself.”

“I’ve come up with a few ideas about how I can possibly combine my work in art with a career in the hotel business,” I say, but before I have an opportunity to explain, the kids spot us.

“Coach Remi!” Jared races our way. “Let’s play a three-on-three soccer game! Me, you, and Dacia against Uncle Tris, Tommy, and Mom.” He seems to have stacked *his* team.

“What ’bout me and Bah-Bah Lamb Baby?” Wendy whines.

“You can be on Mom’s team,” Jared replies with a smirk.

The kids scramble to create goal posts out of branches ripped from the carefully trimmed shrubs. The groundskeepers are probably chewing on their fists to stop themselves from intervening. Tristan convinces Wendy (and Bah-Bah Lamb Baby) to be cheerleaders on the sidelines. Everybody is laughing and having fun.

And it hits me—this is my family.

I *do* belong with them... and with Tristan.

I don’t have to be alone anymore.

Happy Thanksgiving to me.

CHAPTER 20



Remi

Each time Tristan models for me, I'm awed by his physical beauty. I'm more awed that he chose me, such a profoundly flawed man, to be his partner. Sheer amazement leads to me drag him off to my bedroom where I prove my passion and gratitude by making love to him. Making love leads to a staggering rush of feelings for him—feelings I no longer fight.

Lying in bed, Tristan in my arms, I admit to myself that leaving unspoken the words that express my depth of feeling gives them so much more power.

“There's no one else, right?” I ask, my voice rough with unfounded doubt, as I hold him to my chest and kiss his hair.

When Tristan shakes his head and utters, “There's nobody but you,” I feel like a king.

I *want* to verbally claim him as my own; he's already so completely mine. And I'm going to do this—as soon as I can find the words to explain why it has taken me so long to come clean. I'll need to expose the darkest parts of my psyche: how losing *everything* I loved—my parents, my home, my hope for the future—on the eve of my ninth birthday has emotionally paralyzed me for nearly two decades.

He's incredibly patient with me. It's been a full week since Thanksgiving Day when I pledged to discuss the status of our relationship. Neither of us has initiated the “is this love?” conversation. It's clearly my place to bring it up since he

raised the topic on the holiday. Yet I can't find the words, even when they're so very simple and ring loudly and constantly in my head. Day and night... when we're together and when I'm alone... at school and at home and on the streets between.

I love you, Tristan.

"You promised to take Wendy to the library today." Again, Tristan lets me off the hook.

"That I did. I'll drop you off at the Art Shoppe in Brentwood Village for your modeling job. And then I'll pick Wendy up at the apartment, and we'll walk to the Brentwood Village Library."

"When you get there, she's gonna want you to read every storybook she can get her hands on about Santa Claus. The child has a *new* obsession."

"That won't be a problem," I assure him. "And Tara will have a few hours alone to go Christmas shopping."

"For once, Christmas presents aren't gonna break the bank." He tilts his face up to collect a kiss.

I love you, Tristan.

"Go take a shower. I'll make us lunch," I say.

"Or you can heat last night's leftovers."

I nod as he rises from the bed.



Remi

WENDY IS beyond excited about Christmas. I'd forgotten about the magic that Santa Claus and flying reindeer and sugarplum fairies bring to a child's life.

"Again, Emmie! Read it again!" I've read her seven different stories about the night before Christmas. In the company of three chatty toddlers, she's built a gingerbread house with glue and cardboard and plastic jewels. She has colored a printed picture of a snowman family. At this point,

the child is yawning; time to walk her home before I need to carry her.

“I have a better idea, Wendy. Let’s head back to your apartment. We can show your snowman picture to Bah-Bah Lamb Baby.”

“On the way home, can we stop at the Yum Yum Shop for a cookie?” she asks.

“Of course, we can, sweetie.” I’d do anything for her—a cookie is a minor request.

“Gotta get Jared and Tommy cookies too.”

“They’d be disappointed if we didn’t.” I bundle Wendy up in her puffy pink winter coat, fuzzy white earmuffs, and tiny purple mittens. I want to paint what I see—a happy child with rosy cheeks and strawberry curls spilling around her face. I grab my jacket as we head up the stairs to the library’s main floor, and she races for the door. “You’ve got to hold my hand, Wendy.”

“I’m a big girl. I know how to walk all by myself.” Her bottom lip protrudes.

I stop her on the sidewalk. “No deal.”

“O-kaaaay, Emmie.” The pout disappears, and she grins up at me. “I’ll hold your hand ’cause I love you, and you’re gettin’ me a cookie.”

She grabs my hand before I have a chance to put on my jacket and drags me along the sidewalk, chanting, “C is for cookie!”

After a few minutes of walking, I stop and let go of her hand. “Stand right beside me for a second—I’m freezing. Time to put on my coat.”

Wendy leans against my leg as I throw the coat over my shoulders.

“I see it, Emmie! The cookie shop! Look—right over there!” She bolts toward the street.

“Wendy! Stop right now!” I drop my jacket and race after her. “Wendy!”

“Gonna get a gingerbread man!” And she’s on the street.

“Dammit, Wendy!” I’m three feet behind her. “Come back here!”

She stops in the middle of the street and turns to look at me. Her wide eyes are the last thing I see before the screeching of tires.

Then the shrill scream of a little girl.

And my own guttural moan.



Tristan

“IT’S OKAY, Remi. Wendy’s fine—no harm was done.” I’m trying my best to comfort him, but my attempts are futile. It’s as if he doesn’t want to be comforted.

“The car missed her by two fucking feet.” Remi lies beside me on his bed—flat on his back and stiff as a board. I’ve never seen him so pale. And I’ve seen him tremble before—many times, in fact—but never so violently.

“It *missed* her... The only thing wrong with her now is her attitude.” I smooth back his hair, and he shuts his eyes. “Wendy is pissed off to the max that you didn’t stop for cookies.”

“I couldn’t stop to buy her cookies when I kept tossing mine.”

“You keep getting sick because you’re freaking out. And that’s normal—but you need to relax. Calm down—it’s over now.”

It’s natural for him to be this upset, I assure myself. This afternoon rocked Remi’s world in the worst way possible. On their walk home from the library, Wendy ran out onto the

street and came close to getting hit by a car. But nobody blames Remi for the close call.

Nobody except Remi.

He's inconsolable, but not in a sobbing, hysterical way. His mood is black. He's uncommunicative. And he's furious... at himself.

"It's not over—I nearly got Wendy killed. I... I... can't live with it." He turns onto his belly and drags a pillow over his head. "Leave me alone, Tristan. Take the SUV and go home. I'm not decent company."

I need to change his mood. "I'm not leaving you." Echoes of unpredictable interactions with my mother ring in my mind. And of my assurances as I watched her walk out the door so many times. "*No matter where you go, Mom, I'll always be here when you come home.*"

"I can't think this through with you here," he growls.

Undeterred, I rise from the bed and pull off my T-shirt, joggers, and briefs. And then, kneeling beside him, I shove away the pillow and yank his jeans down his legs. "Turn over."

"Go home, Tristan. Please..."

I sigh and push him onto his back. "Let me get these things off you." I pull down his boxers, and he doesn't try to stop me. "Now sit up." Eyes closed, he does as I say. I unbutton his shirt and push it from his lax shoulders.

"I'm gonna be sick," Remi barks and scrambles from the bed, and then from the room.

When he returns a few minutes later, naked and shaking, he smells like mouthwash.

"Let me take your mind off it," I say as I press him down onto the bed and climb on top of him, stretching my body over his. He constantly tells me that he loves the feeling of my silky skin on his, so I give him as much of the sensation as possible.

"Tristan, I'm so sorry."

“You have no reason to be sorry.” I push myself from his chest and look down into his eyes. They’re darker than ever—two murky pools of anguish.

“People you care for—they’re here one minute but can be gone the n-next.” His voice breaks, and he shudders.

“We’re all still here. Everybody’s okay.” I’m starting to doubt my words.

He shakes his head repeatedly. “The world as you know it can change, Tristan—in one split second.”

I press my lips to his. At first, it’s like kissing the back of my hand, but then suddenly, he’s responsive. Almost as if he’s starving for me.

Remi grabs my hips and flips us, so I’m beneath him. Settled on top of me, he grinds his dick against mine before covering my lips with his and devouring my mouth.

“Need you so much...” he murmurs between possessive kisses.

I’ve never heard him utter such a confession. I’m comfortable with the sentiment—I need Remi too—but not with the raw desperation in his tone.

He crouches between my legs and scatters ravenous kisses over my chest, as if he needs to do it now or will forever lose his chance. Soon, his kisses amble lower; without fanfare, he sucks my ready dick into his mouth, all the way to the back of his throat in a single swallow.

“Oh, God...” I utter.

When he pulls his mouth from me a few moments later, his words surprise me. “I didn’t mean to hurt Wendy.”

“You *didn’t* hurt her.” I can’t believe we’re still discussing this—*while* making love.

Next thing I know, the tube of lubricant is in his hand, and he’s rolling on a condom. “Gotta get you ready.” This isn’t the usual order of things—today’s lovemaking is a bizarre frenzy of mixed-up pieces.

Despite his frantic motion, though, he's careful as he opens my body.

"I'd never hurt you," he whispers as he inserts a second finger. "Don't worry."

"Look at me, please." I need to see his face—his eyes—so I can read his mood.

Remi's feral gaze penetrates mine as a third finger presses inside. I can't make sense of his expression, his words, or his actions.

"Now," he says and lifts my legs to his shoulders.

When he pushes his dick into me, it's with a stabbing motion rather than his usual gently probing slide. Something inside my heart, maybe my last shred of hope, shrivels and dies. But hope is renewable, and as it rekindles, I reach for his face and clutch it between my damp palms.

I need to do something—to say something—so I can let him know he's not alone. That he's safe with me and always will be. And that no moment of carelessness, no unavoidable accident—not even his paralyzing fear—will turn me away from him.

"I love you, Remi... I've loved you for so long." The truth is what I offer him.

The expression in his eyes shifts from frenzied to feverish. It's as if my words have melted the shell of ice that guards his heart. I see a tiny flicker of *I love you too*. And then, it's gone.

His passion mounts more quickly than I'm used to, and soon, he's stabbing into my ass, his rhythm steady and relentless. The warmth in his eyes from a moment ago—like the brief flicker of love—has been replaced by a piercing stare of simple desire. Greed for physical fulfillment. Urgency that has no relationship to tenderness.

As Remi approaches orgasm, he grabs my dick and strokes me with the same determination as his thrusts. My legs slide from his shoulders as my passion mounts. But I don't want to come because this is lust—plain and simple—and I shouldn't reward it. I can't seem to get that message to my traitorous

body—it rises in ecstasy with Remi, its partner in crime. United physically, but emotionally never more distant, we let go. Clinging to each other, we ride out the pleasure.

The bliss is brief.

Once sated, Remi collapses at my side, and as we lie panting, I do what needs to be done. “I said that I love you. Did you hear me?”

“I heard you.” There’s no warmth in his tone.

I sit up, lean heavily against the headboard, and grip the sheets. “Do you...” I stare down at his face, noting the tightness of his jaw. “Do you love me too?”

He closes his eyes, more fully shutting me out. Preparing himself... and me, maybe. When he finally opens them, and I see his hollow stare, I’m ready.

“I’m sorry, Tristan... I’m not in love with you. I want you, and that hasn’t changed. I like being with you too. But love—it’s not that.”

Though not entirely surprised, I gasp. Then I nod several times, so he knows I heard him. I rub my eyes but not to hold back tears. Because I’m not going to cry—not in front of him.

“Sit next to me,” I say softly.

Remi is like a statue—made of hard, white marble that can somehow, miraculously, flex and bend and shift so he’s sitting beside me on the bed. I place my hand on top of his. “Don’t worry—it’s okay.” I told my mother this every time I saw goodbye in her eyes.

Confused by my sweet response to his blatant rejection, he tilts his head.

“I’m not who you need,” I say simply.

Sometimes it goes this way in matters of the heart. Tara has lost the affection of her children’s two fathers. And of course, neither of her twins could snag a loving commitment from Mom.

Remi shakes his head almost imperceptibly and then asks, “We can keep dating, right?”

I shake *my* head with enough vehemence to make my meaning clear. “I can’t. Not now.”

“Why not?” My hand is suddenly engulfed in his. And gripped... like a lifeline.

“I can’t pretend I don’t love you. And I don’t want to.” I pull in a long, deliberate breath to help prevent the inevitable tears. I’ll let them come—they can bowl me over—when I’m alone. “One day, I promise, we can be friends again.”

“What about *now*? What happens to us now?” Remi’s question is as frantic as his lovemaking was, which honestly confuses me. His grip slides to my wrist. “Answer me, dammit.”

“I need some time away... and so do you.”

“I don’t need time away from you—I never said that.” He seems shocked and bitterly so.

If we stay together—days spent tending to the kids, nights in each other’s arms—he’ll exist in an easy comfort zone and will never discover who he’s meant to be. He won’t find the person he should be with—*in love with*—forever. And I’ll suffer more when he eventually cuts the cord.

“I’m doing this for you as much as for me. You’ll understand someday.” My voice doesn’t even shake. I think I always knew it would come to this.

“*Exactly* what are you trying to tell me?”

I don’t understand why Remi is unwilling to grasp that our “dating” relationship is over. It shouldn’t be so difficult to get this message across. In fact, he should be relieved.

I slide from the bed and reach for my clothes. “What we had—the dating thing—is done. It’s over, at least until I can see you and be your friend, and I won’t...” *And I won’t fall apart.*

I’ve got to get out of here. I refuse to force him to face my tears.

Still frozen to his spot on the bed—leaning rigidly against the headboard—Remi stares at me, his jaw hanging in disbelief. He’s no longer pale, though. Two fiery red splotches have made their home high on his cheekbones.

“Everything is going to be okay, Remi.” I need to convince him of this. I can’t bear the idea of him feeling guilty about hurting me.

We *never* agreed to anything more than a casual dating relationship—I just got carried away. Remi even refused to discuss the subject with me after I brought it up on Thanksgiving Day, which should have told me everything I needed to know. *This is my bad.* I pull on my clothes quickly and force a smile.

He shakes his head fiercely. “I don’t want to stop seeing you.”

“You’ll see...” I step deliberately toward the bedroom doorway; it’s a challenge not to run. “This is for the best.”

“When will I talk to you again?”

“Why don’t you let *me* be the one to get in touch with *you*? When I’m ready.”

I’m met with silence.

I don’t turn back to look at him. Seeing as I’m close to losing control, I can’t even manage to voice my goodbye. Once free of the bedroom, I snatch my purple-flowered backpack and sneakers from the rack in the kitchen, step out of the loft onto the landing, slide the heavy door shut behind me, and then race barefoot down the stairs onto the cold city street.

Where I end the battle with my tears.

CHAPTER 21



Remi

What the fuck did I do to my life?

Tristan's gone... I drove him away by refusing to admit what I know to be true. *I'm deeply in love with him.* My chest physically hurts—it *must* be heartache.

But what if he's right? Maybe it is better for both of us that we're apart. And maybe if I repeat this to myself a thousand times, I'll believe it.

Stretched out on the couch, gazing at the exposed duct work hanging from the ceiling while sucking with gusto on my fifth beer of the night, I dwell upon the unexpected and unwelcome change in my life.

Fortunately, I remember what it's like to be alone on Saturday nights. Up until a few months ago, unless I had a male visitor who shared a few heated hours with me in bed, all my Saturday nights were spent alone in my loft. Back then, though, I never felt lonely. Which could be because I was frequently drunk off my ass and couldn't feel much of anything.

Tristan and his family ended years of my self-imposed isolation. If he and I weren't here at the loft on the weekends, we slept in his tiny twin bed at his apartment so we could take care of the kids. I never resented sharing Tristan with them. I treasured the family moments.

A wave of pain cuts easily through my thoughts—a warm knife through butter.

I'll survive this. I've been groomed to endure the pain of profound loss and isolation.

That sweet, emotionally connected interlude in my life is over. And by continuing to hang around the kids, I'd be hurting Tristan. He told me he needs time away to adjust to our breakup. He also said *I* need time away from him. But the kids—it doesn't seem fair they should suffer.

I experienced loss as a child—it kills me to inflict that kind of pain on them. Too bad I can't see a way to avoid it.

I hoist my ass from the couch, shuffle to the kitchen, and pour four fingers of whiskey. After draining the glass and braving the burn, I refill it and return to the couch where I can get back to my overthinking. I smile; soon, I'll be too numb to torture myself this way.

Tristan said everything would be okay... but when?

My only consolation is that I won't have to endure the loss of a precious Wilder family member to a tragic accident or devastating illness. With them out of my life, I'm again safe.

Sipping thoughtfully on the brown liquor in my shot glass, I admit the pathetic truth. I never did manage to free my mind of the incapacitating anguish of losing my parents. And God knows, I can't go through that kind of suffering again.

What happened with Wendy today was a harsh reminder of why I don't emotionally attach... to anyone. Human life is way too fucking fragile—little Wendy was a fraction of a second from being taken from us. And it was *my* fault, just like it was *my* fault Mom and Dad were driving on an icy road—rushing home to throw *me* a birthday party—on the night they were killed.

There's a knock on the door that I want badly to ignore. But it could be Tristan, reconsidering his decision. I need to talk to him—maybe it's not too late to come clean.

I stumble across the living room to the entryway and slide the heavy door to the side. The smiling face is one I've lately come to appreciate but is not the face I crave. I hide my disappointment by turning my back to Dacia.

“What do you want?”

“Hello to you too. It’s time for my Saturday night check-in—so where’s your gorgeous boyfriend?” As always, her banter is witty.

Too bad I’m in no mood for fun and games. “He’s not my boyfriend.”

“Whatever you say.” She pushes past me, calling, “Hey, Tristan, where are you?”

I step beside her. “He’s not here.”

“Why the hell not? Tara has the night off, so you guys aren’t on kid duty.”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but Tristan and I are taking a break from our... dating relationship.” I head into the kitchen, grab a bottle of beer from the fridge, pop off the top, and hand it to her.

“What the fuck did you do, Remi?” She grabs the beer and sucks down half in several swallows. “How did you manage to screw it up with him?”

“It wasn’t *my* decision.” Not that I left him much choice.

She follows me to the couch. “No shit—I sure didn’t see that coming.”

I sigh. Tristan made *his* decision based on what *I* refused to admit. “You’re right, though. I was the one who screwed it up.”

We drop onto separate corners of the sectional and gawk at each other until I lift my glass of whiskey and pour the remainder down my throat.

“So, you’re gonna try to drink him away?” she asks.

“That’s the plan.”

“Want to talk about it?” Her tone softens. Slightly.

I shake my head, but my loose lips have a different idea. “He wanted more than I could give.”

“As in, he wanted you to admit that you were, in fact, boyfriends?” The sharp tone returns.

“Something like that.”

“I don’t get you, dude. You had the hottest, sweetest guy in Garner City. A built-in family too. But you’d rather be alone.”

Dacia hits the pathetic nail on the head with her rash assumption, so I nod.

“What about the kids? You gonna break their little hearts too?”

“I can’t see them anymore—Tristan asked me to give him some space.”

“Well, you can’t just dump them like trash on a sidewalk.” Dacia makes no effort to hide her irritation.

Self-preservation forces me to glance away. “What choice do I have?”

“Strictly for the kids’ sake, I’m gonna help you out.” Her words express tolerance, but her glare is lethal. “I’ll talk to Tara and figure out where you can meet up with the kids without running into Tristan. Maybe you can ease your way out of their lives rather than tragically disappearing... the way their fathers did.” She drains her beer.

“I’d appreciate that.”

“So, you’re gonna let Tristan go without a fight?” Her curled lip lets me know what she thinks of the idea.

“He’s better off without me,” I reply and mean it.

“Keep telling yourself that.” Dacia slams her empty bottle down on the coffee table. “I can’t stay. Got plans to watch late-night TV with Tara.”

I wish like hell I was going with her. “Have a blast.”

“Yeah, whatever.” She stomps toward the door.

This is for the best, I remind myself sternly.

I still don’t buy it.



Tristan

AS SOON AS I step through the apartment door, Tara calls out to me from the living room. “Christ, Tris, Dacia told me you broke up with Remi!”

Crappy news sure travels like wildfire. “Technically, that’s what happened,” I mumble.

“What was that?” she shouts. “Speak up or get your ass in here!”

“And tell us where the hell you’ve been all night,” Dacia yells as I pull off my hoodie in the entryway. “We’ve been worried. So, fill us in on what’s up?”

Just as I figured, I’m getting pummeled with questions. “I went to the movies—decided to stay for two. I’m not ready to face the kids.” I head into the living room where the girls are drinking beer on the couch, the volume down on the television. “How did you know what happened with us, Dacia?”

She heads into the kitchen and returns a few seconds later with a beer for me. “I stopped by Remi’s loft before I came here. He told me the news... as he chugged a healthy shot of whiskey.”

Not my concern. “Well, it sucks, but it’s for the best.”

“How do you figure that?” Tara asks. She pulls me down beside her on the couch and studies my expression as if all my secrets can be explained in the lines of my face. But I know how to be stoic—a lesson learned from being a life model.

“Stop gawking at me, Tara.” She ignores my request, so I take a long pull on my beer. “Our relationship wasn’t working for him. And there’s no point in continuing to ‘date’ when we’re not on the same page.” I wonder if Tara realizes how close this feels to Mom’s rejection. *You’re a great kid, Tristan—but don’t ask me to stick around.*

“So, it *was* working for *you*?” Dacia asks.

“Uh, yeah. I thought it was working well.” My eyes sting, and I take another sip of beer to prevent the lip quivering that without exception leads to crying. “What happened with Wendy on the street earlier today changed his attitude.”

And my heart isn't safe with him anymore.

“When I got back here after Christmas shopping, Remi had put Wendy down for a nap, and he was sitting at the kitchen table, sort of hyperventilating,” Tara explains. “Not bawling or anything, just panting and rambling about how he fucked up and... and then he rushed off to the bathroom. I think he got sick.”

I'm not going to spill Remi's secret about how he kept bolting to the bathroom in the loft, off and on all evening. “He definitely wasn't himself tonight. But that isn't why I decided we should stop dating.”

Tara and Dacia gape at me expectantly. What I want is to go to bed, pull the covers over my head, and lick my wounds alone, but I owe them an explanation. They're going to be the ones who help me explain this complicated situation to the kids. My relationship with Remi *has* been a family affair.

“What it comes down to—and it's a little bit embarrassing to admit—is that I'm in love with Remi and... he doesn't feel the same way.”

“That's bullshit. *We* see how Remi looks at you—if it's not love, I don't know what is.”

“Tara, that's not what he told me, and believe me, he was specific.” I'll never forget his words. “*I'm not in love with you. I want you, and that hasn't changed. I like being with you too. But love—it's not that.*”

“When I was in his loft tonight, I told him he shouldn't dump the kids like they never mattered to him,” Dacia says.

“You're right,” I agree. “There's no need for the kids to suffer over this.”

“If you want, I’ll let him know where he can see the kids—when you won’t be around,” Dacia adds. “He can gradually see them less and less until he’s out of their lives, and you’ll never have to look at him again.”

“No fuckin’ way are my kids gonna hang out with the asshole who hurt my brother.”

“I know you always have my back, Tara.” I throw my arm around her shoulder and pull her against my side. “Dacia’s right, though. Remi and I aren’t a good fit, but he’s been great with the kids, and they love him. He should still see them if he wants to—it’s only fair to them... and to him.”

A few stray tears trickle from the corners of Tara’s eyes. She and I have always experienced each other’s pain as if it were our own. “I’m so sorry, Tris. Watching you guys together on Thanksgiving—the way he held your hand and tried to defend you from his nasty grandmother—convinced me that your bond was solid.”

“He pulled the rug out from under me too. But I love him enough to want him to be happy. If I’m not the right person for him, it’s better for both of us to accept it now.” I stand and stretch, adding a yawn to convince the girls that I’m totally wiped out. “I’m gonna hit the sack.”

“Love you, Tris,” Tara says, wiping her eyes.

“For the record, Remi is a damn fool to let you go,” Dacia adds.

“Can you keep the kids out of my room in the morning? I want to sleep in.” I want to hide from the world for as long as possible.

“I’ll do my best,” Tara replies.



Tristan

CURLED IN MY BED, I cry for so long, I worry that my eyes will still be puffy and red for my modeling jobs on Monday. I can’t

seem to pull myself together. I told Remi I loved him to help ease his pain and brought a world of suffering down on myself.

“It’s for the best that the truth is out,” I murmur into my pillow. I’d have continued to fall more and more in love with him as I waited for words of love and commitment. Words he never intended to say. The last thing I need in my life is another person who can’t commit—like Mom.

If I could summon anger, maybe the pain would ease. I’m not mad at Remi, though—he did nothing wrong. The reality of love isn’t always pretty. I know this; I watched my sister lose two men to other women and alcohol and the need to feel free. I watched my mother leave Tara and me repeatedly—first for a few nights at a time and then for a few weeks. Now, I can’t remember the last time I saw her.

Sometimes things work out in love, but more often they don’t. Falling in love is risky business.

I rub my eyes more fiercely than is necessary to dry them. Maybe a bit of pain will distract me from shedding more tears that won’t change anything.

Tomorrow is Sunday, the day I was going to model for Remi in his loft one final time. It was to be a bonus—beyond the three hours I owed him for the kids’ Halloween costumes—so he could complete his sketch and be ready to begin painting. That’s clearly not going to happen, but at least my debt is paid. I hope he’s captured enough detail of me in his mind to complete the portrait. I can’t be near Remi now unless I want to crumble at his feet.

At first, Remi talked about giving me the completed portrait for my portfolio, but he has spoken of doing that less and less in the past weeks. I don’t want it anyway. Too many intimate memories are attached to it—we ended up making love every time I posed.

But it wasn’t *making love*. What we did in his bed was have sex, plain and simple.

I pull myself up so I'm sitting on the edge of my creaky twin bed; sleep isn't coming to my rescue tonight. A long, empty Sunday stretches before me—I need to make a new plan, so I don't spend it in tears. I've always been one to pick myself up off the ground rather than wait to get run over by the next truck to come down the road.

On wobbly feet, I step to my tiny desk beneath the window. I open my laptop and type in Garner City Community College, Department of Education.

CHAPTER 22



Remi

It's been the longest week of my life. Between missing Tristan so much I feel like a shell of the man I was when we were together, wondering what Tara and the kids are up to, and trying to come to terms with my lie, each day drags into its own agonizing forever.

I hate myself more every minute. My art is all that keeps me going.

In Human Series Sculpture class, Dacia invites me to Tommy and Jared's indoor soccer game. "The game is tonight at the Garner City Field House at seven. Tara and Wendy will be there to watch, so you can see all three kids."

I'm thrilled and terrified at once. "Tara gave the okay for me to come?" I won't force my way into their presence.

"She isn't exactly pleased, but yeah. The kids haven't stopped asking about you all week, and it's driving her crazy."

"What about Tristan? Will he be at the game?" My heart pounds with what feels like hope.

"Don't worry, you won't have to see Tris. He's modeling at the Wining Painter tonight."

My heart sinks—I badly want to see him. He hasn't reached out to me by call or text. Not that I expected him to do this; he said he needed time away from me. I *want* to tell myself that my worry is for Tristan's state of mind alone, but I know the truth—my concern is for *my* psyche more than his.

My mood is dark. I'm depressed and lonely. I can't eat or sleep. I'm a complete shitshow.

A major component of the new miserable me is an uncertainty that wasn't part of my nature until I lost Tristan. I constantly question my decision to tell him I didn't love him. Sure, I'm now safe from the prospect of losing a precious member of the Wilder family, but in the process of protecting my heart, I've lost myself.

"Come with me tonight, Dacia. I'll pick you up at—"

"No thanks, dude. You're on your own for this one." She shoots me a smirk/glare combo and refocuses on building her armature for next week's study in portrait sculpting. "Best of luck."

I'm going to need it.



Remi

I TAKE my SUV to the game, although Garner City Field House is close enough to the loft for me to walk. I'm hoping Tara will accept a ride home... and when I carry Wendy inside the apartment, I'll "accidentally" bump into Tristan. This is unlikely to happen for many reasons, but a man can dream.

It takes all my mental energy to push through the field house front doors. I'm met with the distinctive smell of sweaty cleats and a long stretch of turf fields under fluorescent lights, each separated by heavy netting. I pass a high school men's soccer team and a coed team with kids who look too tiny to wear soccer cleats before coming to Jared and Tommy's team. Their tie-dyed T-shirts say "Ball Kickers" in thick black font across the front, and I wonder how they managed to get that name past the league officials.

It doesn't take long for the boys to spot me.

"Coach Remi, you came!" Tommy runs to me and gives me an enthusiastic fist bump.

Jared isn't so friendly. He's old enough to understand what a breakup is, and from his sour expression, I can tell he blames me. Correctly so because it's my fault.

I saunter to the sideline to say hello. "Hey, buddy. I'm excited for your game tonight."

"Like, whatevs." He refuses to look at me.

Better to get ahead of this. "I'm sure you know that your uncle and I have... um, gone our separate ways."

"Yeah." He folds in half to stretch his calves. "I heard."

"It doesn't mean you and I can't still be friends."

"And me?" Tommy asks.

"Of course. And Wendy too."

"Grown-up dudes—except for Uncle Tris—always take off on our family. I'm used to it. It's no biggie."

"I know it seems that way but—"

"Me and Tommy's dad *and* Wendy's dad both bolted. And now you." He stands and faces me, his cheeks pink. "Lucky for me I don't give a crap."

I glance at the sidelines. Tara is sitting in a folding metal chair, observing us. Wendy is kneeling at her feet—her back turned—watching the little kids' team play. Tara sends me one of those smirk/glares I got from Dacia in sculpting class. I offer a halfhearted wave, and when she doesn't return it, I shrug.

"You'll find that I'm different from them, Jared. I'm here, aren't I?"

"I guess so."

The coach calls the Ball Kickers together.

"See you after the game, guys. Remember what it takes to win."

"Team effort!" Tommy shouts. He was paying attention during Jared's fall season.

I walk around the turf field and join Tara, who doesn't greet me. But Wendy does. "Emmie! Mommy says next year, I can play soccer with the Weebles." She points to the coed team she's been watching.

"I'm sure you'll be a very good soccer player, sweetie."

"Jared told me you're not gonna cuddle Uncle Tis in his bed no more."

Nothing like getting emotionally sucker punched by a preschooler. "Uh, yeah. I guess he's right."

Tara glances at me and smiles with disdain. "From the mouths of babes, huh?"

"I'm a big girl!" Wendy's lower lip protrudes.

"Big girls don't pout," Tara points out and turns her attention to the boys' game. Jared is chosen to start, leaving Tommy rather bent out of shape on the sideline. We watch in relative silence—I can't resist calling out a few tips to Jared—until Tommy gets pulled from the bench.

"Finally," she mutters. "I *am* paying for both boys to play."

"Tommy looks younger than most of the other boys on the team," I remark.

"I can't exactly get *two* boys to *two* different age group leagues. I'd be here every night of the week and it's impossible with my job—so I asked if Tommy could be on Jared's team."

"He's going to have to earn his playing time, seeing as he's with older boys."

"I suppose. Next year's gonna be a challenge—I'll be taking Wendy to preschool league too. Good thing the little ones only play once a week."

"I'll help," I offer.

"You'll be long gone by then, Remi."

I don't know what to say to her easy dismissal, so I shut my mouth. Still, it stings.

Tara isn't finished, though. "I didn't want you to see the kids at all, but Tris told me I was wrong. He said you're great with them, and it'd hurt *all* of you if I said, 'take a hike, Coach Remi' like I wanted to."

"Maybe he's right."

"Well, I'm not so worried about *you*. But them..." She nods toward the boys and then at Wendy. "They don't deserve to be hurt."

"Thanks for letting me come tonight." This conversation isn't much fun, but it needs to happen if I'm going to be part of Jared, Tommy, and Wendy's lives. Something I'm surprisingly committed to.

"I'm just gonna say it right up front. You screwed up royally with my brother. Even if Tris has no clue, I *know* that you love him—don't bother denying it."

I don't deny it. I stare at the game and listen to what she has to say.

"You're a coward, so you pushed him away." When her eyes fill with tears on behalf of her twin, I wish I could melt into the floor. "And to think, I trusted you with his heart."

"Uh... is he okay?" I hold my breath, wanting her to say he misses me desperately.

"What the fuck do you care?" She answers *my* question with her own.

"Good thing Tommy didn't hear your naughty word, Mommy."

"I shouldn't have said it, Wendy."

"I *do* care about him, Tara." I'm not sure if I said the words aloud.

When her eyes widen, I know I did. "Then do something about it before it's too late. Tris loves you, but he's a survivor. Once you lose his trust, it'll be a total bitch to get back."

"Bad, bad Mommy!"

Flustered, Tara stands. “I’ve gotta go to the restroom. Remi, will you stay with Wendy?”

Last time I watched Wendy, I nearly got her killed. “Um, sure.”

“Can I sit on your lap, Emmie?” Wendy climbs on before I have a chance to reply.

I wrap my arms around her and sigh.

CHAPTER 23



Tristan

I *'m ready for this...*

I have no choice but to be ready. I signed up for an evening class—Child Growth and Development—at Garner City Community College for next semester. Between the cut in pay for working at the preschool on Tuesdays *and* Thursdays, as is my new agreement—I only make minimum wage at Kid Castle—and financing my night class, I need to save every penny I make. I can't afford to tell Jillian Stitt that I'm not interested in twelve hours of modeling work in her Human Series Sculpture class just because the guy I used to date is a student.

I plod dutifully across the LCC campus. Like a horse wearing blinders, my gaze doesn't stray from the path before me. When I'm safely wrapped in my role as a life model, I know how to emotionally isolate myself. But here and now, I'm vulnerable to an unpredictable environment. And I refuse to break down in Remi's presence, so I stare straight in front of me.

I'm in no condition to bump into my ex in the courtyard. Last week, I lost the guy I'd fallen for, and my ego still smarts from the rejection. But worse, I lost a measure of trust in *myself*. I had no idea I'd become so dependent on Remi for emotional support. And for—however ridiculous this may sound—something as basic as fun.

Since the kids came along, I've set aside my desire for good times in favor of my need to be responsible. I saw it as a choice—either work my ass off to support Tara and the kids or live a footloose lifestyle that's all about me. There was no middle ground. Never having had a dependable parent, all I wanted was for the kids to feel secure. For years, I stayed focused and did a pretty good job of letting the kids know their lives were stable.

Somehow, without my explicit agreement, Remi slipped laughter and adventure into my responsible lifestyle. With him, I sampled new foods and drank my fair share of red wine, but the best part was that we enjoyed the kids together. I learned something from Remi: I don't have to give up on myself to take good care of them.

I'm back to being largely the same guy I was before I met Remi, though thanks to what I learned about myself, my goals have expanded. Providing a stable life for the kids is my primary duty, but Tara now has a job with decent pay and benefits, so I'm free to focus more on what *I* want. I've pulled my career goals off the back burner. I will allow no distractions.

“Wait up, Tris!”

Unwilling to risk possible eye contact with Remi, I refuse to turn around. But I stop walking long enough for Dacia to catch up to me. “Hi, Dacia.”

“You're modeling for my sculpting class today.”

“Yeah, I know.” I've been dreading it since Jillian Stitt called last week.

“This unit is portrait sculpture, so...”

“So, I get to keep my clothes on,” I finish her thought.

“Most of them, I think.” Dacia grabs my arm, and I look at her. “Are you cool with seeing Remi?”

“I don't know.” He broke my heart, but then I walked into it with eyes wide open.

“The dude's a mess, if it makes you feel any better.”

“It doesn’t—I want him to be happy.”

“Well, he’s not. You’re doing way better than him.” Dacia hasn’t seen me crying in bed at night.

“I’m sure he’ll be okay.”

How crushed can Remi be when he ‘liked’ and ‘wanted’ me but felt no love for me at all?



Remi

I’M NOT ready for this...

I sit alone in the art studio, my ass planted on a high stool behind a sturdy sculpture stand. The wooden base I painted black last week is ready and waiting, the wire armature is attached with heavy staples. The only thing still unprepared for this class is my head.

I needed to get here well before Tristan arrived. I needed time to brace my trembling body on this metal stool, to grit my teeth, to curl my hands into tight fists. To fortify myself.

He won’t be naked, I tell myself, as it’s a small consolation. Tristan is the life model for a portrait sculpture unit. I won’t be forced to study the fine details of the private parts of his body I’ve come to know so well.

Today will be all about the face of the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen—and yes, this is less of a consolation. I’ll focus my attention on the streamlined profile I’ve admired, the classic bone structure I’ve caressed, the fine lips I’ve parted with my tongue, the silken blond hair I’ve run my fingers through. And the mysterious green eyes of changing shades.

What color will they be today?

Measuring his facial proportions with calipers will be a bittersweet challenge that’ll require me to be close enough to smell him. And of course, to touch him. This proximity to the man I love more than I knew was possible... well, it could break me. I can’t let it.

I did this to myself.

Gradually, students enter and set up their sculpture stands with the necessary tools. They gather rotating turntables and wooden sculpture bases coated with dark-colored acrylic paint, pre-made armatures of twisted aluminum wire extending from them like signposts from the street. And, of course, they collect the heavy balls of clay from which they'll mold their masterpieces. Next to enter the studio is the professor, Jillian Stitt, lugging a heavy tote bag filled with God knows what.

Finally, Tristan steps through the door, closely behind Dacia. My gut clenches.

As he drifts past the dozen staggered sculpture stands, placing one foot cautiously in front of the next, I'm reminded of the first time I saw him. Now—like then—he's in the room with us... but also is not. His presence seems more ethereal than human. Thoroughly focused, he doesn't stop moving until he reaches the large window against the wall where Jillian stands.

They chat briefly, and she points to the screen set up in the corner. He shakes his head, shoots her a contrived, yet still beguiling, smile—which she eagerly returns—and floats to the center of the room. There, Tristan tosses his quilted vest to the floor and unbuttons his plaid flannel shirt, letting it fall from his chiseled shoulders. He wears nothing underneath. Before taking a seat on an antique Windsor chair in nothing but his faded jeans, he sets his absent gaze on the clock above the classroom door.

Miracles happen. I manage *not* to cry out with anguish at the sight of the graceful chest I caressed a mere ten days ago.

Jillian steps to the center of the room, a few feet to the left of Tristan. “Good afternoon, students. Over the past several weeks, we've discussed how a sculpture, a photograph, a painting, or any other artistic expression of a subject, can be a portrait, if the face is the primary focus.”

My gaze is pulled to Tristan's face. Not in the objective manner of an artist, but with the anguish of a scorned lover. A

lover who hasn't, in fact, been treated with even a touch of disdain, as *I* am the one who scorned *him*.

“We’ve studied ancient and modern sculpture portraits—noting how they record an individual’s appearance and dare to hint at personality. There truly is magic in a sculptor’s interpretation. In this unit, our sculptures will not be whimsical, but will reflect authenticity, in terms of our model’s appearance. Keep in mind what you learned in last week’s demonstration as you create your three-quarter life-size clay portrait of Tristan.”

Without removing his sage green gaze from the clock, Tristan dips his head in greeting.

“We’ll take turns using calipers to measure the proportions of Tristan’s face. Let’s start with Anya and make our way to the right. In the meantime, you should conduct some preliminary sketching to clarify your mental image of the model. Remember, your sketch should be approximately the same size your sculpture will be.”

With shaking hands, I pull a sketchpad and pencil from my messenger bag. I tilt my head—an attempt to gain perspective—but there is no perspective to be attained regarding *this* model.

“Pablo Picasso said, ‘Sculpting is the art of intelligence.’ It’s one of the oldest art forms on earth. And the sculpture portrait is, in my opinion, the best portraiture form to reflect reality. It takes up space, as we do.” Under any other circumstance, Jillian’s words would inspire me.

I clench my jaw and begin to sketch. The exquisite details of Tristan’s face are as familiar as his cool professional demeanor. I easily recognize the carefully constructed, stoic persona I so longed to break through, and eventually did. His aloofness calls to mind my grandmother’s cynical advice—never let them see you sweat. He is a living example of her wisdom.

By the time it’s my turn to take his measurements, I’m nauseated and perspiring. I can’t seem to move from my stool.

“Tristan, you’re up,” Jillian reminds me. “And time is of the essence.”

“Of c-course.” Sketchpad, pencil, and calipers in hand, I stumble toward Tristan.

When standing before him, I find myself at a complete loss for the measurement technique I long ago mastered. Tristan, however, is not at a loss for the compassion he consistently demonstrates.

“It’s okay, Remi.” His shimmering gaze falls from the clock and targets my face. I wonder what it costs him to look upon me with such empathy. The stunning translucence of his eyes—enhanced by the glimmer of the late-afternoon light shining in through the studio’s oversized window—catches me off guard. “You know what to do.”

I nod once and place the notebook and pencil on the nearby table. I hold the calipers in one hand as if my plan is to get down to business. Business, however, takes a back seat to raw need. I don’t—maybe I can’t—refrain from an impulsive action. I reach out, thread my fingers into his flaxen hair, and then gently brush it aside, allowing my touch to linger on his forehead.

“To gain a more accurate measurement.” A flimsy excuse for the unnecessary contact.

My words are intersected by his sharp gasp. “That’s fine,” he replies to my lie and fixes his stare high on the far wall.

I’m hurting him.

I shake my head—hurting Tristan has never been my intent—and take the necessary measurements with as much speed as I can manage, recording them one by one in my sketchpad. Throughout our interaction, he maintains steadiness where I tremble like a timeworn brown leaf in the brisk autumn wind.

“Thank you,” I say. Before stepping away, I utter the truth. “This is a slow death.”

Once again, feeling the warmth of his gaze upon me, I scramble back to my sculpture stand. On it, I drop the calipers,

sketchpad, and pencil, and rush from the room, escaping my self-created torture chamber.



Tristan

“I SHOULDN’T HAVE TAKEN this job,” I tell Dacia as we leave the Clayton Arts Building.

“Really, Tris? You’re gonna avoid modeling for art classes because Remi’s afraid to make a commitment?”

When Remi bolted from the sculpture studio, it reminded me of his behavior on the night after Wendy nearly got hit by a car. “I think he rushed out of the studio to... maybe to get sick in the bathroom. He seemed really upset.”

“I checked on him in the hallway a few minutes after he left the classroom. He mentioned something about drinking too much last night. I’d say bourbon is the culprit, not you.”

I’m not convinced. I know him fairly well at this point—not as well as I thought, but enough to recognize panic in his behavior. And I can’t make sense of what he mumbled after he took measurements of my face. “*This is a slow death.*” I don’t mention his remark to Dacia, though. It was meant for my ears.

“Class couldn’t have been easy on *you* either,” she continues. “You look much the worse for wear.”

“Thanks.” I smirk at her. “Are you saying I’m not living up to my usual beauty standard?”

This earns me a spurt of laughter. “You couldn’t be anything but beautiful on your worst day—and you know it. But you look tired.”

Before I have a chance to dish out an excuse for why I’m not sleeping well, the solid mass of a large man’s shoulder rams into my side with such force, I’m knocked to the ground.

“Professor Santini—what’re you doing?” Dacia moves between us. “Jeez, dude!”

“Oh, dear me... I’m so very sorry. Did I *accidentally* bump into you, Tristan?”

He offers me his hand, as if to help me to my feet. I shake my head. “No, thanks.”

“Accidents happen, young man.” There’s a dangerous gleam in Professor Santini’s eye. “I certainly hope more *painful* accidents don’t happen to you... at night, when you’ve finished modeling for Jillian Stitt’s sculpture class and are crossing campus in the dark.”

“That sounds like a threat.” I’m not sure where Remi came from, but he has materialized before us and is positioned in Professor Santini’s personal space. “The administration would be disappointed to learn that their life drawing professor verbally threatens and physically harms classroom models.”

“Ah, your knight in shining armor has arrived, lovely Tristan.” Professor Santini scowls. “For your sake, I hope he’s nearby next time you *unintentionally* trip and fall on your ass.” He turns from us and strides away.

Remi leans down and grabs my forearm. “Let me help you up.”

“I’m fine, really.” I bat his hand away and dust the pebbles from my butt as I rise.

“You shouldn’t walk alone at night.” His combative tone suggests that this is more of a demand than a suggestion.

“He wasn’t alone,” Dacia says. “He was with me.”

“Hell of a lot of good *that* did him,” Remi mutters. “Tristan, *I’ll* walk you to the bus tonight and after class on Wednesday night.”

“I can get home in one piece, Remi. But thank you for the offer.”

“Suit yourself.” His tone is aloof, but he shadows me all the way to the bus station.

CHAPTER 24



Remi

Wednesday afternoon's sculpture class is here before I know it. The time flew—from when I confronted Professor Santini in the courtyard after Monday night's class until now—because I spent it developing a plan. A plan to get my life back. Or in other words, to get Tristan back.

Being without Tristan is like dying a slow, agonizing death. The suffering is more gradual than what I experienced when I lost my parents after the accident, but it's suffering all the same. Days of anguish have helped me to accept that I'd be better off *with* Tristan—praying incessantly that he lives to see another day—than lost without him.

In the studio, Tristan conducts himself in the same professional demeanor I've come to expect when he poses for artists. Cold, distant, perfect. A stunning ice sculpture that I'm struggling to recreate in clay.

I work in silence at my sculpture stand, observing the object of my art with as much cool impartiality as is possible. *Who am I fooling?* I can't be objective when it comes to Tristan, but I *can* feign impartiality, which is what I do.

When class is over, I approach him after he says good night to Jillian.

"Hi, Remi." His eyes widen when I draw near. "I'm... uh..."

It's obvious he has more to say, so I wait.

“I’m not scared to walk across campus without a bodyguard, you know.” He snickers adorably. “I can run a lot faster than Professor Santini.”

“I’m not here to guard you.” This isn’t entirely true; I fully intend to protect him from Santini’s threats. “I was wondering if we could talk.”

“Talk?” Tristan’s eyebrows lift, taken aback by the suggestion. “About what?”

“Can I walk with you?” We can’t discuss our relationship here in the studio, with students milling about.

“Uh, sure... I guess.” He glances at Dacia and shrugs. She waves and leaves the studio, allowing us time to be alone.

I don’t get to the point of our discussion until we’re strolling in the dark along the path that divides the college courtyard. I pull in a deep breath for needed strength, and the truth pops out. “I lied.”

He stops walking to gape at me. “Come again?”

I stop too, close enough beside him for our shoulders to brush. “I said that I lied.” There’s no need to beat around the bush. This is too important. “When you told me you loved me, I said I didn’t feel the same way. And it wasn’t true.”

Tristan stumbles backward a few steps toward a bench set in the lifeless remnants of last summer’s grass, and he drops to perch on its edge. He has nothing to say but shakes his head vigorously. Utterly bewildered.

I stand before him and press on. “I want you in my life.” My next declaration is the highlight of my rather simple plan to coax him back into my arms. “I love you.”

It’s met with more head shaking. When he speaks, his tone is gravelly. “You... Remi, you broke my heart.”

“I know... and I’m sorry. I broke *my* heart, as well.”

It’s cold enough outside for his heavy exhalations to be visible in the frosty air. “Why?”

“Why did I lie? It would take forever to explain, but the short version is... I was scared.”

“Scared...” Tristan echoes, still confused. “And you... you said you want me in your life.”

“More than anything,” I admit.

“I’ll be ready soon.” In the darkness, it’s difficult to make sense of Tristan’s expression, though I’m not certain that the bright light of day would do much to make it clear. “It’s still too hard... for me to be with you and just be...” His next noisy breath seems to require great effort. “We can be friends soon.”

“*Friends?*” He’s completely missed my point. “I don’t want to be your fucking friend. I love you, Tristan. And I want to show you, by making love to you every morning when you wake up and every night before you fall asleep. I want you to move into the loft so we can share our lives.”

I may as well have expressed a desire for us to relocate to Mars. Tristan stares at me in stunned disbelief. And sadly, with not a fraction of the joy I’d expected. “You just miss the companionship... and the sex.”

“You think this is about getting my rocks off?” I feel every bit as shocked as he looks.

“No, no, of course not—it’s about loneliness.” He grasps my hand. His skin is cold, like my heart must have seemed when I told him I merely liked and wanted him. “I love you, Remi—more than I ever thought I could love someone who isn’t part of my family. It’s why I need to give you up.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You deserve *everything* in a partner.” Tristan allows a stuttered sigh, and a tear slides from the corner of his eye. “Look at it like this... Maybe your grandmother was right on Thanksgiving Day when she said we have nothing in common. Our upbringings and life experiences are too different for us to flourish together.”

That was very close to how Grandmother had phrased it; Tristan had taken mental notes.

“She also said that social class is a critical factor in finding a path forward as a couple—and I believe her. I think you do too.” Several more tears fall.

“I don’t believe that bullshit for a second. My mother came from a family of poor dairy farmers in Vermont, and my father was heir to a hotel fortune—it didn’t stop them from building their lives on one another,” I say, hoping he’ll listen as closely to me as he did to my grandmother. “My parents were fantastic together, just like we are.”

I think I’m getting somewhere until Tristan’s back stiffens. He’s visibly shifting into selfless mode—into the man who is willing to sacrifice everything *he* wants to benefit those he loves. “One day, you’ll see that I did this because I love you so much.”

“Tristan—”

“What we had together wasn’t right for you, and you were honest with me about how you felt, which was brave.” He squeezes my hand before releasing it to wipe his eyes. “I really think we’re better off apart.”

Tara told me that if I lost his trust, I’d be hard-pressed to get it back. “Have I lost your trust?”

Again, Tristan shakes his head. “You haven’t lost a thing.” He steps close to me and kisses my cheek with icy lips. “Don’t worry—it’ll be okay.”

Pulling his coat tightly around him, he sets out in the direction of the bus station.

With a hopeless heart, I follow along; his safety is my lasting concern.

CHAPTER 25



Tristan

Wendy is as infatuated with Kid Castle as I am. What a pair we make—never happier than when we’re at preschool. It’s a safe space, where “make pretend” rules. The real world can’t compete.

As we step onto the street in front of the building, Wendy is fully wrapped up in telling me about her new BFF. “Tammy loves baby cows—she calls ‘em caffers.”

“Calves,” I correct her with a smile.

“That’s what I said—caffers. They’re not as cute as lamb babies.”

Wendy could talk about farm animals all day. Sometimes she does.

“I wanna go to the Castle *tomorrow*—Tammy’s gonna bring her caffer, Moo, and I’m gonna bring Bah-Bah Lamb Baby, an’ they can play together.”

“We don’t go back to Kid Castle until next Tuesday,” I remind her.

“Me and Tammy are gonna feed ‘em with tiny baby bottles in the kiddie kitchen... like real mommies.” She pulls in a long breath, loading her lungs with enough air to bellow. “*Please, Uncle Tis—lemme go to the Castle tomorrow!*”

Before her bottom lip pops out, I reply, “I’ll talk to your mom about it when we get home. If she says okay, I’ll call the director and see if they have space for you.”

“Cool beanies.” In compliance with the rule that has been strictly enforced since her close call with Remi, Wendy grabs my hand. We head down the sidewalk toward the bus station. “Lambies are fuzzy and wooly and...”

As my niece babbles about her favorite topic, I sink into my thoughts, as has recently become my habit. Echoes of last night’s conversation with Remi prickle my brain. He claimed to have lied when he denied loving me on the day I ended our dating relationship, alleging that he was scared. *Scared of what?* He also claimed to want me back in his life—for me to even move into his loft—but that could be a declaration made from sheer loneliness. And horniness.

The truth is that I love Remi enough to back off—so he has the time and space to figure out what he wants from his life... and *who* he wants to share it with. I had sincerely wished it could be me, but I’m not one to push. Pushing people into giving you what you want is a frustrating waste of energy. It never worked when I tried to force my mother into coming down to earth to help Tara with the kids when they were first born. The result was that Mom ran away from us instead of just walking.

But Remi isn’t Mom. And *both* of us claimed we had no use for the complications that go with a serious relationship. I had come around to giving love a try—it was my choice.

I thought love was in the air.

I roll my eyes at myself for thinking something so sappy. Still, it’s true. I’d thrown my hat into the relationship ring, so to speak, and I thought Remi was starting to see me as his boyfriend too. But then, after Wendy almost got hit by a car, I morphed into somebody who was fun to hang out with and hot enough to fuck. *Not* someone to love.

It doesn’t make sense.

My plan is to stay away from Remi until his dangerous whims can’t hurt me—until time sucks the passion out of how I feel, and all that’s left of my love is the cracked shell. We can call that shell friendship.

Maybe I'm not so concerned about Remi's emotional fulfillment after all. *Could it be I'm terrified of something too?* He gave me an easy, if not painful, way out when he denied loving me—I snatched it with both hands and refuse to let go.

“And Bah-Bah Lamb Baby's gonna fit just right in the dolly highchair.”

“Uh... at Kid Castle?”

“Uh-huh.” Wendy wrinkles her nose. “Are you *listenin'* to me, Uncle Tis?”

“Of course I am. Bah-Bah Lamb Baby will fit *perfectly* in the kiddie kitchen high chair.”



Remi

THIS TIME OF YEAR, days are short, and I experience the lack of light as a chill in my bones. Especially on cloudy afternoons, like today. I pull a rag wool sweater over my T-shirt instead of continuing to fight shivers in the briskness of the airy loft.

Since I've arrived home from the liquor store, I've been standing behind my antique easel, hard at work on the watercolor portrait of Tristan. To some extent, all painting and drawing is created from memory, as we must take our eyes off our subject when we commit it to paper. Even without Tristan in front of me—draped provocatively over the wingback chair, staring me down with a coy side eye—I'm able to complete this project without too much difficulty. Throughout my years in art school, I've trained my memory to recall visual detail, so the colors and shadows I'm now creating in watercolor emerge from a solid reference in my brain.

Tristan posed for hours in the chair by the window. The image is burned in my memory.

The knock on the door that interrupts my brooding can have only one source. “Come in, Dacia!” I left the door ajar

when I brought in the latest box full of assorted bottles of liquor. As of late, my best friends.

She strides across the living room to stand behind me and is silent as she studies the watercolor portrait of Tristan. Finally, she says, “This is the best portrait you’ve ever done.”

I shrug. “Call me inspired.”

“He looks real, but better than, if you know what I mean. Which *is* hard to imagine, seeing as Tristan’s already the best-looking dude in the Western Hemisphere.”

I can’t help but laugh. “I wasn’t trying to beautify him with my art. I just want to express who he is.”

“Even with just the one eye showing—it’s like looking into his soul.”

“Yes, I know.” And it’s pure torture.

“What are you gonna do with it when it’s finished?”

“Hmm.” I sniff. “There’s a scuff mark on the wall over there.” I point with my paintbrush. “One night when we were watching the kids, Jared got overly enthusiastic in an indoor soccer game with Tommy. He jumped to kick a high ball, and his sneaker left a mark on the wall. I’ll probably hang the portrait over the sneaker print.”

“To hide the mark... or the memory?”

“Both.” I’m nothing if not honest. *It’s easy with Dacia.*

She nods. “What happened when you talked to Tris in the courtyard on Wednesday night? Did you work things out?”

“I’m surprised you haven’t heard about it through the thriving grapevine.” I thought Tara and Dacia knew all my painful secrets.

“Tris won’t talk.” She makes a zipped-lips/throw-away-the-key gesture.

“Then why should *I*?”

“Because inquiring minds want to know.” She twists her lips to the side. “So, spill.”

“Let’s sit.” I place my brush on the easel’s tray and lead Dacia to the couch. “Here’s the scoop. I asked Tristan to come back to me. I even said I wanted him to move into the loft.”

“Did you throw the L-word at him.”

“Several times.”

“And?”

“He doesn’t believe I know my own mind. He thinks I meant it when I said I didn’t love him.”

“It was probably a very hard thing for him to hear.” She stands and walks back toward the window to study the portrait. “Why on earth did you say you didn’t love him?”

Surprisingly, the answer is on the tip of my tongue. “Simple fear.”

“Fear of what?”

“What is this—the fucking Inquisition?”

“Maybe it is... so tell me, what scares you so much?” As always, she’s persistent.

“The very thing I denied that day—loving him. And loving Tara and the kids.”

“Ah, the fear of loss—it’s classic.” She turns to look at me. “But what have *you* ever lost? You’re a wealthy hotel heir—the man who has everything.”

“I lost my parents in a car accident on the night before my ninth birthday.” There it is—the root of all my troubles. The reason I’m a loner. And I don’t need nosy Dacia to confirm this.

“You’ve mentioned you were raised by your grandparents—and on Thanksgiving, they were there, but not your parents. I guess it felt intrusive to ask you about it.”

“When have you ever cared about overstepping the boundaries, Dacia?”

“You can be... um, let’s say *very discouraging* when you’re in avoidance mode.” She sits beside me on the couch

and places her hand on my knee. It's strangely comforting. "And I'm sorry about what happened to you, Remi. Really, I am, but everything makes sense now."

"I'm glad you think so."

"Maybe you should tell Tristan," she suggests.

"Maybe he's over me already," I reply.

"Maybe you're living in a total dreamworld." Dacia rolls her eyes. "And you can find out how he feels when you tell him the whole truth."

"Maybe I will." We smile at each other.

Maybe I lost the person I love most because I was so afraid of (once again) losing the people I love most.

The irony is painful.

CHAPTER 26



Tristan

“I ’m gonna talk to him about it,” Dacia says. I can hear the smile in her voice.

“He won’t be pleased.” Tara’s smiling too. I don’t have to see her to know.

“When have I ever cared about pleasing people, Tara? That’s not my job here.”

Based on the number of cans in the trash bin, the girls are each about four beers into their private drinking party and have no clue that I’m already home from my Friday night job at the Wining Painter. And I’m listening to them scheme from the kitchen.

“What do you plan to say?” Tara presses her.

“I’m just gonna speak the truth. When have I ever done anything else?” Dacia thinks she has mastered the art of projecting clueless innocence. Fortunately, *I’ve* been clued in.

“It wasn’t exactly God’s truth when you informed my daughter that Bah-Bah Lamb Baby told you she was exhausted and wanted Wendy to take her to bed. Or when you told Jared that you turned down a full athletic scholarship to Duke University for women’s mud wrestling.”

“How do you know *that* isn’t true?”

“I wasn’t born yesterday.” They break into laughter, and I hear the clink of beer bottles.

It makes me happy to see Tara and Dacia bonding. Overwhelmed by raising three kids, Tara hasn't had an opportunity for friendship since she was a freshman in high school.

"Hey, I just got home from the Wining Painter," I call out before entering the living room. "How did Jared and Tommy's soccer game go?"

"Better than the last game, especially for Tommy. He got a little more playing time," Tara replies. "And Jared managed to manipulate 'Coach Remi' into standing on the sideline with the other two coaches."

"How did the regular coaches feel about that?" I wish like hell I had been there to see it. But it's better that I wasn't.

"They were a bit perturbed until they realized that Remi is the soccer-whisperer."

"So, Tara, it sounds like the Ball Kickers won the game."

"By two goals."

"Nice." I drop into the chair opposite the couch. "The owner's cousin was at the Wining Painter again tonight."

"Lizzie's cousin, the very nerdy Nate?" Dacia asks.

"Yup—that'd be him." Nerdy, *pervy* Nate.

"Did he tape you when it was time for your break?"

"He did, creepy leg rub included." The bad kind of shivers spread across my chest as I recall the way Nate's clammy fingers stroked my calf as he marked my position with tape. "I need to find a new Friday night paint-and-sip gig."

"Or better yet, Lizzie needs to put a stop to her cousin's roving hands."

"Like that will ever happen," I sigh. "Most artists are completely respectful of me when I'm working, but there are always a few exceptions. I need to work harder to avoid those situations."

"You shouldn't *ever* have to deal with that shit," Tara says.

We're all quiet for a few minutes, each of us thoroughly wrapped up in our own thoughts. Dacia finally breaks the silence with a question. "Why do you think Remi told you he didn't love you on the day Wendy nearly got hit by a car?"

I glance up at her. "Where did that question come from?"

"I'm just making conversation."

Yeah, right... "Well, I haven't given it much thought," I lie.

"I have," she says.

"Color me shocked." I let the sarcasm flow.

"Oh, don't be," she quips, but then her demeanor changes. Soberly, she adds, "I talked to him, you know."

Now she has my full attention. "You talked to Remi about *me*?"

"The discussion actually focused more on him—on his fear of losing you."

"I don't have a clue what you mean."

"Don't you think it's odd that Remi's attitude changed on the same day Wendy very nearly... got hurt?" *She could've been killed.*

"He *was* a different person that evening." So cold and distant.

"Remi told me that he lost his parents to a car accident when he was nine."

"A while back, he showed me some online news articles and videos about it. Do you think losing his parents and what happened with Wendy are somehow connected in Remi's mind?"

"I think you should talk to him about it rather than assume that you two are incompatible."

I shake my head. "I don't know, Dacia."

Tara stands and crosses the room. She perches on the arm of my chair and runs her hand through my hair. Her soothing touch makes me think of Remi's fingers in my hair. And I

want to close my eyes to relive the details, but that would reveal how much I ache over my loss.

“Remi doesn’t understand that people in our lives are never truly gone, even when they’re no longer with us. If we love them, and they impact our lives, they’re always with us,” she says.

I shrug. “I guess.”

When I look up, Tara takes my face firmly in her hands. “Do *you* understand that, Tris?”

Tara’s theory is sweet but misguided. “I loved Mom. And *she’s* gone.”

“She’s still part of you, Tristan. You learned from her—you’re a better, more dependable uncle because of her.”

I’m not sure I want to accept what she’s telling me. Because if I let her words sink in, I’ll need to admit that *I’m* pushing Remi away—just like he pushed me away. *And* for the very same reason—fear of loss. I’m terrified of losing him—not to death, but to his unstable impulses.

I cover Tara’s hands with mine and glance from her to Dacia. “I get the message.”

“Good.” Tara’s not one to push an issue after it’s been dealt with to her satisfaction.

“How does an icy-cold beer sound?” Dacia asks.

“You know what? I’m wiped out. Gonna head to bed.” I need to spend some time alone with my thoughts.

“Love you, bro.” Tara leans down and kisses my forehead.

“Sleep well, Tris.”

I’m not sure I’ll sleep at all.



Tristan

AS PREDICTED, sleep is hard to come by.

I lie in my cramped, creaky bed—a bed that Remi and I somehow fit in *together* perfectly—and once again pay the price of letting myself fall in love. I'm confused, and, like Tara and Dacia pointed out, I'm scared. No, I'm *terrified* of letting Remi become an integral part of my life and then losing him to his fear... of losing me.

We're caught in a cruel cycle of despair that I'm not sure we can escape.

I turn onto my side and gaze out the window into the darkness. I find no answers there.

At least the kids still have Remi—he's managed to overcome his fear enough to be there for them. Jared, Tommy, and Wendy aren't damaged like us, so they can give their hearts without fear.

I close my eyes. *Lucky them.*

CHAPTER 27



Remi

When the phone rings at exactly nine in the morning, I'm caught off guard. *Can it be December fifteenth already?* I lost track of time as I wrestled with my loss of Tristan. And as I've overindulged in almost every brand of bourbon at the neighborhood liquor store.

"Good morning, Grandmother." I stifle a yawn.

"And the very same to you, young Julian."

"I hope you and Grandfather are well."

"We are very well, thank you." Grandmother sniffs artlessly, which is unlike her. I take it as a sign that she's about to address a topic she's unsure of. "And how is that *man* you date? The handsome Tristan? And his family?"

"Jared and Tommy are participating in an indoor soccer league. I go to most of their games. And Wendy is attending preschool several days a week. She loves it."

"And Tara?"

"Tara's thriving in the new responsibilities of her supervisory job."

"I hope to have her working forty hours a week at the corporate headquarters—the day shift—in the very near future. We've discussed it—as soon as her youngest child is in school fulltime, we'll make the change. Then her duties will increase even more."

“Tara’s career is moving along smoothly.”

“Indeed. And the nude model you say you’re dating, how is that relationship unfolding?”

To tell the truth or lie my ass off, that’s the question.

“I’m... no longer dating him.” *Christ, I need a cup of coffee.*

“I’m not surprised,” she replies in the haughty tone she reserves for I-told-you-so moments. “He has too many *challenges* in his life to be with someone like you.”

“Challenges?” This should be interesting.

“Tristan has clearly endured severe neglect in his life—ranging from emotional indifference to a lack of financial support. He suffers the problems of his family like poison arrows to his heart... and he always will. Tristan’s life is a penance to profound insecurity.”

“Grandmother, Tristan is poor, not broken.”

“And you, my dear, are as emotionally broken as a person can be, but you are also as wealthy as God. You and that stripper are *not* a suitable match.”

I’m at a loss for words, but I grind out, “He’s not a stripper.”

“The truth, my son, is always difficult to hear because—”

“Hand me the damned phone, Helen.” Grandfather’s voice booms in the background.

“Julian, give that back to me right now!”

A physical scuffle seems to occur on the other end of the line. To put it mildly, this is unusual.

And then my grandfather’s voice. “Young Julian? Are you there?”

“I’m here.”

“I have rarely involved myself in the personal aspects of your life. That ends today.”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Well, son, I hope you understand *this*. Tristan Wilder is a fine young man. He cares deeply enough about his family to sacrifice for them—a rare and noble characteristic. Not only is he handsome, but he is thoughtful and sensitive. If you care for this man, you could find no better partner.”

Grandmother apparently snatches the phone from him because her voice is again loud and clear when she says, “Don’t listen to your grandfather. He’s an old coot who knows nothing about affairs of the heart!”

I can’t help but smile. “I think he knows love well, Grandmother. After all, you two lovebirds have been happily married for nearly fifty years.”

“Young Julian, I forbid you to ruin your life with a pauper like Tristan Wilder!”

“You were fine when you thought his equally poverty-stricken twin sister was my girlfriend, if I remember correctly.”

“Tara has business acumen—which would be an asset since you seem to have more interest in painting pretty pictures than finance. Keep in mind that when you take your rightful place as CEO of the Remington Plaza Corporation, a partner who is a *nude model* will be nothing but a hindrance in an upper-class social circle—and in the insatiable lens of the media.”

“You’re right about the paparazzi, Grandmother. They’d certainly find Tristan an irresistible target—such a beautiful and decent man. It’s a topic I’d need to discuss with him, should we ever reunite. Which is my greatest hope.”

“You are being unreasonable, young man!”

“No, for once in my life, I’m being honest. With myself... and with you. Soon, I hope to be equally honest with Tristan, should he allow me the chance.”

“Young Julian, please!”

“Goodbye, Grandmother. Please thank Grandfather for his long-awaited input.”



Tristan

WENDY HAS CAUGHT a cold at preschool, which isn't all that surprising. But combined with a resurgence of her allergies, it makes for work interruptions for Tara and sleepless nights for me. Not to mention a frustrated three-year-old who is miserable about missing school and her BFF, Tammy. Or as Wendy refers to her, "Moo's Mommy."

"She's gonna miss all of the holiday fun at Kid Castle if she doesn't get better soon," I tell Tara when we finally get Wendy down for the night. "Only four more school days before winter break."

"That's the least of our worries. How are you going to keep modeling and working at the preschool when you've had little to no sleep?"

"We need to buy that air purifying system now," I decide.

"After Christmas—remember, Santa Claus is coming to town. We need to pay for the kids' presents first."

I haven't seen Tara so frustrated since she started her job at Remington Plaza.

"Mommy! I scored a goal!" Tommy races into the kitchen after their usual Friday night soccer game, glowing with pride.

Jared follows at his heels, and then Remi steps reluctantly into the kitchen. "Hey." He looks at Tara. "Missed you at the game tonight. How's Wendy feeling?"

"Not good." Tara hugs Tommy. "I'm so proud of you."

"*I* scored twice." Jared is not one to miss out on the glory. "But it's cool—scoring *one* goal is, like, a super big deal for Tommy."

"I'm proud of you too, Jared. And thanks for being so excited for your brother." Tara takes the boys by the hand. "Time to get your pajamas on, guys. I want to hear all about the game."

And just like that, I'm alone with Remi. He studies the wall behind me like it's fine art.

"Thanks for taking the boys to their soccer game and out to dinner again," I say. "I would have taken them, but I had to work at the Wining Painter."

"They kind of expect me to be there now. And I can't say no to a pizza date." Remi finally settles his pained gaze on my face. "Not a problem at all."

"I bet the coaches like it when you come too," I say. "Tara calls you the soccer-whisperer."

"They're getting used to me, I guess." He glances away again. "How have you been?"

If I believed that honesty was truly the best policy, I'd tell him that even when Wendy was sleeping through the night, I wasn't. My head has been too full of memories of us. "I'm okay."

"You look tired."

"Wendy's been sick, so, you know..." There's so much I want to say, but the words are stuck in my head.

"I... uh, I got a few ideas from the boys about what they want for Christmas. And what Wendy wants too. I wrote it all down, so you and Tara don't get them the same things." He pulls a scrap of paper out of his front pocket and slides it across the kitchen table.

"Thanks. That will help us out." He certainly *seems* dependable, at least when it comes to the kids. Maybe I judged him too rashly. "We're gonna save up for an air purifying system—after we pay off the Christmas presents. Maybe late in January."

"Okay, then." He buttons his winter jacket. "It was good to see you. I miss you, Tristan." He glances at me expectantly.

A huge lump makes me cough when I swallow. I clear my throat, but it's still there. Clearly, returning Remi's sentiment aloud is not an option, so I nod.

His gaze clouds over. “I guess I’ll head out. Kiss Wendy for me.”

I nod again and watch as he turns and walks out the door.



Remi

CLASSES END for winter break on Wednesday, so I need to make my move tomorrow after Life Drawing class with the target himself, Professor Mario Santini.

I’ve spoken to four men—life models who Santini reportedly sexually harassed last semester with intimidating treatment in the studio during class and unethical behavior when they agreed to model at his house. They’re all willing to speak out about how he threatened their jobs and future options at LCC if they didn’t come to his house, model for him—naked and alone—followed by a demand to provide him with oral sex. Thankfully, he never got that far with Tristan.

I’ll present my case for suspending Professor Santini to the Dean of Students at noon tomorrow. The witnesses are readily available upon my request.

Sundays seem so empty, especially now that I know how full of laughter they can be when I’m surrounded by Tristan and the kids. I step to the interior wall where I hung the completed portrait of Tristan. I mounted it at eye level so I can pretend we’re looking at each other... when I talk to it. *How warped is that?*

“I can’t be with you, but I *can* do something to make life for models like you safer—and that means taking down Santini.”

I’m not insulted when he doesn’t respond. In fact, he wouldn’t know what to say about my plan if he *were* here in the flesh. Tristan would probably think of what I’m planning to do as seeking vengeance, which is not his style. I, however, am not above it.

I did justice to Tristan's stunning beauty in this portrait—I painted his face to show its chiseled perfection. His captivating eye is the work's focal point, though. It radiates light as does a shard of green sea glass gleaming on white sand. And I caught his expression exactly as it was on the first day he posed—distant, yet coy. I remember well how on that morning his cagey stare and subtle smirk burned a single, unwelcome question in my mind. *Does he want to be mine as much as I want to be his?* Then there's his skin—the color of warm Gobi Desert sand. My skill at articulating it in watercolor has me yearning to touch him.

My yearning is for more than the physical aspects of the man. I miss Tristan's ability to calm me, coax me, comfort me. I long to break through his mask of self-control, to be the only one he trusts to peek behind the stoicism.

Impulsively, I pull my cell phone from the back pocket of my jeans. I dial his number and hold my breath until he speaks.

“Hello.”

I can tell by the restraint in his voice that he's seen the caller ID and knows it's me. “Tristan?”

“Uh-huh.”

I need to come up with something to say, to legitimize this reckless attempt to connect with him. “I wonder... when can I come over to drop off the kids' Christmas presents?”

We both know I could easily have called Tara for this information.

“Uh, how does Christmas Eve sound? School will be over for the kids, and Tara won't be working.” His reply gives me no clue as to how his eyes look right now. *Are they narrow with disdain? Wide with hope? Damp with regret?*

“Will *you* be there?” I ask.

“I don't need a gift, Remi.” He sighs. “And I have nothing for you.”

You are all I want. “No worries—Christmas is for kids, right?”

“It is.”

“I’ll drop by at about four. How’s that?”

“Sounds good.”

I wait for him to say more—and am disappointed. “It’s great to hear your voice, Tristan.”

He’s quiet but doesn’t hang up.

“I miss you.”

“I... I miss you too.” His voice is soft. “See you Friday.”

CHAPTER 28



Tristan

Jared, Tommy, and Wendy are absolutely wired.

Santa Claus is coming tonight, and all three kids feel confident that they've been rarely naughty and much more frequently nice. Their group attitude can be described as "bring on the loot, Santa."

It's been a busy day. We've baked and decorated gingerbread men—one has been designated as Santa's midnight snack. We've watched four different YouTube cartoon videos about elf antics, gone for three walks in the slushy snow, and scattered reindeer food on our tiny front porch. The kids are now negotiating whether they can open Remi's presents when he stops by.

"Coach Remi will want to, like, watch us open the stuff he picked out," Jared insists.

"Presents are to be opened on Christmas Day, not Christmas Eve," Tara argues. She knows that Remi's gifts constitute a significant portion of what will be under the tree tomorrow morning. "Right, Tris?"

I shrug, hoping to stay out of the controversy.

"Emmie promised to bring me Bah-Bah Lamb Baby's sister, Bah-Bah Black Sheep." Except for a residual cough, Wendy has recovered from last week's cold. "And baby lambs shouldn't sleep all night long in boxes with big bows on top!"

“Mommy, I wanna paint Santa a picture to go with his cookie—and Coach Remi’s bringin’ me new watercolors to use. Gotta open them tonight.”

Yeah, I’m staying out of this; it’s Tara’s decision. I sit on the counter near the sink, sip a beer, and keep my mouth closed.

“Hope you’re feeling merry, Wilder family!” Dacia pushes open the door, kicks the snow from her boots, pulls off her parka, and drops a shopping bag full of gifts on the window seat. “You kids ready for a visit from Jolly Old Saint Nick?” She strides into the kitchen, grinning widely.

“We’re *more* ready for Coach Remi to come with, like, piles of presents,” Jared replies. “But Mom says we can’t open them ’til tomorrow. That totally sucks!”

“Remember, Jared, Santa is *still* watching you.” Tara knows how to fight fire with fire. “I’m gonna make mac and cheese for an early dinner, so why don’t you three go and wash your hands?”

When the kids leave the room, Dacia makes herself comfortable at the kitchen table. “Mmmmm... it smells like gingerbread heaven here.”

“The kids made you a Dacia-cookie. Purple hair and everything,” Tara says.

“Awww, that’s cute. Did they make a *hero* cookie for Remi?” Dacia asks.

“They made him a coach cookie with a soccer ball. Why a hero cookie?” I ask.

“Because rumor has it that Remi went to the Dean of Students earlier this week with a well-supported complaint and got Professor Santini suspended for sexual harassment of male models who work in his class. I think he did it mostly because he was so pissed off that Santini harassed *you*.”

“You’re kidding me.” Maybe *I* didn’t invite the harassment after all—maybe Professor Santini has a real problem.

“And when word got out that Santini was messing with the models, a bunch of students came forward to say that he’d hassled them too.”

Tara steps in front of where I’m seated on the counter and points her finger in my face. “You didn’t tell me a professor was giving you a hard time.”

“What were *you* supposed to do about it?” I ask. “And I survived the class in one piece. The problem came when I went to his house to model for him one on one. He wouldn’t take no for an answer... about a few different things.”

“Don’t tell me he—”

“No.” I shake my head. “Professor Santini didn’t manage to get what he wanted from me—I, uh, escaped from his house.” Wearing nothing but a robe. Thankfully, Remi rescued me.

“What a complete asshole.” Tara isn’t pleased. “He deserves to lose his job.”

“From what I hear, LCC is gonna need a new life drawing professor.” Dacia doesn’t seem too disappointed. “Professor Santini’s a gifted instructor, but no matter how talented, nobody wants to take class from a predator.”

My cheeks heat beneath the cloud of emotion that settles over me. I still suffer from humiliation over what went down that day at Professor Santini’s house and fear about his threats.

I’m relieved he’s lost his position at LCC—he’ll no longer be able to lord his power over so many young men. But it’s not why I feel like I’m melting. What gets me is that Remi cares enough about what I went through to do something about it.

“Remi *is* a hero,” I admit.

“Are you gonna tell *him* that?” Dacia asks.

I really don’t know. I shrug and cover my face with my hands.

The kids are back before we know it, and I need to pull myself together. So, I turn my attention to business. “Did you scrub your hands for twenty seconds *with* soap?”

They nod somberly.

“Santa’s still got his eye on us,” Tommy says. “So, we gotta be real good.”

“Just until we go to bed,” Jared adds.

We sit to eat. The kids shovel macaroni in their mouths, aware that Coach Remi will be here soon.

Nobody is more aware of that than I am.



Tristan

“Ho! Ho! Ho!” Remi pushes through the front door. “Seeing as I forgot to bring my elves, could I have a hand dragging in the major haul of presents?”

The kids’ eyes widen at the idea of a “major haul” of presents.

“Me and Tommy and Jared’ll be your elves, Emmie!” Wendy shouts.

“You three, finish eating dinner.” I stand. “*I’m* at your service, sir.” I join Remi in the entryway and stick my feet into my boots.

Together, we lug in a boatload of presents—more than this family has ever seen.

When we return to the entryway, I pull off my coat and boots and fill in Remi on the topic of today’s heated debate. “The kids have been begging Tara to let them open your gifts tonight while you’re here.”

“What did she say?” Unsure as to whether he’s invited to stay for a while, Remi hasn’t yet taken off his coat.

“Well, Tara said no. I think she’s nervous that there won’t be enough presents under the tree to wow them tomorrow morning if they open your gifts now.”

“You saw the number of gifts I brought—I got what was on the list and a bunch of other stuff that caught my eye. The kids can open half of them tonight and the other half tomorrow morning and be wowed both times.”

He’s right. “I guess you should talk to Tara about it.” I’m doing what I can to let my sister make this decision, but my heart screams its desire to spend every single second of Christmas Eve with Remi.

While Remi chats with Tara about plans for tonight, Dacia and I carry the presents into the living room. It takes five trips. There isn’t enough room for all the gifts under the tree; they spill out all over the floor.

“Okay, kids, the decision has been made,” Tara announces as the kids dutifully clear the table. “You’ll each get to open three presents tonight. Remi will choose which ones.”

“Yes!” Jared yells.

“Cool!” Tommy and Jared jump to slap a high five.

“Cool beanies!” Wendy joins in. “Bah-Bah Black Sheep won’t have to sleep in a box.”

“I’ll wash the dishes,” I offer. “You guys get started in the living room.”

Everyone except Remi rushes out of the kitchen. He steps so close behind me that I can feel the warmth of his body. “Want some help with the dishes? It’ll go quicker.”

“Three children’s heads will literally explode in the living room if you don’t get in there now.”

“I hear you,” he replies and saunters from the room, none too eager to leave me.

Fifteen minutes later, I’m sitting cross-legged on the floor beside Wendy, admiring *two* matching Bah-Bah Black Sheep—yeah, a *pair* of scarily lifelike gray stuffed sheep with silky black faces.

“Emmie got me *twin* baby black sheeps!”

Tommy has already opened his new set of watercolors and a package of special art paper and is in the kitchen, filling a cup of water so he can paint at the coffee table. Jared is trying to figure out how to set up an electronic soccer game in the hallway. We'll be stepping over it for the next six months.

Remi excuses himself to run outside. "I forgot something in the SUV—Tristan, you want to come along?"

I follow him without asking questions. We run down the street to his SUV, and I carry in one of two heavy boxes wrapped in colorful snowman paper, both with Tara's name on the tags.

"What the hell is this?" she asks, eyeing Remi warily.

"You're not going to believe this, but Santa Claus stopped by my house with these boxes," Remi explains. "He told me there was no more room in the sleigh and asked if I'd take care of the delivery for him."

Wendy is listening. "Lucky for Mommy that Emmie had room in his car for her presents!"

"You didn't have t-to d-do this," Tara stutters.

"You don't even know what Santa got you—it could be a real *live* lamb."

Wendy's eyes widen. "Huh?" When nobody replies, she drags her new stuffed sheep to the bedroom to meet Bah-Bah Lamb Baby.

The adults laugh at Tara's grimace; the thought of having a live animal to contend with is too much for her to consider. When she tears off the wrapping paper on the larger of the two boxes, her eyes widen. "Oh, God—an air purifier!"

"It's a two-piece system, so you can put one in Wendy's bedroom and the other out here," Remi says.

I shake my head. "It's too expensive of a gift."

He glances at me uneasily and then back at my sister. "The tags say Tara's name, but it's a gift that will ease Wendy's suffering. Which will make life better for the whole family."

“I want to keep it so much, even though I feel like I shouldn’t,” Tara cries and rushes across the room to where Remi stands. She throws her arms around his waist. “Thank you!”

Tara’s decision to accept the gift has already been made. And I’m fine with it—it isn’t my call.

“Please don’t feel awkward about the gift, Tara. I have too much money to know what to do with and...” He gulps and adds, “well, you’re entirely welcome.”

Wendy stumbles into the living room with an armful of stuffed animals, and Dacia graciously changes the touchy subject. “Hey, what do you know? Remi, is that card for me?” She picks up a red envelope with her name on it.

Remi is choked up too, but he grinds out a few words. “I didn’t forget you, Dacia—I got you a few gift cards to the Wining Painter, but you’ll have to take me as a guest at least once.” Before she can thank him, he walks back into the kitchen. When he returns, he’s wearing his coat and boots and holding a slim rectangular package wrapped in brown paper that is decorated with sketches of pine trees and snowflakes and packages tied up with ribbons. “This is for you, Tristan.”

I take the gift from his trembling hands into mine. “For me?”

“Thank you for letting me share Christmas Eve with you.” I know he’s referring to the whole family, but his damp gaze is on me. I stare back into the dark eyes I love and bite my bottom lip to stop its quivering.

When he turns and rushes from the room, I watch in silence.

“You’re actually gonna let him go?” Tara asks in disbelief.

“What the fuck are you thinking, Tris?” Dacia adds.

“Bad word!” Tommy shouts as he reenters the living room, balancing a cup of water.

“Hey, did Coach Remi leave?” Jared calls from the hallway. “I wanted to play hover soccer with him.”

“He left real fast so’s he didn’t bawl,” Wendy replies.

My thoughts spin into a whirlwind of confusion... and regret. And although I plan to save the hand-decorated giftwrap—maybe even hang it on my bedroom wall—I rip the paper from the gift, curious to find out what he’s given me. An unframed canvas... and on it is the most extraordinary depiction of me I’ve ever seen, and I’ve seen many. The watercolor portrait that I posed for in his loft is complete... and breathtaking.

I stare at it in awe until instinct tells me to turn it over. There’s an inscription.

I know my heart as well as I know my mind.

I know that I love you, Tristan, and I always will.

Remi

“Hold this.” I shove the painting into Tara’s hands and race from the living room. I tear through the kitchen, not even hesitating to slide my bare feet into the boots waiting by the door. And I bolt out the front door and onto the snowy street.

I glance to where Remi has parked his SUV. The headlights are on, and he’s pulling out of the spot. Relief floods my heart that he hasn’t yet driven away—but I refuse to waste valuable time savoring this minor victory.

As I run down the street, waving my arms over my head so he can’t miss me, it hits me that normally reserved Tristan must look, to Remi, like he’s totally losing it. But I don’t care what I look like—I need him to see me. *And* hear me. “Remi! Wait up—stop, please!” I bellow like Tommy when he catches Tara cursing.

I’ll do whatever it takes to catch his attention. To stop him from leaving.

The SUV is soon on the street, heading my way. The vehicle’s interior is dark, but I can still make out Remi’s soulful eyes. They’re wide with surprise at the sight of the barefoot man in his path, flailing and shouting. When the SUV stops, I race to the passenger side and climb in.

“Park.” I issue the command in a throaty bark.

“Okay.” Remi doesn’t glance at me across the center console. And though he holds his neck stiffly—seemingly quite controlled—his breathing is loud as he pulls down the street and backs into a spot.

“Let’s try it again...” I know what I’m doing—*the right thing*—and it feels good.

He turns to study me. “Try what?” His gaze is shadowed by a mind full of doubt.

“The thing we got so horribly wrong the first time, of course.”

Remi shrugs. “Then go ahead, I guess.” He has no idea what I’m about to say.

A certain conversation has been stuck in my mind—I couldn’t forget it when I so desperately wanted to, but now I’m glad it’s bottled in my brain. “I said that I loved you. Did you hear me?”

Recognition of my question from the night our relationship fell apart flashes in Remi’s eyes. He blinks once and replies with the same simple sentence as before. “I heard you.”

I reach across the console with my icy hand and grab his upturned one that rests on his knee. Then I pull his palm to my lips, kiss it softly, and ask, “Do you love me too?”

The haze of confusion parts, and he nods. “I love you more than you’ll ever know.”

“Congratulations, Remi. This time, you gave me the *correct* answer.” When I take his stubbly face into my hands, a sensation of warmth spreads through my entire body.

“The second time is a charm.” He leans in and presses the most meaningful kiss I’ve ever received against my waiting lips.

“Spend Christmas with me,” I say. “*With us.*”

“I’ll gladly spend Christmas with the Wilder family but consider yourself fairly warned—I’m gonna stick around

forever.”

“I can work with that.”



Remi

WE'RE on our sides in Tristan's creaky twin bed in a crowded bedroom with too-thin walls. Facing each other but not touching, it's the most intimate moment I've ever shared with a lover.

“You should realize that the kids are gonna wake us up at the crack of dawn,” he warns.

“That leaves us about six hours alone in this bed.”

Tristan smiles. It's sexy, a little bit shy, and clearly an invitation. “How do you want me?”

That's easy. “Talking,” I reply. “I want you talking.”

The surprised O his lips form is *almost* comical. “You don't want me spread-eagled on my back? Or on my knees with my butt in the air?”

“Those suggestions are certainly tempting, but I'd rather figure out what went wrong with us. Because it can't happen again.” I refuse to risk losing Tristan and communication is the key.

But damn, I'm a different man from who I was three months ago—to turn down sex so easily.

“What do you want to know?” he asks.

“It's not just what I want to know—it's what *I* need to explain.” A great deal needs to be spoken and understood, for both of our benefit.

“I'm listening.” Tristan pushes himself up so he's sitting in the middle of the bed, with his knees bent and his arms wrapped around them. The sight is as stunningly beautiful as any classroom pose, but it's even better now that he's mine.

I rest my head on my arm. “I’ve always stayed away from relationships—and I’m talking about with both friends *and* lovers.”

“What about Dacia?” He focuses his sultry gaze on me. “You’re friends with her.”

“She forced friendship on me. Believe me, I battled against it and lost.”

Tristan giggles, and it sounds so refreshing, I want to drink it. “She *does* have a forceful personality.”

“Anyway, my theory went like this. The closer you let yourself get to people, the more you lose when they’re gone. And I don’t mean gone, like when somebody changes his mind about wanting to be with you. I mean gone, like when the logging truck slams into your parents’ sedan, and they’re crushed to death.”

He gasps at my bluntness. “I-I see what you mean. Love comes with risks, and life offers no guarantee of permanence.”

“Exactly. And it’s why I tried to hold back from loving you. Eventually, I gave up—I wanted to be with you too much to be disciplined. And I was actually happy about it until...”

“Until Wendy nearly got hit by a car.”

“Yes. Seeing the car a few feet from her reminded me of what losing someone you love can do to your life. And I lost all hope that I could cope with the risk of loving you... and them.”

“So, you said you *didn’t* love me, hoping I’d stop loving you too, and our relationship would fade away.”

“I figured that neither one of us would be hurt too badly if I denied loving you. But I was wrong, Tristan. Like I said to you in sculpture class, living without you—because of my rash, panicked reaction to fear—was like enduring a slow death.”

“You aren’t the only one who is afraid of loss.”

I’m not sure what he means. “You seem so rational and patient... and ready to forgive. I thought as soon as I admitted

my lie, you'd come running back to me. I never expected you to say we were better off apart."

"I did it because *I'm* afraid of something too..." Tristan shakes his head as he considers his words. "Unstable people terrify me, and your behavior set off warning bells."

"How am I unstable?" I never thought of myself that way.

"Everything about you was hot and cold—wanting me one minute and hiding from me the next. I lived with that kind of treatment from my mother, throughout my childhood. She was here one day, gone the next. I don't want to be with someone I can't depend on."

I press him down on the bed and pull his back against my chest, so we're nestled together. "You can depend on me, Tristan."

"I wouldn't be spooning with you if I didn't believe that," he replies in a brighter tone than I expect. "I may need an occasional reminder that people have ups and downs—it doesn't mean they aren't trustworthy. It just means they're human."

I need to have this resolved. I can't live with a cloud of worry hanging over my head. "So, we understand what went wrong?"

"*I* do. What about you?"

"I do too," I reply. Tristan turns to his other side so he's facing me and presses his silky skin to mine. Then he lifts his chin for a kiss. "Whose idea was having a serious conversation while stark naked?"

"I didn't know we were going to bed to... to talk," he explains. "We're not finished yet?"

"Not quite." I squirm backward against the wall, gaining several inches of space between us. Then I tilt my head for the proper perspective. "You're my boyfriend now." I sound like an angsty teenager making a claim on my crush. But I don't care—Tristan is mine, and it needs to be stated.

“So far, I like where you’re going with part two of this conversation.” Tristan leans forward and nips my chin playfully. “Please continue.”

“No dating other people.” I refuse to share him.

“That was never even a consideration.”

“And I want you to move in with me.” I try to slip this condition in with the “we’re exclusive” thing, knowing it’s more complicated than that.

“I’ll have to talk to Tara—I’m usually the one to pay the rent here.”

That’s not a no. “We can figure out the minor details later.”

“Money is more than a *minor* detail for my family,” Tristan says, squeezing my hip for emphasis.

“I get that. And I have an idea for Tara and me to work together—like job sharing *my* corporate position—starting this summer.” We may have no more secrets, but I’ve never been one to spill my guts to anyone. Nonetheless, I go on. “It’s going to require more planning but working together could be an opportunity for both of us. It’ll increase Tara’s responsibility and salary and will hopefully allow her time for the kids and me some freedom to paint.”

“It’s an interesting idea.”

“That said, I’m not sure about going to law school.”

“Maybe you don’t need to,” Tristan says. “Requiring that you attend law or business school could have been a strategy—your grandmother’s way of shifting your brain’s track from art to business.”

“I sincerely hope I can figure out a way to do both.” I place my hand over his. “I like making future plans with you.”

“If Tara was making bigger money, it would free me up to take more education classes.”

Tristan is thinking about the future too.

“Exactly.”

“Are we done with the serious talk now?” he asks, a touch impatient.

“Why? Do you have other plans for this evening?” Teasing Tristan never gets old.

“I-I really do... because I-I’ve missed being *close* to you. Know what I mean?”

“I feel closer to you than I ever have to any other person,” I admit, fully aware that Tristan’s mind is on a different kind of closeness.

“Me too, but, uh, I wouldn’t mind getting *physically* close to you... like, right now.”

“I’m not one to argue with an excellent suggestion.” Intimacy is better with Tristan than it has been with anyone else, but it *isn’t* the foundation of our bond. “We’re going to have to keep the moaning to a minimum, though. You share a paper-thin wall with Tara.”

“Look at you, so confident you can make me moan,” he taunts.

“Oh, I can’t resist a challenge.”

It’s bliss when Tristan wraps his arms around my neck. And having lost him once because of my own cowardice—and unsure that I’d ever hold him this way again—it feels something like a miracle to be close to him again.

My mood shifts from playful to sober; making love to Tristan is about far more than feeling good. “You believe me, right?”

“That you enjoy a good challenge?” He smirks.

“That I love y-you.” The unexpected sob that rises from my throat is an involuntary blend of relief, thankfulness, and awe.

“Uh-huh, I believe you.” Tristan pulls my face to his and parts my lips with his tongue. I hadn’t realized that a kiss could prove depth of feeling, but this one does. He tilts his head to seal our lips and then proceeds to explore my mouth

with a care and curiosity that's new to me. A chill spreads across my naked skin, and with it, desire blooms.

“Do you have the stuff we need to make love?” I should have thought of this before now.

“Hang on—it's in my bureau drawer.” Tristan hops from the bed and barely ten seconds later, he slips in beside me, fully prepared.

I reach up and flick on the reading light above his bed. “Lie on your back.” I want to look into his eyes as we make love, so I can be certain he's opening more than just his body to me.

Without hesitation, Tristan drops the condom and lube by the pillow and rolls onto his back. His expression is a warm invitation. His arms rest loosely at his sides; his legs bend and then fall apart. He's relaxed, calm, and sure of the man he's looking at.

I kneel between his thighs. “When I first saw you, I found you so exquisite... I thought getting you in bed would mean I'd conquered you. And once we'd slept together, I'd have wrung my need for you from my soul.” Tristan closes his eyes—not to hide—but to better focus on my words. “It didn't turn out like that.”

When he opens his eyes, it's like gazing into the spring. Bright and full of hope, even in the dim light.

I lean down to kiss him, and our lovemaking begins in earnest. Inside the tiny beam shining from above the bed that labors to light my way, I gaze at my partner. The pale, downy fuzz on Tristan's arms and legs shimmers like gold. His sandy hair, tousled by my hands, fans out on the deep-blue pillowcase. His smooth, sculpted chest welcomes my touch, and I answer the invitation.

Resting my weight on the strength of one arm, I caress the velvety skin in the hollow of his neck. My lips follow the path made by my fingertips, and he sighs his pleasure. When I push myself up, to again take in his beauty, I admit what crossed my

mind when I first saw him in the drawing studio. “You look like an angel.”

Tristan shakes his head. “I’m no angel, Remi.”

I don’t bother to disagree; I know who he is. He’s the man who gives everything to the ones he loves. And he’s the man who saved me from a lonely life.

When I bend to take his swollen dick into my mouth, it’s as much to taste as it is to please. After taking a moment to savor and tease the sensitive tip, I move upon him steadily. My purpose clear. His moans are restrained, and I sense his struggle to stay in control. I’m aware of the very moment he shoves his fist into his mouth to stifle his sounds.

When his thrusts become vigorous, I pull my mouth from him. “I want you to come when I’m inside you.” When he nods, I kneel and get to work with the lube.

Tristan keeps his fist between his teeth as I open him. A mere minute later, though, he pulls it out to say, “I’m ready now.”

Patience has never been Tristan’s greatest virtue while making love. Still, I swiftly roll on the condom. And just as he recreated a past conversation earlier tonight, I’m going to do the same, but with a slight improvement. I lift his ass, so his entrance is near.

“This,” I murmur and press the head of my dick against the slick opening to his body, “means *everything* to me.”

He smiles with agreement.

I push inside the body of my lover—deliberately and constantly—never removing so much as an inch of myself until my balls brush his ass. And then I slide in and out of him, at first, with a smooth, steady rhythm. There’s no rush to complete this act. Making love to Tristan tonight is a promise of sorts—that I will be the man he can depend on for everything he needs, from emotional wellbeing to physical satisfaction.

“Faster, Remi.”

His demand changes everything. I tighten my grip on his hips and shorten my thrusts, as he takes himself in hand. And we journey together to a place we'll never go without one another again. When I release inside him, and he explodes between our chests, I embrace the truth.

“I'm so much in love with you, Tristan.” It's not hard to admit.

THE END... for now

Stay tuned for Book 2 of the DON'T LET GO Series, *Smitten*.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Award-winning gay romance author and mother of four, Mia Kerick, knows that a satisfying romance novel is riddled with challenges. For true love to prevail, the leading men are going to have to put in some effort. But the HEA is oh-so rewarding.

From *Jane Eyre*'s Mr. Rochester to *Brokeback Mountain*'s Ennis and Jack, Mia has a great affinity for the tortured hero in literature. Her contemporary gay romance focuses on such steamy tropes as hurt/comfort, forbidden love, and enemies/friends to lovers. She firmly believes that sometimes a lover has to break his heart to save him. In Kerick's books, the course of true love never runs smoothly.

Mia's books have been featured in Kirkus Reviews magazine. They have won a 2019 IPPY GOLD award for Juvenile/Young Adult Fiction, a 2018 YA GOLD MOONBEAM Children's Book Award, a YA Readers' Favorite Award, several Gold Rainbow Awards in YA and adult categories, a Reader Views' Book by Book Publicity Literary Award, the Jack Eadon Award for Best Book in Contemporary Drama, a YA Indie Fab Award, a First Place Royal Dragonfly Award for Cultural Diversity, a First Place Story Monsters Purple Dragonfly Award, a Bronze Medal for Readers' Favorite Young Adult Romance, and more.

Mia cheers for each victory made in the name of human rights. Her only major regret: never having taken typing or computer class in school, destining her to a life consumed with two-fingered pecking and constant prayer to the Gods of Technology.

OTHER BOOKS BY MIA KERICK:

Whatever He Needs

Hide Your Love Away Series

Born for Leaving

The Art of Hero Worship

The Red Sheet (YA)

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