



THE
PRESCOTTS

Skin DEEP

TARA WYATT

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PROLOGUE



June

“*W*hy are all of those people staring at us?” asked Violet MacAllister, bumping her shoulder against her friend/wedding date/sort of boss Hudson Prescott. When he glanced down at her, a little line digging in between his brows, she tipped her head in the direction of a table about fifty feet away, where a group of ten people were openly staring at them. Two of them, she recognized as Hudson’s brothers, Noah, and Levi. But other than that, they were all complete strangers to her.

New people always put her on edge. That was probably why the last new friend she’d made was...well, it was Hudson. She’d started working for him at the tattoo shop three years ago and they’d quickly struck up a friendship. At first, Violet had hoped it would be more than just a friendship, but considering that Hudson had been in the middle of planning his wedding when she’d started working for him, she’d quickly squashed that idea. And it had remained squashed all through his horrendous breakup. All through the past three years that she’d spent working with him, hanging out with him, pining for him.

Oh, yeah. It was good and squashed all right.

“Probably because they weren’t expecting me to bring a date,” said Hudson easily, his deep, husky voice sliding over her nerve endings like silk.

“Ah. I see. I’ve shocked them and I didn’t even have to run naked through that gorgeous fountain out front.”

He smirked, the corner of his mouth turning up in a way that made the tips of her fingers tingle. “I mean, I won’t stop you if that’s your plan for the night.” He leaned in a bit closer, the smirk edging towards devilish. “Hell, I might even join you.”

She pointed at the black cast covering his right arm from his shoulder to his knuckles. “But you didn’t bring your trash bag.”

The smirk morphed into a full on grin, one that had his piercing blue eyes flashing. “What can I say? I like to live dangerously.”

The word dangerously seemed to hang in the air between them, and Violet’s mind flashed back to that afternoon three weeks ago when he’d been in a terrifying motorcycle accident. He’d been incredibly lucky that his only injuries were a broken arm and several scrapes and bruises. His bike had been totaled, but at least he’d make a full recovery.

“I think you’ve had enough danger for this year,” she said, trying her best to keep her voice level. He played off the accident like it was no big deal and he was fine, but it had scared the absolute shit out of her. It was one of those wake up moments, like when Dorothy wakes up in Oz and suddenly everything is in glorious technicolor. Knowing just how bad that accident could’ve been had her looking at Hudson with a fresh perspective.

Mixed with old lust that she really, truly did think she’d squashed.

Hudson chuckled, the low sound vibrating down her spine. “No shit.”

The bartender handed them their drinks—a whiskey for him, and a negroni for her. All around them, the wedding reception was just ramping up. The couple—Hudson’s cousin Lucian and his bride Olivia—hadn’t returned from photos yet, so everyone was milling about, drinking and eating the hors

d'oeuvres while upbeat jazz floated through the floral-scented air.

“Come on, let’s go say hi before they start jumping to conclusions.”

“Yes, it would be a shame if your family thought you actually had some kind of love life,” she teased. He winced and shook his head.

“Ouch. Right to the heart.” He dipped his head as they walked toward the table of family members/open-starers. “Be gentle with me, Vi. Jeez.”

She glanced at him over her shoulder, giving a little shrug and trying to ignore the way her heart was battering itself against the inside of her chest. “Not my fault if the truth hurts.”

“What’s that saying?” he asked, peering up at the ceiling as he pretended to rack his brain. “Something about stones and glass houses and not throwing things...Shit, it’s on the tip of my tongue...”

She scrunched up her face. “Yeah, yeah, yeah,” she said, rolling her eyes. Before she had time to think of another quip, they’d reached his family.

“Hey, everyone,” said Hudson affably, clearly not bothered by the fact that the two of them were a source of open speculation. “This is my good friend, Violet.”

At the words *good friend*, Violet glanced up at him, something twisting in her stomach. Maybe she hadn’t had enough to eat today. It was the only logical explanation for the raw, hollow feeling inside her. Scrambling to push it aside, she smiled and turned her attention to his family.

“You know Noah and Levi,” he said, gesturing at his brothers. “This is Felicity, Noah’s girlfriend, and Madison, Levi’s girlfriend.” Violet smiled and nodded at the two women, who gave her warm smiles in return, coupled with a glint of speculation in their eyes, especially Madison’s. “This is my cousin Theo and his wife Lauren. Theo’s a lawyer out in LA, and Lauren—”

“Is a super famous singer,” said Violet, her face going red as she spoke. “Holy shit. You’re Lauren MacKinnon.”

Lauren laughed and held out her hand, shaking Violet’s. “I am. Although technically, I’m Lauren Prescott. Legally, anyway.” Violet blinked several times, feeling starstruck. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“This is my cousin Sebastian and his girlfriend Kayla, and my cousin Max and his wife Willa.”

Violet said hello to everyone, doing her best to keep all of the names and faces straight.

“How do you two know each other?” asked Willa.

“We work together at the tattoo shop,” answered Violet, and Willa grinned.

“You know, Max and I met through work, too.”

“Oh, really? What do you do?”

“We work in software development. At the time, Max was the CEO of Tapp, and I was one of the coders.”

“Wow, that’s impressive,” said Violet. As the conversation flowed around them, Violet became intensely aware of two facts.

1. Everyone else here was coupled up, making her and Hudson the only single ones; and
2. Hudson’s family was very impressive in a way that made Violet feel very much like an imposter who didn’t belong.

A lawyer, a US Olympic snowboarding coach, a famous singer, the director of a non-profit, a multimillionaire CEO, a rockstar computer genius.

Me? Oh, I’m just a severely dyslexic person who draws on others for a living.

Immediately, she pushed the horrible thought away. Yes, she was severely dyslexic, but she loved her work as a tattoo artist. She loved helping people express themselves through art

and getting to be a part of that journey. She loved the significance of tattoos, the beauty of them.

Maybe what really had her feeling like an outsider was the state of her love life. Sure, she and Hudson had teased each other about it just a few minutes ago, but being single was something she struggled with. It was this horrible tug of war within herself of wanting to be with someone while also struggling with letting someone get close. Letting someone in. She knew she kept most people at arm's length. It was a behavior born out of self-preservation she'd learned a long time ago.

But she knew that if she wanted a relationship, it was something she'd have to face. Especially seeing as the only man she'd even been remotely interested in over the past three years only saw her as his *good friend*.

After several moments, the group started to break up, venturing off in different directions. She glanced over at Hudson and reached out a hand to smooth a wrinkle on his white button-down.

"Thanks. It's not sitting right because of this thing," he said, lifting the arm wrapped in the fiberglass cast. He'd skipped the tie, leaving his shirt open at the collar and revealing a glimpse of inked skin. He'd paired the shirt with simple navy blue dress pants, and even though he was fairly dressed down for such a swanky wedding, he looked perfect. Absolutely perfect. He was also sporting a three-week beard growth ("you try shaving with just your left hand" he'd said with a shrug when she'd commented on his mountain man look), which was doing him all kinds of favors.

"What?" he asked, taking a sip of his drink and glancing around the elegantly decorated ballroom. "Do I have something on my face?"

"No. I was just admiring your beard," she admitted. "It suits you. I think you should keep it, even after the cast comes off."

"Even though there's this one place the hair doesn't grow?" he asked, pointing at the faint scar above his lip.

“Nah, it adds to the intrigue. How did you get that scar, anyway?”

He grinned. “I was nine and playing Hungry Hungry Hippos with Levi and Noah. The two of them were being complete animals, bashing the levers with their fists and so I started doing the same thing. Being an absolute pillar of maturity, I decided it was stupid and I gave up just as Levi smashed his fist down on the board and sent it flying right into my face. I needed three stitches and Mom took the game away. Anyway, the moral of the story is never, ever play Hungry Hungry Hippos with Levi.”

She laughed. “Damn. Guess I’ll have to cross that one off my bucket list.”

“Sorry to crush your dreams.”

“Your house must’ve been chaos, with the three of you running around.”

He smiled, glancing across the room to where Levi was piling a plate high with appetizers. “It was pretty crazy at times. I don’t think there was single wall that went unscathed.” The light in his eyes shifted and he cleared his throat, taking a sip of his drink. “Come on, let’s get some food before Levi eats the entire appetizer buffet.” He tossed back the rest of his drink and then took her hand, sending a shock of heat up her arm.

No. Squash it. Squash it. SQUASH IT.

Because while she couldn’t seem to control her body’s response to him, he’d never given her any indication that he was A) interested in her romantically, or B) interested in *anyone* romantically. Ever since his fiancée Jessica had left him practically at the altar, he hadn’t dated, at all. As far as she knew, he was basically a monk. A monk who owned a tattoo shop and rode a motorcycle, but still. A monk.

Although she wouldn’t know if he’d had a one-night stand with someone or whatever...Ugh. Just the thought of it had her stomach twisting itself into uncomfortable knots, and she took a long sip of her drink.

“Hey, Hud!” called Levi. “Come try these vegetarian spring rolls before I eat them all.”

They reached the buffet and she was a little embarrassed at how much she didn’t want to let go of his hand. But she did, and they filled their plates, chatting with Levi and Madison about their jobs as paramedics in Manhattan.

“What’s the most surprising thing about your jobs?” she asked them between bites of bacon-wrapped scallops and crab cakes. She’d thought that the mini quiches and caprese skewers also looked mouthwateringly good, but she’d left the few remaining ones for Hudson, since he could actually eat those. He’d been a strict vegetarian for his entire adult life, and while it wasn’t something she could ever do—saying goodbye to bacon and burgers just wasn’t an option—she admired his dedication to his values.

Levi and Madison exchanged a look before Madison said with a grin, “How much stuff people put up their butts.”

Violet choked on a laugh, holding her hand in front of her mouth as she nearly swallowed a scallop whole. It took several seconds before she could breathe normally again, and her eyes were running with tears.

“A buttload of stuff,” deadpanned Hudson, and Violet started choking all over again. She smacked at his good arm while Levi groaned.

“Don’t. Don’t make me hurt you.”

“Why? Is there a game of Hungry Hungry Hippos around here somewhere?” Violet managed, making all of them laugh. She loved the way the skin around Hudson’s eyes crinkled when he laughed, and once again, she caught herself staring.

Just then, the reception’s MC asked everyone to take their seats, so she followed Hudson to their table. The bride and groom entered to a round of rousing applause, and Lauren MacKinnon serenaded them with her version of “A Thousand Years.” As they twirled on the dancefloor, the lights went soft and glowy, as though the entire space was lit by fireflies. For a moment, it didn’t feel as if they were in a swanky ballroom in

Manhattan. Everything felt ethereal and magical. The air smelled like delicious food with a hint of something heady and floral. The moving lyrics had tears—emotional ones, not choking ones—stinging her eyes. The way Lucian and Olivia were smiling softly and gazing into each other’s eyes, as though the entire universe existed right there, between them made her chest tighten.

“What are you thinking about?” Hudson whispered in her ear.

“That I want this for myself someday,” she answered honestly.

“Really? A big wedding like this?”

She tore her eyes from the gorgeous couple and turned to face him. He was so close, so beautiful that just looking at him felt like a punch in the sternum. The softly glowing light caught his thick blond hair, his curls short and tamed right now. God, his hair looked so soft. What would it feel like to run her hands through it, just once?

She shook her head. “No, not like this. I just mean...look at them. They’re so happy. So in love. I just want...I just want a guy who looks at me like that.”

“I think you actually have to date to have a wedding.”

“Ugh. Don’t remind me.”

She cocked her head, studying him. She had no idea what kind of wedding he’d planned with Jessica and she never asked about it or brought it up, assuming it was a sore spot. “Is this hard for you?” she asked softly, not because it was the right time to bring this up, but because she needed to know. If he was hurting, if he needed someone in his corner, if he needed *anything*, she wanted to help. Which, God, was pretty freaking pathetic. She was like a little puppy dog, following him around with hearts in her eyes, and she needed to stop.

“Being at a wedding you mean?” he asked, his eyes still on his cousin and his new wife.

“Yeah.”

His gaze moved to her. “No. Not anymore. There was a time when it would’ve been, but...no.” He sighed, shaking his head. “As much as it sucked, I know I dodged a bullet. She was right to pull the plug. I’d bet everything I have that we’d be divorced by now if we’d gone through with it.”

She stared at him, trying to process what he’d just said. A part of her had assumed that he was still pining away for the woman who’d jilted him, and that was why he was single. But if he was over Jessica, then why...

“But events like these...” He sighed. “They make me miss the hell out of my dad.”

Her chest ached for him and she reached out, covering his much larger hand with hers. “I’m sorry, Hud,” she said softly. His skin was warm and a little rough to the touch, and she could see the edges of his inked sleeve poking out from beneath his shirt cuff. “I can only imagine how much.” She knew that he’d lost his dad at age twelve. She knew that his dad had been a captain with the FDNY, and he’d died when the towers had fallen on September 11th. But beyond that, she didn’t know much. He didn’t talk about his dad, and she’d assumed it was because he’d lost him so long ago that the pain was forgotten. Now, she was wondering if he never talked about it because the pain was still raw.

Before she could find the right way to ask a question she really, really shouldn’t ask, the dance ended and dinner began, complete with toasts and clinking glasses and copious laughter and cheering. The atmosphere was bright. Upbeat and serene, and Violet wanted to wrap herself in it. Make it a memory that would last, given that she didn’t know the next time she’d get to attend an event like this with Hudson as her date. Probably never.

Dinner consisted of a creamy potato and leek soup, a salad with the most amazing dressing she’d ever tasted, and a mouthwateringly perfect steak. Hudson had pasta with mushrooms and stuffed peppers, and honestly, his looked so good that it almost made her wish she’d chosen the vegetarian option. Almost.

Shortly after dinner, Lucian and Olivia cut the cake and slices were served to everyone, and once the last speech had wrapped up, the dance floor was officially open. Violet felt completely sated—from the wine, the food, the lovely music, the gorgeously decorated ballroom. Sitting next to Hudson and chatting easily with his brothers and their girlfriends, who were both warm and funny. Even though she was a little intimidated by them—Felicity was an English teacher, which made Violet more aware of her own intellectual shortcomings, and Madison looked like a freaking supermodel—they were kind and welcoming to her.

The band started playing an upbeat song she loved, and her eyes flicked to the dance floor, which was quickly filling with people. Violet loved dancing. She loved music and moving her body and the rush of adrenaline that came with a really fantastic song playing at full blast. But she didn't want to dance by herself—hello, that would be weird, considering she hardly knew anyone there—and she didn't think Hudson would be up for dancing with his cast. Still, she couldn't stop herself from shaking her shoulders in her seat a little as she stared longingly at the growing crowd of people getting down.

“You *really* want to dance, don't you?” asked Hudson, and when she whirled, there was a small smile on his face.

She hesitated for a second. “Um, well. Yeah, I mean, I do. But it's totally cool if you're not—”

“Of course I'll dance with you, Violet. Come on. I wanna see this dress in action.” He leaned in closer, so close that she could feel his warm breath on her neck. “It looks amazing on you, by the way. It's perfect.”

She laughed and pushed to her feet, her brightly colored dress swirling around her. She'd found it at a vintage thrift shop in Brooklyn and she'd been worried that it wouldn't be fancy enough for an event like this, but knowing that Hudson liked it—liked her in it—made her not care what other people thought at all, which was sort of a new feeling for her.

He took her hand, and she knew it was a familiarity she could get used to if she let herself. Leading her onto the dance

floor, he pulled her right into the middle of the crowd. The flashing lights caught his dark blond hair as they started to dance, and she had to admit, she was surprised. She'd never danced with Hudson before, and she hadn't been sure what to expect given his penchant for folky acoustic music and oldies, but the man had moves. Shoulder-shimmying, hip-shaking, quick-stepping moves. The band on stage launched into a cover of "September" by Earth, Wind, and Fire, and Hudson grabbed her hand, spinning her around before dipping her with his good arm.

"You're such a good dancer!" she yelled in his ear to be heard over the music. It was hard to tell in the dim lighting, but she could've sworn his cheeks turned a little pink.

"Thanks. I like dancing, I just don't..." He trailed off and spun her again before doing a little spin himself, adjusting the movement slightly to compensate for his broken arm. "You're a good dancer, too."

"Thanks," she said, her voice coming out a little breathless. "I've always liked dancing. I even did ballet when I was a kid. I wasn't great at it, but I had fun. I was mostly in it for the tutus."

"I bet you were adorable."

She laughed. "I was a pudgy kid with a mess of blond curls who tripped over her own feet on a regular basis."

"See? Adorable. Just like I said."

The song ended and the band began playing "Man, I Feel Like a Woman," and before she could even react, Hudson let out a yeehaw and pulled her close, melding her body to his as he moved them both to the music. His cast rubbed against her occasionally, and he'd have to adjust it to try to move it out of the way.

Feeling all of that hard muscle pressed against her must've disconnected her brain from her mouth, because she was not responsible for what came out of her mouth next.

"You know, I read in like, *Cosmo* or something way back that if a guy's a good dancer, it means he's probably good in

bed.”

Oh, holy shit. I did not just say that.

He laughed, a full belly laugh that made his entire face light up. “I wouldn’t have pegged you for a *Cosmo* reader,” he said, pulling her even tighter against him.

She shrugged, her face still flaming. “Magazines are easier for me, so I read a lot of them when I was a teenager. I mean, most of the stuff in *Cosmo* was complete bullshit anyway. Swirl your hair in your man’s face to turn him on, put a donut around his dick and nibble it off.”

Hudson laughed again, and she felt as though she could gorge herself on that sound. She realized that ever since the accident, he hadn’t laughed much. Granted, he had a broken arm, his beloved bike was scrap metal, and he was worried about not being able to take on clients at the tattoo shop. Not a whole lot to laugh about there.

“Have you ever done that?” he asked, a playful glint in his eyes.

“What?”

“The donut thing.”

It was her turn to laugh. “I can’t say I have. Like I said, most of it was silly garbage meant more to entertain than inform.”

“Mmm. Well.” The song ended, shifting into a cover of “Can’t Help Falling in Love with You.” “They might not be totally off base with the good dancer equals good at sex thing.”

She pulled her head back, her chest tingling with warmth. She couldn’t believe they were actually having this conversation. While slow dancing. Sex was one of the few topics they never talked about. Most likely because neither of them was having any.

“Gee. Someone’s cocky,” she said, shooting him a teasing smile, trying to hide the fact that her insides were melting.

“Nothing wrong with being confident,” he said.

She opened her mouth, but then closed it as something else took root. Something more serious. Something that was honestly none of her freaking business, but right then, in that moment, she was going there. “So...earlier you said that you realized you’d dodged a bullet with Jessica. But you haven’t started dating again. I guess...I’m just wondering why.”

He turned them in a slow circle. “Maybe I just haven’t found anyone I’m interested in.” His hand dipped lower, settling in the small of her back. “Besides, between my arm and the shop, I’ve got enough on my plate right now without wading back into the dating scene.”

“Are you worried about the shop?” she asked, deciding to steer them away from talking about sex and dating. She never should’ve brought it up in the first place. She was just torturing herself with what she couldn’t have and shouldn’t want.

He sighed, his hand stroking up and down her spine in a way that made her want to purr. “Yeah, a bit. I can’t take any clients all summer. It’s going to be up to everyone else to carry us until I’m outta this thing and back to normal. If it were my left arm, things would be different.” She could hear the frustration in his voice.

“It’s just a few months, and we’ll get through it. Whatever you need, I’m there, okay? If you need me to take extra clients or work extra hours, just let me know.” She lifted her hand and cupped his cheek, swept up in the intimacy of dancing with him, the soft lights, the romantic music, the vibrating need to help him and support him in whatever way she could. His beard was surprisingly soft against her palm and she inhaled a shaky breath, emotions coursing through her. “Seriously, whatever you need.”

He met her eyes and then slowly shook his head. “I appreciate that Vi, but I don’t want to pull time from your other projects. I know how important they are to you.”

Twice a week, Violet volunteered at an afterschool arts program in Brooklyn, helping to connect kids with art as a means of expression and discovery. She’d done her MFA at

NYU a few years ago, and was always looking for ways to spread art throughout the community. But the project that was nearest and dearest to her heart was her dream of starting a non-profit organization that connected kids with learning disabilities to art. Violet knew firsthand just how transformational art could be for a kid who struggles with reading.

She was about to respond, but then he pressed his cheek ever so slightly into her palm and every single thought in her brain went haywire. Her palm tingled with warmth and her eyes met Hudson's. For a moment, they stayed just like that, locked in place and frozen in time. But then he blinked and pulled away, as though suddenly realizing what he was doing.

"I'm happy to help," she said, a little hiccup in her voice. "I have time. Right now, I'm just in the process of searching for grants and applying for them."

"Do you need any help with that?"

She stiffened instantly in his arms, her face going hot. "Why? Because me no read so good?" she asked, irritation snapping in her voice. She cringed, already wishing she could pull the words back. But her dyslexia was like a tiny little bruise. Mostly unseen, mostly forgotten, until something pressed on it and brought her defenses—the ones she'd spent her entire school career honing and nurturing—roaring up. And the truth was, the copious paperwork that came with every grant application was difficult for her. It probably took her twice as long as the average person to get through it all. But she was determined to do it on her own. Not because she had to, but because she needed to know that she could.

Hudson slipped a finger under her chin and tilted her face up, forcing her to meet his eyes. "Hey. Don't do that."

"Do what?" she asked, exhaling shakily. His finger was so warm, so thick, so close to her mouth. It was making her nerve endings short circuit. It was making her forget what they'd been talking about in the first place.

"Put yourself down, or pretend you're anything less than brilliant and amazing. Because I know you, Violet. I know

who you really are.” He leaned in closer. “And I don’t let people talk shit about my friends. That’s not the vibe, babe.”

An eddy of confusing emotions swirled through her. A giddy sort of lust, followed by an intense longing, coupled with something sadder and quieter.

Before she could figure out what to say, the song ended and the MC announced that it was time for the garter and bouquet toss. The lighting changed and everyone shuffled off the dance floor, making space for the bride and groom. The bride sat down on a chair in the middle of the floor, and the groom’s head disappeared under her dress. Violet’s chest twisted as she watched the bride giggle and gasp, her cheeks going a little pink as her new husband emerged with her lacy garter.

Levi came over and tugged on Hudson’s good arm. “Come on. If I have to get up there, so do you.”

“Ugh,” Hudson groaned, tilting his head back toward the ceiling. “Fine.” He shot Violet a wry smile. “Be right back.” She watched him join the group of single men on the dance floor. There were at least a dozen men gathered around, waiting for Lucian to throw the garter, and while she could’ve taken the opportunity to peruse and see if there was anyone who caught her eye, her eyes were magnetized to Hudson. He was all she could see. Hudson. Her friend.

Friend. He’d reminded her of that word just a few moments ago.

Lucian flung the garter and Hudson’s brother Noah caught it. He grinned at his girlfriend, who grinned right back, and then Levi said something to Noah that made him laugh and shake his head. Hudson hadn’t moved when the garter had arced into the air. He’d barely even looked at it, he’d been so disinterested in catching it. Which made sense, given his disinterest in dating in general. Maybe he was happy on his own. Maybe he didn’t long for someone, for some kind of connection the way Violet did.

The problem was, she wanted that connection with *him*, which was why she’d only gone on a handful of dates over the

past few years.

“All single ladies, report to the dance floor,” called the MC, and Violet sighed and shuffled her way forward along with several other women, including the bridesmaids. Well, at least she wasn’t the only single one. She’d been to a wedding that spring where the bouquet toss had been between just her and two other women. In that moment, Violet had sworn that if she ever got married, she wouldn’t do this at her own wedding. Tradition be damned.

Violet stood alongside Felicity and Madison, half hiding behind Madison’s towering figure. The bride moved to the center of the dance floor, a conspiratorial grin on her face. Probably because she knew she’d never have to stand up in front of an entire room of strangers trying to catch some flowers ever again.

But then, instead of throwing it, she turned around and handed it to Kayla, Sebastian’s girlfriend. And when Kayla turned around, Sebastian was down on one knee, a ring glinting between his fingers. And as he proposed, Violet’s throat thickened almost painfully. She glanced away, loneliness swamping her and making it hard to watch the happy couple. Her eyes met Hudson’s and it was like a weight pressed down on her chest. For the briefest moment, she let herself imagine that she could have that someday, with him.

But despite the colorful tattoos decorating her arms, Violet had learned that fairy tales weren’t real a long time ago.

*September*

The buzz of the tattoo gun filled the air as Hudson leaned in close, carefully shading the elaborate skull tattoo on his client's ribs. Music permeated the air, and he could tell that Violet had chosen the Spotify playlist today because it was mostly upbeat classics. She was the only one who'd pick the Supremes as background music.

The tattoo he was working on was large and complex, featuring a large, intricate skull with delicate detailing and shading and the words *memento mori* beneath it in an ancient looking, Roman-inspired font. It was the first large-scale tattoo he'd done since getting his cast off and returning to work. He'd eased back into it at first, doing mostly touch-ups and small, simple tattoos, but it felt good to tackle something more complicated. It felt good to let the creative part of his brain take over as he added touches of shading and small cracks in the three-dimensional skull.

"How's it looking?" asked Jeff, his client. He was a man in his forties who'd survived both cancer and a terrible car accident over the past few years, and he'd come in looking for a tattoo that would remind him to embrace his mortality. To accept it and live without fear. Without regret. Hudson had immediately thought of the stoic aphorism *memento mori*, which translated to "remember that you will die." And the skull? It was badass, just like Jeff. And coming back from his

injury, Hudson had wanted to challenge himself, artistically. Creatively.

“Fucking amazing,” said Hudson, pushing his glasses back up his nose with his gloved hand. “Just a bit more shading and we’ll be done.”

This was what he loved doing. Using art to help people bring their vision, their truth to life. To permanently mark their bodies with something beautiful and personally significant.

“Awesome,” said Jeff, grimacing as Hudson moved the needle over a particularly sensitive spot. The ribs were one of the toughest places to get a tattoo because of the lack of fat between bone and skin, but he respected the placement Jeff had chosen. “I’m gonna look at this everyday and remind myself. Someday, I’m gonna die. I’m gonna reflect on that because it’s the truth. And because I’m gonna die, I’m gonna live until I do. Every day counts, no matter what.” He grimaced again and Hudson lifted the gun from his skin, wiping away some residual ink with a cloth. As he inspected his work, Jeff continued. “Before I got sick, and before the accident, I felt like...I don’t know. I was always waiting for something else to work out first before I did the things I wanted. I was gonna wait until I retired to travel. I was gonna wait until I lost weight to start dating again after my divorce. I was gonna wait until I’d paid off my car to take some college classes. But what the fuck was I waiting for? Life is now. Right fucking now, you know?” He lifted his head and met Hudson’s eyes. “That’s what I want people to remember when they see this. Don’t live your life in limbo waiting for shit to be perfect. It’s never gonna be perfect. Do it anyway. Live now, because someday, you’re gonna die.”

“Wise words, my man,” said Hudson, turning the gun back on to add some more shading to one area of the skull. Having had his own brush with death just a few months ago, he knew that Jeff was right. He’d spent the entire summer feeling as though his life was on hold. Waiting for the cast to come off so he could go back to work and stop his business from going under.

Honestly, the only thing that had saved him from going absolutely fucking bonkers was Violet. Not only had she stepped up at the shop, keeping things running as best as she could, but she'd made sure to keep him entertained. She hadn't let him sit at home and feel sorry for himself, which had been a very tempting prospect at times. She'd dragged his ass all over NYC in the name of "getting his mind off of things." Coffee in the park, free stand-up comedy shows, Shakespeare in the Park, a Bon Iver concert, strolling the Met and talking his ear off about the various paintings and sculptures. She'd even signed them up to be extras in some zombie movie filming in Queens.

She'd made a cute zombie.

A grin pulled at the corner of his mouth as he remembered the way she'd stumbled toward him, all done up in her zombie makeup. Then she'd suddenly paused, as though something had occurred to her. "Gee, Hud...zombies eat brains, but I don't think that's vegetarian. I think you might starve."

"Nah," he'd replied, winking at her. "I'm sure I can find some graaaaaiiiiiiiins to eat."

She'd burst out laughing and then slapped him on the arm, making fun of his bad joke.

"At least one of us is smiling," said Jeff, glancing from his reddened skin to Hudson.

Hudson nodded and switched off the gun. "I have good news. I think we're done." He wiped more excess ink off and rolled back on his stool, depositing the gun on the nearby tray.

As he finished up with Jeff, wrapping the tattoo in a clear bandage and giving him some aftercare instructions, he cashed him out and then headed back to his office. Most of the space was taken up with the shop itself, with each artist having their own area marked off with opaque silk screens. By the front entrance, the walls were covered in framed pictures showcasing the different types of artwork available, along with retro American Classic style prints. The floor was done in classic black and white checked tile, while the ceiling was covered in tin tiles, embossed with an Art Deco style pattern.

A vintage chandelier hung over the front desk. At the back was a small storage closet with cleaning supplies and the autoclave, another closet with other supplies, like gloves, ink, receipt paper, light bulbs. And across from that closet was Hudson's little office. Back here, the floors were wide wooden planks, and they creaked beneath Hudson's boots as he crossed the small space to his desk, sinking down into the black leather chair.

Sitting back, he looked up and around, taking in the awards on the wall, the framed write ups about his shop from sites like Gothamist and Time Out. God, he loved this job. More than that, he loved this shop. He loved the artists he worked with, and he loved providing a space for art and creativity to flourish. A place for people to come and heal, express, adorn...whatever they needed, he wanted to give it to them. Was privileged to give it to them.

For years, he'd dreamed of having his own shop. Of creating something just like this. And with a lot of hard work and scraping by and loans and long hours and extra jobs bartending, he'd done it.

But then, in the blink of an eye, he'd had the rug pulled out from under him. He closed his eyes, memories of the crash coming back fast and hot, making his skin tight. Riding his bike down a road he'd ridden on hundreds of times. The brake lights, red in front of him. Trying to stop and then skidding, trying to avoid a collision. The next thing he remembered, he was on the pavement surrounded by people, his head pounding, blood streaming from multiple cuts and scrapes, his arm on fire.

He swallowed thickly, opening his eyes and pushing it away. He didn't want to let himself get swept up in the emotions of that night. The fear, the pain, the worry. The regret, the anger, the heavy sadness. Even now, he could feel them tugging at him, like waves lapping at a shore, ready to pull him under.

There was a rap on his door, and then Violet stuck her head in. And it was as though the sun had just come out, making the waves recede back into the sea where they couldn't reach him.

“Hey!” She held up her phone in her hand, smiling excitedly at him. “We just hit 20k on Instagram!”

He forced himself to smile. In his experience, more social media followers didn’t make a big difference when it came to paying the bills. “That’s great.”

“I think it’s because of those pics of you I posted last week,” she said, glancing down at her phone and scrolling, finger flicking across the screen.

“Pics?”

“Yeah. I shared that owl that Thane did on your shoulder a couple of weeks ago.”

“And?” he asked, arching an eyebrow.

“Um, do you not own a mirror? I posted a hot, tatted guy with muscles on our Insta and people liked it.”

Something stirred in his chest at her words, but he knew she was only teasing. She didn’t actually think he was hot. But she did like to give him a hard time. She busted his chops, just like any of the other guys at the shop would.

She stepped into his office and leaned against the door jamb. Her wild curls were pinned half up, and she had a smear of paint on her bright green T-shirt. “You know, you should’ve let me do your owl,” she said, peering at him thoughtfully with her huge gray eyes. “That cottagecore shit is my jam.”

“Maybe next time,” he said noncommittally, glancing around the office again. She was right. Nature tats were more up her alley than Thane’s. But the truth was, he wasn’t sure he would’ve been able to handle her hands on his bare skin for the couple of hours it would’ve taken to finish the tattoo.

Ever since they’d danced together at his cousin Lucian’s wedding a few months ago, something had felt...different between them. Maybe it was because of all the time they’d spent together that summer. Maybe it was because he was lonely and projecting that loneliness onto her, seeing things that weren’t there.

Maybe it was because he thought Violet was brilliant and funny and strong and kind and so fucking pretty it almost hurt to look at her.

But really, the reason didn't matter. They were friends, and she worked for him, and that's the way it was. The way it had to be.

"Hey, are you okay?" she asked, stepping all the way into the office and shutting the door behind her. "You seem...I dunno. Down, I guess." She propped her hip on his desk. "I thought we were doing better, now that you were back in action. God knows you've been working like a madman. I saw your client bookings for the next couple of weeks and I don't know when you're going to have time to eat."

He hesitated, but then when he met Violet's eyes, so filled with concern and care, he sighed and pulled a file folder from his top desk drawer. Opening it, he spread out the sheaf of papers inside. "We're barely making ends meet right now. We're in the black, but barely. But we have big expenses coming up. Me not working for almost three months put a big dent in our overall bottom line. Our lease is up in January, and if we don't want to get evicted, we'll need to come up with the payment soon."

Normally, he put aside money out of the shop's earnings each month to cover the yearly lease on the space, but he hadn't been able to do that for the last three months. They were in the black and didn't have any outstanding bills, but he was also coming up short when it came to lease money.

"How much is the lease?"

"\$150,000 a year."

Violet let out a low whistle. "And how much are we short?"

"Probably fifty."

As he spoke the words, a wave of cold washed over him. He didn't want to lose the shop. He couldn't. But he didn't know how the hell he was going to come up with fifty thousand dollars in just a few months. He'd already taken out

a business line of credit, but he was reluctant to go further into debt. Not without a solid plan of how he'd get out of it. Maybe if he brought on another artist or two, they'd bring in new clients. Or maybe he needed a new revenue stream. Or maybe he needed to start bartending in his downtime again.

He didn't know. He didn't have any answers.

"I'm sorry," he said, rubbing a hand over his face. "I don't mean to put all of this on you. It's not your problem."

"Hey," she said, coming around the desk and perching in front of him. "Just because it's not technically my problem doesn't mean I can't help you carry it. Just like you don't let people talk shit about your friends, I don't let my friends carry heavy shit alone."

She laid a hand on his shoulder, sending warmth curling over his skin. Warmth and an easing of tension, slowly, but gradually.

His eyes landed on the framed family photo he kept on his desk. His mom had taken it just a few years before his father had died. He and his brothers were in the front yard with their father, all of them shirtless and in bathing suits. It had been a hot day, Hudson remembered, and they'd been washing the cars and playing with water guns. In the photo, his dad was healthy and smiling, his arms looped around a nine-year-old Hudson, who was looking right at the camera. Beside Hudson, Noah was striking a superman pose while Levi stuck his tongue out.

"I wish my dad was still around. He'd know what to do. He'd have advice and knowledge and point me in the right direction. He'd say it like it was the most obvious thing in the world." He let out a sad laugh. "Or maybe I just feel that way because I was only twelve when he died, and to me, he was still all-knowing and infallible."

Just a few short years later, everything had changed. Nothing had ever been the same, and it was a weight, a loss, that Hudson still carried with him. Still kept tucked safely away so that he wouldn't drown in the intensity of it.

Violet stroked her hand up and down his arm. “Maybe your family could help? I know in the past Noah—”

“No,” he said, gently cutting her off. “I need to figure this out myself.” He met her eyes for a moment and then glanced away. “It’s important to me.” He sighed, wanting to lean into her touch. To soak up all of that sweetness and warmth she was offering. But he couldn’t, and he needed to remind himself why. “They’ve already done so much for me, Vi. Noah helped me get the shop going, and now that he’s starting his life with Felicity, I don’t want him to worry about me or feel responsible for me. And when Jessica left, Noah and Levi were there to pick up the pieces. They gave me a place to live, a way forward, a stable foundation. When she walked out on me the night before our wedding, it almost destroyed me. It was only because of them that I didn’t. I can’t ask them for more. I can’t.”

When he looked up her eyes were bright, almost as though they were shining with unshed tears.

“Hud,” she said, her voice coming out raw and shaky. “I’m sorry. For your dad, for Jessica, for this, now. I’m sorry, and I’m here. Whatever you need, just ask. I know you don’t want to lean on people, but this shop means a lot to me, too, and I want to help. Okay?” She gave his arm a squeeze. “Anything you need.”

Wow, Vi. That’s not pathetic or needy or sad at all. Nope. Definitely not.

He held her gaze, his insides feeling hot. Feverish and restless. His heart thumped wildly in his chest and he forced himself to take a deep breath. Violet couldn’t give him what he needed most.

Because he wouldn’t let her. He couldn’t. Not after the way things had gone down in flames with Jessica. He needed Violet in his life too much to ever cross that line with her.

Tension pulsed around them, expanding and eating up all of the space in the room until all he could see was her. Fuck, he could even smell her, that sweet, musky cinnamon vanilla scent she always wore that made him hard.

“Hud?” she asked softly, lifting her hand from his arm to his face, gently scratching her fingers through his beard. He’d kept it even after the cast had come off because she’d said she’d liked it.

God, he was so fucked.

His phone started buzzing from his pocket and she leaned back sharply, as though she’d been caught doing something she shouldn’t. He leaned forward and pulled his phone from his back pocket, glancing down at the screen.

“I should take this, it’s my mom,” he said, and Violet nodded, hopping down off of the desk and leaving his office without a backward glance. Almost as though she was running. Had she felt whatever the hell had just happened between them, too? For the sake of their friendship, he hoped not.

“Hey Mom,” he said, answering the call. He leaned back in his chair, the leather creaking softly under his weight. “What’s up?”

“Hey, honey. I just wanted to check in with you and make sure you’re not overdoing it. You’ve only had your cast off for a few weeks, and I would hate for you to have another setback by trying to do too much.”

He smiled softly at his mom’s concern. “I’m okay, Mom. I’m working a lot, but I’m taking breaks.” It was a half-truth, but the last thing he wanted was his mother worrying about him. He’d put her through enough with the damn motorcycle accident.

“Good! I’m glad to hear that. You know, maybe you could take some of those breaks in the company of someone else.”

He arched an eyebrow even though she couldn’t see him. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I’ve been told that people go on these things called dates where they spend time getting to know someone they might be romantically interested in.”

Veronica Prescott, always a smartass.

“I thought dates were a kind of fruit,” he deadpanned, picking up a pen and twirling it restlessly between the fingers of his free hand.

“Very funny. But listen, I have a new neighbor, and she has a daughter in her late twenties. She’s new to the area and looking to meet some people. Maybe you could show her around? Give her some insider tips from a local?”

Hudson grimaced. “I don’t think so, Mom. I’m pretty busy with work right now.”

“Oh, come on, Hud. You think I don’t know that you haven’t been on a single date since all of the Jessica stuff? You need to move on. You need to live your life. I want to be a grandma before I’m too old to enjoy it.”

Hudson scoffed. “If you want grandkids, talk to Noah and Felicity, or Levi and Madison. I can’t help you out there.” He closed his eyes as he spoke, a sense of longing washing over him and making his arms feel impossibly heavy. Did he want kids? Hell yeah, he did. Or at least, he had, when he’d thought happily ever after was something that happened in real life.

“Oh, believe me, I do. And I wouldn’t be surprised if Noah and Felicity aren’t engaged by the end of the year. But I don’t want you to be alone.”

“I’m happy alone.” Was that the truth? He wasn’t even sure anymore. It was a half-truth he’d repeated so many times that it felt completely true.

There was a pause before his mother asked, “What about Violet?”

He sat up a little straighter, his heart at full attention. “What about her?” he asked cautiously.

“I just know how much time you’ve been spending together and she’s such a nice girl.”

“She is a nice girl. That’s why she’s my friend.”

“And you spent a lot of time together this past summer, and I just thought...” She trailed off, letting out a sigh. “I just worry about you.”

“Mom, I promise you, I’m fine. I’m not dating because I’m good on my own, and I need to focus on work. I don’t need to be fixed up with anyone.”

“I just don’t want you to be lonely.”

“I’m not. Promise. I have friends, I have my family. I’m very happy with the way things are.”

“Hudson, baby. I don’t know that I believe you. Come on. Why don’t you ask Violet out? Are you not interested in her that way? She’s so pretty.” There was a pause, and then she said softly, “Don’t let Jessica take your past away from you. What’s done is done. You need to move on.”

“I have, Mom. Jessica’s in the past. I’m over it. I’m just not interested in dating or relationships right now.”

“So you’re really not interested in Violet?”

“Even if I was, there’s no indication she’d be interested in me, and I don’t want to risk making our friendship awkward and weird. I don’t want to risk losing one of my best tattoo artists and a good friend in one fell swoop.”

“But what if it did work out, Hudson? Because you tell me that she’s just a friend, but I’m your mother and I know you. I know you down to your bones, and I saw you with her all summer. I saw the way your eyes would light up when she walked in a room, or the way your smile would get bigger when you talked about her. You like her. Maybe more than like her.”

As the truth of his mother’s words hit home, his heart started to race so hard it almost hurt. Not racing in a butterflies and rainbows way but in a ohshitohshitohshit way. He felt as though he was dragging his brain through quicksand, trying to find the right words to tell his mother she was wrong. Completely wrong. But he couldn’t.

“I’m better off on my own, Mom,” he finally managed, unable to argue with anything she’d just said. Losing his father had almost killed him. Losing Jessica had almost killed him. And given how intensely he felt everything—the good and the bad, the highs and the lows—he just didn’t have it in him to

put himself out there again. He was tapped out. Empty. It wasn't ideal, but it was just the way things had to be.

"Listen, I gotta get back to work," he said, ending the silence stretching between them. "But I'll see you for Dad's thing next week, right?"

"Of course. Just...think about what I said, okay? I know you're a grown man and you can live your life the way you choose, but just...think about putting yourself out there again. That's all I ask."

"Okay. Love you."

"Love you, too, honey."

He tossed his phone down on his desk and yanked his glasses off, then scrubbed a hand over his face. After a few deep breaths, he resettled his glasses on his face and his eyes landed on the folder full of financial documents. He pulled it toward himself and spread out several papers over the desk, searching for a solution he'd missed the first hundred times he'd looked through them.



Someone is knocking on Violet's door. She opens her eyes, rubbing at them groggily. There's no light peeking in around the edges of her curtains. It can't be morning yet. She sits up and listens, her heart thumping. There's another knock, and this time she hears Hudson's voice.

"Vi? It's me." Hurriedly, she throws on a long, baggy T-shirt and rushes to the door.

"Yeah, coming," she calls, breathless. She unlocks and opens the door and Hudson's there, standing in the doorway with fire in his eyes.

"I couldn't sleep. I started walking and I ended up here." His familiar, masculine voice washes over her.

"I..." She shakes her head, her voice trailing off. "Come in. Since you're here." And then she steps toward him, wrapping him in a hug. It's just a greeting. It's not anything more. It can't be. She reminds herself of that even as she soaks in his warmth, his scent, his solid frame and strong arms cradling her. His hands smooth up and down her back, almost dipping to her ass. Almost, but not quite. Because that's not what he's here for.

He yawns deeply.

"Are you tired? Do you want to lie down?" she asks, and he nods.

"Yeah." He answers instantly because he thinks her request is completely innocent.

They lie down on the bed together, facing each other, and he wraps his arms around her again, tucking her against him. There's always been something about the way he smells that calms her. As though the scent of his skin has some magical power over her. She wants that scent all over her, but it'll never happen.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

"Yeah. I think I just needed to see you." His voice is gentle as he strokes a hand up and down her spine.

"Okay."

He presses a chaste kiss to the top of her head, and her nipples go hard despite the innocence of the gesture.

"Can I stay? I don't want to be alone."

"Of course you can stay," she whispers. His eyes meet hers, intense and sweet at the same time, and her clit pulses. She squeezes her thighs together, wanting desperately to throw her leg over his hip, but knowing that would be crossing a line. Especially given that she doesn't have any panties on.

"This feels nice," she whispers. "Everything's always so easy with you, Hud."

"Mmm," he murmurs, rubbing a hand up and down her back in a hypnotic, soothing rhythm. She has to stop herself from rubbing against him like a cat.

With each pass of his hand up and down her spine, she can feel wetness gathering between her thighs. She shifts, moving a bit closer to him, and as though he can sense what she needs—and he can, because he's Hudson, sweet, sensitive, Hudson—he gently hooks her leg over his, pulling her even closer. His hand—big and warm and strong—rests on her thigh, his fingers playing along the hem of her T-shirt.

His other hand starts to dip lower and lower on each pass down her spine, the tips of his fingers grazing her ass. She lets out a shivery little sigh, basking in the feeling of his hand on her back, his hand coasting higher and higher on her thigh.

His hand ventures even lower this time, disappearing under her T-shirt and skimming over her ass. He lets out a soft groan as her flesh fills his hand.

“No panties?” he asks, his voice going husky, his eyelids heavy.

She bites her lip and shakes her head. “No.”

“Vi,” he breathes and presses a kiss to her throat.

“Hud,” she moans, slipping her hands under his T-shirt and exploring the planes of skin and muscle there. His arms tighten around her and suddenly she’s on top of him, legs splayed on either side of his hips, bodies pressed together.

Heat flushes over her and she starts to shake with the effort not to grind against him. He fills his hands with her ass cheeks, kneading and pulling her against him so that her bare pussy lines up with the hard ridge in his jeans.

God, he’s so hard. For her.

“I can feel how wet you are,” he whispers, kissing along her jawline.

“Uh huh,” she pants, unable to stop herself from rocking her hips against him, pressing her aching clit against that hardness. “Oh God, this feels so good.”

“Good.” He nips at her neck, tugging her shirt down to expose her shoulder. His tongue traces circles over the bare skin he just exposed and she shivers, rocking into him harder. His hands are back on her ass, his grip harder this time as he helps her work her pussy against him.

“I’m going to leave a wet spot on your jeans,” she says, half warning, half apology.

“I don’t care, Vi. It’s hot how wet you are.”

She nuzzles her nose against his jaw, his beard tickling her skin. The scent of him is turning her to mush, to a needy pile of hormones. She bites back a moan and Hudson’s grip tightens again, working her shamelessly against him.

“Take what you need. Whatever you need, Vi.”

“I need you,” she breathes into his neck. “I need to come.”

One of his hands leaves her ass and trails down her soaking wet slit, his thumb flicking over her swollen clit. She moans, tilting her hips to give him better access. The wet sound of his thumb slicking over her clit fills the room.

She dips her head and kisses him, tasting him for the first time. They moan together as his thumb works magic between her thighs.

“Vi, God. I want this, but...we shouldn’t fuck. Okay? I wanna make you feel good, but we can’t fuck.”

“I know,” she moans. “I know. You can’t be who I want, and we don’t want to ruin the friendship.”

“Right. So we can’t fuck.”

“We won’t,” she promises. “I know we can’t.”

“But I want to feel you. I just need a taste of this wet pussy rubbing against my cock. That’s okay, right? That’s not fucking.”

She whimpers and nods enthusiastically. “That’s not fucking. That’s not breaking the rules.”

He drops his hands to his jeans, where he thumbs open the button and then drags down the zipper. Violet waits, unable to breathe, as he pulls his cock out. Then he spreads her wide with his fingers, engulfing his cock with her folds. She lets out a shuddery gasp at the velvety hot sensation of him and he grabs her hips, his earlier gentleness gone. Searing hot pleasure shoots through her as he grinds against her, coating his cock in her juices. She plucks at her nipples as they grind together, deep and slow, gasping for air. She starts to shake, unable to catch her breath, and the feeling only intensifies when he leans up and kisses her, the drag of his tongue over hers delicious and perfect.

The tip of his dick bumps against her clit and she moans into his mouth, so he does it again and again, reading her cues effortlessly.

“You’re going to make me come, Hud. Fuck. Fuck.”

“Don’t go without me. I’m close. God, I want to fuck you.”

“We can’t,” she sobs.

“I know.” He sounds as though he’s in pain.

His hands are now a vise on her hips as they hump and grind like teenagers. The beginning of her orgasm shimmers around her, and she doesn’t know how much longer she can hold on. But she wants to. Because she knows that when she comes, this is over.

Just then, he rolls her underneath him, his eyes glued to where his cock is enveloped in her lips. Glistening.

“That feels so fucking good,” she gasps and Hudson lets out a loud, sexy as hell groan as ropes of come start shooting out of his cock, landing on her skin in hot stripes.

He presses the tip of his cock to her clit, rubbing in circles as he comes, and at the sight of his come coating her pussy, Violet comes. Hard.

Violet jolted awake, alone and sweaty in her bed, her clit pulsing wildly between her legs.

Holy hell. She’d had an orgasm from that dream. A really intense one. She flopped over onto her side, pressing her thighs together, wanting the pulsing to die down. God, that had been hot and dirty and yet sadly realistic. Because even in her wildest sex dreams, she knew that Hudson couldn’t ever actually be hers. She knew that they’d never be more than friends. Even in fantasyland, she knew where they stood and that nothing would ever change that. He was completely entrenched in work, completely disinterested in dating.

Maybe this was her sign that she needed to move on. To accept the friendship for what it was and stop wanting more. If she couldn’t even have what she really wanted even in her dreams...that had to mean something, right? And maybe that would really be for the best because she couldn’t stand the thought of losing him as a friend.

She sighed, pushing thoughts of Hudson aside, and grabbed her phone on her bedside table to check the time. Her alarm was due to go off in just a few minutes, so she flung the covers back and stretched. The sun was peeking through the bamboo blinds on her windows, and she walked on her knees towards them, pulling them open. The sun was rising over Brooklyn, casting a warm orange glow over the brownstones across the street. Sunlight spilled into her room, landing on the white duvet and the intensely colorful art hanging on the white walls. She padded out of her small bedroom and into the equally small kitchen and living area. The entire apartment was about 400 square feet, but it was new and clean and all hers. It was also right at the tippy top of her budget at \$1500 a month, but she'd been tired of living with roommates and had felt ready to have her own place. As long as she kept up working full time at BSW and managed to sell a few pieces of art a month, she could manage it. Barely.

She started the coffee maker and then headed into the bathroom to brush her teeth. She grimaced at her reflection in the mirror, her curls sticking up at funny angles. She'd have to dampen it and scrunch it with a T-shirt in order to get them to calm down. Most of the time she liked her curls, but every once in a while, she saw a woman with stick straight hair thrown up in a sleek ponytail and felt a pang of envy.

Today would be a busy day. She was volunteering at Creative Kids that morning, which she loved, and then she had a few clients booked at the tattoo studio that afternoon. Afterward, she was invited to a rooftop hangout with some of the other people who lived in her building, with wine and appetizers. She probably wasn't going to go.

"You should go," she said, meeting her eyes in the mirror. She didn't want to, but she knew she should. It was just that meeting new people was...well, it was really freaking hard. It took her so long to get comfortable with others that most people gave up on her and moved on before a friendship really had a chance to take root. She wasn't good at letting people in. It was probably a defense mechanism leftover from being bullied for her dyslexia as a kid, but it was hard to let it go. Hard to trust that she could be her real, authentic self with

others and they wouldn't reject her. It was easier to just not try. Lonelier, but easier.

Once she was dressed, had scarfed down a bagel and some coffee, and had gathered her bag for the day, she headed out. The walk to the subway station was about fifteen minutes, and she listened to a fundraising podcast as she walked, trying to pick up tips about how to get her own organization going. She'd thought about working with an existing organization instead, but none of them had someone with an actual learning disability running them. Finding a new medium of expression through art was her lived experience, and because of that, she wanted to start her own and run it the way she thought would be the most helpful.

She caught the C line from Utica Avenue, then got off at High Street ten minutes later. From there, it was another couple of blocks to Water Street, where Creative Kids was located. On her right, Cadman Plaza park was bustling with people. It was a glorious early fall morning, with the sun shining, a light breeze blowing, a hint of crispness in the air. September in New York was often unpredictable. It could be cold, rainy, blustery, or just as hot as summer. But today was perfect, and everyone was out taking advantage of it.

She turned off her podcast and stashed her headphones as she walked, soaking in Brooklyn Heights, one of her favorite areas of Brooklyn. Lush green parks, cobblestone streets, views of both the Manhattan and Brooklyn bridges. It was postcard perfect, and at times almost looked like a movie set, it was so lovely. Just a block up from Water Street was Pebble Beach, a shingle beach that looked across the East River to Manhattan. Over the summer, she'd painted a series of paintings there, looking at the city skyline, capturing it at different times of day, a study of light and shadow, the interplay of glass and steel with stone and water. She'd sold them to a local art collective and had managed to put some money in the bank for once.

Maybe she should be looking to raise money with her art instead of slogging through grant applications. Funding art with art had a kind of poetic symmetry to it that she liked.

Violet stepped inside the building and headed toward the studio on the main floor. Creative Kids had been around for over ten years, and Violet had been volunteering for them for the past several years. It had been founded by Beatrix Wilder, a woman Violet had gone to art school with, and she'd jumped aboard when she'd heard that they were looking for volunteers. They ran programs for kids as young as two, and Violet loved spending her Saturday mornings surrounded by art and kids and creativity.

The studio itself was an open, airy space, the walls covered in art and lined with shelves holding supplies. Violet hung her bag up on the coat tree by the entrance and headed toward where Beatrix was busy setting everything up. Today's project was to create a unique superhero and learn some techniques about drawing comic book style art.

"Hey," said Violet, grabbing a sheaf of papers and starting to pin them to the easels scattered throughout the space. "How's it going?"

"Good. Here, set these up on the table," she said, handing Violet a pile of old comic books. "For inspiration."

"Good idea." She spread them out across the large paint-spattered table in the middle of the space. "Hey, so...I was hoping to pick your brain about something," she said, grabbing a handful of pencils and taking them over to the sharpener mounted on the wall.

"Shoot."

"Okay, well, you know that I've been applying for grants for the program I'm trying to get off the ground, and I'm finding a lot to apply for, but I'm not really getting anywhere. It seems to be radio silence or polite rejections, and I'm not sure what I'm doing wrong. Is it just a matter of being persistent and applying like crazy? Should I do some other kind of fundraising? Are there secret tips and tricks I don't know about?"

Beatrix blew out a breath. "Not really. Grant applications are a slog, no matter which way you slice it. Persistence often pays off, but it's not a guarantee. Maybe you could think about

starting smaller? What if you ran something out of a park this coming summer? Then you'd only need funding for supplies and some marketing."

Violet tilted her head, considering. "That's not a bad idea. Maybe I'm not being realistic with what I want to do." She glanced around the space. "Because what I want is something like this, but on a smaller scale and targeted at kids with learning disabilities."

"Maybe you need to look for grants in the education sphere instead of the arts one."

"Also a good idea."

It was nearly time for the class to start, and the kids started streaming in, everyone hanging up their jackets and finding a spot at an easel, chattering excitedly with their friends. During the session, Violet's role was to support Beatrix, who taught the kids what to do. Violet would then help them out, make suggestions, and make sure everyone had the supplies they needed in order to do that day's project.

Once Beatrix had given them basic instructions on how to come up with their character and some comic book drawing techniques, they were free to explore the comic books on the table and start sketching out their ideas. Violet loved this part of the creative process, watching as an idea became something real and tangible. Loving the way the different kids expressed themselves.

"Can you tell me about your superhero?" she asked Ava, one of the younger girls in the class.

Ava nodded excitedly, but then hesitated. "I...maybe I should pick something else."

Violet crouched down, looking at the dog in a cape that the girl had sketched out on her paper. "I think you should do what makes you excited."

Ava grinned. "His name is Super Booger Dog."

Violet laughed. "I love it. Tell me more."

“Well, he fights crime by shooting boogers and snot at bad guys, but his weakness is that he’s allergic to everything.”

“Amazing. You want some help? I can show you how to make the snot look really slimy.”

Ava’s smile grew, showing off a couple of missing teeth. “Okay! The slimier, the better!”

Violet laughed again. “I couldn’t agree more. Here, let’s make it look extra drippy, and then when we color it in, we want really light shading on the outer edges, and darker towards the middle. Like this.” She demonstrated, her hand moving over the page as she sketched out an experimental blob of snot. Ava giggled.

“That looks so good!”

“Here, you try. I bet you can do even better than that.” Something in her chest went soft and warm as she watched Ava work, concentrating with her tongue sticking out of the corner of her mouth. A vision of a little girl with blond curls and bright blue eyes hunched over an easel slammed into her, taking her breath away. Her eyes started to sting at the tenderness of it, but she hastily shoved it away. She’d have to actually date if she wanted to be a mom someday, and right now she was too hung up on one of her closest friends to even entertain the idea of having a healthy relationship with someone else.

God, she needed therapy, didn’t she?

For the next half an hour, the kids worked diligently on their projects, asking for help and guidance less as they became absorbed in their work. It was a feeling Violet knew well. There was nothing in the world quite like losing herself to a piece, getting lost in the movement of her brush over the canvas, the hours slipping away like minutes as she poured herself into what she was creating.

Beatrix ambled over, a few fresh smears of paint on her apron. “You know, I’ve been thinking. I have a friend—well, a friend of a friend, really—who’s an art agent. He’s fairly new to the scene and looking to build his client list. He’s dealing

with brokers, galleries, and clients looking for commissioned work. Maybe if he found you a few commissions, that would be a way to get some extra funding going for your project? Or you could host a gallery show with all of the proceeds going to your organization. In any case, he might be willing to help you. You want his number?”

“Really?” asked Violet, peering at Beatrix with a mixture of hope and wariness. “You think he’d be willing to take me on?” She’d considered getting an agent in the past, but had never followed through with it, assuming that everything about her was too small potatoes to attract any legitimate attention.

“Yeah. I mean, you have existing clients, you have a good reputation, your work is outstanding. I’m kinda surprised you don’t have an agent already, to be honest.”

Violet shrugged, feeling both proud and a little shy at Beatrix’s assessment of her. “Yeah?” Then she shook her head, not wanting to give the impression she was fishing for compliments. “I mean, sure. Of course, I’ll take his number. Thank you!” She had the sudden urge to hug Beatrix, but she tamped it down. Beatrix was not a hugger, and she was doing Violet a huge solid here. The last thing she wanted to do was to make her uncomfortable. “Let me just grab my phone.”

She retrieved her phone from her bag by the door, glancing down to see a waiting text from Hudson.

HUDSON:

Hey, I have a question for you when you’ve got a sec.

VIOLET:

Shoot.

She returned to Beatrix and took down her friend—well, friend of a friend’s—information, adding him to her contacts.

“Thank you,” she said, shooting Beatrix a smile. “I’ll definitely give him a call.”

“Tell him I referred you, and that I think you guys would be a great match. Professionally, I mean. I’m not trying to set you up with him.”

Violet laughed. “No worries. And thank you again.”

Just as she was about to slip her phone back into her pocket, it buzzed with an incoming text message.

HUDSON:

I have a family thing next week. Every year, we get together to remember my dad and honor his memory. Usually we have dinner, look at photos, share stories.

Violet worried her bottom lip between her teeth. Where was he going with this? Before she could figure out what to say, another text message came through.

HUDSON:

This year, Noah and Levi are bringing their significant others, and I was wondering if you’d come with me?

VIOLET:

You’re worried about feeling like a third wheel on an already tough day?

HUDSON:

More or less. And I can’t think of anyone else I’d rather bring than you.

She stared at his text message, re-reading it several times and trying to process the emotions washing over her. They were all too snarled up with each other to disentangle them, though. All she knew was that she felt a rush of adrenaline, a fluttering in her belly, and a slight heaviness in her chest weighing it all down.

VIOLET:

In that case, I'd be honored.

HUDSON:

Great, thank you. I will owe you one, big time. I'll text you the details, ok?

VIOLET:

Sure.

Then she shoved her phone back in her bag and returned her attention to the last few minutes of the art class, wondering what the hell she'd just gotten herself roped into.



Hudson rolled his bike to a stop in front of Violet's building, the engine purring between his thighs. After the accident earlier that year, his bike had been completely trashed. Thankfully, the insurance money had come through, and as soon as his arm had healed, he'd picked up a new one. Even though he had a driver's license, he'd never owned a car and planned to keep it that way.

He slipped his hand into the inside pocket of his leather jacket and pulled his phone out, shooting off a text to Violet.

HUDSON:

I'm out front.

VIOLET:

Be right down!

He turned the bike off and pulled off his helmet, unstrapping the extra he'd brought along for her. His bike wasn't a large cruiser, but there was enough room for two.

The front door of her building popped open and she strode out, the late afternoon sunshine catching her golden curls and making her look angelic. It actually took his breath away for a second, how heart-stoppingly gorgeous she looked. She stumbled slightly as her eyes landed on him straddling the bike, and then she grinned, walking faster toward him. He

could feel his heart rate pick up with every single step she took toward him.

“Well, isn’t this a nice surprise,” she said, running the tips of her fingers over the motorcycle’s handlebars. He could’ve sworn he felt that touch across his own skin, goosebumps trailing up his arms.

“What did you picture when I said I was picking you up?” he asked, handing her the spare helmet. She shrugged.

“I guess I didn’t think about it.” Then she slipped the helmet on over her head, a few strands of wild curls escaping out the bottom. He helped her adjust it and then she climbed onto the bike behind him, her thighs cradling his, her chest flush against his back. Her hands splayed over his stomach, and he felt the muscles there tighten in response.

He wasn’t used to having Violet this close. Wasn’t used to feeling her against his body, hearing her voice so close in his ear. It was an exercise in torture and restraint, but a necessary one because she was doing him a solid by coming with him tonight.

Every single year, he dreaded this day. It was maudlin and depressing and like pouring salt into a wound that had just started to heal. His dad was dead; why couldn’t he be left alone to remember and grieve in his own way? Why did he have to spend the painful anniversary of the day the towers fell torturing himself with photos and mementos and stories?

When he’d found out that Noah and Levi were bringing Felicity and Madison this year, he’d almost bailed. He’d already been dreading the day since Labor Day, and then knowing he’d be playing third wheel to his brothers’ lovey dovey relationships was almost too much. Not that he begrudged them their happiness or desire to have someone’s support, but it only emphasized how alone he was. No Dad. No partner. Just him. And fuck, was that lonely sometimes.

He revved the bike and Violet gripped him tighter.

So he did it again.

She scooted closer, so close he could feel the heat from between her thighs pressing against him and it took every single ounce of brain power he possessed to navigate them safely through Brooklyn, over the Manhattan Bridge, across Manhattan through SoHo, and over the river to Jersey City, where his family all lived. Driving across the city with the sun starting to sink slowly in the sky, the wind whipping around him, Violet pressed against him...that was a happy place if he'd ever found one. The drive ended far too soon—as far as Hudson was concerned, he could've spent the entire evening riding around the city with Violet pressed against him. It was one of those moments where everything else seemed to fade away and nothing else mattered but the here and now. Completely zen. It was something he needed more of in his life, especially with the stress of recovering from the accident and worrying about the shop's finances.

After he'd parked the bike in his mom's driveway, Violet carefully pulled her helmet off, her curls spilling everywhere and springing back to life. Unable to help himself, Hudson reached out and brushed a few stray tendrils out of her eyes before taking the helmet from her and stashing it.

"What did you think of the bike?" he asked, taking her hand and leading her toward the front door. As his palm slid against hers, she let out a soft gasp that he almost wished he hadn't heard, because it only made him want things he had no right to want.

"A little scary at first, but then super fun. Like, exhilarating. Thanks for not crashing."

He chuckled and bumped his shoulder against hers. "Only because you were on board. Otherwise, I'm a madman on that thing."

"Oh, I'm sure," she said, rolling her eyes playfully.

All of this—his attraction to Violet, his growing feelings for her—would be so much less complicated if she wasn't so fucking cute all the time.

He pulled them to a stop. "Hey," he said softly, brushing another wayward strand out of her eyes. "You know I'd never

do anything reckless with you on board, right? You're safe with me."

Her eyes went soft and she grinned at him. "I know. I trust you, Hud."

In that moment, something passed between them, the air seeming to thicken and pulse around them. But then he reminded himself what they were there for and cleared his throat, leading her up the porch steps.

"Is this where you grew up?" she asked, taking in the wicker furniture on the porch, the garden boxes filled with bright yellow mums.

He nodded. "Yeah. I'm honestly surprised that Mom hasn't downsized yet."

"That's because I'm hoping for grandkids," said his mother, who'd opened the door as they mounted the steps.

"Did I ever tell you that subtlety is one of your best traits?" deadpanned Hudson as he bent to give his mother a kiss on the cheek.

His mother reached up and pinched his cheek far harder than necessary. "Did I ever tell you sarcasm is one of yours?"

Hudson laughed. "Touché. Mom, you remember Violet," he said, urging Violet forward with his hand on the small of her back.

"Of course. It's so nice of Hudson to invite you to join us," she said, and then shot Hudson a look weighted with meaning. He fought the urge to roll his eyes. "Everyone else is already here. Come on in. I made lasagna, Caleb's favorite." She turned and patted Hudson on the arm. "Eggplant for you, of course."

"Thanks."

They stepped inside and right away, he felt as though he'd been punched in the gut. The console table in the front hall was covered in framed photos of his dad—his parents' wedding picture, his official fire captain's portrait, pictures of him with the boys at various family events, like Christmases

and birthdays. Tea lights flickered between the photos, and in the middle of the table sat the flag that had adorned his coffin, folded into a neat triangle and encased in a box with a glass lid.

The flag usually sat on the mantel in the living room, and for as long as he could remember, Hudson had avoided looking at it. It hurt too much to think about that day. To think about what his father had sacrificed. To think about how their lives had changed completely in the blink of an eye, along with the lives of the families of so many other first responders.

“Hudson, why don’t you give Violet the tour and then come join us in the kitchen for drinks?” suggested his mother.

He rubbed a hand over the back of his prickling neck. “Uh, yeah. Sure.” Maybe it had been a mistake inviting Violet to this event. He could already feel his emotions—intense and heavy and ready to pull him under—rising to the surface and tinging everything. Touching everything. Making him feel things he didn’t want to feel. He could barely manage it without Violet there, but having her by his side added another dimension of things he was trying desperately not to feel.

He led her upstairs and showed her the main bedroom and Noah’s old room. “And this is the room I shared with Levi,” he said, pushing open a door that still had panels from a comic book he’d drawn in high school taped to it. Violet traced her fingers over the yellowed and curling paper and then followed him inside. He took it in, trying to see it through Violet’s eyes. Twin beds against either wall with shelves above lined with books, trophies, and medals. Posters for the New York Rangers and Green Day. An old PlayStation was hooked up to a small TV, and in the corner was a desk with an ancient computer that he and Levi had fought over almost daily.

Violet walked slowly around the space, and something inside him warmed. She sank down onto his bed and grabbed a notebook from the shelf, thumbing it open. She flipped through the pages without saying anything, just quietly observing, her bottom lip caught between her teeth.

“You were already drawing tattoos in your teens,” she said, running her fingers over an American Classic style anchor.

He sat down on the bed beside her, tilting his head as he looked at the clumsy pencil drawings on the page. “Yeah. I was always drawn to it, this melding of art and personal expression. I always knew it was what I wanted to do.”

She nodded and flipped to another page, featuring a huge dragon curving from the top corner to the bottom one. “I like this one. The intricacy of the scales, the shading around the wings. It’s good. How old were you when you drew it?”

He shrugged. “I dunno. Sixteen or seventeen, I’d guess.”

“You were talented even back then.”

He felt his cheeks warm, and he reached over and flipped the page. It was filled with animals—tigers, butterflies, bats, lions, wolves.

“Oh, this wolf is really good, too,” she said, once again running her fingers over it, as though she needed to touch it to connect to it.

“That means a lot coming from you,” he said, shifting closer to her on the bed to get a better look at the notebook.

“What do you mean?” she asked, flipping to another page.

“You’re the most talented artist I’ve ever met. You paint and sculpt and sell your pieces to actual collectors. I’m good at what I do, but you’re on a whole other level, Vi.”

She set the notebook in her lap and turned to look at him. Their eyes met, and once again, there was that thickening, pulsing sensation.

Hudson couldn’t deny it any longer: he wanted Violet. He’d be a fool to act on it, but fuck did he want her.

“Come on,” he said, rising from the bed and needing a little space. “Let’s go back downstairs.”

She put the notebook back on the shelf and rose to follow him. He showed her through the living room and into the kitchen, where everyone else was gathered around the island,

bottles of beer in hand. There were more pictures of his dad lining the counter and Hudson forced himself to look at them. It was hard to believe that after two decades, they were still so hard to look at. It still felt so raw.

Violet said hello to everyone and then accepted the beer Noah offered her, settling in at the island. He noticed that her back and shoulders were a little rigid, indicating she wasn't completely at ease.

"I noticed a guitar in the living room next to the fireplace," said Violet. "Was that your dad's?"

They all laughed and she frowned in confusion. "It was," said Hudson. "And God, he was awful."

"Remember that rendition of 'House of the Rising Sun' he always played whenever he brought that thing out?" asked Levi. "I always think of him when I hear that song." He smiled sadly, and Madison looped her arm around his shoulders, pressing her lips to his temple. The show of tenderness made Hudson ache. He missed having that kind of connection with someone, as scary as it was.

"What was he good at?" asked Violet, glancing over at the pictures.

"Barbecuing," they all answered in unison and then burst out laughing again. "It was his thing," said Noah, smiling wistfully. "He was master of the grill."

"And he never let anyone forget it," said his mother, dabbing at her eye.

"He always took us to the Bronx Zoo, every summer," said Hudson, wanting to contribute a memory of his own, despite the tightness in his chest.

"Aw, that's nice," said Felicity. "I wish I could've met him. He sounds like a wonderful man."

"He was," said his mother, her expression growing sad. "He really was. There was no one like him. He was handsome and loving and hardworking. Whatever he did, he gave it his all. Right until the very end."

“Except maybe playing the guitar,” deadpanned Levi, and the mood lightened again.

She glanced around the room at her sons. “I see so much of him in each of you, both physically and otherwise. Even though he’s gone, it gives me peace knowing that he lives on in each of you.”

Hudson’s throat thickened painfully and he took a long pull on his beer. This was what he’d been dreading. The sharp pain of grief that would stay with him for days if he let it in. Some people might’ve thought it was a blessing to have such intense emotions, but it wasn’t. It was hell. Feelings left scars and he was forced to deal with the aftermath of those scars. Losing his father had left a scar. Jessica walking out on him had left a scar, albeit a much smaller one. He didn’t need more scars.

As dinner cooked, they shared more stories about his dad—watching movies and eating ice cream, the annual family trip to Cape Cod, going to the beach, playing Legos. There were so many memories, and Hudson was grateful for them, even if they were painful.

And throughout it all, Violet listened attentively, asking questions here and there, and giving his forearm the occasional squeeze. As though she knew that he needed that contact to stay in the present and not get swamped by the memories.

Deciding that a change of subject was in order, he turned his attention to Noah, whose newest tattoo was still wrapped in a clear bandage. He’d come in earlier that week so Hudson could finally do the tattoo of the phoenix on his forearm he’d wanted since the spring.

“How’s it healing?” he asked, moving closer and peering at the orange and red flames dancing across the skin of Noah’s inner forearm. “Looks good, I think.”

Noah nodded, glancing down at the tattoo. “Yeah, I think it’s healing fine.” Noah already had several tattoos, and he knew how to take care of them. “Feels itchy, but I know that’s normal.”

“Bah, I don’t know how you can do that to yourselves,” said their mother, rolling her eyes. “I gave you perfectly good skin. Why do you need to draw all over it?”

“Are you saying you don’t want a tattoo, Mom?” teased Levi. As the baby, he was able to get away with more than Noah or Hudson, and while it had driven them nuts as kids, they now saw it as an asset. Whenever there was a situation she wouldn’t like—bad news, a difficult conversation, whatever—they sent Levi in first.

“No, thank you. No offense, sweetie, but I would never,” she said, patting Hudson on the arm.

“And we’re not ruining the skin you gave us. We’re enhancing it,” said Levi, who also had a couple of tattoos courtesy of Hudson.

“I don’t know about that,” she said, then poked Hudson in the ribs. “I think you have more ink than skin at this point.” She was probably right about that. He had tattoos on his neck, down each arm, covering his upper chest and almost his entire back, and all the way up his left leg, most of them his own art.

She sighed. “I am proud of you though, honey. I know how hard it is to run a business. And even though it’s not what I would’ve chosen for you, if it makes you happy, then I’m happy.”

“It does. Make me happy, I mean. It’s a gift to be able to not only share my art with people, but have it bring meaning to their lives, too. Not every artist gets to say that. It’s art and creativity and emotion and life, all rolled up into one.”

The oven timer dinged and his mother rushed over, pulling out a large Pyrex dish followed by a second, smaller one. “I made you one with eggplant, mushrooms and zucchini,” she said, meeting Hudson’s eyes over her shoulder. He smiled gratefully. He’d been a vegetarian since he was a teenager, and while his mom had had a hard time adapting to it at first, she’d become used to it once it had become clear he wasn’t changing his mind. He’d even considered going full vegan, but had found it just a little too challenging. Cheese was life, as far as he was concerned.

They all gathered around the table, drinks in hand and started to help themselves to the salad and garlic bread on the table. All conversation died as they ate, savoring Veronica's amazing cooking. In the dining room, more photos and candles lined the credenza and Hudson felt that knot he'd been fighting against all night start to take root right in the middle of his chest.

"Violet, honey, what are you working on these days?" asked his mother as she passed around the salad bowl for the second time. Violet took it and spooned some more of the creamy Caesar onto her plate.

"Not a whole lot right now. Hudson keeps me busy at the shop, and I volunteer with a kids art organization. I'd like to start my own program, so I've been researching grants and applying for funding, but no luck so far." She paused, and then added, "A friend did give me the contact info for an art agent who's new and building his client list though."

"What?" asked Hudson, a grin spreading across his face. "You never mentioned that."

She shrugged, humble as always. "Well, nothing's come of it yet. I'm supposed to meet him for a late breakfast tomorrow. He asked me to bring my portfolio, so we'll see if he's interested. But if he is, he might be able to get me some higher paying commissions, better gallery shows. It might be a way to fund the program and make a little extra money."

"Vi, that's amazing," he said, reaching over and giving her shoulder a squeeze. Her cheeks went pink and she ducked her head down, concentrating on her lasagna.

"Thanks," she said softly. "I just don't want to count my chickens before they hatch."

"There's no way this guy takes a look at your portfolio and doesn't sign you on the spot. You're amazing."

She looked up and when her eyes met his, they were bright, luminous almost. Shining with something he couldn't quite name. When he looked away, he saw his mother watching him with a knowing look on her face.

Once dinner was finished, his mother served homemade tiramisu, another of his dad's favorites, and they once again returned to sharing stories and memories. And while it was good to remember, to look back and smile and laugh and be grateful for the short time they did have with him, it also hurt. It was amazing that grief over something that happened so long ago could still feel so fresh. Fresh in a way that made his heart beat sluggishly, made his pulse pound dully in his temples. Emotional pain manifesting as physical pain.

As though she could sense what he needed, Violet wove her fingers through his beneath the table, giving his hand a gentle squeeze. And at that simple, comforting contact, it was as though something settled back into place. As though a fog lifted and what was right in front of him became obvious.

Violet. He had feelings for Violet. Strong ones. And for once, he wanted to act on them. The thought was still terrifying, but even scarier was the thought of knowing the truth of how he felt about her and doing nothing about it.

In the space of ten seconds, he felt as though he'd blinked and his entire worldview had shifted.

He squeezed her hand back and then pulled their joined hands into his lap, running his thumb over her knuckles. She inhaled softly, and something heady and powerful charged through him. He'd lived like a monk ever since everything had gone down in flames with Jessica.

He didn't want to live that way anymore. Just the thought of exploring Violet, learning what made her moan, what made her sigh, what made her beg for more...fuck. His cock started to thicken at the thought.

Granted, he didn't know if she wanted him that way. She might not, but that was a bridge he was prepared to cross. He needed to know.

With dessert finished, his mom raised her cup of coffee for a final toast. "You know, Caleb would be so incredibly proud of the men you've become. Good hearted men thriving in their careers and with a strong connection to your family. Noah, I know he'd be thrilled that you followed in his footsteps and

made captain. And I know he'd be proud of the balance you've found between being there for your family, and living your own life so that one day, hopefully soon, you'll have a family of your own." She smiled meaningfully at Noah and Felicity. "Levi, he would love that you chose to become a paramedic, to pursue a career saving lives and helping people. He'd be so proud of who you've become and the life you're living. And Hudson, I know he'd be overjoyed that you followed your passion for art and turned it into a career. It's not the path we expected you to take, but your father always believed that God put things in front of us for a reason, whether it be people, opportunities, desires. You're following your path, and that would make him happy. I know that he's resting peacefully because of the three wonderful men he left behind to carry on his legacy." She wiped at her eyes and then they all clinked glasses.

Hudson blew out a breath and took a sip of his drink, pulling his mother's words deep inside him. His father wouldn't want him to live stuck in the past or holding himself hostage to old grief. To old wounds. Living his life in fear of pain instead of seeking joy. And he wanted to make him proud. He wanted to live up to the kernels of truth in his mother's words. He wanted to be worthy of that pride.

And the way he'd been hiding himself away from the world over the past few years—that wasn't worthy at all. It was weak. It was letting fear win. Fuck, if his father could run up the stairs of a burning tower trying to save people knowing it might cost him his life, he could face opening his heart again.

And with Violet's hand still in his, he knew he had to. There was no alternative.



Violet clung to Hudson as the bike roared over the Brooklyn Bridge, the cool night air whipping around her. She could feel the warmth of him against her hands, even through his leather jacket, could feel the rock hard muscles there. Could feel his strong thighs pressed against hers, making her throb. She was almost painfully aroused, something the vibrations of the bike wasn't doing anything to help.

God, she was so wound up after that dinner. She hadn't expected him to be so vulnerable with her, showing her his childhood bedroom, inviting her to share in remembering his dad. She'd felt close to him, closer than she ever had, and she knew it was because he'd opened himself up, letting her see parts of him that he didn't openly share. She'd seen the sheen of tears in his eyes a few times as they'd shared memories of his dad, and he hadn't done anything to hide it.

When she'd reached for his hand under the table, she'd meant it solely as a comforting gesture, but for her, it had quickly turned into something more. Connection, and need, and the hunger for more. She'd done her best to ignore those other feelings, though. She wouldn't let herself go down that road with Hudson. She wasn't foolish enough to risk the only close friendship she had, no matter how into him she was.

Hudson smoothly changed lanes to move around a line of yellow taxis, then took them around Cadman Plaza park as he curved away from the bridge. Instead of navigating

immediately back to her place, he took them on a winding route through Brooklyn Heights. The river was a dark mass, reflecting the gleaming lights of the skyline, and even though the city was as busy and bustling as ever, Violet felt that there was a kind of peace that settled over everything once the sun went down.

By the time he turned down her little tree-lined street, she was dreading getting off of the bike. She didn't want to unwrap herself from around him. She didn't want today to end. Didn't want the connection she was feeling with him to end. For just a little while longer, she wanted to let herself pretend that this could be something.

He pulled up to a stop at the curb in front of her building, and she let go of him with a reluctant sigh, immediately missing his solid warmth against her. She wrestled the helmet off her head, sending her curls flying everywhere, and she swiped at them, trying to push them out of her face. Surprising her, he killed the engine and pulled off his own helmet.

"Thanks for coming with me tonight. I know that was probably weird for you, but I really appreciated the company and the support," he said, pushing a hand through his hair. It was slightly disheveled from the helmet, and she had to curl her fingers into her palms to stop herself from reaching out and running her fingers through it.

"Of course. I was honored that you asked me."

A silence hung in the air between them, permeated by a siren in the distance.

"Do you want to come up for some tea?" she asked after a moment, sensing that they both wanted to stretch the night out. Or maybe he just wasn't ready to go home alone yet. In any case, he was lingering, and she wanted him to linger.

"Yeah, sure." He pulled the keys from the ignition, stashed the helmet under the seat, and then locked the handlebars. Why was every single thing he did so sexy? It was as though he was designed to be completely perfect for her. He was artistic and smart and sweet and funny. Muscular and covered

in tattoos. Sensitive and passionate about the things he loved. And damn, did he look good in that leather jacket.

Giving her head a small shake and reminding herself that not only was he her closest friend, he was one of her only friends, she led the way up the stairs and into her building. He followed her, and she could feel his gaze on her like a brand, searing her skin. She arched her back, and she wasn't sure if she was running from or toward the sensation of being under his scrutiny.

She unlocked the door to her apartment and closed it behind them, watching as he toed off his boots and shucked his jacket. And then he stretched, revealing an inch of skin and muscle as his T-shirt rode up. Then he rubbed a hand absently over his stomach.

Everything this man did was beyond sexy. He was like a walking aphrodisiac and Violet felt as though she was losing her mind. As though the tug of war going on inside her between what she wanted and what couldn't happen was going to rip her in two.

She moved into the tiny kitchen and started the kettle, opening the cabinet and rummaging around for the box of herbal tea she knew was in there. Hudson wandered into the kitchen and made himself at home at the small bistro table in the windowed alcove.

“Thanks for inviting me up,” he said, slinging one tattooed arm over the back of the chair. “I wasn't ready to go home to an empty apartment.”

She shot him a crooked smile. “I had a feeling.”

“You've always been so good at reading me.”

She let out a little laugh. “You're the one thing I'm good at reading, apparently.”

“Vi, don't—”

“It's what I do, Hud. I learned early on that it's just easier if I make a joke about it first. Really. It's okay.”

“I get that it’s a defense mechanism for you, but you don’t need to do that with me.”

She focused on making the tea, because he didn’t understand that she *did* need to do it with him. Especially him. To keep that little bit of distance. The safety of the walls she’d painstakingly built over the past twenty years. Because if she didn’t, she’d do something she couldn’t take back and she’d ruin everything.

And then she’d truly be alone.

“Your dad seemed like a really amazing guy,” she said, changing the subject. The kettle started to boil, and she focused on making the tea, trying to ignore the way her stomach was twisting itself into knots.

“He really was,” said Hudson softly, and she placed a mug of tea in front of him, then sat down in the empty chair across from him.

“I can’t imagine how hard it was for you all, losing him so tragically and at such a young age.”

His lips firmed into a thin line and he wrapped his large hands around the mug. “It was. I don’t think I’ve ever fully processed it, you know? The grief, I mean. Days like this bring it all back to the surface and it feels so fresh and raw that it’s like it’s ripping me up from the inside, and I don’t understand how it can still be that way after all this time.”

She reached over and laid a hand on his forearm. “Maybe it stays so fresh because you hang onto it. You press it down deep inside and don’t ever let it out.”

“I can’t. It hurts too much.”

“You can. The world won’t come crashing down if you do. You need to let it out so you can let it go.”

He exhaled shakily and looked away, his shoulders tight. “It’s not just sadness. There are layers to it. There’s anger—anger about the terrorist attack, anger that he had to sacrifice his life because of something done out of pure hatred. There’s disappointment over everything he’s missed and will miss. There’s loneliness because there are times where I wish so

badly I could just ask him for help or advice and he's not there. Fuck." He wiped at his eyes and before she could stop herself, Violet rounded the table and sat down on his lap, wrapping her arms around him. His arms went around her immediately and she held him tighter. His shoulders shook and she held him, smoothing her hand up and down his back, wishing she could take some of this pain for him, but glad he was letting it out.

"It's okay, Hud," she whispered, and she leaned back, pressing her forehead to his. "You're okay. It hurts, but you're okay."

He moved his head back and forth, their noses brushing. She could feel his warm breath fanning against her lips, and her stomach dropped down to her ankles. Her heart fluttered wildly, and she didn't know what to wish for more: him to pull away, or to kiss her and give her a taste of the mouth she'd fantasized about.

He let out a low sound and slid one of his hands up her back and into her hair, tangling in the curls there.

"Vi," he said, his voice a ragged whisper. "Gonna kiss you."

A riot of butterflies erupted in her stomach and even though she knew she should stop him for the sake of their friendship, she didn't want to. She wanted this. Needed this, just as badly as he did. Having dreamed of it made it that more difficult to stop him because she wanted to know if the reality lived up to the fantasy.

And then his mouth was on hers. His lips were firm but gentle, and so, so warm. She let out a soft whimper and kissed him back, parting her lips slightly, wanting to taste him. He moaned and swept his tongue along her bottom lip, completely unhurried. She opened even more for him and his tongue slid against hers, making her clit pulse in time with her heartbeat. He took his time with the kiss, savoring and exploring, tasting and discovering, and she knew that she was going to say yes to whatever he wanted. Not just because he needed whatever

cathartic release she could provide, but because she was absolutely powerless to pretend she didn't want this too.

His fingers tightened in her hair, sending tingles racing across her scalp, and she deepened the kiss, wanting more. More of him. Of his taste, his touch, his body. More of the illusion that this could be anything more than tonight.

With a gruff moan, he swept his tongue against hers, and she knew that she should pull away. This was risky. Irresponsible. Dangerous, even. Not only was he her friend, but he was her boss. They shouldn't be doing this. There were reasons they shouldn't. But she couldn't seem to remember most of them as he kissed her into a quivering mass of nerves.

He broke the kiss and buried his face in her neck, dragging his lips over the sensitive skin there. His stubble scraped at her skin as his lips and tongue sucked and soothed, making her writhe in his lap.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" she said, letting her head fall to the side and giving him better access. He tugged on her earlobe with his teeth in response.

"I need you, Violet. I need you so much right now. But if you want to stop, we'll stop." She could hear the need in his voice, and she knew it wasn't just a physical need, but an emotional need. A release. An outlet for the grief he was still struggling with. And even though she knew it was probably a terrible idea, she wanted to give him what he needed.

He lifted his head. His pupils were blown with lust, his lips parted in a way that made her want to kiss him again.

"I don't want to stop."

And then his mouth was on hers again, claiming her with hot, intoxicating sweeps of his tongue. Kissing Hudson wasn't like kissing anyone else. It was hotter and better and so much more perfect than she could've imagined.

His hand splayed over her stomach, his fingers warm through the thin material of her blouse. He moaned and deepened the kiss, and then tugged her blouse out of her jeans, his hand sliding up under her shirt. She gasped against his

mouth as his hand closed over her breast, his thumb brushing over her peaked nipple. With an impatient growl that had her melting against him, he tugged the cup of her bra down, filling his palm with her breast.

Oh, God. This was all happening so fast. Fast enough that she couldn't think. Not clearly, anyway. Her thoughts were like little snippets, snatched away before they were complete because of the way he was kissing her, touching her.

We shouldn't do this—oh fuck I love the way he kisses like that

Just this once because he needs it

Yes, pinch my nipple, fuck

This is about release. Not you. It doesn't mean anything

God, I'm so wet

Just this once because I need it

We have too many clothes on

This is going to be a disaster

I'm his comfort and he's my fantasy and for tonight, that's enough

God, I want him inside me

With a sigh, she pulled herself off of his lap and silently offered him her hand. He met her eyes, a beat passing between them, his chest heaving. And then he stood, taking her hand and letting her lead him to her bedroom.

They made it to the bed and then he was kissing her again, his hands roving over her body, setting fire to every single one of her nerve endings. She broke contact with him just long enough to tug her blouse up over her head and toss it to the floor, then did the same with her bra. Hudson's fingers went to the button of her jeans, and a fresh wave of butterflies erupted in her stomach. God, they were really doing this.

Holy shit.

The kiss grew dirtier, a messy slide of tongues and lips as he helped her work her jeans down over her hips. She kicked free of them, leaving her in nothing but a pair of plain pink panties.

“Violet,” he whispered, his eyes bright in the dim lighting of her room. “Fuck.”

He palmed her breast, his gaze devouring her. Looking at her as though he was starving and she were a buffet.

Because this was what he needed. Comfort. Escape. To feel something other than grief and loss.

He traced the pads of his fingers over her nipple, and she gasped, arching into his touch. And then his hand traveled lower, down over her belly and between her legs until he was cupping her over her panties.

He groaned and dragged his palm over her, the friction too brief to give her any kind of relief from the wild pulsing that had settled there.

She could feel his hands trembling slightly as he touched her, roving from her breasts to her pussy to her ass and back, as though he wished he could touch all of her at once.

He slid his fingers into the waistband of her panties, pulling them down, and she rose to her knees to shimmy out of them. He knelt behind her, and when she was fully naked, he pulled her against him, her back flush with his chest. He trailed sucking kisses up and down her neck, scorching a path over her sensitive skin as he rolled her nipples between his fingers, plucking and pinching at them. She bucked against him, and then, leaving one hand on her breast, his other hand slid lower, down her belly and to her pussy.

“Hud,” she gasped as he parted her with deft fingers, slicking them up and down her slit. He groaned and then started circling her swollen clit, making her head fall back against his shoulder as she tried not to fly apart. “Fuck, that feels good.”

He slid first one and then a second finger inside her, then dropped his hand from his breast to massage her clit. She

started to shake, searing hot pleasure skating down her spine and curling in the pit of her stomach. She clenched around his fingers, the wet sound of him fucking her filling the room.

“Oh God, you’re gonna make me come,” she panted, and she could feel her slick juices coating her inner thighs. She was dripping everywhere, soaked. Greedy and hungry and terrified of what would happen when he was finished with her.

He rubbed her clit in tighter and tighter circles, curling the fingers inside her, pushing her to the brink. Everything inside her tightened and then burst into hot, heavy throbs. She bit her lip to muffle her scream as she rode his hand, bucking and writhing.

He pulled his hand free and she fell back on the bed. Her heart vaulted into her throat and then plummeted into her stomach at the sight of Hudson on his knees above her. Holding her gaze, he reached behind him and yanked his T-shirt up over his head.

Oh, fuck. He was glorious. Roped with muscle to a degree she hadn’t expected, and covered in colorful tattoos, running from his neck down both arms, over his pecs and down the middle of his chest.

He was beautiful. He was perfection.

Reaching up, she skimmed her hands over his warm skin, wanting to trace every single gorgeous line on his body.

He dropped his shirt to the floor and then eased himself down on top of her, his mouth crashing into hers. She wrapped her legs around his hips, rocking up into him.

“You need to be naked,” she whispered, fresh arousal zinging through her, bright and hot. Reaching between them, she cupped him through his jeans, letting out a loud moan at what she found. Even through the denim, she could tell he was thick and long. And so freaking hard. She stroked him and he kissed her again. She could taste how badly he needed this. The release. The comfort. And mixed in was how badly she needed to indulge her feelings for him, just this once.

He rose to his knees again, his belt buckle clanking softly as he opened his pants. Then he heaved a breath, his muscular chest expanding, and pushed a hand through his hair. “Shit. Do you have a condom?”

She pressed her lips together and shook her head. “No. I haven’t been with anyone in a long time...” She slid her hand up his abs. “And neither have you, I don’t think. And we’ve both been tested for work. So unless there’s a reason I don’t know about...we don’t need one.”

She could see the relief on his face. “I’ll pull out.”

She smiled up at him and nodded. “God, yes. Come on me.”

He made an anguished sound and rose from the bed to shuck his pants. She held her breath as his pants hit the floor, her eyes glued to the gorgeous cock standing tall between his legs. He was even bigger than she’d anticipated—long and thick with a beautifully flared head already dripping with pre-come. He stroked himself and then climbed back on the bed, making her heart pound crazily.

He gripped her hips and urged her up onto her hands and knees, and then he was right there, his thick head nudging at her entrance. She sucked in a shaky breath, pressing back into him. He slipped inside, just an inch, and they both let out a loud moan. He dropped down over her, kissing a path over her shoulder blades as he withdrew and then worked himself in another inch. Her fingers curled into the duvet as he thrust his hips in a steady rhythm, sinking deeper and deeper with each thrust. His hands gripped her hips and he pulled her back onto him, filling and stretching her so that her entire body was throbbing and tingling. God, he was big.

“Fuck me, Hud,” she moaned, wriggling against him. “Please. Please.”

“Christ,” he ground out and established a hard, deep rhythm, the drag of his thick cock against her sensitive walls exquisite. His grip tightened on her hips, and he started making the most deliciously masculine sounds, somewhere between a grunt and a growl. Her muscles started to tighten

again and she slipped a hand between her legs, rubbing her clit. She was already so turned on and sensitive from her earlier orgasm that she knew it wouldn't take her much to get there. The mattress creaked beneath them, shaking in its frame as he fucked her relentlessly, chasing after the release he needed so badly.

“Fuck, you take me so well,” he growled, and it was his praise that sent her over the edge, her clit pulsing and throbbing against her fingers. She clenched around his thrusting cock and he let out another loud groan. Pressing her face into the pillow, she moaned, her entire body shaking with the intensity of the pleasure racing through her veins.

Before the last of her orgasm had faded, he pulled out of her and flipped her onto her back, then slid back inside her. “I need to see your pretty face,” he whispered, then kissed her, stealing her breath. Stealing her heart, even though she knew that wasn't what he was after. But it didn't matter. Tonight was about what he needed.

She wound her legs around his thrusting hips, his rhythm slower but just as deep as before. Even though her eyes kept fluttering closed with heady pleasure, she needed them open. She needed to remember every single thing about this. The sweat dotting Hudson's hairline, a curled lock falling forward onto his forehead. His muscles bunching and flexing, making the intricate tattoos ripple. The grunts and groans falling from his mouth. The scent of his skin. The fullness of him inside her, nothing between them.

“Fuck, your eyes are gonna make me come,” he ground out, and slipped out of her, his hand going to his glistening cock.

The need to taste him surged through her and she quickly flipped herself back onto her hands and knees, facing him this time. Before he could protest, she took his cock into her mouth, melting at the knowledge that she was tasting herself on Hudson's cock.

He threaded his hands into her hair, taking what she was offering. “Shit!” he growled, and she felt the first spurt hit her

tongue. She swallowed him down greedily, imprinting the taste of him on her brain. He came long and hard, panting and groaning through his orgasm and she tried her best to swallow down every drop of his come.

She looked up at him, and he blinked slowly, as though coming back to himself. Then he smiled, the sweet, lopsided grin that she liked best and he lifted his hand to her face, using his thumb to wipe some of his come from the corner of her mouth. Without thinking, she turned and captured his thumb between her lips, licking it clean. Savoring what she knew would be the last taste of him.

His smile grew, and he stroked her face tenderly. Affectionately. “Jesus, Violet. You’ve forever ruined me.”

She smiled tentatively at him, and she realized she was shaking. Her eyes stung and her throat thickened, but she shoved it away, doing her best to stay in the moment and not let her mind race ahead to what was coming next.

Catching her completely by surprise, he urged her up with his fingers under her chin and then kissed her, a slow, lingering kiss. Apparently he liked that he could taste himself on her, because he moaned and wrapped his arms around her, pulling her tight against him.

“That was incredible,” he murmured against her lips. He kissed her again, and again. “You’re incredible.”

“You’re welcome,” she said, ducking her head and nuzzling into his neck. From the corner of her eye, she caught sight of the clock on her nightstand and was surprised to see that it was already after 11. “I’m sure you want to get home,” she said, pulling away slightly, needing to put that little bit of distance between them. He let her pull away, but when she met his eyes, he cocked an eyebrow. “You don’t have to stay,” she added, in case he needed that out. After all, this was Hudson. Kind, sweet, Hudson.

“What if I want to?”

She closed her eyes for a moment. No, he couldn’t stay. This was already messy and hard and painful. Sleeping next to

him would be torture.

But this would be her only chance to feel his body against hers all night. To indulge her rampaging feelings just a little bit longer.

She slid her hands up his chest, giving in to the need to touch him. To pretend he was hers to touch, for just a little while longer.

“If you want to, you can.”

Shooting her a lopsided smile, he moved off the bed, grabbed his underwear and tugged them on, tucking his still semi-hard cock away. Then he pulled the ruffled covers of her bed back and looped an arm around her waist, pulling her under the covers with him. It was so quick and unexpected that she let out a surprised laugh. He tucked her against him with her back to his chest, his fingers skating up and down her arm, leaving goosebumps in his wake.

For several moments, neither of them spoke, and Violet’s thoughts started to race and swirl, chasing each other around her brain. She knew that him wanting to stay, wanting to cuddle probably had more to do with the comfort he needed than anything else, and she wasn’t going to let herself read anything into it. She knew, deep down, that she wasn’t enough for him. Not after Jessica, who was tall and lithe and had a Ph.D in English literature. Who was different from Violet in every single way—that was the woman Hudson had wanted to marry. Not some half-illiterate starving artist who worked for him. For the sake of their friendship, for the sake of her sanity, for the sake of her heart, she had to lean into the truth of that. That he wasn’t for her.

“You’re one of the best things in my life, you know that?” he murmured against her hair. “You mean so much to me.”

Oh, shit. Here came the part where he let her down easy. Panic made her chest tighten and her thoughts scatter.

“And I’m sorry—” he started, so she cut him off.

“Shhhh. It’s okay, Hudson. You don’t need to say anything.” She ran her fingers up and down his arm, her heart

catching in her throat as she traced the faint scar left behind by his accident. All of the emotions she'd felt that day came rushing back, pulling at her like waves trying to suck her under. The fear twisted up with relief. The worry snarled around hope. They were so big, so tangled, that they made her chest feel tight. As though they were consuming all of the oxygen inside her, making her head swim.

She'd almost lost him that day. And the knowledge of how close she'd come to losing him made her feel like less of a horrible person for wanting to spend the night in his arms, even if he wasn't hers to keep.

He placed a kiss on her bare shoulder and then pulled her tighter against him, enveloping her in his solid warmth. Imprinting the scent of his skin on her.

And she didn't fight it. For tonight, she'd give him whatever he needed.

But only for tonight.



“**S**hit, shit, shit,” came Violet’s panicked whisper, and Hudson slid his arm through the sheets, reaching for her. But her side of the bed was cold, the blankets tossed back. He opened his eyes just as something hit the floor of Violet’s bedroom. She stood in the middle of the room, half dressed, hopping crazily as she tried to jam a boot onto her foot, her curls sticking up at odd angles.

“Hey,” he said, propping himself up on his elbows. His body felt...good. Different. Lighter in a way he hadn’t known was possible. Maybe because he’d found a way to let go of some of his grief. Maybe because of the mind-blowing orgasms he’d had with Violet last night. Maybe because he’d finally stopped lying to himself and given in to his feelings for Violet. Feelings that had been there for a long time, even if he’d been in denial about them. Feelings that were still scary because he didn’t know how this was going to work, but now that they were out and free, he couldn’t call them back and pretend they weren’t there.

“Hey,” she said distractedly, striding over to her dresser and putting on some earrings. He could feel the tension radiating off of her. Could practically see the way she was scrambling to rebuild the wall she’d finally taken down last night. Maybe she hadn’t meant to, but she’d let him in. When he’d been inside her, her eyes locked on his and filled with so much sweetness and adoration, he’d seen the truth of what was between them. Because as much as he’d denied his feelings for her, she’d been denying her feelings, too. He’d seen it, that

beautiful truth shining out at him, and it was that truth, that knowledge, that had sent him over the edge.

Violet had wanted it, too. Violet cared, too.

He sat all the way up, propping his arms on his bent knees. “Last night was—”

She let out a nervous laugh and shook her head. “We *really* don’t need to talk about last night.”

Every single word was a brick in that damn wall.

“I know we don’t need to, but I’d like to. Because it was kind of a big deal. At least, for me.”

She dropped the earring she’d been trying to put on, crouching down to retrieve it from the floor.

“I’m, um, yeah. I know that you needed that release,” she said, not meeting his eyes as she stood. Hiding. Letting fear win. He knew because it was what he’d done for far too long.

“I did, but it wasn’t just about that.”

A silence fell between them, and he studied her. It would’ve been easy to take her actions as a rejection. As a wish that last night hadn’t happened, but he didn’t think that was what was going on here. At least, he hoped that wasn’t what was happening.

“Do you regret having sex with me last night?” he asked. He needed to know for sure.

She finally turned and met his eyes. “No. I...I don’t. Of course not.” She sighed and then came and sat down on the bed, far enough away from him that he couldn’t reach for her. “But for the sake of our friendship, we should probably pretend it never happened.”

Her words were like ice water, dousing the pleasant buzz that had been humming through his veins ever since he’d opened his eyes. For him, last night had changed things. It had opened his eyes to the truth of his feelings, his desires. But for Violet...it had sent her running.

“You want to pretend it never happened?” he asked, the words like sawdust in his mouth. Fuck. He hadn’t been ready for that. He’d assumed she’d need a little gentle coaxing to open back up, to share her heart the way she had last night, but this...he didn’t know what to do with this.

“I think that’s for the best, don’t you?” She glanced around the room, taking in the rumpled sheets, the clothes strewn across the floor. How could they not be on the same page about this? He’d seen last night as a beginning, and she saw it as something she wanted to forget. “It’s not that the sex wasn’t good, or that I regret it. I just...you’re my friend, and I don’t want to do anything to jeopardize that.”

He pushed a hand through his hair and sighed. “Uh, yeah. I guess I understand that.” He didn’t really understand it at all. He’d thought last night had changed things between them.

She nodded and rose from the bed, once again flitting around her room, gathering up what seemed to be random things. Anything to avoid looking at him and having the conversation he so desperately wanted to have with her.

“I have to go,” she said, heading toward the door. “I’m already running late for the meeting with that art agent.”

“Oh, yeah,” he said, scrubbing his hand over his face. “Good luck.”

“Thanks. I’ll, uh. I’ll see you.”

The door closed, and he was alone in Violet’s tiny apartment. Alone and surrounded by her scent and the memories of last night and what it had meant to him. How it had shifted everything, as far as he was concerned.

He flopped back down on the bed, his arms out at his sides as he stared at the ceiling. When he’d kissed her last night, yeah, he’d been looking for relief. For an outlet for the pain shredding him from the inside out. But as soon as his lips had touched hers, something had burst through him. The knowledge that he was seeking this comfort from Violet not because she was convenient, but because he had feelings for

her. That he wanted her not as a one-time outlet, but that he wanted her, period.

He'd fallen asleep with her in his arms last night, and he'd visualized how he wanted this morning to go. Sweet, sleepy cuddles that slowly morphed into something more. Kissing and touching and whispering about what last night had meant to him. A slow, leisurely breakfast after a couple of orgasms. The promise of something new. Scary, but bright and shiny and worth the risk.

Instead, he'd gotten a panicked Violet who couldn't seem to get away from him fast enough, practically sprinting out of her own apartment. A Violet who wanted to pretend last night had never happened. Who was still very much in denial about her feelings for him.

Because she did have feelings for him. He knew what he'd seen last night in her eyes. He knew what she'd shown him when those walls were down. It had been real, even if she wanted to pretend it wasn't. Even if it scared the absolute shit out of her.

But where that left him, he didn't know. And that made him feel empty. Hollow and sad and he didn't know what the fuck else.

With a sigh, he sat up and swung his legs over the edge of the bed, his mood growing darker and more turbulent as he gathered up his clothes and tugged them on. He tried to figure out exactly what he was feeling right then, but he couldn't. It was all a confusing jumble that made him simultaneously want to chase after her and punch something.

He stepped out into the main area of the apartment. His boots were still by the front door, and the two mugs of tea he and Violet had quickly forgotten about were still sitting on the small kitchen table. Bright sunshine streamed in through all of the windows, a few dust motes floating in the beams. The entire apartment was quiet and lifeless without Violet in it.

For a moment, he thought about staying and waiting for her, but maybe that would only make things worse. After all, she'd said that she wanted to pretend that last night hadn't

happened. Not because it hadn't meant anything to her, because he could tell that it had, but because she was scared of *what* it had meant. Violet wasn't someone who let people in easily.

Not even him.

He saw a blank sketchbook on the coffee table in front of the sofa, and he crossed the space to it, picking it up. Without thinking, he picked up the black pen beside it and started writing.

Violet,

Last night was incredible. I've never felt so connected to someone in my entire life, and I know that kind of connection can be scary, but I'm not going anywhere.

He huffed out a breath and tore the sheet of paper from the pad, crumpling it up and letting it fall at his feet.

Vi,

Last night, everything changed, and I can't bring myself to regret that. I'm sorry that you're scared. I'm scared, too.

He tore that note off, too, scrunching it up into a ball.

With an impatient sigh, he tried again.

I don't want to pretend last night didn't happen. Last night was amazing, and for me, the start of something new. It opened my eyes to this amazing thing that's been right in

*front of me the entire time, and I'm so fucking
sorry it took me so long to see it. To see you.*

He read and re-read the note, and then tore it off the pad, slowly ripping it into tiny pieces. For several long minutes, he stared at the blank page in front of him, trying to figure out how to say what he needed to say. How to say what she needed to hear. But the longer he sat with his thoughts, trying to catch them so he could organize them, they just swirled faster and faster. Until all that was left was four lines and art. Because there was always art.

I see your heart

Behind the wall

And I'll fight for

The woman who owns it - H.

And then he drew an intricately detailed violet with bricks scattered around it. And when it was finished, he left the pad open on the coffee table, cleaned up his discarded notes that said too much and not enough, and let himself out of Violet's apartment.

Violet practically sprinted the half mile from her place, where she'd left Hudson lounging in her bed, to the subway station where she could hop on the C train. The agent had offered to meet her at a brunch place in Chelsea, which wasn't exactly convenient for her, but she was willing to jump through hoops to take this meeting. Not only could it be a turning point in her career, but it was a much-needed distraction from what had happened last night.

God, last night had been amazing. And probably a huge mistake. And she didn't know how to feel about any of it. And given how confused and scared and mixed up she felt, she should probably try to put it out of her mind and focus on the meeting ahead.

But she couldn't stop thinking about it. As she sat on the subway, her large portfolio tugged snugly between her legs, her body swaying back and forth in time with the clacking of the train, all she could do was replay every single second of last night. The way Hudson's skin had tasted. The feeling of his body moving inside hers. The sound of his voice as he fell apart.

I need to see your pretty eyes.

Every single thought made her stomach erupt in butterflies, her entire body going haywire. But that didn't change the fact that it shouldn't have happened. He was pretty much her only friend, and the last thing she needed to do was jeopardize their friendship.

"Stop," she muttered to herself, giving her head a shake. She glanced around the half-full car, praying for a distraction of some kind. Normally, she dreaded the normal subway antics all NYC residents were used to, but today she would've given her right arm for an annoying magician, or two blind men fighting, or a goth blasting The Cure (all things she'd witnessed).

She slipped her phone out of her bag, checking the time. Shit. There was no way she was going to make it there on time. She was going to be at least ten or fifteen minutes late. Not the first impression she wanted to make.

By the time she got off the subway at W 23rd Street, she felt sweaty and nervous, her mind still racing about last night. She had this hollow feeling in the pit of her stomach, and she wasn't sure if she was going to be able to eat, even though this was a brunch meeting. Her skin felt uncomfortably tight, and the promise of a headache was starting to build behind her eyes.

The inside of the little restaurant was pretty, with soft gray and bright teal walls, plants lining shelves and hanging from the ceiling. A long coffee counter covered in a honeycomb tile lined the far wall, and bistro tables with industrial-style metal stools sat near the large windows. Violet glanced around, spotting a man in a beige beret, large glasses, an oversized sweater and skinny khakis. She moved forward, and he looked up from his phone, his face politely neutral.

“Are you Violet?” he asked, his voice lower than she’d anticipated.

She nodded and extended her hand, shoving her portfolio under her other arm. “I am. You must be Mr. Wong.”

He gestured for her to take the stool across from him, and she did. “Please, call me Andrew. So.” He tented his fingers in front of him. “Beatrice spoke very highly of you. That’s not something she often does.”

“No?” she asked, her eyebrows raised. Just then, a server came over and took their orders. They each asked for a latte, but while Andrew ordered the smoked salmon poached eggs, Violet stuck with yogurt and granola, not trusting her unsteady stomach to handle something more.

“No,” he answered once the server had left. “In fact, the way she spoke about you had me very intrigued. I understand that you’re looking to take on commissions to raise money for a non-profit?”

“Well, yeah,” she said with a shrug. “I’m hoping to start an arts program for kids with learning disabilities and I need funding to get it off the ground. But I’d also like to grow my career as an artist,” she added quickly, not wanting him to think that she didn’t take her work seriously.

He nodded and then pointed at her portfolio. “May I?”

“Sure, of course,” she stammered. She picked it up, almost dropped it, and then handed it to him with a rueful smile. He took it and opened it, spreading some of the photographs across the table, studying them with a pensive look on his face.

And while she knew she should be concerned with what he thought about her work, all she could do was stare out the window and think about Hudson. She didn't regret comforting him the way she had. He'd needed it, and she'd wanted to give him what he needed. But maybe things had gone too far. How were they going to move forward without things being weird? She didn't want things to be weird.

She wanted Hudson. But she knew that wasn't realistic. As amazing as last night had been, there wasn't more of that in her future. Men like Hudson didn't choose women like her. Women like her were the friend. The sidekick.

"Violet?" Andrew's voice pulled her out of her thoughts, and her cheeks warmed as she pulled her attention back to their meeting.

"Yes, sorry. A little lost in thought."

"This series," he said, not even acknowledging her comment. Maybe he was used to dealing with strange and quirky artists. "It's quite stunning." He gestured at a series of paintings she'd done of the sun rising over the Brooklyn Bridge. "Where are they?"

"I have them," she said.

"I'm surprised you haven't sold them to a gallery or a collector," he said, paging through more of the photographs.

"A lot of this work is work that I did while completing my MFA, and most of them have very personal sentiment attached to them. I never planned to sell them, so they weren't created in a commercial spirit, if that makes sense."

"But you could see these to raise money for your non-profit," he said simply, still flipping through pictures.

Violet paused. The paintings she'd done while completing her MFA were deeply personal and she was incredibly attached to them. Maybe it didn't make sense, but she wasn't willing to part with them. They felt like an important part of her, of her history, and she planned to hang onto them forever.

"I'd rather take on commissions to do that," she said as politely as possible.

“I understand. What about this one?” He pointed at one of her favorites, a conceptual piece that showed a portal opening onto a Regency-era ballroom, the dancers gaping at the futuristic buildings and floating hovercraft.

“I’d rather not part with it.” Which was her polite, professional way of saying she was never, ever selling her favorite works. The thought of letting go of them actually made it feel as though a hole were opening up in the middle of her chest. She couldn’t do it. They meant too much to her, both because of what she’d put into them, but also because they were a part of her and held deep personal meaning.

“I see. Well, if you ever change your mind, I could probably fetch some decent money for many of these.” He pushed his glasses back up his nose, still studying the portfolio.

“I won’t. Change my mind, I mean.”

He carefully closed the portfolio just as their coffees arrived, and he peppered her with questions about her experience, her education, her influences, the types of commissions she’d like to take on. She answered as best as she could, even though her brain was only half present, the other half back at her apartment where she’d left Hudson.

By the time their food arrived, her nerves had lessened, but her focus was still shot. Thankfully, Andrew didn’t seem to have picked up on the fact that she was only half-present as he chatted about the different artists he represented, his connections to galleries and collectors, and how he’d gotten started in the industry.

Once the server had cleared away their breakfast plates—his plate clean, hers only half-eaten—he opened her portfolio again, pulling out several photographs of portrait work she’d done. “I think you have a keen eye for portraiture. Highly detailed, clear realism influences, lots of personality and intrigue. I do have a couple of clients who are looking for commissioned portraits. Would you be interested in that?”

She nodded, the knot in her chest easing slightly. “Yes, definitely.”

“The type of payment would be up to you and the client to negotiate, and I would take ten percent of the total payment as commission.”

“That’s fine.” Violet knew that that was the industry standard.

“Great. In that case, I’d be happy to take you on and I can set up some meetings with potential clients next week.”

“Really?” A smile spread across Violet’s face, and he nodded.

“Yeah. I’ll email over some standard paperwork. Take a look and let me know if you have any questions. Or if you decide you want to shop any of these other pieces.” His eyes lingered on a watercolor she’d done of Central Park in spring.

“I’ll think about it, but I really don’t think I’m interested in parting with any of them.”

He shrugged. “Fair enough.” Then he rapped his knuckles on the table and started to stand. “Brunch is on me. I’ll be in touch.”



Violet was giving an absolute masterclass in avoiding someone, and Hudson was ready to tear his hair out.

It had been nearly 36 hours since he'd let himself out of her apartment. She hadn't had any clients booked at the shop that day, so he hadn't seen her at work. She hadn't responded—via text or email or fucking carrier pigeon—to the note he'd left her, and he was wondering if he'd made a mistake. If by saying he was going to fight for her, he'd come on too strong.

But it had been honest. Because he was going to fight for her. He couldn't just pretend there was nothing between them when everything had changed between them. When he'd finally opened his eyes to exactly what had been in front of him this entire time.

Violet. Beautiful, amazing, incredible Violet.

Even when he'd first gotten together with Jessica, he hadn't felt like this. Alive and buzzing and, for the first time in a long time, full of anticipatory hope about the future.

Wasn't that worth the risk? Wasn't that worth fighting for?

He thought it was.

But Violet...well. She'd come in early that afternoon, her arms full with a tray of coffees, a tote bag stuffed full with sketch books and art supplies, clothes, and more. She'd deposited a coffee on his desk—his usual order from the local shop, a dark roast with milk and a little bit of honey—then busied herself at the front desk, checking appointments,

answering emails, and returning phone calls. She wasn't the receptionist, but every time he looked up, she was busy with something.

His one o'clock client came in, and it was going to be a long session. Today, they were starting a large sleeve going from his shoulder to his wrist that, when finished, would look like a fire-breathing dragon perched on a castle. So for now, he didn't have time to think about Violet or what to say to her. He had work to focus on.

That is, until he stepped into the little supply room in the back, looking for the assortment of ink colors he'd need today. She was there, perusing the shelves with a thoughtful look on her face, and when he entered, she whirled and dropped the small container of ink she'd been holding. It landed on the floor with a crack, dark blue ink splatting across the tiles. They both bent down to pick it up, nearly cracking heads as they did. He felt her curls brush against his skin, and it made his entire body sing with awareness. With the memory of those curls between his fingers, the slide of her skin against his.

Still crouched on the floor, their eyes met, and from the way her pupils nearly swallowed up her entire iris, he had a feeling she was reliving it, too.

"Um, sorry. About the ink," she stammered, standing and practically sprinting out of the room. She returned a second later with a cloth, which he took from her. Their fingers brushed, sending electricity tingling up his arm.

"It's no big deal," he said, wiping at the spilled ink.

"Good," she murmured, and then turned her attention to neatly arranging all of the little vials and pots on the shelf, lining them up precisely. "I mean, when things aren't a big deal, that's good, because not everything needs to be a big deal. In fact, most things aren't, right? That's a funny expression, isn't it, a big deal? What does that even mean? We don't say things are a small deal, or a medium deal. Like the ink. Is that a small deal or a medium deal kind of situation?" She blew out a breath, her eyes darting around the room, landing everywhere but on him.

Everything he wanted to say was on the very tip of his tongue, but he had a client waiting, and he didn't want to get into the conversation that needed to happen when they didn't have enough time to really talk.

"Definitely a small deal kind of situation," he said, and she glanced at him. He moved a little closer, close enough that he could feel the heat from her body. Close enough that he could see the tremble pass through her. "But what happened between us? Now that was a big deal, and one we need to talk about when I'm done with this client."

"Oh!" she breathed. "Oh. Um. No. I really don't think we need to. It's fine. Everything's fine. We're fine."

"My office. Later. Because Violet?" He waited for her to look up and meet his eyes. "I'm not fine. And I don't think you are either."

She opened and closed her mouth, watching him as he backed out of the space, leaving her alone with the rows and rows of inks and other supplies.

By the time he was finished with his client, a few hours had passed, and he was grateful for the distraction that submersing himself in his work had given him. It was amazing that sometimes the best way to work out a problem was to stop thinking about it. To just let it go and let his subconscious do the hard, invisible work while he occupied himself with art.

He walked his client out, double checked his schedule to make sure he had a half hour before his next, and then found Violet working at her station, putting together a sketch for one of her own clients.

"Hey, Vi?"

But she didn't respond, and he could tell she had her air pods in, so he tapped her on the shoulder. Her pen went flying, sending a streak of color across the screen of the iPad she was working on. She let out a squeak and then pressed her hand to her chest.

"Don't do that! You scared me!" she said, ducking down to grab her pen.

“Sorry. Not my intention,” he said, holding up his hands in front of him. The awkwardness hanging in the air was like another person, so solid and palpable. “But I need to talk to you in my office.”

She paled and then nodded, pulling out her air pods and standing from her stool. “I have a client in an hour,” she said carefully, eyeing him as though he might lock her up in his office and never let her leave. And as tempting as that thought was, the fact that she thought it of him made him feel shitty. Shitty, and off-kilter, and so, so awkward.

“And I have one in thirty minutes. Come on. Let’s talk. Please.”

She let out a shaky breath and then nodded. “Okay. Yeah.”

She followed him to his office, and he closed the door behind them, sealing them away from the world. With everything inside him, he wanted to reach for her. To wrap his arms around her and pull her against him and promise her everything was going to be okay. But as much as he wanted that, it wasn’t what she needed.

“Did you get my note?” he asked, sitting down on the edge of his desk, his hands braced on either side of his hips.

“I...did.” She nodded, her eyes bouncing around the room.

“I’m sorry if it freaked you out, or if it was intense.”

“Um, yeah, it was a little intense. But...” She trailed off, shaking her head. Her bottom lip was caught between her teeth, and he could see the fear, the worry etched across her face.

“But what?”

“But I...” She huffed out a breath, crossing her arms over her chest, and for the first time since she’d run out of her apartment, genuine panic started to set in. What if sleeping together had actually wrecked them? He wasn’t prepared to lose her as a friend.

Shit.

“Violet, I need you to know that the other night with you was incredible. It started out as me seeking comfort from someone I trusted, but it quickly turned into a hell of a lot more, and now, my eyes are open to what’s been in front of me this entire time.”

“Hudson, don’t,” she whispered. “Please, because I can’t.”

A weight settled on his chest. “You can’t what?”

“Do this. With you. With anyone.”

“Why?” He pushed off of the desk and crossed the space between them, stopping only a few inches in front of her. “Tell me why.”

She started to shake, and so he did the only thing that made sense. He wrapped his arms around her and tucked her against him, resting his chin on the top of her head. He stroked a hand up and down her back, soothing her. Wanting to give her some of the comfort she’d given him the other night.

“Aren’t you scared?” she whispered, her face pressed into his chest.

“Yeah, Vi. I am. But some things are worth being scared for.”

“Are they? Because for me, fear has always been a warning, and one I’ve regretted not listening to. I ignore the fear of being rejected, and then the people I care about most reject me. I ignore the fear of failure, and then clients drop me or my art doesn’t sell and I end up broke. I ignore the fear of ruining my best, closest relationship and now look. Fear is a warning. It’s preservation.”

Her words sliced through him, leaving him feeling torn. Shredded.

“You think the other night ruined us?” he asked, the words bitter in his mouth.

“I think if we have a hope in hell of getting back to normal, we need to pretend it didn’t happen,” she said, stepping away from him, and out of his arms. Out of his reach. “You think you want something with me, but you don’t. You

just think you do because you're a romantic and you're getting caught up in something you wish was there, but it's not."

Ice ran through his veins and he clenched his jaw. "So you're telling me the other night changed nothing for you." His words were flat, monotone. Every single breath hurt.

"It changed nothing for me. I'm not the girl for you. I never was, Hudson. What happened between us was a one off thing that can't happen again."

"Because you're scared."

"Because I don't want to lose you as a friend! Shit, this is what I was afraid of!" Her voice bounced off the walls of his small office, reverberating in his ears. "And now you're all twisted up, and you're getting me all twisted up, and—"

"I'm not twisted up, Violet," he said, pushing a hand through his hair, needing an outlet for the energy, the desperation, the frustration snapping through him. "I know what that night meant. I know what it changed. And I think it changed things for you, too. And I think you're scared because you've been hurt. You've been rejected. You think you're not good enough for some fucked up reason. And that's bullshit, Violet. It's absolute bullshit. You can't run from everything hard or scary in your life. You can't."

"No offense, Hud, but I'm not looking for a life coach. I can run my own life, and I can make my own decisions. This conversation is over. I'm sorry that it happened. I'm sorry we got our wires crossed. But you need to let this go. For the sake of us, just let it go."

She turned and walked out of his office, closing the door behind her. Hudson let out a groan and sank down into the chair behind his desk, dropping his head into his hands. How had he managed to make such a fucking mess out of this?

But that was the thing about messes—they could always be cleaned up. She might've thought (or was trying to convince herself she thought) that they'd made a huge mistake by sleeping together, but he knew that wasn't true. He knew it in his bones.

She was scared. Her walls were up. But he'd meant everything he'd said. Everything he'd written.

He was going to fight for her. There was no other option, as far as he was concerned.



Violet double checked the address on her phone, and then glanced up at the imposing three story house on the corner of Fifth Avenue and East 79th. She didn't come to this part of the Upper East Side very often, mainly because she wasn't one of the wealthy elite who lived here.

She glanced down at her phone again, triple checking the address her new art agent, Andrew Wong, had texted her. Her adrenaline picked up as she realized that she was, indeed, in the right place.

Her meeting with Andrew had honestly been a bit of a disaster, given that she was both late and completely flustered from waking up next to Hudson. But he'd been impressed with her portfolio, and he'd signed her on the spot, telling her he had a few clients looking for commissions.

God, she never should've let things go as far as they had with Hudson. She'd selfishly thought she could handle one night, had thought she could indulge her feelings for him just once and then everything would go back to normal.

Things were pretty fucking far from normal. Hudson felt like he owed her something, and she didn't want to be anyone's charity case. Especially Hudson. Because there was no way he actually wanted a relationship with her. She wasn't the type of woman he went for. But because they'd had sex and he was a nice guy, he felt as though he had to offer her... something. Or maybe he saw her as a project. A real fixer upper.

And it had pissed her off. And she didn't want to be pissed off at Hudson. She just wanted to take back the best sex of her life and go back to being friends. Go back to quietly pining for a man who was way out of her league. Which, when she thought about it, sounded kinda miserable. Then again, so did opening herself up only to be inevitably rejected and found lacking.

She blew out a breath. She didn't know what she wanted, and right now wasn't the time to dig into it all. Squaring her shoulders, she walked up to the massive dark wood door and rung the bell, which she could hear echoing through the house. A crisp breeze blew, fluttering the leaves in the trees of Central Park at her back, making her blue and red plaid skirt whip around her legs. Horns blared, yellow taxis inching their way up Fifth, and in the distance, an ever present siren blared. Coffee carts lined the road leading into Central Park, selling coffee and bagels to locals and tourists alike, and her stomach rumbled, reminding her that she'd been too nervous about this meeting to eat breakfast.

The door opened inward, and a handsome young man clad in a three piece suit peered at her inquisitively. "Yes?"

"Yes, hi, I have an appointment with Eunice Rutherford-Davenport. I'm Violet MacAllister, the painter. The artist," she added when his expression didn't change.

He gestured for her to enter, and she stepped into a massive foyer with classic black and white tiles on the floor, cream-colored walls, and a swooping, curving staircase. Antique wall sconces cast small pools of light, leaving the rest in austere shadow. On the far wall, a large canvas displayed the only color in the room, and Violet's jaw nearly hit the floor.

"Oh my God, is that a Kandinsky?" she asked, taking a couple of steps toward the painting.

"It is," said the man in a clipped tone. Then he held out his arm. "May I take your jacket?"

"Oh, sure," said Violet absently, juggling her leather-bound portfolio as she shrugged out of her denim jacket, her eyes still

glued to the painting. She couldn't stop looking at it. Couldn't stop admiring every single inch of it, and wondering if she'd ever create something with even a fraction of the vitality and creativity as the canvas in front of her.

"It's stunning, isn't it?" came a voice from behind her, and Violet whirled, taking in an elderly woman clad in a hot pink blouse, black trousers, enormous black glasses and vivid red lipstick. A string of diamonds glittered around her neck, and a ruby the size of a golf ball glinted on her finger. "Tell me what you see when you look at it."

Violet's eyebrows rose, but she turned back to the painting. "This is an untitled Kandinsky, I believe, likely painted in the early 1920's when he was teaching at Bauhaus. This was a transitional period for him and you can see his experimentation with geometric abstraction here. Straight lines, subdued colors, balanced composition. But there are still some organic shapes, and you can see the influence of his earlier landscapes here, and it's the melding of the two that marked a new era in his creative expression."

"Well. An excellent answer." The woman came to a stop beside Violet and wrapped an arm around her shoulders. "But what does it make you *feel*?"

"It makes me feel connected—to art, to the past, to the present, to humanity. To know that every person who looks at this sees something different and yet we're looking at the same image. It's...spiritual."

The woman squeezed Violet's shoulders. "Very good. I think you'll do nicely. Come. I want to show you something so we can discuss the work I'd like to commission. I'm Eunice Rutherford-Davenport, but all my friends call me Ness. You may do the same."

She turned and started back up the staircase, and Violet followed her. They passed by an opulent sitting room all done in shades of green and gold, the windows looking out onto Central Park. They stepped into an adjacent room, one whose walls were filled with paintings.

Of naked men.

Violet's eyebrows rose but she quickly schooled her expression into what she hoped was something neutral. Which was hard to do, given that everywhere she looked, there were muscles and penises and balls and butts.

"This is what I call my dirty bird collection," said Ness, extending a hand and waving it to encompass the room. "I collect nude portraits of beautiful men. I'd like you to paint me another for my collection."

"Wow," said Violet, setting her portfolio down and walking up to one of the paintings. It was good. Highly detailed, nice brushwork, good use of light and shadow.

Massive penis.

"Have I shocked or offended you?" asked Ness, taking a seat on one of the plush white sofas in front of the fireplace.

"Not at all," said Violet, shaking her head. "I'm surprised, but certainly not offended." As Violet studied the paintings, out of the corner of her eye, she saw Ness pick up her portfolio.

"Have you painted many nudes in the past?" she asked, thumbing through slowly.

Violet stopped in front of a portrait of a man sliding down a fireman's pole. "Not many, but I did do a series of them while completing my MFA at NYU. Did you have a model in mind for this project?"

"I'd like you to take a look at the paintings and tell me what's missing from my collection."

"Ohhh-kay," said Violet, peering up at the paintings. All were modern, all featured men of various ethnicities between the ages of twenty-five and fifty, all were nude. All posed, but in different, dynamic locations. All gave some hint as to the personality or occupation of the subject. "I'm not sure," she answered after several minutes. "What's missing?"

"Come, sit." She patted the seat beside her, so Violet crossed the room and sat down on the edge of the couch. Somehow, while she'd been studying the paintings, a tray with

a teapot and two tea cups had appeared without her notice. “Your portfolio is very impressive. You’re a talented artist.”

“Thank you,” said Violet, her cheeks warming slightly. Ness poured a cup of tea and handed it to Violet, her hands remarkably steady for her age.

“It’s earned praise, you don’t need to blush. Your work speaks for itself. I was intrigued when our mutual friend Andrew mentioned that you also work as a tattoo artist.”

“Oh?” Violet blew the steam away from the rim of her probably crazily expensive tea cup.

“Yes. You see, I’ve recently become quite intrigued with tattoos. The history of them, the current craze for them, the beauty of them. I’d like to add a tattooed model to my collection. And I figured who better to capture the ink on someone’s skin than an artist who knows how to put it there in the first place.”

“Interesting,” said Violet. “I haven’t spent a lot of time painting tattoos, but I’m sure I could. Did you have a model in mind?”

“I do, and that’s the other reason you’re here. You work at Brooklyn Skin Work, right?”

“Yes. I have for a few years now.”

“Good.” Ness reached into her pocket and pulled her phone out. Then she slid her glasses down her nose, held her phone out far in front of her and poked at the screen daintily with one finger. Eventually, she brought up BSW’s Instagram page. “Do you know him?”

She turned her phone toward Violet, Hudson’s image filling the screen. He was wearing a sleeveless shirt and laughing, his inked arms on full display. Violet’s heart beat so fast she thought it was going to burst.

“Um, yes. That’s the owner of the shop. Hudson Prescott.”

And my best friend. And the man whose come I swallowed a couple of days ago.

“I would really like him to pose for the painting. He’s perfect. Do you think he’d be amenable?”

“I...really don’t know. I don’t think so,” she said, shaking her head. There was no way she could ask Hudson to pose for a nude portrait, especially after everything that had happened between them over the past few days.

“That’s a shame. But I understand. Not everyone’s comfortable with it. In any case, I’d like to move forward with the portrait, and I’m sure in your line of work you know several tattooed hunky men who might be willing to pose for you?”

“Uh...” Violet scratched at her nose. “Potentially? I mean, I’m sure I could find someone to sit for the painting...”

“Good.” She looked at her phone again, holding it away at arm’s length. “Are you sure you can’t convince him? This man? There’s something so magnetic about him. The line of his shoulders, the flash of white teeth beneath his beard, the confidence in his posture...he’s very appealing.”

“I really don’t think he’d do it.”

“Perhaps I could sweeten the pot. I’ll pay you \$200,000 for the portrait, and you could split the fee with him. That’s more than double what I normally offer.”

For the second time that morning, Violet’s jaw nearly hit the floor. “Two. Hundred. Thousand. Dollars.”

Her mind swam as she tried to process that amount of money. It was enough money that she could get her program up and running. It was enough money that it would save Hudson’s business from the financial hardship currently stressing him out.

It was as though the answer to both of their problems had just fallen right into her lap, neatly gift-wrapped and everything.

She turned to Ness. “You’ve got a deal.”

Hudson drummed his fingers on the scarred wooden table, nervous energy surging through him. He glanced around the small pub, his eyes bouncing back and forth between the TV above the bar playing sports highlights—not that he was much of a sports fan—and the door. Every single time it opened, his heart thundered to life in his chest, and he held his breath, looking for Violet’s blond curls.

They hadn’t talked since their heated discussion in his office. He’d decided that the best course of action was to give her space and let the tension between them blow over while he figured out what his next move was. Because even though things were strained between them, and even though she was scared—hell, so was he—he wasn’t giving up on them. He knew what he felt. He knew what they could have. And he’d been sincere when he’d left her that note.

He was going to fight for her. For them. Even if she was scared. Even if she felt like she wasn’t good enough.

But for now, she needed space, so he’d backed off. And now, a few days later, she’d texted him, asking him to meet her for a drink because she had something to talk to him about.

The door opened and Violet stepped in, glancing around the bar. She visibly swallowed when her eyes landed on him, and he lifted his hand in a small wave. He felt as though his entire body was vibrating, like a rocket ready for takeoff, at the sight of her, but he forced himself to take a breath and stay where he was. After she’d asked to see him, the last thing he wanted to do was scare her away. Again.

“Hey,” she said, shooting him a tentative smile as she slung her bag off her shoulder and dropped down into the seat across from him. “Thanks for coming.”

“Of course,” he said with a shrug, aiming for casual and easy. “I’m glad you texted.”

The waitress swung by their table, and Violet ordered an iced tea. “And for you?” she asked, shooting Hudson a flirty

look. He ignored it.

“Brown Pelican, thanks.” He folded his hands in front of him on the table, weaving his fingers together so he wouldn’t reach for Violet.

“What’s in a Brown Pelican?” she asked. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard of that before.”

“It’s apple cider and ginger beer. It’s good.”

“Hmm.” She shifted in her seat, blinking rapidly. “It’s really warm in here, huh?” she asked, shrugging out of her denim jacket and taking her time with arranging it just so on the back of her chair.

“Maybe a little. So. What’s up?” There were so many things he wanted to ask her, but for now, what’s up would have to do.

“I...” She let out a nervous little laugh and tucked a curl behind her ear. “I think I have a way for both of us to get the money we need. And I’m not sure you’re going to like it, but hear me out.”

“Okay. I’m listening.”

The waitress returned with their drinks, setting down first Violet’s and then Hudson’s. He noticed that she’d scrawled her number on the disposable coaster, along with the words “Call me! – Ashley” and a little heart beside it. He carefully slid his glass over the number so Violet wouldn’t see. He didn’t want to give her any more ammo for her “I’m not good enough” bullshit.

“So you remember how I had that meeting with the art agent? That’s why I had to leave after we...” Her face went red and she took a sip of her drink. “Anyway, he signed me and he set me up with a client who wanted to commission a portrait.”

“That’s great!” he said, clenching his hands in his lap so he wouldn’t reach for her. Not touching her felt so unnatural. Like he was cutting off a part of himself.

But he'd do whatever it took to make her feel comfortable. To make her feel at ease with him.

“Yeah. So I met with her. She's this kind of eccentric older lady named Eunice Rutherford-Davenport, and she has a collection of nude portraits of hunky guys.”

Hudson's eyebrows rose. “That's...not what I was expecting.”

“Me neither. But wait, there's more!” she said, doing her best infomercial imitation. He smiled down into his drink. God, she was cute. So fucking cute. “She's recently become enamored with tattooed guys, and she requested me specifically because of my work as a tattoo artist. And not just because of my work as a tattoo artist, but where I work.”

Hudson blinked in surprise. “This lady knows Brooklyn Skin Work?”

Violet nodded. “She does. While I was there, she pulled up our Instagram page because she already knew who she wanted to model for her next nude portrait.”

There were several good looking artists who worked at the studio, and they also shared pictures of clients showing off their finished work. “Who?”

“You.”

He sputtered on his drink and thumped himself on the chest. His eyes were wide, his eyebrows raised. “Me?” he finally croaked out. He rubbed a hand over his mouth, trying to process this.

“Yeah. You. And if you do it, she's offered to pay us \$200,000.”

Hudson's head snapped back as though he'd been smacked. “Two hundred grand?” He pressed his fingers to his temples, trying to think. Trying to wrap his mind around this. “For a nude portrait of me?”

“Yeah. We'd split the money fifty-fifty. I'd have money for my arts organization, and you'd have money for the shop's lease. It's a win-win.”

“You’re not the one who has to be naked,” he muttered, blowing out a breath.

“It’s not like I haven’t already seen it,” she said quietly, and his eyes snapped to hers. Heat pulsed between them and his cock twitched.

“True,” he said, shooting her a wry grin. “But that doesn’t mean I want to show it to the world.”

“It wouldn’t be the world. It’s a private collection. No one but Eunice would see it.”

“It’s a lot of money,” he said, scrubbing a hand over his face. “Are you comfortable with it?”

“Sure. I’m just the one doing the painting.”

“That’s not what I mean. I’m talking about spending time with me, naked. Are you okay with that?” Because the more he thought about it, the more he wanted to do it. Not only was the money insane and the answer to all of his problems, but maybe being fully vulnerable with Violet would let her see that she could trust him. Would allow her to open herself up to what was between them.

“I...am,” she said in a completely unconvincing tone. “And I’m super okay with the money.”

“Then I’m in. I’ll do it.”



The following evening, Hudson flipped through his record collection, searching for something to put on in the background. Violet was due to arrive at his place any minute, and he was a ball of nervous energy. Not just because he'd be taking his clothes off in front of her—again—but because lately he was *always* a ball of nervous energy around her.

He decided on Fleetwood Mac's *Rumors* and carefully removed the record from the sleeve, then gently placed it on the record player. The needle landed with a familiar thump and scratch, and then music started flowing out of the speakers.

There was a soft knock at his door, and he hurried to open it. Violet stood on the other side, arms laden with a portable easel, sketchbook, and other supplies.

"Here, let me," he said, reaching out to help her with her things. She let him take everything from her and followed him into his apartment.

"Thanks for agreeing we could do it here. Your place is a lot bigger than mine, and it has a lot more character."

"Do you have an idea of how you want me to pose?" he asked, an empty feeling yawning in the pit of his stomach. Even though she'd seen him naked before, he was still nervous about taking his clothes off.

"I've got a few ideas, yeah."

Which meant that Violet had been thinking about him naked, which was a win in his book. He wanted her to think about him. To remember their night together. To be honest about what she was thinking and feeling. Because wanting to pretend it didn't happen? That was bullshit, and he knew it as well as she did.

“You're in charge here, Vi. You just tell me what you need from me.” She stopped, chewing on her lip as her eyes crashed into his. His words hung between them, and she blinked rapidly, as though shoving them away.

“Right. I think it's best if we set up here, in the living room. I was thinking that it would be best to really capture you in your element. So on the couch, a book in hand, maybe looking over your shoulder out the window.”

“Yeah, that would work. I mean, whatever you need, you just let me know,” he reiterated. “Do you want some help setting up your stuff?” he asked, moving a bit closer to her.

“No!” she said a little too loudly, jumping back from him. He held up his hands in a placating gesture, and although he tried not to take it personally, it stung.

Maybe the big fuck up wasn't sleeping with Violet. Maybe the fuck up was taking so long to see what had been in front of him for years and doing nothing about it because he'd been too caught up in his own baggage.

But now that his eyes were open, he couldn't close them again. He didn't want to, and even though she was trying to push him away, he didn't think that was what Violet wanted or needed either. She'd walled her heart away to keep it safe. To protect it after the shit she'd gone through.

He was going to do whatever it took to scale those walls.

“I'm sorry, I'm just feeling a little on edge,” she said, unfolding her easel and setting it down. “I didn't mean to, like, snarl at you.”

“Hey, snarl away. Who am I to interfere in the artistic process?”

At that, she poked her head out from behind her easel and stuck her tongue out at him, and it was like something settled back into place between them. He headed into the kitchen to make some tea, occasionally glancing over his shoulder to watch her set up her station. She set the massive sketchbook on the easel, then retrieved a small case filled with pens and pencils, erasers, a pencil sharpener, even some charcoal. It was sexy, watching her in her element, her focus fully on her craft.

He poured them each a cup of tea and then headed back into the living room, setting hers down on the little table she'd moved to sit beside her easel.

“Thanks again for agreeing to do this at your place. It’s so much cooler than mine,” she said, arranging and then rearranging her pencils.

“Thanks. I like my place, too.” He’d moved in not long after his breakup with Jessica, and he’d been there ever since. He lived on the top floor of an old turn of the century house, and the feature that had drawn him to the space was the ceiling. In the living room, half the ceiling was glass windows that curved downward, bathing the space in light. The top floor had originally been used as a conservatory and greenhouse, and some of those architectural features were still evident. He’d fallen in love with the bright light, the wooden beams and scratched wood floors, the creaky cupboards and ample space. It had character and life and felt like home.

“So, the first step in this process will be a fairly detailed sketch that I’ll need to show Eunice for approval before we move forward with the portrait. Because this is a commission, she gets final say on everything, so I want to make sure she’s happy before putting paint to canvas, so to speak. I’m hoping to get the majority of the sketch done tonight.”

“Do you want me naked for the sketch?” he asked, sipping his tea. Slowly, her head appeared from behind her easel and their eyes met. She swallowed thickly.

“Yes. I need you naked. I mean, you need to be naked.”

“Okay.” Still holding her eyes, he set his tea down on the coffee table and then reached behind him, tugging his shirt up

over his head. He let it drop to the floor, cool air washing over his skin. Violet licked her lips as he thumbed open the button of his jeans, then slowly pulled the zipper down. He pushed them down, letting them pool at his ankles. She swallowed again as he stepped out of them, pushing them to the side with his foot.

He hooked his thumbs into the waistband of his boxer briefs and waited a moment, studying Violet. Her cheeks were pink, her lips slightly parted, her chest rising and falling in sharp little pants. Her pupils were huge, devouring her irises and it took him back to that night. The way her eyes had eaten him up when he was inside her, so full of lust and need and pure, unfiltered adoration...He cleared his throat and looked away, willing his blood to run anywhere but south.

The song on the record player ended, and in the silence before the next one started, he could hear her breathing, fast and harsh.

He pushed his underwear down, letting them slide down the length of his legs and then stepping out of them. Violet let out a tiny whimper as her eyes went to his cock and then ducked behind her easel, papers rustling, pencils once again being rearranged. The music filled the room, everything they weren't saying eating up the space between them.

Suddenly, a handful of pencils went flying, rolling and skittering across the floor.

"Shit," Violet whispered, quickly dropping down to pick them up. Her oversized sweatshirt slid off of her shoulder, giving Hudson a glimpse of a creamy expanse of skin punctuated with a light blue bra strap. Skin he knew was soft against his fingertips, sweet against his mouth. The memory of holding her against him, kissing her neck and shoulders as he touched her flooded him, and he cleared his throat and looked away.

Do. Not. Get. Hard.

But he was already looking at her again, completely mesmerized by her. God, how had he not seen it before? How had he been so fucking clueless? His heart thundered in his

chest as he openly stared. As though she could feel his gaze on her, her eyes flicked up to his, the grays sharp and intense.

“Sorry,” she breathed, gathering up the last of the errant pencils. Her sweater dipped, giving him a view of her breasts, clad in light blue lace. Her eyes once again dropped to his cock and then she blinked rapidly, looking away. She stood and put the pencils back on the table and pushed up the sleeves of her sweatshirt, exposing her colorful tattoos. He hadn’t taken the time to fully appreciate them the other night, but when he got the chance—and he would—he wanted to know the story behind every single one. He wanted to trace every single line with his lips, his tongue, until he had them memorized.

God, he wanted to kiss her. He couldn’t remember ever wanting someone this badly. Needing someone this badly.

Except for the other night.

A possessiveness he’d never experienced before burst through him and he actually had to fight back a growl. Violet was *his*, even if that scared her. His hands started to shake and he crossed his arms over his chest, fighting back the craziness surging inside him.

He’d never felt even an ounce of this intensity with Jessica. It was as though Violet had awoken something in him, something primal that he hadn’t even known he possessed. And now that it was out, there was no putting it back. The only way to sate it was her. And the only way to Violet’s heart was to show her she *was* good enough. That she could trust him. That he wouldn’t hurt her the way she’d been hurt in the past.

She peeked out from behind the canvas and all of the breath whooshed out of his lungs. For a moment, he forgot that he was naked, forgot that she’d pushed him away, forgot his own fucking name because all he could think about was her.

Violet MacAllister, the most exquisite woman he’d ever known.

Holy shit, this was crazy.

Having sex with Hudson? Not part of the plan.

Freaking out after because she wanted things she didn't feel worthy of? Not part of the plan.

Getting paid an insane amount of money to paint him naked? Definitely not part of the plan.

Violet's heart pounded in her chest as she rearranged her supplies for the seventeenth time, trying not to look at Hudson but knowing she had to look at him. Dreading looking at him because of the rush of lust and memories and longing looking at his gorgeous naked body inspired.

"You can do this," she whispered to herself. After all, this wasn't the first time she'd ever painted a nude portrait. She'd done several in art school and had never felt this flustered or undone.

But none of those models had been her best friend who she'd had incredible sex with. Her best friend who she had feelings for. Her best friend who could shred her heart into pieces if she let him.

As she picked up a pencil, snippets of things he'd said to her flashed through her mind, even though she'd spent the past couple of days running from them.

My eyes are open to what's been in front of me this entire time.

Some things are worth being scared for.

Jesus, Violet. You've forever ruined me.

I see your heart

Behind the wall

And I'll fight for

The woman who owns it

"How did you want me to pose?" he asked, ripping her back to the present. She realized she'd been standing there,

pencil poised in front of the paper, mind completely elsewhere.

“Oh, um...” She poked her head out from behind the easel again, fully aware that she was using it as a shield. Everything inside her went hot when her eyes landed on Hudson’s naked body. God, why did he have to be so damn beautiful? The dark blond hair, thick with the hint of curls. The piercing blue eyes. The square jaw covered in a closely cropped beard. The panty-melting smile. The muscled body covered in gorgeous tattoos.

The most beautiful dick she’d ever seen in her life.

It was long and thick, even though he wasn’t hard. His head was round and smooth, and his balls were full and heavy. It twitched against his thigh, and her eyes flew up to his. He just cocked an eyebrow at her.

“Okay, um, pose. Right. So, uh, if you could grab a book, like a novel-sized book, and then sit on the couch. Like, with your back against the armrest on the right. No, my right, sorry, your left,” she said, babbling away as he turned to grab a book from a nearby bookshelf, giving her a view of his muscular ass. He settled himself on the couch, wordlessly following her directions.

“Great.” She stepped out from behind the easel. “Prop your left arm on the armrest, yeah, like that, and hold the open book in your other hand. Bend your right leg so that your knee is up and extend your left...perfect. Yeah, just like that.”

She ducked back behind the easel and started tracing lines onto the page, but then quickly changed her mind and erased what she had, selecting a slightly different pencil and starting over again. She was so hot that she wanted to open a window, but she figured that would be inconsiderate of Hudson, who was, you know. Naked.

She peeked out at him and it was as though her heart stopped for a moment. He really was the most beautiful man she’d ever seen. And it wasn’t just because of the physical perfection of his body. It was because she knew his soul. His sweet, sensitive, smart, soul.

His gorgeously thick cock was just the cherry on top of the Hudson-sundae.

Great. Now she was thinking about places on his body she'd like to lick whipped cream from instead of focusing on the sketch. She forced her eyes away from his cock and to his chest, studying the tattoos there. A massive lighthouse sat right in the center of his chest, over his sternum, branching out into rocks and waves over each of his defined pecs. The sleeve on his left arm was clearly inspired by the American Classic style of tattoos, featuring roses, hearts, skulls, dragons, ships, birds all intricately woven together with a looping ribbon. The sleeve on his right arm was different, featuring a mishmash of images, including a quote from Thoreau in flowing script on his forearm, a broken heart in flames she knew was a tribute to his father, forest imagery, the evil eye, ivy creeping up onto his neck, and more. It wasn't going to be easy to capture it all, but she knew she could do it.

To say that Hudson was hot didn't do him justice. He was beautiful. Gorgeous. Masculine perfection. And the idea that she could translate his transcendent beauty to canvas was intimidating. She'd never painted someone she'd had an emotional connection with before.

Oh, shit. Emotional connection.

A friendship connection. Not...more.

His abs were mostly unmarked, save for a small compass near his hip. Once again, her eyes drifted down his body, landing on his thick cock, and she licked her lips, remembering the taste of him on her tongue, his hands in her hair. Her heart picked up its pace at the memory, her pussy fluttering and clenching. Lust and need poured through her, making her clit pulse, and she adjusted her stance, rubbing her thighs together. Trying to both ignore and ease the ache. But the memory of Hudson inside her was too powerful to just push away, as much as she wanted to.

This is a paying job. Be professional.

She forced her eyes away from his cock and down his muscular legs. He didn't have as many tattoos there, just one

on his right thigh that wouldn't be fully visible from her angle, and another on his left calf, a set of abstract, overlapping squares.

He shifted slightly on the couch and dropped his hand to his cock, arranging it so that it fell against his left thigh, making it more visible for the painting.

"I assume you want a good view of the goods?" he asked, his voice a little raw.

Her pussy clenched, heat pouring through her.

Inside me. Need you inside me.

The words were on the tip of her tongue as she stared, unable to think of anything else but climbing her best friend—her best friend who was out of her league, and who'd realize it sooner rather than later—like a fucking tree.

"Um, yeah," she squeaked, and he left it where it was. Thank God, because another second of watching Hudson's hand on his cock would've had her combusting. "Th-thanks."

"Sure. Tell me if there's anything else you need me to adjust."

His eyes met hers, and she could see the heat simmering there. Not just simmering. Boiling. Ready to spill over. She inhaled a shaky breath and rubbed her thighs together again, her clit on fire. Fuck, she was so wet.

If she didn't get a handle on herself—*now*—she wasn't going to survive this. She needed to focus on the job. The money. Getting back to some sense of normalcy with Hudson.

"You're perfect," she said softly. "I mean, the pose. The pose is perfect." Her face burned and she retreated back behind the easel. Closing her eyes, she took a deep breath. Her heart felt like it was going to gallop out of her chest. Her hands were shaking so badly that she wasn't sure she'd even be able to draw, and that didn't serve either of them.

But she also knew that if she could capture even a fraction of his sexual magnetism on the canvas, Eunice would be thrilled. And then they'd have enough money to make their

biggest problems disappear. She could start her program. He could renew the shop's lease without worry. And maybe, if Eunice recommended her, it would open up a whole world of high paying commissions for Violet.

In short, if this was a success, it could change her life. Which meant she had to find a way to be professional. She was a grown woman with an MFA. Time to act like it, no matter what she felt. No matter what had happened between them.

She took another deep breath and then looked out from behind the easel.

“Shit,” she whispered, her eyes devouring him, heat swirling through her. Every single time she looked at him, it felt like a small shock. Like licking a battery.

God, how did he even fit inside me?

“Did you say something?” he asked, and she gave her head a shake.

“Just talking to myself. Sorry.”

“Can I see the sketch when it's done?”

“Um, sure. Of course. I just need to, uh. To start.”

She cleared her throat, took another deep breath, and brought her pencil to the paper, forcing herself to start working.

And for the next hour, she did, eventually losing herself to the process as she always did. It always felt like she found pieces of herself when she created something. Pieces that had disappeared a long time ago. She was still recovering them after everything that had happened. Art was life. It was her therapy, her joy, her means of expressing herself. And now, her means of starting something that might help kids going through the same thing she'd been through, only they wouldn't have to face it alone.

“Okay, take a look,” she said, unclipping the paper from the easel and stepping out from behind it, holding it up to show him. “What do you think?”

He squinted and then shook his head. “I don’t have my glasses on, or contacts in. Can you bring it closer?”

“Oh, uh. Sure. Yes. Closer. Right.” She swallowed thickly and started walking towards him, doing her best to look everywhere but at his cock.

A full body tingle rushed through her as she got closer, making her legs feel weak. She forced herself to look at his chest, telling herself she was studying his tattoo and looking for details she could improve upon.

She stood next to the sofa and handed him the sketch, and he took it and stared at it for what felt like an eternity, but was probably only ten seconds.

“It’s good, Vi. It’s really good.”

“Yeah?” she asked, embers glowing inside her at his praise.

“Yeah. I love it. Are you happy with it?”

She nodded, feeling a little breathless. “I am. I like it. And I hope Eunice will too.” She took the sketch back and turned her back, heading back toward the easel. She felt almost dizzy with lust and need and the desperate need to cling to the knowledge—the *truth*—that he wasn’t for her. She squeezed her eyes closed.

“So, are we finished for today? Or do you need more?”

Yes, I need more. I need so much more.

Her nipples hardened to aching points at his words, her body responding to him against her will.

“Yeah. We’re finished for today. You can get dressed.”

“Great.” He rose from the couch and started pulling on his clothes while she slipped her collection of pencils back into their case.

He casually walked across the living room, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck. He came around behind her and stood, clearly looking at the sketch again.

“You know, I do think the level of detail is a little uneven,” he said, a teasing hint in his voice that had her whirling around.

“How so?”

“You seem to have spent most of your time here,” he said, gesturing in the general vicinity of his dick. “Just an observation.” And then he smirked at her, heading into the kitchen.

How on earth was she going to survive this?



Violet stepped inside Eunice's front door, the suited butler bowing silently to her as she entered. She set her portfolio containing Hudson's sketch down on the bench and then shrugged out of her jacket. The butler took it with a small nod and then gestured to the stairs. "She's in the portrait room, Miss MacAllister."

"Thanks," she said, picking up her portfolio and heading up the stairs, hoping she didn't get lost. But as she mounted the stairs, she could hear lively jazz music coming from the direction of the portrait room, and she followed it until she reached the door, which was ajar. She pushed it open and smiled at the sight of Eunice. She was sitting on the sofa, back against the armrest, legs crossed at the ankles in front of her, thumbing through the latest issue of *Vogue*. Her white hair was styled so that it stood nearly straight up, and she was wearing what Violet already thought of as her trademark glasses and red lipstick. Today she was wearing a brightly colored muumuu with marabou cuffs, two inches worth of silver bangles on each wrist, and a necklace made out of enormous spheres of turquoise.

"Ah, Violet," she said, looking up from her magazine. She tossed it onto the coffee table and then swung her legs over the side of the sofa.

"No, no, you don't need to get up," she said, stepping further into the room.

Eunice waved her away. “Please. If I don’t move these old bones around, I get stiff. It’s good for me.” She gestured towards Violet. “Is that the sketch?”

Violet nodded, suddenly feeling nervous. Nervous and...a little possessive. She didn’t want to share Hudson with Eunice, even though that was the entire reason she was there.

“It’s just a preliminary, so if you don’t like it, we can try something else.”

Eunice held out her hand and Violet let her take the portfolio, and then she immediately paced to the window, looking out onto Central Park. Her skin felt overly sensitive as she shifted from foot to food, waiting for Eunice to say something. For several moments, Eunice didn’t speak, and with each passing second, the possessive jealousy burning in Violet’s stomach only gathered strength.

“Well,” said Eunice after what felt like an eternity. Violet forced herself to turn back from the window. “First of all, he’s perfect. Absolutely stunning. And that cock! My word. He’d split a woman in two with that thing.”

Violet’s stomach hardened to stone, and she forced a neutral, polite smile to her lips.

“Your sense of space and composition are excellent.”

“I feel like there’s a but coming.”

Eunice tilted her head, studying the sketch. “I’m not enamored with the pose. It’s too casual. I want something more...raw. Primal. Not necessarily sexy, but sexual.”

“I see. Did you have something specific in mind?”

Eunice pursed her lips. “No. I’ll leave that to the two of you to work out. But I do think we’re headed in the right direction, and as a show of good faith, I’ve got a little something for you.”

She turned and walked over to the gleaming mahogany desk by the window, opened a small lacquered box and pulled out a check. “Consider this a deposit,” she said, handing Violet a check for \$20,000.

Violet nearly swallowed her tongue.

“Ness, you don’t have to pay anything now. We agreed that the fee would be paid when the portrait was complete.”

Eunice shrugged with a small smile. “I know, but you’ve gotta eat, honey. Believe me, I know. I didn’t always have this,” she said, gesturing around the room. “I’ve been on this earth for ninety-one years, and I’ve seen the highs and lows life has to offer.”

“Well, I really appreciate it,” said Violet, tucking the check into her pocket. She’d deposit it right away and then transfer half to Hudson.

Eunice tilted her head, studying Violet. “Everything okay, my dear? You seem...a little off, compared to the last time we spoke.”

“Oh, I’m fine,” she said, waving away Eunice’s concern.

Eunice snorted. “You’re a fabulously talented artist, darling, but a terrible liar. Come. Sit.”

Violet sighed dejectedly and did as she was asked. Eunice moved to the corner of the room and tugged on a gilded rope. A bell chimed distantly in the house.

“While we’re waiting for our tea, why don’t you tell me what’s troubling you?”

Violet let out a little laugh. “I don’t even know where to begin.”

“Is it a man, money, career, or health?” When Violet just blinked at her, she smiled, easing herself down onto the sofa. “In my experience, most problems fall into one of those categories.”

Violet chuckled. “Man.”

“Mmm. And let me guess. It’s this man in particular, isn’t it?” she asked, tapping a manicured fingernail against the closed portfolio.

“No, I...” she started, but then her shoulders slumped and she was suddenly too tired to put up a façade. “Yeah.”

The butler arrived with their tea, and Eunice busied herself with pouring them each a cup. “Tell me what’s going on. An artist needs an outlet.”

“I shouldn’t,” Violet said, feeling self-conscious.

“What if I guess?”

Violet felt almost numb as she answered. “Sure. Go ahead.”

Eunice pursed her lips, sitting back in her seat, her tea cup cradled in her weathered hands. “I think you have feelings for our Mr. Prescott. Perhaps you’ve even acted on those feelings. But for whatever reason, things are still quite unresolved between the two of you.”

Violet’s mouth fell open. “That’s...accurate. How did you —?”

Eunice grinned. “There are very few mysteries left when you reach my age. So. Tell me about you and our handsome model.”

Violet took a sip of her tea and cleared her throat, feeling a bit like a specimen under a microscope, but wanting to unburden herself nonetheless. It wasn’t like she had any other close friends to talk about this stuff with.

“Well, um. I met him a few years ago when we were working at the same tattoo parlor. I was attracted to him, but at the time he was engaged to someone else. She actually called things off the night before the wedding.”

Eunice inhaled sharply. “Goodness. How awful.”

Violet nodded. “When he opened his own shop, he invited me to come work for him and we became good friends. In the aftermath of his breakup, he didn’t seem interested in dating, and even though I totally had a thing for him, I didn’t want to muddy the waters, especially given how it wouldn’t be worth the risk.”

Eunice frowned. “What do you mean?”

“I’m most definitely not his type. You should’ve seen his ex-fiancée. Tall, sleek dark hair, a Ph.D. in English literature.

I'm not that."

"No, you're not. But different isn't a value judgment. It's just different. And maybe he wouldn't want to be with someone who reminds him of his ex."

"Maybe, but that doesn't change the fact that I'm not enough for him."

"Whatever do you mean? Did he tell you that?"

"No, no. I just know."

Eunice let out a laugh, deep and loud. "Youth is so wasted on the young, let me tell you." She laughed again, then pushed her glasses up on top of her head, wiping at her eyes. "Darling, look at me," she continued once she'd composed herself. "You are beautiful, young, talented, and sweet. Why on earth would you think you're not enough for him? After all, he's been your friend for years. He asked you to come work for him because he obviously respects your talent and your work ethic. He's comfortable enough with you to allow you to paint him nude."

"I'm...I'm dyslexic," she said in a quiet voice. "I have a learning disability, and my whole life, I've been told that I'm not good enough. Teachers, peers, everyone. And if you hear something enough, you start to believe it. I was called names, told I'd never amount to anything, that no college would take me. In high school, this group of boys used to scream 'spatula' at me because the only job I'd ever be capable of was working at a fast food joint."

"And you proved all those assholes wrong, didn't you? It's not everyone who has a Masters in Fine Arts from NYU."

"I didn't set out to prove them wrong. Art saved me. I found a way to express myself. But that doesn't heal all the damage that was done."

"I'm going to tell you something, and I want you to hear me. Just because you think a thought doesn't make it true. Those thoughts you have? They're ingrained in you. When you do something or think something repeatedly, the same synapses fire together, creating a deep trough. The deeper the trough, the faster they fire. But just because that trough is there

doesn't make it true. And while I'm sorry for all of the pain and rejection you faced growing up, that doesn't predict future pain and rejection. Every person, every situation is unique." She leaned forward and laid a hand on Violet's knee. "Don't let your memories of the past rob you of a future." She sighed. "You owe it to yourself to be brave and go after what you want, including our handsome Mr. Prescott if that's what your heart desires. You can't hide from all of life's hurts because if you do, you're not actually living."

Violet wanted to know what hurts this rich old lady had faced in her life, and as though she could read her mind, she kept talking, her eyes softly unfocused.

"My father worked in a glass factory, and my mother was a shopgirl. I think they would've wanted more children, but we were so poor. We lived in a two bedroom apartment in Astoria, and we didn't have much. When I was older, I would take the subway to Greenwich Village, and I fell in love with the fashion boutiques, the antique shops, the jewelry stores. It was all so lush and bohemian and foreign to me. I tried to get hired on, but none of them would have me. I got called everything from street rat to much, much worse.

"But I loved art. I loved beautiful things. So I managed to get a scholarship to the University of Wisconsin to study art. I wasn't rich, but I was bright and ambitious. I met my husband there, my Richard, and together we built an empire. We started a textile business that eventually became a restoration firm. We worked for various presidents, we traveled to Europe several times a year. Talk about feeling like a fish out of water! But I embraced the opportunities that came to me, even if I felt out of my element.

"But with all of that success, there was loss, too. Richard and I were never able to conceive, and my old age has been lonely. Richard died six years ago now, and life got lonelier still. But I don't regret any of it. I'm glad that I didn't let my fear hold me back, because what a goddamn adventure I've had." She leveled her gaze at Violet. "You're worthy of adventure, my darling. You're worthy of love and happiness and chasing your dreams. Fuck what other people have said.

Fuck the haters, as the kids say. Live your life courageously, unapologetically, whole-heartedly. Because let me tell you, it goes by in a blink. So live it. Today. And leave the past where it belongs.”

A few hours later, Violet stepped inside the tattoo shop, her mind whirling and refusing to settle back into place after her conversation with Eunice. It wasn't as though no one had told her those things before, but somehow, coming from Eunice, they felt far less like cliches and much more personal. As though she wasn't just offering pat advice, but she'd seen through to the core of Violet and genuinely wanted more for her.

Could she have more? Was she ready to stop using the past as a shield against the future?

She'd stopped by her place first to deposit her portfolio. No way was she going to risk bringing a nude sketch of everyone's boss to work.

“Hey,” she said as she moved to her workstation, setting her things down. She had a client coming in to get inked later that day, and a few sketches to work on for potential clients in the meantime.

“Hey,” said Thane, one of the other full-time tattoo artists at the shop. “I need a favor.” His long hair was piled on top of his head in a man bun, as usual, his sleeveless shirt showing off his heavily tattooed arms.

“Sure, what's up?”

“We've got a walk in. I have a client coming in about twenty minutes, and Hudson's already working on someone. It's Dex's day off, and Jade won't be in for another few hours. Do you think you could take him? I know we don't normally scramble to accommodate walk-ins, but...” He shrugged, looking over at Hudson, whose brow was furrowed in concentration as he tattooed a storm cloud on a female client's

inner arm. He didn't have to say it. They all knew that the shop needed every single customer it could get.

"Sure, no problem," she said. "I have a couple of hours before my client, so as long as he doesn't want anything crazy, I should be able to fit him in." Thane shot her a grin and she headed toward the little reception area by the front door. The man was bald with a closely cropped dark beard, and he was plainly dressed in a black leather jacket, white T-shirt and jeans. He looked to be in his mid-to-late thirties. "Hey," she said, extending her hand. "I'm Violet and I'll be looking after you today. What brings you in?"

"I want to get a tattoo to commemorate 9/11, like maybe on my back or shoulder. I'm not sure."

"Come on back and we can talk about it some more. Have you had a tattoo before?"

She led him back to her workspace, pulling the silk screen halfway closed to give them a little privacy.

"Yeah, I've got a cobra here," he said, pointing at his right pec. "And a devil face on this side." He tapped his left pec.

A snake and a devil. How charming.

Violet hoisted a professional smile onto her face and picked up her iPad and stylus. "Great, so you know what to expect in terms of sensation and healing."

"Yeah."

"Did you have a design in mind for this tattoo?"

"Yeah." He leaned forward, bracing his arms on his legs. The lights shone against his smooth head and the look on his face had the hair on the back of Violet's neck standing up. "You know about 9/11, right?"

"Of course. I'm born and raised in NYC, so I was here when it happened." Her mind flashed back to the memorial for Hudson's father, to the pain that family still carried from his sacrifice.

"Right." His voice was flat. "But I mean the truth."

“The truth?” she asked, one eyebrow arched.

“It was an inside job, and I want to commemorate the most corrupt day in our country’s history with some ink.”

“Um...” Everything inside Violet went cold as she tried to figure out how the hell to handle this. She tilted her head to the side and set the iPad down. “I’m not sure I can help you with that.”

He shook his head. “It’s okay, you don’t need to come up with the design. I already know what I want.”

Her stomach churned sickly. “And what’s that?”

He grinned, transforming before her eyes into a full-blown creep. She crossed her arms in front of her, wanting to put even that small bit of space between them.

“I want the two towers, side by side. On the left one, I want the word ‘inside’ and on the right one, ‘job.’ And then I want in big block letters ‘truth hurts’ underneath them. Maybe a tattered American flag in the background? What do you think?”

Violet sucked in a breath, her nostrils flaring as anger chased away her uneasiness. Her pulse sped and she rolled her lips inward. “What do I think? I think you need to leave because there’s no way I’m doing that.”

He frowned. “What do you mean, you’re not doing that? You’re a tattoo artist, aren’t you?”

“We have the right to refuse service to anyone, and I’m refusing service to you,” she said, her voice shaking a little as she fought to hold back her anger. “Please leave.”

“You’re not the only artist here. Maybe someone else will do it.” He stood and pushed the silk screen back. “I didn’t want a dumb bitch like you tattooing me anyway.”

Violet popped off of her stool. “If refusing to do a vile, disgusting, offensive tattoo makes me a bitch, then yeah, I’m a bitch.”

Immediately, both Thane and Hudson were right there.

“Whoa,” said Hudson, stepping between them. “What’s going on?”

“He wants an offensive 9/11 conspiracy theory tattoo and I refused,” she said, gulping down a breath and trying to get a handle on the anger surging through her. A part of her wished she could’ve handled it quietly because she didn’t want to expose Hudson to this.

“This is what happens when you hire women,” the man said to Hudson. “If she worked for me, I’d pop her one and tell that bitch to shut up.”

Moving swiftly, Hudson fisted his hands in the man’s shirt and shoved him into the wall, holding him in place. “Say that again. I dare you.” When the man just smirked at him, Hudson shook him, hard enough that the man’s head thumped against the wall.

“Oh yeah? You wanna fight me over this dumb hoe?”

Hudson growled, and then Violet’s hand was on his arm. “Hud, come on. He’s not worth it.”

Suddenly, the man craned his neck, still in Hudson’s grip and spit on Violet. She was too shocked to do anything but take a step back. She could feel the slimy, sticky spit on her cheek, and her stomach roiled. She started to shake, her limbs going cold. But she didn’t miss the sight of Hudson’s fist slamming into the man’s face. Thane grabbed Hudson, who looked absolutely livid, trying to pull him off, and she started to back away toward the bathroom, needing desperately to wash her face.

Violet disappeared into the bathroom, shutting the door behind her. She wet a paper towel and scrubbed at her face, rubbing until it was red and raw and sore, but she still felt dirty. Disgusting. Less than. That man hadn’t seen her as a human. He’d seen her as disposable. As dirt. And it made her feel about two feet tall. Her eyes stung with tears, and she gripped the sink, hanging her head down. She felt weak and dizzy, no matter how many deep breaths she took.

She didn't know how much time had passed when there was a knock on the bathroom door. It cracked open just an inch.

"Vi? You okay?" Hudson stepped in, and her eyes zeroed in on his reddened knuckles. She couldn't remember ever seeing Hudson lose his cool like that. Ever.

"Yeah." There was a squeezing sensation in her chest as she let go of the sink and when she turned, she was surprised to see Hudson right there, his features tight with concern.

"Vi," he whispered, and he pulled her into a hug. "I wanted to fucking kill him." He stepped away and slipped his hand under her chin, tilting her face up to his. "You sure you're okay?"

She inhaled shakily, pulling his comforting scent into her lungs. "I was so angry, Hud. The tattoo he wanted made me want to puke, I was so disgusted." She blinked away the tears and met his eyes. "I know the sacrifices that were made that day, and the price that so many families paid. I'm horrified that anyone would buy into those conspiracy theories, and you know what? I don't even give a shit about the names he called me because he's an asshole and his opinion means nothing to me."

"I can't believe he spit on you." His eyebrows slashed downward. "I wish I'd hit him more than once."

She pressed her face against his chest. "I've never been attacked like that. It stunned me, that someone could be so hateful."

"Fuck. I really wish I'd done more than just hit him."

"It's not your fault. And I don't regret standing up for you and for every family like yours. I would do it again, spit and all."

He kissed the top of her head and she melted into him, wrapping her arms around his waist and anchoring herself with his solid body against hers.

And right then, she knew. She didn't just have feelings for Hudson. She was in love with him. The fierce need to protect

him, to defend him...she'd never felt anything like it before.

“Vi, I—” he started, but there was another knock on the door, and Thane stuck his head in.

“Hey, you okay?” he said, zeroing in on Violet. She nodded, still pressed against Hudson. Normally, she would've jumped away, but she didn't want to. She wanted his arms around her. And for once, she felt like she'd earned it. “He's gone. I think you scared the shit out of him.”

“If he ever comes back, he'll be fucking sorry.” Hudson stepped away from her and the loss of him made her feel almost panicked, but then wove his fingers through hers, giving her hand a squeeze. They followed Thane back out into the shop, and he dropped his head so he could whisper in her ear. “I've got you, Vi. I'm right here, and I'm not going anywhere.”

Maybe it was time to start believing him.



Hudson rushed to answer his front door, his hair still wet from his shower and dripping onto his T-shirt. Not that it mattered because he'd be naked soon enough. He pulled open the door, a wide grin stretching across his face at the sight of Violet. She was wearing a pair of paint splattered overalls with a cute little crop top underneath, her curls spilling out from under her beret.

"Well, eef eet eesn't zee famous artiste," he said, putting on a horrible French accent.

She laughed and handed him some of her things. "I think you and I have different definitions of famous." She took off her shoes and then tossed her hat onto the couch as he moved into the living room, setting up her easel where it had been before.

"Um, I'm not sure if we're going to pick up where we left off," she said, scratching at her cheek. "Eunice wasn't thrilled with the pose."

His eyebrows rose. "Oh. Okay. Did you have something else in mind?"

"She said she wanted something more primal. Raw, and sexual."

"Maybe...on the bed?" he asked, his heart thundering to life in his chest. He didn't know how he was going to handle being naked on his bed with Violet within arm's reach. He'd probably crack a molar from clenching his jaw.

Her face lit up. “Yes!” she said enthusiastically, making his cock twitch in his pants. Dammit. He’d just fucked his fist, and come all over the shower floor while remembering the way he’d come down Violet’s throat. He’d thought that if he had any hope of controlling himself this evening, he’d better take the edge off. But clearly, it hadn’t really worked.

Violet quickly moved her easel into his bedroom and immediately set about adjusting the lighting.

“You doing okay?” he asked, sitting on the edge of the bed, not wanting to get in her way as she worked. It had been two days since that asshole had spit on her for refusing to do the offensive tattoo, and although she seemed okay, he needed to hear it from her.

“I am. It shook me up, but I’m okay.”

He watched her set out her pencils, erasers and pens, moving with much more confidence than the first time she’d sketched him. Tenderness blossomed inside him, spreading like liquid across his chest, down to his stomach. Any sane person would’ve been repulsed by that asshole’s tattoo request, but she’d done it because she was defending him. Protecting him, and standing up for him and his family and what they’d lost. He’d been incredibly touched that she’d gone to bat for him like that, and it was the knowledge that she had his back, that she understood his loss and his pain that was making it harder and harder to control himself around her.

Somewhere along the way, he’d fallen for Violet. Fallen for her in a way that his life didn’t make sense without her in it.

“Okay, leave your clothes on for now, but can you get up on the bed?” she asked, tilting her head as she studied him. “Right in the middle, yeah. And on your knees. Look to your left and maybe put one of your hands on your stomach, like really low. Yeah, like that. Now, for some details...” Her eyes bounced around the room, and she held up a finger. “Be right back.” She disappeared back into the living room and then returned a moment later with his well-worn copy of Thoreau’s *Walden*. She set it on the edge of the bed, positioning it just so.

“Where are your glasses?” she asked, glancing around the room.

“Bathroom counter,” he said. He’d taken them off for the shower and then put his contacts in afterward. She disappeared again, and then quickly reappeared. She opened the glasses up and set them on the book. “Now, when you get undressed, I want you to sort of toss your clothes on the bed.”

“Am I getting undressed now?” he asked, adrenaline surging through him. He didn’t think he’d ever get enough of the heady feeling of being naked for Violet. He wanted her to look. To see and remember and know.

“Please,” she said, her voice going a little husky and once again taking him back to that night, when she’d begged him to fuck her. His cock twitched again and he immediately switched to thinking about motorcycles and poetry and records he wanted to add to his collection. God, she made him feel like a horny teenager.

He pulled his shirt up over his head and tossed it to the side. Then he shucked his sweatpants, and he could’ve sworn Violet made a small whimpering sound when she realized he was commando. He tossed them to the side too and then returned to the middle of the bed, settling onto his knees.

“Can you spread your legs a little wider?” she asked, and he immediately filed that away under things he wanted to say to her.

“Uh huh,” he managed, expending the rest of his focus on not getting hard.

“Oh, that’s good,” she said softly, and he closed his eyes for a second. “Can you move your hand back to your stomach...just a little lower. Oh my God, perfect. Yes, this is so much better than before.”

The sound of her pencil scraping across the page filled the room, and Hudson tried to focus on his breathing and not the heaviness in his balls.

“Oh!” she said suddenly, stepping out from behind her easel. “Eunice paid a twenty thousand dollar deposit. As soon

as the check clears, I'll get you your half."

"Seriously? That's amazing." He felt some of the ever present tension in his neck and shoulders start to melt away. Knowing he'd be able to keep the lights on for at least a few more months was a huge relief.

"I know. It was really generous of her, and she didn't have to do that. She's actually a super fascinating person."

"What's she like?"

For the next several minutes, she told him all about Eunice and her life and the stories she'd shared with Violet. "She even sort of called me out for some of my bullshit."

He frowned slightly, feeling instantly protective. "What do you mean?"

She sighed while continuing to sketch. "I told her about the dyslexia and how it's affected me. She basically told me I was letting my past dictate my future, and...she's not wrong."

"No," Hudson said, and her eyes snapped to his. "She's not."

She stepped back from her sketch and scrutinized it. "Do you think you could move your hand even lower? So that your fingers are, um, like threaded through, uh..."

"What do you mean?" he asked, being an asshole and playing dumb because he wanted her to come closer. Maybe even show him what she meant.

He got his wish, because she moved toward the bed and took his hand, then slid it further down his belly until his fingers were in the thatch of dark blond hair between his legs. Slowly, she adjusted his fingers one by one, and he bit back a moan when the side of her hand grazed his dick.

"Yeah," she whispered. "Just like that."

Fuck. Trying not to get hard was torture. It was hell.

He captured her hand before she could move it away, then laid it on top of his so that her fingers were woven through the

hair too. “Tell me you don’t think about it,” he said, his voice raw, rough around the edges.

“Think about what?” she asked, fluttering her eyelashes at him innocently.

He dropped his head forward, his lips brushing against her ear. “How fucking good I felt inside you.”

She let out a soft moan and then scurried away, retreating back to her easel. “Maybe we should try a different pose,” she said. “Wrap your hand around yourself.” He did, squeezing the base of his shaft, his chest heaving as he took a deep breath. She licked her lips and then shook her head, her curls bouncing. “Hmm. No. Maybe move it closer to the tip.”

He smirked at her and did as he was told, stroking himself in front of her, and he knew that the walls between them were coming down. Fuck, he’d strut around the room like a rooster if that was what she wanted right now.

“You know, I think I liked it better lower,” she said, her cheeks pink and her eyes glinting playfully. He groaned as he slid his fist back down, his cock now at half-mast. “Wait, I want to see it the other way again,” she said breathlessly, and he stroked himself, this time not stopping, just slowly sliding his hand up and down his aching shaft until he was hard as a fucking rock.

Violet’s eyes were pure fire as she watched him stroke himself, and then she cleared her throat. “No, I’ve changed my mind. Back to the original pose, please.”

With a soft grunt, Hudson released his cock and he didn’t miss the way Violet was rubbing her thighs together.

“Tell me you don’t think about it,” he repeated, his voice lower than usual.

Her eyes slammed into his, knocking all of the air out of his lungs. “Of course I think about it.”

“I think about it constantly, Violet. I think about how it was like something cracked open inside me when we kissed. Like I was finally tasting sunshine for the first time in years. Maybe ever. I think about how fucking beautiful you are and

how I could barely breathe when you took your clothes off. I think about how it took everything I had not to come when you came all over my fingers. How fucking good it felt to be bare inside you. How hot and perfect and sweet it was. It was the best sex of my life. Because it was with *you*.”

Her eyes went soft and she moved closer to the bed again. “What if we fuck up our friendship?”

“What if we can have more?” he countered. “I’m scared, too, Vi. That fear is why it took me so long to see what was right in front of me.” He pulled her up onto the bed with him, and then he took her hand and laid it over his heart. “But as scared as I am, this is beating for you.” His arm slid around her waist, pulling her flush against him, her hand shaking where it rested over his pounding heart. “I don’t want to end our friendship. I want to start something even bigger and more amazing than what we already have.”

“Hudson,” she whispered, and then tipped her head up, brushing her lips against his.

“If we do this,” he said, weaving his hand into her curls, “this means something. Just like last time meant something. This isn’t an escape, or a heat of the moment decision. This is you, choosing us.”

“I choose us,” she said, her eyes bright, and then she kissed him. He groaned against her mouth, savoring the sweetness of her tongue licking along his bottom lip. She made a soft mewling sound as he swept his tongue into her mouth. His cock jumped, pressing against her belly, and he couldn’t remember a time in his life when he’d felt so primed. So damn ready to fuck and claim and worship.

She moaned and slid her hand from his heart down to his throbbing cock, wrapping her hand around it and stroking him slowly.

“Fuck, I love the way you touch me,” he groaned, his eyes shuttering. “So goddamn perfect.”

She inhaled a shaky breath, her body trembling against his as she stroked him. She traced her finger over the tip of his

cock, spreading the pre-come that had gathered there around his head. “I touch myself,” she said, so softly he almost didn’t hear her at first over his own racing pulse. “I think about sucking your cock and swallowing you down, and I touch myself every single night.”

“Shit, Vi,” he panted, his hips starting to move. He lifted his hands and started working on the straps of her overalls, needing to see more of her. Needing to see all of her. “That’s so fucking hot.”

He dropped his head and buried his face in her neck as her overalls slid down to her hips, inhaling her sweet scent. She smelled like cinnamon and vanilla, and he trailed kisses over the soft skin under her jaw.

“I can’t wait to be inside you again,” he said, nipping at the junction where her neck met her shoulder. Fuck, he felt as though he were on fire. Like he was going to burn from the inside out with how badly he wanted Violet. Needed Violet. Especially now that she’d told him she was choosing them. Giving this thing between them—the attraction, the lust, the emotional connection that stretched beyond friendship—a chance.

Violet tipped her head to the side and let out a happy sigh, her hand still wrapped around his cock.

“I’ve wanted you for so long, Hud,” she whispered, her eyes closed. “You have no idea.”

He tugged on her earlobe with his teeth and then kissed a path from her ear to her collarbone, heat churning through him. “Maybe this was always what was supposed to happen. Maybe you were always meant to be mine, kitten.”

“Kitten?”

“Mmm. You’re sweet and soft and you make the most incredible little sounds. My kitten,” he said again, weaving his hand into her hair and tugging gently, exposing more of her neck to him. He kissed and licked her soft skin, wanting to imprint himself on her.

“Yours,” she breathed, and he was unprepared for the wave of possession that charged through him. He knew that there was no going back now. That Violet was his, and he’d do anything to protect her. To make her happy. To support her. Anything.

It hit him that he’d never felt even an ounce of that with Jessica. He’d cared about her, yes. But what he felt for Violet was already deeper and much more consuming. And fuck, it felt so goddamn right. Sweet, beautiful Violet, his to love and protect and cherish.

Fuck, yes.

“You look like a goddamn angel, you know that? You are the sexiest woman, Vi.”

Violet looked at him, her pupils huge, her hand working his cock faster and faster. Her chest rose and fell in quick, sharp pants, and he needed her shirt gone. Now. Sliding his hands up her sides, he gathered the fabric and slowly lifted it off over her head. She wasn’t wearing a bra, and her full breasts swung free, her sweet, dusky pink nipples hard and begging for his mouth.

“You are fucking stunning, Violet. I don’t think you have any idea just how gorgeous you are.” He dipped his head and sucked one of her nipples into his mouth, swirling his tongue around the pebbled peak. She moaned and arched her back into him, her fingers slipping into his hair.

She made a strangled sound and shook her head. “I’m not —”

“You are. I could stare at you for hours. Days.” He kissed her, his tongue tangling with hers. “The rest of my life,” he murmured against her lips, and she gasped softly, then kissed him, slower and deeper than before. She slid her hand up and down his cock and he let out a gruff moan.

“That’s it, kitten. Stroke me.”

She tightened her grip, and he could’ve sworn he saw stars. “How did this even fit inside me last time?” she asked,

loosening her grip and tracing the tip of her finger over a vein that ran up the length of his dick.

“Because you were fucking soaked. And I’ll make sure you are again.”

He held her tight and crushed his mouth to hers, kissing her hard and deep. Violet moaned into his mouth, his dick pinned between them and throbbing. As he kissed her, she wriggled against him, dragging his cock against the soft skin of her stomach.

Relief tangled with the need to claim as the taste of Violet burst across his tongue. Her fingers dug into his biceps as she sucked on his tongue. The kiss grew messier, needier, as urgency spread between them.

Already, Hudson knew that this would be different than last time. Better, because this time there’d be no walls between them.

She broke the kiss, gasping breathlessly, and then she took his hand and guided it to her heart. It was beating wildly in her chest, making her breast jump and pulse. “It beats for you, too,” she said softly.

“God, Violet,” he moaned, feeling so full, like he was ready to burst. He wanted to scream from the Brooklyn rooftops that Violet was his. “Can I come inside you this time?”

She nodded shakily. “Yes. I have an IUD. We’re covered.”

“Good. Because you have no idea how badly I want to see your pretty little pussy dripping with my come.”

She trembled in his arms. “Jesus, Hud. Shit.”

“You like when I say filthy things to you, kitten?” he asked, rubbing his cock against her stomach again. “When I tell you that I want to fuck you raw and fill you up with my come?”

She nodded. “Yes,” she moaned. “I fucking love it.”

“I want your mouth,” he said, tightening his hand in her hair just slightly. “Suck me.”

“Fuck, Hudson. You’re killing me,” she moaned as she dropped down to all fours, kissing the very tip of his cock. It jumped against her lips and she nuzzled against it, staring at it with mix of reverence and awe that made him feel like a fucking god.

“Use your tongue on me, kitten. Lick my cock.”

She made that soft mewling noise again and then spit on his cock, and it took every ounce of control he had not to come right then and there. She dragged her tongue up and down his cock, then swirled it over his aching balls. Pre-come dripped from the head at a steady pace now, and she swirled her tongue around the tip, lapping it up and moaning appreciatively.

“You taste so good,” she said, licking up another drop.

“Lick it all up,” he said, watching as she did, sucking gently on the tip of his cock. “Good girl.”

She made a desperate sound and then parted her lips, swallowing half his cock. Hudson’s head fell back and he let out a deep groan at the hot, wet perfection of her mouth. She swept her mouth up and down his length, teasing at his slit with every pass, as though she wanted to get every single drop he had to offer.

“Oh fuck, Vi. This is the hottest blow job I’ve ever had in my damn life.”

She moaned and sucked him enthusiastically, taking him a bit deeper every single time she moved her mouth up and down his length. She wrapped her hand around the base of his shaft, stroking him as she sucked him. His grip tightened in her hair and his hips started to move a little, taking more and more of her mouth.

Hudson watched, his mouth open, his chest rising and falling rapidly, rapt at the sight of his glistening cock disappearing between Violet’s lips. His balls tightened and pleasure sparked down his spine. He hit the back of her throat and she choked a little, but didn’t ease off of him at all, clearly as desperate for this as he was.

“Shit, kitten,” he growled, his hips moving a little faster. “Don’t stop. I’m so fucking close.”

She moaned and sucked him even deeper, taking him all the way to her throat and swallowing around him. Her eyes were watering, her curls a mess around her head, making her look like a gorgeously debauched angel.

His debauched angel.

“Yes, Violet,” he groaned. “Fuck, you look so pretty with my cock in your mouth. Gonna fill that pretty mouth with come.” His breathing came in harsh pants and Violet swallowed him down again, moaning around his shaft, her lips stretched wide around him.

“Shit!” he grunted as the first spasm of his orgasm pulled at his balls. “I’m gonna...fuck, here it comes.”

His hips bucked as he came hard, spurting into her mouth and down her throat over and over. She did her best to swallow it all, but there was so much that some of it dripped out of her mouth and onto her breasts. The sight of his come marking her spurred him on, sending another surge into her mouth. She eased off his shaft and then looked up at him, meeting his eyes as she swallowed everything that was in her mouth.

And then she scooped up the come on her chest with her finger, then sucked her finger into her mouth.

Even though he’d just exploded, Hudson’s cock gave an appreciative twitch. A tremble coursed through him as he watched her in awe, trying and failing to wrap his mind around how unbelievably sexy and sweet she was.

“You’re amazing,” he breathed, stroking his fingers over her soft cheek. “Fuck, Violet.”

She licked her lips. “You taste amazing.”

He grinned at her. “Once you go vegetarian, you never go back.”

She threw her head back and laughed, and he helped her to her knees, kissing a path across her collarbones. “I need you

naked.” His hands slid up her sides until he was cupping her breasts, savoring the weight of them in his hands.

“Really?” she asked, her voice a little breathy. “I thought we’d go back to the sketch now.”

“I’m not finished with you yet, kitten. Not by a long shot.” He slipped his hands into her overalls, pushing them down over her hips, letting them pool at her knees. He held onto her so she could balance as she kicked free of them, one leg at a time. They landed on the floor in a heap, and Hudson decided that Violet’s clothes on his bedroom floor was one of his favorite sights.

He moved his hands back to her breasts, kneading and massaging, plucking gently at her sensitive nipples. Her back arched into him and he dipped his head, taking his time teasing first one and then the other nipple, not stopping until she was writhing against him, her head moving back and forth. Trailing one hand down between her breasts, he kept going until he was cupping her through her panties. Even through the layer of cotton separating them, he could feel how hot and wet she was.

“Please,” she whispered, and he pushed her panties to the side, sliding his fingers through her wet slit. “Oh fuck, Hudson. Yes,” she moaned, her head falling forward onto his shoulder.

“Such a wet pussy,” he murmured approvingly. He moved his hand higher, running it through the little patch of blond curls there before sliding his fingers over her slit again. “So wet and all mine.”

She shook against him and he grinned, parting her and then pressing his palm against her swollen clit. Moving in a slow circle, he played with her, basking in the noises she made, the way she swiveled her hips as though chasing his touch. She panted and gasped as he worked her clit, feeling it swell against his fingers.

He slid first one and then a second finger inside her. “So wet and tight, kitten. So pretty and pink.” He fucked her, moving his fingers in and out and then pulled them free, lifting

them to his mouth. She lifted her head and their eyes met just as he sucked his fingers into his mouth. The taste of her flooded him, making his blood heat and his pulse pound. “As much as I want to fuck you, I need to taste you first. I’ve been dying to get my mouth on you ever since the other night. Not tasting you was my only regret.”

She whimpered and he wrapped an arm around her waist, easing her down to the bed. He hooked his thumbs into her panties and slid them down her legs, letting out a sharp exhale as she came into view. When they’d had sex the first time, the lights had been off and he hadn’t seen nearly as much as he wanted to. But now he could see everything, from her beautifully swollen clit to her glistening folds. His mouth watered at the sight of her.

“I want you so much,” she said, lifting up onto her elbows. “I’m aching for you.”

Hudson wasn’t a man who needed to be told twice, and he settled himself between her spread thighs, inhaling deeply and pulling her sweet, musky feminine scent into his lungs. He licked her, dragging his tongue from her entrance to her clit and back down again. Her hips jumped, and he smiled against her.

“Oh fuck, Hudson,” she moaned loudly as he sucked gently at her clit. His neighbors probably heard that, and he didn’t give a shit. He wanted the entire world to know how good he made his girl feel.

Violet. His girl. *Goddamn.*

He ate at her like a starving man, exploring every inch of her, gorging himself on her taste. He dragged his tongue across her clit, lapping at it before gently nipping at it with his teeth. Violet’s legs had started to shake, her hands on her breasts as she pulled at her nipples.

“You taste so fucking good, kitten.” He licked her clit again. “Such a sweet little pussy.” She moaned and he slid his tongue up and down through her folds, working her with his lips and tongue. He sucked her clit into his mouth, pulling on it before releasing it and sliding his tongue inside her, fucking

her with his tongue. Her sweet, musky flavor consumed him, making him feel wild. Making him feel like a goddamn caveman. He moaned against her, then dipped his tongue even lower, licking her from her cute little asshole all the way back up to her clit.

“Oh God, your mouth,” she panted. “Yes, oh shit.”

“It’s yours,” he said, kissing her clit and then sucking it back into his mouth. Her fingers were in his hair, her hips moving up and down as she ground herself against her face. “Every part of me is yours.”

He could feel her pussy throbbing against his mouth, could feel her entire body shaking. His cock was already hard again, pressing against the mattress, and he moved his hips, trying to get a little relief.

Violet’s eyes were closed, and he growled against her as he lapped and sucked messily at her dripping pussy. “Open your eyes, Violet. Look at me as I make you come.”

She did as she was told, her fists tightening in his hair to the point of pain. He ate at her mercilessly, unrelentingly, slurping and sucking and licking. He pulled her clit into his mouth and sucked on it, feeling it swell even more against his tongue. Violet’s moans grew louder and sharper, her breathing loud and raspy. Her hips bucked so hard he had to hold her down with one arm.

“Fuck, Hudson!” she screamed as she came against his mouth, hard enough that he could feel every throb and pulse of her clit against his tongue. He let out a loud groan as fresh wetness coated her, and he lapped it up, reveling in her taste. His eyes met hers, and they were wide and hazy, her mouth hanging open as she watched him lick her gently, soothingly. He pressed soft kisses around her clit, licked at her outer lips. Soft whimpers fell from her lips, her hips still shifting on the bed. When she was quiet, he rose to his knees, then spread her lips apart with his thumbs.

“Look at you. Fucking delicious.” He eased himself down on top of her, kissing her breasts, sucking her nipples, slowly

working her back up again. She shivered against him and then they both moaned as his cock grazed her pussy.

“How is it so fucking good?” she asked, looking up at him with a slightly dazed expression. “I can’t even process how good it is.”

“Because this is where we’re supposed to be. It feels right because it is.”

“I need you inside me,” she said softly, wrapping her arms and legs around him. He let out a sharp breath as the head of his cock notched at her entrance.

“I need it, too,” he said, his voice strained. The urge to plunge into her and fuck was strong, but there’d be a time for that in the future. Because now they actually *had* a future, and right now, all Hudson wanted was to make love to his girl.

He pushed into her, just a couple of inches, and they both let out a loud moan. He pressed his forehead to hers as he slowly worked himself in. He could barely breathe, she felt so fucking good. Like warm silk. Wet and creamy and tight. So fucking perfect.

Heaven. Being inside Violet was heaven.

“Oh, fuck. Hud. It’s so good. I need more.”

He let out a raspy breath as he worked himself the rest of the way in, finally sinking balls deep into her tight, welcoming heat.

“You feel amazing, Violet. I don’t think I told you that last time I was inside you. I don’t think I told you nearly enough. I was too in my own head. I’m sorry if I made you feel—”

She cut him off by crushing her mouth to his, kissing him long and deep as he slowly worked his way in and out of her, heat pounding down his spine. “I know, Hud,” she whispered, tracing her fingers over his cheek, scratching into his stubble. “I know.” Her eyes were luminous, bright with emotion. He slid his hand into her hair, kissing along her throat.

“Tell me you’re mine, kitten.”

She moaned and sighed and pressed her face into his touch. "I'm yours. I'm so yours."

He made a strangled sound and started to move a little faster, emotions crashing through him. Possession, a sense of wholeness, of rightness.

Of being home.

Her pussy fluttered around him and he ground his teeth together, not wanting this to be over yet. Wanting to feel her come apart on his cock before he finally let go inside her.

He rolled them, pulling her on top of him without leaving her body. She straddled him and started to move her hips, sliding up and down his cock, taking him slow and deep.

"Tell me you're mine," she whispered, riding him slowly, her pussy clenching around him, soaking his cock. He pulled her down to him, her breasts pressed to his chest and kissed her. "I'm yours, Violet," he murmured against her lips, kissing her, following the rhythm of her hips. He dropped his hands to her ass, helping her move, making them both moan and gasp. "Every part of me is yours."

She let out a half-moan half-sob and sat up so she could ride him harder, gasping when he hit a spot even deeper inside her. He reached between them and started rubbing her clit in tight little circles, and her pussy squeezed him. Her hands went to her breasts, pinching and plucking at her stiff nipples. The sight of her above him, the feeling of her pussy gripping him, the beautiful ecstasy on her face—it was something Hudson never wanted to forget.

She came, falling forward onto him, her entire body shaking as her pussy tried to squeeze the life out of him. He could feel his control slipping, and he thrust his hips up harder and faster as she panted out his name over and over again, chanting it like a prayer. Or maybe it just felt like a prayer because being inside her, feeling her come apart on his cock made him feel like a fucking god. He gripped her hips and surged up, feeling the need to claim her. To go as deep as possible so she'd feel him after they were done.

The pressure mounted, and he knew he couldn't hang on much longer. She pulsed around him and lifted her head, her eyes wild with passion. With something more.

"Hudson," she said, her voice shaking. "It's been you for so long."

Her words sent him over the edge, searing pleasure shooting down his spine and centering on where he was moving inside Violet.

"Goddamn," he ground out, coming long and hard inside her, and she pressed her forehead to his, moaning softly. Her curls fell around them like a curtain, and his heart throbbed crazily in his chest. She kissed him gently as he pulsed one last time inside her, and he knew he'd remember this forever. That on his last day on earth, this moment would flash through his mind.

He moved his hands from her hips and wrapped his arms around her, holding her against him and kissing her slow and gentle, a peacefulness unlike anything he'd ever felt settling over him. After a moment, she started to move off of him, and he tightened his arms around her.

"Don't go yet," he whispered. "Stay just a little longer."

She smiled at him and laid down on him, making a soft purring noise as he stroked his hands up and down her back, marveling at how soft her skin was.

And right then, he knew. He was irrevocably, helplessly, madly in love with Violet MacAllister.



Violet lay in Hudson's bed, surrounded by his scent, staring hazily at the ceiling as she tried to process what had just happened.

The most amazing sex of your life with the most amazing man you've ever known, that's what just happened.

It didn't feel real. It felt like something out of a fairytale. Like something that happened to other people. The hot, tatted, muscly guy with the motorcycle and the tattoo shop who wrote poetry about fighting for her heart wasn't meant for her. How could he be?

And yet he was. It was hard to accept, hard to wrap her mind around, but she couldn't deny how she felt about him. And she definitely couldn't forget all the things he'd said to her. How he'd looked at her with his heart in his eyes, his emotions written all over his gorgeous face.

Hudson stepped back into the bedroom, pulling her out of her thoughts. He was still completely naked, and she drank in the sight of him, all of that skin, that ink, those muscles.

That cock. Jesus.

His arms were full, and he moved around his bedroom, setting candles on top of the dresser and on the nightstand, lighting them, and then disappearing again briefly before returning with a plate laden with grapes, cheese, crackers, olives, and hummus. She grinned, sitting up.

“I thought you might be a little hungry,” he said, pulling back the covers and settling himself in bed beside her, his back against the headboard.

“I’m starved,” she admitted, and he picked up a grape and held it out for her. She parted her lips and grabbed it with her teeth, deliberately grazing her lips against his fingertips. He groaned softly and then popped a grape into his own mouth. She felt like she was staring as they both chewed, but it was as though her eyes were magnetized to him. It physically hurt to look away.

As though he could read her mind, Hudson smiled at her, the crooked half-grin that always turned her insides into mush. “I can’t stop looking at you,” he said, eating another grape. “You’re so beautiful it’s mesmerizing.”

Her immediate, knee-jerk reaction was to brush away his comment. She’d never learned how to take praise and compliments and to this day, they made her uncomfortable. But instead, she smiled, pulling the words inside her. Trying to believe them. Wanting to believe them.

“I was just thinking the same thing about you,” she said, dipping a cracker into the hummus. When she’d finished chewing, he leaned forward and kissed her softly, his lips slow and gentle against hers. “This doesn’t feel real,” she whispered, and he kissed her again, then set the plate down between them and slid an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close.

“It’s real, Violet,” he said, pressing a kiss to her temple. “I meant everything I said earlier, about this being the start of something. I have feelings for you. Strong ones.”

Violet’s heart rate picked up as fear tried to take hold, but she did her best to ignore it. Some of those reactions were so ingrained they were as natural as breathing, and it was going to take time and effort to accept this new reality between her and Hudson.

“I have feelings for you, too, Hud. I have for a long time now.”

“I had no idea. Honestly.”

She shrugged, nibbling on a piece of cheese as she snuggled into him. He was so solid and warm. So comforting and familiar, yet wildly exciting at the same time. “You weren’t interested in dating, and I didn’t want to do anything to make things weird between us. And…” She hesitated, shaking her head.

“What?” He twirled one of her curly locks around his finger, casually playing as though lounging in bed after soul shattering sex was the most natural thing in the world for them. “Vi, you can tell me anything.”

“After Jessica, I just didn’t think… I was your type. That you’d feel anything beyond friendship for me.”

His eyes darkened, and he moved the plate to the side so he could pull her into his lap. He let out a shaky breath, his hands roaming over her arms, up and down her back, leaving her skin tingling.

“You, Violet MacAllister, are the sexiest, sweetest, most incredibly talented woman I’ve ever known. I think you’re so beautiful that it hurts to look at you sometimes. I feel it, right here,” he said, pointing at his chest. “You look like a fucking angel.” He gave one of her curls a little tug. “Your eyes sparkle when you smile, and the sound of your laugh is like sunshine. You’re passionate about what you do, and about helping people. You’re a gifted artist, and you work so incredibly hard. You’re loyal and trustworthy. You care about other people. You’re warm and giving and even just being your friend felt like such a fucking gift.” He shook his head. “If anyone wasn’t my type, it was Jessica. Because you are most definitely my type.”

“But you were going to marry her,” she said quietly, and he bit his lip.

“And not marrying her is the best thing that ever happened to me. Well, maybe the second best,” he said, grinning at her. Then he sighed. “Jessica was never right for me. I think… you know, I think there was a part of me that was still grieving. That was still dealing with the loss of my dad, and I just

wanted somewhere to belong. Something to fill that void. And on paper we worked. And because it made sense, I just went with it in an effort not to feel all of the hard things I didn't want to feel."

"So you grabbed onto that relationship, even though you knew it wasn't right."

He nodded slowly, stroking her cheek.

"What's different about this one? I'm not asking you to compare because that's not fair, but...I need to know. Because there's a part of me that's freaking out. I'm not the girl who gets the dream guy."

A smile spread across his face. "I'm your dream guy?"

She nodded, her face heating. "Absolutely."

He leaned forward and kissed her, his tongue stroking slowly against hers in a way that had fresh heat gathering between her legs. She would never get enough of kissing this man. Never.

"This is different because you make me feel things I never felt with Jessica. Yeah, I was happy with her. Content. But this is so much more than that. I feel alive for the first time in years when I'm with you, Violet. With you, it's not just contentment. It's pure, unfiltered joy."

"I make you feel that way?" she asked, her voice shaking a little. This all felt too good to be true. She couldn't wrap her mind around it.

His smile softened and he twirled another lock of her hair around his finger. "How could you not? You make me laugh. You're my favorite person to talk to. You see me the way no one else does." He moved closer, his lips brushing against the shell of her ear. "And I've never come so hard in my life as when I'm with you." He pulled back. "So, yeah. This is completely different from what I had with Jessica. Like, not even on the same planet."

She shook her head slowly, then buried her face in his neck, both hiding from him and seeking comfort from him. "It's hard for me to wrap my mind around that. My entire life,

I've been told I'm not good enough. Teachers thought I was stupid, classmates called me special ed, and everyone treated me like I was less than. It happened for so long and on so many levels that I started believing it. So when you tell me things like that, it's hard for me to fully accept them, not because I don't think you're telling the truth, but because my messed up brain thinks it couldn't possibly be real."

He stroked a hand up and down her back, his other hand cradling her head. "I'm so sorry for everything you went through, Vi. I'm so sorry. People are assholes."

"They are. But art saved me. It's why starting this organization for kids with learning disabilities is so important to me. I want to help them, maybe protect them from going through the same shit I did."

He traced his fingers over the colorful tattoos on her arms. "Art is a powerful thing. I know it saved me after my dad died. It was my only source of comfort. My only safe outlet. Levi would go to school and start fights with kids or act out. Noah would pretend he was a man at fourteen, shouldering responsibilities he shouldn't have had to take on. And I read and drew and buried myself in art."

She kissed him then, needing that connection with him. "I get what you mean when you say I feel like joy. Because that's how you feel to me. You're so caring and sensitive and..." She swallowed, her throat thickening at the emotion swirling through her. "You're my favorite person, Hud. My absolute favorite person."

He smiled and nudged her nose with his. "And you're mine." They started kissing again, hands stroking and exploring, completely unhurried. This wasn't foreplay. This was afterglow, and Violet was more than happy to bask in it.

Rain started to softly patter against the window outside, and all Violet wanted to do was cocoon away from the world with Hudson in this bed.

"You can't walk home in the rain," he murmured against her mouth. "You should stay here."

“I agree,” she sighed. “It’s too wet outside.”

He tickled her ribs, making her shriek with laughter. “It’s wet in here, too.”

She laughed and then kissed him again. “We should probably work on the sketch some more, though. Since we haven’t exactly been productive this evening.”

“Hey, I’d say that this evening was incredibly productive.”

She kissed him once more and then somehow managed to climb off of him, knowing they needed to get some work done before she got too tired to focus. She reached for her discarded panties.

“Don’t,” said Hudson from behind her. “I think you should leave them there and include them in the painting.”

She tilted her head, considering. “Is this your way of getting me to not put underwear on again?”

“It’s a multipurpose suggestion. I think it’ll add a nice layer of detail, and yes. I’m trying to make sure you’re pantiless for the rest of the night.”

She shot him a grin and then pulled on his T-shirt, tucking her nose into the collar and inhaling deeply. “Mmm. It smells like you.”

His expression changed, morphing from something playful to something more serious. Something more tender and emotional.

He shook his head. “I’m sorry, Violet. I can’t believe that I didn’t know all this time.”

She bit her lip. “If you’d known, would it have changed anything?”

At that, he flung back the covers and stalked over to her, completely naked. “Hell, yes, it would’ve.”

And then he sealed his admission with a kiss.

Hudson's back was stiff and his muscles were getting tired, but he didn't dare complain. Not with the ten grand sitting in his bank account, and not with the way Violet was completely focused on her work.

Watching her work was the only thing that was saving him from going crazy. Not only was being naked around her and not being inside her a special kind of torture, but he hadn't known it would take so many hours over multiple sessions to work on the portrait. But watching Violet work was fascinating and sexy and worth the muscle aches and the boredom.

They'd completed a few sessions now, every single one taking longer than it should've because as soon as his clothes came off, it was only a matter of time before they were in bed. Not that he was going to complain about that, either. They hadn't had an official "what are we" talk yet, but as far as Hudson was concerned, Violet was his girl. And given her admission about her feelings for him—something he still felt like an enormous dumbass for not noticing—he was willing to bet that he was her man.

She stretched from behind the canvas and then worked her neck in a circle. "I think we're good for today, Hud. I'm ready for a break, and I'm sure you are, too." He nodded and stretched, carefully working himself out of the pose as his muscles protested.

"How's it coming?" he asked, pulling on his underwear and then crossing his bedroom toward her.

"I think we're about halfway done, maybe more," she said. "Come take a look."

He did, and he was completely breathless at what he saw. He could still see the sketch underneath, but she'd painted his entire body. The background was still blank with just a few lines delineating where the bed and window were for reference. The detail was absolutely exquisite, as was the play of light and shadow.

"It's absolutely incredible," he said, staring at the painting in awe. Just when he thought he'd wrapped his mind around

how talented she was, she'd surprise him, again and again.

"I'm glad you approve," she said with a shy grin, gathering up her brushes and stashing her palette in an airtight container so that the colors she'd custom mixed wouldn't dry out between sessions. "I hope Eunice does, too."

"I'm sure she will. You said that she loved the sketch. And I'm glad we're finished for the day because now I can take you on an actual proper date." It was a day off from the tattoo shop for both of them, and Hudson planned to take full advantage of it.

"A date?" she asked, her face lighting up. "Really?"

"Yeah." He pulled his jeans on but didn't do them up, then walked over to her, wrapping one of her curls around his finger. "What kind of man doesn't take his girlfriend on dates?" The word hung between them, filling the air, vibrating with hope and possibility.

She slid her arms around his waist, an adorable smile on her lips, the kind that made her nose scrunch up a little bit. The kind that made everything else in Hudson's world feel so much less important than her. "I'm your girlfriend?"

He cupped her face, his thumbs feathering over her cheeks. "I really hope so, Violet. Because these past few days with you..." He trailed off, his throat thickening with emotion. "You're amazing. I've never felt this way with anyone before, in or out of bed. So, yeah. As far as I'm concerned, you're my girl."

"Hud," she whispered, then arched up onto her toes to kiss him. How had he spent so much time not kissing this woman?

God, he was such a fucking idiot.

She broke the kiss and shook her head. "I have to go home to change first. I'm not sure what you have planned, but pretty sure you don't want me walking around in this," she said, gesturing to her paint-splattered overalls.

He grinned at her and moved to pull on his shirt. "We can swing by your place first."

“What should I wear? What are we doing?”

“I thought we could have lunch in Central Park, and then I got us tickets to that exhibit at the Guggenheim.”

“The Jackson Pollock one?” she asked, her voice going higher with excitement.

“Yeah. And then we have dinner reservations at a little Italian place nearby. I think they’re supposed to have a live jazz band tonight.”

She stared at him, blinking slowly. “Wow. You...you thought of everything.”

“It’s our first date. I wanted to make it special.”

Her features tightened, and he lifted his hand, cupping her cheek. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. I just...no one’s ever put this much effort into... into me before. It’s a little overwhelming.”

“Violet, listen to me. You’re worthy of effort. You’re worthy of everything. If it’s too much for you, we can do something else.”

“No, it’s not that. The plans sound amazing. I just...it seems like they’re for me, and not for you.”

“First of all, yes, I made these plans with you in mind because I want to treat you and show you how special you are. Second, you know me. You think it’s a hardship for me to eat lunch in Central Park and visit an art museum? To gorge myself on pasta while listening to jazz?” He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I want to do all the same things you do, Vi. That’s one of the many reasons we work. Why we make sense.”

She pressed her face into his touch and then nodded, moving away to finish packing up her supplies.

“Why don’t you just leave all of that here for now?” suggested Hudson, threading a belt through the loops on his jeans. “Instead of having to carry it back and forth.”

“You don’t mind me leaving some stuff at your place?”

“Of course not.” He moved toward her again, seemingly unable to stay away from her. “In fact, if there’s anything else you want to leave here, that’s fine with me.”

“Like what?” she asked, slipping her arms around his waist. The fact that she didn’t seem to be able to stay away from him either lit him up from the inside.

“A toothbrush, a change of clothes, basic toiletries, food you like. Whatever. I don’t mind. In fact, I think I’d really like seeing little reminders of you all over the place.”

She kissed him again, and this time the kiss between them grew heated. Tongues sliding and tasting, soft, gasping moans, hands smoothing over skin, sinking into hair. As he always did when he was with Violet, he completely lost sense of time and place, ready to lose himself in her.

But then her stomach growled loudly and she broke the kiss, biting her lip to stifle her laughter. He laughed too, and then wove his fingers through hers. “Come on. Let’s go get some lunch.”

It was a glorious fall day in New York. The leaves were starting to change, and the air was cool and fresh while the sun shone brilliantly. The summer had been swelteringly hot—even more so with a cast covering his arm from knuckles to shoulder—and Hudson was grateful for the cooler temperatures and breezy weather.

They took his bike to Violet’s place so she could change into clothes that weren’t covered in paint, and she emerged wearing a pair of flared jeans and a silky pink blouse that showed off her curvy frame. She’d thrown a colorful knee-length cardigan on over top, and changed from her running shoes to a pair of little black ankle boots.

Watching her come down the stairs from her building, Hudson was overwhelmed with the sense of possessive happiness crashing through him. That gorgeous woman was his. That angel had spent last night moaning out his name. Had made him laugh, made him come, made him see the world in a different way.

He'd never felt like that with Jessica, and he knew it was because the kind of connection he had with Violet was the once in a lifetime type. His only regret was that he'd taken so long to realize it.

She hopped onto the back of his bike and plopped the helmet back onto her head, and then they were off. Hudson hadn't thought the pleasure of riding his motorcycle could ever be heightened, but that was before he'd had Violet on the back, her thighs bracketing his, her arms wrapped tightly around his waist. The rumble of the bike, the fresh air zipping around them, Violet pressed against him—it was perfection. Absolute perfection.

They roared over the Brooklyn Bridge, the sun shining and reflecting off of the East River. Small white caps had formed on the waves, and Hudson could feel the cool wind whipping around them. He pulled the fresh air into his lungs, wanting to savor every single second of this day.

They crossed the bridge and then he steered them along the FDR, keeping the water and the Brooklyn skyline to their right. The trees were a riot of oranges, yellows, and reds, whizzing by in a flash of color. Eventually, he got off the FDR and wove them through Midtown East, zooming down Park Avenue before cutting over towards Central Park. He pulled into one of the garages nearby, and then helped Violet off the bike, stashing the helmets and locking the handlebars.

They walked hand in hand through the park, only stopping to buy bagels smeared with cream cheese from a cart. The trees were glorious shades of orange and yellow, the leaves rustling in the breeze above them. Occasionally, one or two would flutter down, landing on the path beneath their feet. They walked past the famous Group of Bears brass sculpture and then he led them towards Cedar Hill, an area with a sloping lawn and dotted with rocky outcroppings. Cedars and evergreens mixed with the flaming colors of the other trees, and the air smelled like fresh cut grass and pine. In a place like this, it was easy to forget you were in the middle of a bustling city. There were a handful of people around, most of them

doing the same thing Hudson and Violet were—enjoying the beautiful fall weather and eating some lunch.

They sat down on a rock facing the rolling lawns and unwrapped their bagels.

“I used to come sledding here with my cousins when I was a kid,” he said, pointing at the hill. “Right over there.”

“Were you close with them growing up?”

Hudson nodded. “Yeah, we were. They were around the same age as us, although their lifestyle was pretty different from ours. Our fathers were brothers, but they couldn’t have been more different. My dad was focused on service and helping others, wanting to make a difference in the community. Uncle Quentin, on the other hand, was focused on making as much money as possible, and his entire life revolved around it. He married Aunt Adelaide because she came from money, or that’s what my mom thinks, anyway. They had a horrible marriage, and I think that was really hard for my cousins. Their parents never seemed to take much of an interest in them.”

“That’s horrible,” she said softly, shaking her head. “I can’t imagine growing up like that. I still see my parents twice a month for dinner, and we may not see eye to eye on everything, but we get along and I love them. I mean, I was an only child growing up, so sometimes I’m jealous of the bond you have with your brothers. Sometimes I look at families with lots of siblings and think it must be nice to have that, you know? Not that I really minded being an only child. I never had to share a room, or fight over the TV or anything like that.” She sighed. “I do worry what it’ll be like when my parents start to get older and I have to deal with that on my own. I’m worried that’ll be hard and lonely.”

He slid his arm around her waist, pulling her closer. “You won’t have to face it alone.”

“Big promise to make on a first date, Prescott.”

He chuckled. “Maybe it is, but I mean it.”

She turned slightly, her face turned up to his as she studied him. “You don’t do anything halfway, do you?” she asked, shaking her head slightly.

“Nothing that matters,” he said, then lowered his face to hers, kissing her gently. She sighed against him, kissing him back.

“You know, it’s funny,” she said after they’d broken apart. She picked at her bagel. “Usually on a first date, you ask all the getting to know you questions. But there’s no point in asking you about your family or your job or your hobbies because I already know all of that. I know what kind of movies and music you like, I know that your travel bucket list item is to visit Paris and spend all of your time in art galleries. I know that you don’t give a shit about sports, and that if you weren’t allergic, you’d probably have a cat. I know that you love live music. It’s like everything and nothing has changed, if that makes sense.”

He grinned. “It does. I know what you mean.”

She gasped. “I just thought of something I don’t know about you!”

“What?” he asked, taking a bite of his bagel.

“I have no idea what your middle name is.”

He smirked. “Why don’t you guess?”

“Hmm,” she said, pursing her lips and tapping her finger against them. “Hudson...Bartholomew?”

He laughed. “Not even close. Try again.”

“Hudson...Eugene. No? Um...Boris?” He laughed again and she kept going. “Nigel? Oh, oh, I know. Danger. It’s got to be Danger.”

“Hudson Danger Prescott does have a nice ring to it, but no. My middle name is Thomas.”

“I like Danger better.”

“Me, too.”

They chatted while they finished their lunch, and then strolled through the park hand in hand, marveling at the gorgeous fall colors surrounding them. Then they meandered their way up Fifth Avenue to the Guggenheim. The Pollack exhibit was only in town for another couple of weeks, and the tickets had all been sold out for months. Thankfully, Hudson's cousin Max had been able to snag him a couple so he could take Violet.

As they stepped inside, their footsteps echoed off of the soaring ceiling and surrounding white balconies. Light beamed in through the domed skylight above, giving the space a reverential feel.

Even though Hudson was familiar with Jackson Pollock, he didn't have an art degree like Violet did, and he couldn't think of a better way to enjoy the exhibit than to walk through it hand in hand with her while she whispered fascinating tidbits into his ear.

"He was one of the most important figures in the abstract expressionist movement, and his particular style is famous for the drip technique he used, where he'd pour or splash onto a canvas on the floor. During the peak of his career, the critics were divided. Some thought his technique created an immediacy and therefore an intimacy of creation, while others disparaged him, saying that his paintings were purely random with no intentional creativity behind them."

"And what do you think?" he asked, wanting to know.

"I think he did something different and brave. The way his work fills the space was something no one else was doing at the time. The paintings don't have a beginning or an end, a top or a bottom, a central focal point. Which means they're open to interpretation and wealth of feeling. What Pollock did was a culmination of all of the previous Cubist work and other Western influences." She stopped and bit her lip. "Am I talking too much? I feel like I'm talking too much."

"You're not. Tell me everything. I love getting to see inside your brain."

She blushed and ducked her head, and then proceeded to tell him about Pollock's relationship with his wife, and how everything deteriorated leading up to his death. She commented intelligently on the individual paintings, and wanted to know what he thought about each of them.

It occurred to Hudson that as smart as Jessica was, he'd never had a conversation this stimulating with her. And he knew it was because of their shared passion for art. Because of the joy they both felt in experiencing it.

They spent hours walking through the museum, and all Hudson could think about was how beautiful Violet looked. She was glowing, talking happily about the different paintings in the exhibit, and he felt completely enthralled with her.

How had he not seen this before? That not only was Violet amazing, but that she was perfect for him? It made him wonder what else had been right in front of his face that he'd missed, too consumed with trying not to feel. And he'd succeeded. He'd kept every feeling at bay, but he'd sacrificed living in the meantime.

By the time they left the museum, the street lamps had come on and the sun had started to rapidly sink below the Manhattan skyline. Violet reached for his hand, and warmth flowed through his body. Everything with her felt so good. It felt so right. And knowing she'd had a thing for him for years...God. So much wasted time. Wasted time he planned to make up for. Wasted time he'd spend the rest of his life making up for.

"The restaurant's just up here," he said, leading her down Fifth Avenue and then hanging a left onto East 88th Street. The street was lined with towering walkups and trees resplendent in fall colors, cars parked along either side. They kept going until they hit Park Avenue, and then he tugged her into the little Italian place on the corner.

As soon as he opened the door, brassy jazz music floated out, and Violet squeezed his hand. "This is the best first date I've ever been on. Ever." She stretched up onto her toes and kissed his cheek. They were shown to their table, a cozy little

booth near the back. She snuggled up close to him, and he wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

“It’s so hard not to kiss you right now,” she said, staring up at him with her heart in her eyes. Her full heart, right there. No longer hidden behind a wall.

“My Violet,” he said softly, and then lowered his face to hers. His lips brushed hers, just once. “You can kiss me whenever you want.”

She let out a small little laugh and kissed him. “Good. Because...” She trailed off, biting her lip. “I feel safe with you. I don’t think I’ve ever felt truly safe with anyone before, and that’s new and scary for me, but also really exciting, and I’m still kinda processing all of these shifts between us. But it’s really important to me that you know that. That I feel so safe with you.”

His heart swelled in his chest and he pressed his forehead to hers. “You’ll always be safe with me, Violet. Always.”



*H*ad Violet just gone on her best first date ever? Absolutely. And it was both thrilling and a little scary that it was with Hudson, who seemed to actually be reciprocating her feelings. Something that was still a little hard for her to believe, but she wasn't going to fight it. She didn't have the strength or the will to pretend that being with Hudson wasn't exactly what she wanted.

"I need you," he said, his voice husky as he cupped her face and kissed her. She moaned softly and smiled into the kiss, and it quickly morphed into something hotter and needier. They made their way through his apartment, shedding clothes, kissing until they were gasping for air. By the time they made it to his bed, they were both down to their underwear, and she was already wet and throbbing for him. Helping her up onto the bed, he kissed a path down her neck and over her shoulder. "I have an idea," he said, and then quickly hopped off the bed, leaving her hungry and needy and curious.

He opened his closet, revealing a floor-length mirror that covered the inside of the door. It opened flush against the wall and faced the foot of the bed. Once he was happy with how the mirror was positioned, he turned on the bedside lamp, casting a soft glow around the room. Her heart fluttered in her chest as she watched him climb back onto the bed behind her. She devoured his reflection with her eyes, drinking in miles of muscle and inked skin.

“I want you to watch, Violet. Watch us together. Because this is how it is now. There’s no going back.” He threaded his fingers into her hair and gave a gentle tug, then scraped his teeth over her bare neck. “You’re mine, and I’m never letting you go.”

“Okay,” she said, forcing her eyes to her own reflection. Her curls were a little wild from both the helmet and his hands, and she could see her nipples peaked beneath her plain white bra. She was wearing matching white lace panties, and there was already a visible little wet spot right between her legs.

“I want you not just to feel what I’m doing to you, but to see it. To own it. I want to see your face as you come. I want you to see how fucking good you make me feel.” He trailed his fingers down her arm as he knelt behind her, leaving goosebumps in his wake. “I want to watch you be my good fucking girl. My sweet little kitten.”

“Fuck,” she whispered, heat gathering between her legs. She’d never expected or even fantasized that sex with Hudson would be like this. Intense and thrilling and possessive. He was so sweet and sensitive and caring, but he had this animalistic side that came out when they were in bed that she couldn’t get enough of.

He cupped her breasts, tugging the cups of her bra down and letting her breasts spill free. His fingers went to her nipples, pinching and rolling and tugging as he kissed her neck. She let her head fall to the side, but didn’t take her eyes off of their reflection. The sight of Hudson’s big hands working her nipples sent fresh arousal spiraling through her, making her feel achy and empty. He slowly slid one hand down over her quivering belly and between her spread legs.

“Look at this little wet spot you made,” he said, his voice rough as he cupped her over top of her panties. He moved her panties to the side, baring her pussy. She gasped as she both watched and felt his fingers slide over her, just once. Then he lifted his hand to her mouth, and she opened for him, sucking two of his fingers into her mouth. He groaned as she teased him, scraping her teeth over him, lapping at him with her

tongue. The salt of his skin, the sound of his harsh breathing, the erotic visual of the two of them in the mirror...God, it would be a miracle if she didn't combust.

He moved his wet fingers back between her legs again, sliding them inside her pussy. Her hips writhed as she moaned. The heel of his palm grazed her clit over and over as he slowly fucked her with his talented fingers, her eyes glued to their reflection. She couldn't stop watching his fingers disappearing inside her over and over again.

"You like watching me play with this pretty little pussy, don't you kitten?" he growled, licking a path up her neck. His other hand cupped her breast, kneading and massaging.

She nodded, her eyelids heavy, her limbs shaking as pleasure raced through her. "Yes. So much." She angled her head back and kissed him, trying to convey everything she was feeling through the kiss. He let go of her breast and wove a hand into her hair, tugging slightly as he started to fuck her faster, the wet sound of his fingers sliding in and out of her pussy filling the room and mingling with her moans and pants. "Please don't stop."

"You feel so good around my fingers. So wet and hot for me. I will never get enough of this pussy. Or this mouth," he said, kissing her again, his tongue sliding dirtily against hers. "Or this heart," he whispered, sliding his hand from her hair to her chest. "Or this brain. I need every part of you, Violet." He made a strangled sound, still moving his fingers in and out of her clenching pussy, grazing her clit with his palm with every pass. "I'm sorry, Violet. God, I'm so fucking sorry."

"For what?" she asked, her head falling back against his shoulder.

"For not seeing it. For being too wrapped up in my own shit and in my own head to see that the most incredible woman was right in front of me this entire time."

"Hud," she moaned, her hips writhing, her heart swelling at his words. "The past doesn't matter. We're here now."

He groaned and bit at the juncture where her neck met her shoulder. “You’re like a drug, Violet. I’m addicted, and there’s no hope of recovery.”

He feathered his thumb over her clit and she let out a shuddery moan. “I’ve never felt like this before,” she panted out. “This need. This consuming feeling of...of...” She shook her head, unable to find the words to describe the fullness inside her.

“Wholeness,” he said, and she sighed and nodded.

“Yes. Like something that was missing is finally there.”

He slipped his fingers free of her body and started circling her clit, kissing her neck, biting and licking as he worked her with his fingers. Then he slowly spread her apart, holding her open in front of the mirror. She was glistening, pink and swollen.

“This is mine,” he said, meeting her eyes in the mirror before his gaze dropped down to her exposed pussy. “Tell me it’s mine,” he murmured in her ear.

“It’s yours. Every part of me is yours, Hudson.”

“Good girl,” he growled, and then licked a path up her neck to her ear, grazing his teeth over her earlobe as he started circling her clit again.

“Whenever you want it, this pussy is yours.” She stared at their reflection in the mirror. “I feel like I think about you inside me every single second of every single day. If I’m your addiction, you’re my obsession.”

“Good. God, you make me want to forget about everything else and just spend all day fucking you. All day, every day, just us and a bed and nothing else.”

“That sounds like heaven.”

He gave her pussy a little slap, and she jerked in his arms, pleasure rocketing through her. Then he slid two fingers inside her again and circled her clit with his thumb.

“I want you to come all over my fingers, kitten. Make my dick jealous.”

Everything inside her tightened, her muscles squeezing his thrusting fingers. He flicked at her clit and curled the fingers inside her, and she burst, her orgasm cresting over her like a tsunami.

“Oh, fuck! Hudson!” she screamed, shaking and convulsing as she milked his fingers, her pussy throbbing. Her vision blurred around the edges and she slumped back against him, breathing heavily. Holding her gaze in the mirror, he slowly slipped his fingers free of her body and then lifted them to his mouth, licking them clean. She whimpered, and she couldn’t tell if the pulsing in her clit was from her orgasm or the fresh arousal at watching Hudson lick her juices from his fingers.

“I want your cock in my mouth,” she whispered, and slid off the bed, landing on her knees in front of him. He was still wearing his boxer briefs, the outline of his cock thick and hard beneath the fabric. “I love when I can feel you throbbing on my tongue. When I can taste how turned on you are.”

He groaned and lifted his hips off the bed enough to free his cock, the thick length of it snapping up against his hard stomach.

“Mmm, yes,” she murmured, gripping him and rubbing the flared head against her lips. “You have the most gorgeous cock I’ve ever seen.”

He made a pained sound. “I don’t want to think about the other cocks you’ve seen, kitten. Not now that you’re mine.”

“Are you jealous?” she asked, feathering kisses over the tip of his cock, her tongue playing in the slit.

“Fuck, yes, I am,” he breathed. She licked up and down his shaft, swirling her head around the tongue. Then she sucked the head of his cock into her mouth, letting him go with a pop. “You’re mine. I should’ve made you mine a long time ago.”

She hummed and sucked him deep, making his hips jerk. His hands found their way into her hair, and he urged her up and down his cock.

“Oh, fuck, use me,” she begged when he slid free of her mouth. Her entire body was tingling, her clit throbbing. On fire.

“Kitten,” he growled, his grip in her hair tightening. “Gonna fuck this pretty mouth.”

“Yes,” she moaned. Suddenly, he stood from the bed, moving them in front of the mirror so that they were both sideways and had a view of his cock filling her mouth. She felt as though she was melting, this was all so hot. She’d never considered herself a submissive person, but clearly being with Hudson was bringing out a side of herself she’d never realized was there. As though it was just for him and no one else. As though she’d been waiting for him this entire time.

He slid his hands back into her hair, the head of his cock bumping against her lips. “Tap my thigh if it gets too intense,” he said, and she nodded, looking up at him and knowing she could trust him. Knowing that she could give this secret part of herself to him and he’d cherish it and keep it safe.

He fisted his cock, tapping it against her lips. “Open, kitten.”

She did, moaning as he fed her his cock, and then she wrapped her lips around him. God, she could get off just on the sounds he was making. The shaky breaths, the masculine sighs, the soft groans.

The head of his cock nudged the back of her throat and she swallowed around him. He pulled out, the slide of his cock over her tongue heavy and decadent. Then he slid back inside, slowly fucking her mouth, his hands tight in her hair. She glanced at their reflection in the mirror, and moaned at what she saw. Herself, on her knees for this tattooed god who could make her come, make her laugh, make her feel safe, make her feel things she’d thought she wasn’t capable of. On her knees with his thick cock stretching her mouth, his hips moving as he used her for his pleasure.

She whimpered and then slipped a hand between her legs, needing to touch herself. Her clit was swollen and sensitive, but it didn’t matter.

“Shit,” he ground out, and gently eased her off of him. “This is too hot, and I’m not ready to come yet.”

She laughed as he helped her up and kissed her, urging her back on the bed. He peeled her bra and panties off of her and then settled on his back, pulling her on top of him. Without waiting, she fisted his cock and sank down onto it, needing him inside her.

They both let out a sighing moan as he slid home, and his hands went to her ass, urging her up and down.

“Oh, fuck, just like that,” she whispered. “Don’t stop.”

“I couldn’t stop if the fucking building was on fire,” he said, moaning when she swiveled her hips.

She lowered herself down over top of him and kissed him, the slide of his tongue against hers echoing the slide of his cock in and out of her pussy. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her neck, his moans getting louder, more intense. She loved listening to him come apart. As though every single thing about him, from the sounds he made to the scent of his skin was the world’s biggest aphrodisiac.

She started to ride him harder, wanting more of those sounds, her ass smacking against his thighs.

Suddenly, he rolled them and pulled out so that she was on her back, sprawled across the bed. Before she had the chance to complain, he was between her legs, licking up and down her slit.

“I’m never going to get enough of the way you taste, kitten,” he said, licking and sucking at her clit between sentences. “I think about getting my mouth on you constantly. I wake up hard thinking about how fucking good you smell. I meant it when I said you’ve forever ruined me. It’s only you, Violet. For me, it’s only you.”

It was a combination of his talented mouth and his words, spoken against the most intimate part of her, that had her falling apart, shaking and writhing, her hands in his hair. She felt as though her heart was going to pound right out of her

chest. Like it was trying to leap out of her body and into Hudson's hands.

If she let it, did she trust him to take care of it? To cradle it and cherish it? To protect it?

With her orgasm still pulsing through her, she reached for him, and he slid back inside her, bracing himself several inches above her.

"I think I might be in love with you," she whispered, couching the truth of her feelings with "think" and "might." Still needing that little bit of protection in case it all came crashing down.

He stopped moving, fully seated deep inside her. She held her breath, her lungs feeling like they might explode.

"Violet," he said softly. Reverently. "I think I've been falling in love with you since you came into my life. I was just too fucking stubborn and stupid to realize it." He shook his head. "But if I'm honest, our friendship has always felt like something more."

She nodded shakily, joy radiating through her. "Like love."

He smiled and then kissed her, working his cock in and out of her once. "Like love."

She wrapped her arms and legs around him, her chest warm and full. And for the first time in a long time, maybe ever, Violet didn't question the happiness she was feeling. She didn't question if she was worthy of it. If she was deserving. If it was going to be yanked away any second now because happiness like this was for other people, not for her.

Instead, she opened herself up to it. Fully, and completely. Hudson's gaze held hers as he stroked in and out of her, their bodies entwined, skin glowing with sweat. The mattress creaked rhythmically beneath them, mingling with their sighs and moans, the wet slide of his cock.

"Fuck, I can't hold on much longer," he growled, picking up the pace, his hips slapping against hers. Her pussy clenched around him, throbbing and wet.

“Come, Hudson,” she said, stroking her hands up and down his broad back. “Come inside me.”

He groaned and fucked her harder and deeper, making her breasts bounce and the mattress shake.

“You’re the only one who’s ever come inside me,” she said, and it was the truth. He was the only one who’d ever been bare inside her.

“Because you’re mine,” he growled, and then she felt his cock flex inside her, his face a mask of torturous pleasure. “You’re mine. Violet. Mine,” he said, the words falling from his mouth as he spurted inside her over and over, filling her and marking her and claiming her all at the same time.

He stilled and pressed his forehead to hers, his breaths rasping against her lips in sharp pants.

“It was always supposed to be like this,” he said, his voice a little rusty sounding. “It was always supposed to be us.” His eyes met hers. “Violet.”

“Hudson.” She closed her eyes, pulling the happiness she was feeling deep within herself, basking in the glorious truth of it, and kissed him.



Violet shook off and closed her umbrella as she stepped through Eunice's front door, the rain outside pelting down relentlessly. Without a word, the butler whisked her dripping umbrella away, then took her jacket and gestured for her to head upstairs to the usual meeting spot. Over the past couple of weeks, she'd kept Eunice apprised of the progress via email. But today, she had photographs of the nearly completed portrait to show her. And while she was excited that the portrait was progressing nicely, she had to admit that there were mixed emotions swirling through her. There was a reluctance to really let the project go because it played such a large part in what had brought her and Hudson together. There was a possessiveness on her part because she didn't want to share Hudson with anyone, not even Eunice. There was satisfaction that the portrait was coming together so well, along with the hope that Eunice would be pleased.

She mounted the staircase and made her way down the now familiar hallway. The house was darker than usual today thanks to the rain drenching the city, giving it a cozier, more intimate feel. When she stepped into Eunice's portrait room, she found her standing in front of the fireplace, which contained a cheery little fire, the logs perfectly arranged.

She turned when Violet knocked softly on the door, not wanting to startle her, and smiled widely. She was elegantly dressed in a vintage Chanel skirt suit in light pink with black detailing. She'd piled several necklaces on, and was wearing a

pair of elegant knee-high gray boots. As always, she was wearing her glasses and her signature red lipstick.

“I’m meeting an old friend for lunch,” she said, waving at her ensemble. “I don’t normally swan around the house in Chanel, just so you know.”

Violet smiled and stepped into the room. “Hey, it’s your house and your Chanel. You do you, Ness.”

She chuckled at that and then took a seat on the sofa nearest the fireplace, motioning for Violet to join her. She did, pulling the folder with the glossy photographs of the portrait out of her bag.

“Are these the progress photos?” asked Eunice, reaching for the folder. Violet held on a half-second longer than she should’ve before releasing it, handing it over.

“Yes. As you can see, the portrait is nearly complete. Although it’s hard to say when a painting is really, truly done. It’s tempting to spend too long on the detail work, sometimes.”

Eunice nodded and opened the folder, perusing the three photographs inside with a neutral expression on her face. After several long seconds, she shook her head slowly.

“Outstanding. Absolutely stunning work.” She looked up, her eyes meeting Violet’s. “You are a true talent, my dear. Destined for artistic greatness. I’m sure of it.”

Violet’s cheeks warmed and her heart raced in her chest. Her thoughts seemed to scatter; she was too happy and excited to really think straight.

“That’s high praise,” she managed, working to accept the compliment instead of brushing it aside.

“And it’s well-earned. This is absolutely beautiful. I think it’ll be my new favorite.”

Violet grinned from ear to ear, and started to unwind the scarf from around her neck. Between the warmth from the crackling fire and the happiness heating her from the inside, she was feeling a little roasty.

“Oh, Violet, my dear, you’ve got a little something,” said Eunice, setting the folder down and reaching out to rub at a spot on Violet’s neck, just below her jawline.

“I do?”

“Yes, and it’s not coming off.” Eunice burst out laughing, a loud, cackling hoot that filled the room. “Oh, Violet. You’ve got a love bite!”

Violet’s eyes widened and her hand flew to her neck. And then her mind flashed back to last night, when Hudson had joined her in the shower after their portrait session. He’d pinned her against the wall, her legs around his waist, his mouth everywhere, biting and licking and sucking.

“Um,” she said, feeling flustered. She couldn’t bring herself to meet Eunice’s twinkling eyes.

“Please tell me that’s courtesy of our handsome Mr. Prescott,” she said, clasping her hands together.

Violet blinked rapidly, feeling as though she couldn’t quite sort out her thoughts. “Um,” she said again. “It...is.”

“Oh!” said Eunice, leaning forward and bracing Violet’s shoulders. “That’s wonderful! You know, if you get married, you have to invite me to the wedding. Since it was my portrait that helped bring down the walls between you two.” She winked at Violet. “And I’ve been known to give very lavish gifts.”

Violet cracked a smile. “I believe it.”

“So. What happened? Spare none of the details.”

“Don’t you have to go? For lunch?”

Eunice waved a wrinkled hand. “I’d much rather hear about the sex lives of young, attractive people.”

Violet laughed, feeling more at ease. “Well, um.” She shook her head, unsure where to start. But then when she opened her mouth, the entire story came tumbling out. The night of September 11th, and what she’d thought would be their one-night stand. The way she’d rushed out the next morning, and the poem and the drawing he’d left her. The way

the portrait had brought them together again. How he'd told her that it had always been her, and he was sorry that he'd been too blind and caught up in his own baggage to see it. That she'd found the courage to admit to him that she was in love with him, and he'd told her he'd been falling in love with her ever since they'd met.

The entire time, Eunice listened, her hands pressed to her chest, a rapt expression on her face.

"Goodness, it's like a novel!" she said when Violet had finished. "You've been pining for your friend for years, only to discover your feelings aren't unrequited. This is just... Well. We need to celebrate."

She stood and walked over to the wall and pressed a button embedded there. An intercom crackled to life. "Please bring up a bottle of Dom Pérignon. The 1996 rose gold, if we still have it. And two glasses. Thank you."

"Yes ma'am. Right away."

"Ness, you don't have to do that," said Violet.

"I know. I'm ninety-one and rich. I don't have to do shit. So if I'm doing something, it's because I want to. Now we're going to drink this bottle of champagne and you're going to gush about your amazing boyfriend, and we're going to toast to your future. Deal?"

"You're pretty special, Ness," said Violet, shaking her head. "I've never met anyone like you."

Eunice hooted with laughter again. "And I doubt you ever will. Now. I do have a very pressing question for you."

"What's that?"

Eunice opened the folder back up and gestured at the portrait. "How on earth does that thing fit inside you?"

Violet doubled over in laughter, clutching at her stomach. She laughed until tears streamed down her cheeks, her jaw sore from laughing.

Eunice dabbed at her own eyes with a handkerchief, shaking her head and laughing. "I told you I was a dirty bird."

“I was warned,” Violet agreed. The butler arrived, carrying a silver tray with a bottle of champagne nestled in an ice bucket and two crystal flutes. He set it down, poured two glasses of champagne, and then with a small bow, silently left the room.

Eunice picked up a glass and handed it to Violet, and then lifted her own. “Here’s to all things new. New portraits, new relationships, and new friends.”

Violet smiled and they clinked glasses. She took a sip, the champagne bubbles dancing on her tongue, echoing the happiness radiating through her.

Hudson pulled open the door of The Roastery, his favorite coffee shop in Brooklyn. Violet was adamant that Brooklyn Brew was better, and they were here so he could change her mind. The scent of coffee hung in the air, oldies playing through the speakers. The interior was industrial looking, with exposed metal beams and piping running across the ceiling. Giant chalkboards hung behind the counter, displaying that day’s menu. The exposed brick walls were painted a bright blue, contrasting with the white pendant lights hanging down. And now that Halloween was only a few weeks away, there were pumpkins and skeletons occupying every corner, as well.

Violet leaned into him, their hands joined, as she studied the menu. “Ugh, that font is really hard to read,” she said. The menu was written in a type of fancy script where the letters almost overlapped. It looked cool, but even Hudson had to admit that it was a little hard to read. “What are you getting?”

“A flat white.”

“Is that like a latte?”

“Yeah, it’s similar, but there’s more coffee and less milk than in a latte.”

“Sure, I’ll try that. Why don’t I grab us a table? It’s getting busy in here.”

“Okay.” He pulled her close and kissed her temple, and then watched her weave her way through the coffee shop. Every single time she moved away from him, no matter how temporary the separation, he felt as though a part of his heart was going with her. A part of his soul.

Now that they were fully connected, he knew he wasn't complete without her. He couldn't take his eyes off of her as she sat down at a table beneath an old-fashioned tin sign. She looked like an angel the way the lights were catching her curls, her skin glowing. Pure and lovely and sweet. But he knew that she was his dirty angel, who could take his cock down her throat and make him see stars. Whose pussy tasted and felt like heaven. Whose skin smelled like sugar and whose body felt like home.

She was everything. And being with her was so much better than he ever thought it could've been.

“Oh my gosh, hi,” came an eerily familiar voice from behind him, and he turned, his mouth falling open a little at the sight of Jessica standing just a few feet away. The last time he'd run into his ex-fiancée was about six months ago, and she'd proudly showed off her new engagement ring to him. At the time, seeing her had been difficult. A reminder of what he thought he'd lost. Now seeing her felt like nothing beyond the surprise at running into her.

He cleared his throat and rubbed a hand over his mouth. “Jessica, hey,” he said in a neutral tone. His eyes darted over her shoulder to where Violet was sitting. She was watching, her eyebrows raised. He met her eyes and shot her a small smile.

“How are you? I heard about your accident. You're okay?”

“Yeah. I'm fine.” He didn't know how she'd heard about his accident, and frankly, he didn't care. “How are you?” he asked, more out of politeness than actual interest.

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, smiling sadly. “Well, it's been a pretty shitty couple of months, actually.”

He lifted his eyebrows and shuffled forward in the line. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

When he didn’t ask her for more details, she shifted on her feet and kept talking. “My, um, my fiancé and I broke up.”

He exhaled through his nostrils. “That’s too bad.”

“Yeah, we just weren’t the right fit. It wasn’t like you and I.”

At that, he turned his full attention to her. “We weren’t the right fit either,” he said calmly. Violet was still watching, her head tilted.

“I don’t know...” Jessica bit her lip, shaking her head. “Sometimes I think I made a big mistake. I’ve actually been coming here a lot. To the coffee shop, I mean. I know you like this place, and I was hoping that maybe I’d run into you.”

“Oh?” he asked. Before she could answer, he stepped forward in line and smiled at the barista. “Hey, can I get two regular flat whites, please?”

Jessica’s hand landed on his arm and he flinched. “Hudson, you don’t have to buy me a drink,” she said, a flirty smile pulling at her lips. Once upon a time, that smile had done things to him. But now, all he could think about was getting back to Violet.

“It’s not for you,” he said evenly, and then tipped his head in the direction of where Violet was sitting. “It’s for my girlfriend.”

He’d be lying if he said he didn’t feel immense satisfaction at the way Jessica’s face fell. “Oh, um. Right. You’re with someone. I didn’t know that.”

“I am,” he said.

Jessica craned her neck and looked at the table where Violet was sitting, staring with all the subtlety of a bulldozer. “Wait. Is that Violet?”

Hudson smiled. Just the sound of her name made him feel warm and happy. “It is.” He paid for the coffees and then moved to the side to wait for them, leaving Jessica on her own.

She ordered her own drink, and as she was paying, Violet left their table and came over, sliding her hand into his.

When Jessica turned, clearly wanting to talk to him some more, she hesitated at the sight of Violet standing there.

“Hi Jessica,” said Violet. “Nice to see you. How are you?”

Jessica and Violet had met a handful of times, but had never been friends.

“I’m...I’m good,” she said, stammering out her response, her eyes darting around the coffeeshop. “So, uh. You two, huh? When did that happen?”

He could see the unspoken thoughts shining behind her eyes.

How serious is this? Do I have a chance? I don’t want to be alone.

“Violet and I have had feelings for each other for a while,” he answered honestly.

“So you guys are, like, a serious thing?” she asked, playing with her necklace, something she did whenever she felt uncomfortable.

“We’re in love, if that’s what you’re asking,” he said. He wasn’t trying to be mean. Despite everything she’d put him through, he didn’t wish her ill. But he also wanted her to know the truth. He’d moved on, and he was happier than ever. Violet squeezed his hand.

“Well, that’s really great!” said Jessica with a forced brightness. “I’m happy for you, Hudson. And Violet. You guys...yeah. So great!”

The barista set down two mugs containing their flat whites, and Hudson moved to pick them up, then handed one to Violet.

“Take care,” he said to Jessica. He slid his free arm around Violet’s waist and they headed back toward their table. As soon as they sat down, he set his mug down, leaned over the table, and kissed Violet softly on the lips.

“Sorry about that,” he said.

She smiled and shook her head. “You can’t control who you run into.”

“Still, that had to be weird for you. It was weird for me.”

She shrugged and took a small sip of her drink. “Oh, that’s good,” she said, nodding appreciatively. “I mean, it was a little weird, but she was here. It’s not like you can just ignore her. You’re not a dick.”

He smirked at her. “Not usually, no.”

She laid her hand over his. “One of my favorite things about you is how you treat other people. You’re kind and fair. You’re confident in this laid-back way. You’re good to people, even your ex.”

Her compliment filled him with warmth, and he linked his fingers through hers, tracing his thumb over her knuckles.

“I actually felt a little sad for her,” she said. “She seemed both thrown that you were with someone and a little lonely.”

“She did,” he agreed. “But Jessica’s current situation is one of her own making, and not something either of us need to worry about.” He braced his arms on the table, leaning a bit closer. “You want to know something? I used to think of the day she left as one of the worst days of my life. But now I’m glad that we didn’t get married. I’m glad things worked out the way they did, because if they hadn’t, I never would’ve wound up with the person I know I’m meant to be with.”

Her eyes went soft and she reached up, scratching her fingers into his beard. “I’m glad things worked out the way they did, too.” For several moments, they just stared at each other, totally wrapped up in their connection.

She grinned. “Anyway, it’s good to know that if we ever break up, you’ll be nice to me when we bump into each other.”

His eyebrows rose and he shot her a look. “That’s never going to happen, because we’re never breaking up.”

“But what if—”

He cut her off by pressing his finger to her lips. “No. We. Are. Never. Breaking. Up.” She smiled against his finger.

“Never?”

“Never. This is it for me, Vi. Us. This connection we have...” He shook his head and swallowed, his throat thickening with emotion. “Tell me you feel it, too.”

“Of course I do, Hud. It’s intense, but in a good way. An amazing way.”

Relief flickered through him. “I don’t want to scare you.” He smiled at her, his heart banging against his ribs.

His phone started buzzing and he pulled it out of his pocket, then shot Violet an apologetic grin. “It’s my mom.”

“Go ahead,” she said, returning his smile easily.

“Hey Mom,” he said, once again sliding his fingers through Violet’s. He wondered if this incessant need to be touching her, connected to her, would ever ease. He had a feeling it wouldn’t.

“Hi, honey. Are you out somewhere?”

“Yeah, Violet and I are just having coffee. What’s up?”

“You and Violet, hmm?”

He hadn’t told his family about his relationship with Violet yet. Partly because he didn’t want to hear endless rounds of “I told you so” and partly because he was a selfish bastard who wanted Violet all to himself.

“Yeah, uh...” He cleared his throat. “We’ve started dating.” Although dating felt like far too small a word to describe what was happening between them. It wasn’t just dinners and movies and casual conversation. It was falling madly in love, like diving headfirst off a cliff. It was seeing his entire future in her eyes.

“Oh, Hudson, that’s wonderful! I’m so happy for you, and you know I think Violet’s lovely. Anyway, I was calling about dinner tomorrow night, to make sure you could still come. You

should bring Violet. Madison and Felicity are coming, and I promise we'll make her feel welcome."

"I know you will. Let me ask her if she's up for it." He lowered the phone and hit the mute button. "My mom wants you to come to family dinner tomorrow night. But no pressure, you don't have to if you don't—"

"I'd love to. We can head over after our final portrait session tomorrow."

Hudson nodded, a bittersweetness tugging at him at the thought of finishing the portrait. He unmuted the call and raised the phone back to his ear.

"We'll be there."

"Great. Is there anything Violet doesn't eat?"

"She's allergic to mustard, and she hates cilantro, but I think that's it." He raised his eyebrows at Violet and she gave him a thumbs up.

"Perfect. I'll see you two tomorrow. Love you."

"Love you too, Mom." He disconnected the call and set his phone on the table. "Are you sure you're ready for this? My family is super all up in each other's business, even though they'd all deny it if you told them that."

"Well, I already know to pass if Levi wants to play Hungry Hungry Hippos."

He laughed, lifting his fingers to the small scar above his lip. "Then I think you'll be just fine."



The past few weeks had been some of the craziest of Violet's life. In the span of less than thirty days, it felt as though her entire world had changed. She was getting paid a crazy amount of money for her art, and she was actually with the man she'd been pining over for what felt like forever. And on top of that, she was starting to feel like a new person. Maybe it was all the orgasms, or maybe it was actually seeing herself through someone else's eyes. She didn't know. All she knew was that it felt good. It felt right.

Hudson gave her hand a squeeze before he pushed open the door to his childhood home. Her mind immediately flashed back to when she'd come here with him nearly a month ago and everything that had happened between them. She wished now that she hadn't let her fear take over, but she'd been so scared. Truth be told, she still was sometimes. But she was learning to live with the fear instead of giving in and running. Hudson had shown her what amazing things could happen when she let someone in.

"Hey," called Hudson, shutting the door behind them.

"We're in the kitchen," called his mother, and Hudson led her through the living room and into the kitchen, which was just as warm and inviting as Violet remembered.

"Violet, so nice to see you," said Veronica as she turned from the oven, where she'd been checking on dinner.

"Thank you for having me," she said. "These are for you." She extended the bouquet to Veronica, who took them with a

smile.

“Well, aren’t you sweet? Thank you, honey. Can I get you something to drink? Glass of wine?”

Violet nodded, loving how cozy and relaxed Hudson’s family home felt. “Sure, a glass of wine would be lovely.” Then she turned toward the island, where everyone else was gathered, feeling four sets of eyes on her. “Hey, everyone. Nice to see you again.”

“So...” said Levi, taking a sip of his beer and giving her an appraising look. “Does this mean that you guys are...” He raised his eyebrows in question.

“Yeah,” said Hudson, opening the fridge and pulling out a bottle of beer for himself. “Violet and I are dating.”

“Oh my God, fucking finally,” said Levi with a grin. He flinched when Veronica walked by and flicked his ear.

“Language,” she chastised, and Levi grinned and shook his head, rubbing at his ear. “We’re having stuffed acorn squash, no ham in yours,” she said, glancing at Hudson, who nodded appreciatively, “garlic bread, and fettuccine alfredo.”

“You’re going to make me drool,” said Violet, taking a sip of her wine.

“Here, have a seat,” said Hudson, pulling out one of the stools lining the island for her. It was the last one, so he leaned against the counter beside her.

“So,” said Noah, his eyes flicking between the two of them. “You finally figured it out, huh?”

Hudson grinned, and Violet felt like her insides were melting. God, he was sexy. And somehow, he was hers. “Yeah, we did.”

A silence fell over the group and then Felicity made a strangled sound. “Fine, I’ll ask, since no one else is. How did it happen? Was there a grand gesture? Did he sweep you off your feet?” she asked, pressing her hand to her chest. Then she laughed when everyone turned to look at her. “What? I love a good love story.”

“It’s true,” said Noah, shooting her a rueful grin. “You should see our bookshelves at home.”

“Not to mention everything on my Kindle.”

“Well,” said Hudson, clearing his throat. His cheeks had gone a little red, and Violet jumped in.

“The night of your father’s memorial. That’s when it started. It was an emotional night, and things just came together,” she said

Levi snickered. “I bet they did.”

Madison rolled her eyes. “You are a child.”

“But you love me anyway.”

Noah looked at Violet, tipping his head in Levi’s direction. “He’s the baby of the family, and he likes to remind us of that fact on a regular basis.”

“Please, you were all thinking it,” said Levi good-naturedly.

“Was it strange, getting together with someone you’d been friends with?” asked Felicity, resting her chin on her hand.

Violet laughed. “Um, yeah. A little. There were definitely a few hurdles to jump over.”

“I get that,” said Madison, nodding. “I mean, Levi and I had been work buddies for a long time, and it was definitely a strange transition going from friends to something more.”

“Strange but worth it,” said Levi, winking at her. Madison’s cheeks went a little pink and she ducked her head.

“How long have you and Felicity been together?” asked Violet, both wanting to know more about his family and to take some of the attention away from herself.

“About six months now. We just moved in together.”

“Wow,” said Violet. “You guys aren’t messing around.” Noah and Felicity definitely gave the impression that they’d been together far longer. They were so serious and comfortable.

“Well, I moved into his place because my lease was up, so it made the most sense for us,” said Felicity quickly. “But be warned,” she added, tipping her wine glass towards Violet. “Once these Prescott men make up their minds about something, they mean it and it’s full steam ahead.”

“So I’m gathering,” she said, glancing shyly at Hudson.

“And it’s different when you’ve known each other for a while,” said Madison. “You kind of fast forward through that initial awkward getting to know you phase.”

Violet nodded in agreement. “Fast forward is definitely a good way to describe it.”

“Okay, so the night of the memorial is when things started to change,” said Felicity, pulling them back to Violet and Hudson’s story. “Then what happened?”

Violet rolled her lips inward, unsure what to say.

“She wasn’t sure if it was a good idea,” said Hudson. “She didn’t want to risk our friendship, plus we work together, so I get it. But I knew I was all in.”

“He left me poetry and a drawing, and then we started working on the portrait, so—”

“What portrait?” asked Noah, his eyebrow raised.

“Besides working at the tattoo shop, I’m also an artist. I’ve been working towards starting an after school art program for kids with learning disabilities. I’m actually dyslexic, and I know how much art helped me, and I wanted to give that same thing to others. But it takes a lot of money to start that kind of program, especially in this city. Space, supplies, all of that’s at a premium. An agent hooked me up with a patron looking to commission a portrait for a lot of money. Enough money that I could start the program and Hudson could easily renew the shop’s lease.”

Noah frowned. “You weren’t sure you were going to be able to renew the lease?”

“I would’ve figured it out,” said Hudson easily.

“Wait,” said Levi. “So this patron wanted a portrait of Hudson?”

Violet grinned. “Yep. A nude one.” She knew his brothers were going to have a field day with that little tidbit, and she couldn’t help enjoying watching their dynamic.

“What?” said Noah at the same time as Levi asked, “Can I see it?”

“Over my fucking dead body,” said Hudson to Levi, earning himself a flick on the ear from Veronica.

“You’re not going to say anything about this?” asked Levi, gesturing at his mother, who was stirring a mound of parmesan into her sauce.

She shrugged. “You’re all grown men. You can do what you want. I mean, Noah’s been half-naked on calendars and even billboards, so I guess I’m a little used to this sort of thing. But, um, where exactly will this portrait be displayed?”

“In a private collection. It’s this hilarious lady named Eunice. She collects nude portraits of hot guys.”

“So why is Hudson going up on her wall?” asked Levi, and Hudson flipped him off. Violet bit back a grin, feeling some of her nerves melt away.

“I love this!” said Felicity, tapping her fingertips together. “Friends for years, brought together by a nude painting. It’s like a book!”

“Okay, this needs to simmer for a bit. You, watch my sauce,” Veronica said to Noah. “Levi and Hudson, please set the table. Girls, come with me. I have baby photos to show you.”

Hudson mouthed “sorry” as Violet got up, but she smiled and shook her head. She absolutely, one hundred percent, wanted to see baby photos of Hudson.

She followed the other women back into the living room, where several photo albums were arranged on the coffee table in front of the sofa. She handed one to Violet. “This one has a lot of Hudson in it.”

Violet opened it, tracing her fingers over the plastic shielding protecting the photos. The first was a picture of a much younger Veronica holding a tiny bundle in her arms, her husband's arm around her shoulders, little Noah standing in front of them.

"That was the day we brought him home from the hospital. He was seven pounds, eleven ounces and had the sweetest blue eyes."

Violet smiled softly and drank in the photo. Looking at a picture of baby Hudson was making her feel all warm and mushy as her mind bounced between the past and the future. She flipped through the pictures, savoring each one. Hudson wrapped in a blanket after a bath. Hudson chewing on a rubber ball. Hudson sleeping in a rocking swing. Hudson grinning in his car seat. He slowly grew as she flipped the pages, her heart pulling tighter and tighter in her chest.

"He's special," said Veronica, leaning back against the sofa as Felicity and Madison laughed at some of Levi's crazy pictures. "I mean, all my boys are special, but Hudson is..."

Violet met her eyes. "I know. There's no one like him."

Veronica laid a hand over Violet's and gave a squeeze. "It makes me happy that you see it, too. He needs someone who understands him and what he needs."

"I think I do," said Violet quietly. "At least, I hope I do. And I want to be that person for him."

"You know, we all saw it. Back at Lucian's wedding, we all knew."

"Knew what?" asked Violet, her stomach fluttering.

"That he had feelings for you. And that you had feelings for him. I was hoping it would just be a matter of time before you both figured it out."

"Well, I knew how I felt, but I didn't think..." She shook her head. "I thought we were just good friends."

"I knew it was more. I could see the way he looked at you. The way his face lit up when you'd laugh. He might've been

in denial, but those feelings were there. I'm glad he stopped running scared from them."

Violet was glad, too. Really glad.

"Oh, Violet," said Madison, flipping through Levi's photo album. She paused at one of Levi and Hudson covered in blue paint, both laughing. "Felicity and I were planning a girls' day sometime soon. Brunch, maybe some shopping, mani pedis. You should come."

"Yeah," agreed Felicity with a smile. "I'd love to get to know you better."

"Really?" asked Violet, and she realized that her first instinct was to look for a trap. To assume this was a set up of some kind. But of course, it wasn't. "Yeah," she said after a beat. "I'd really like that."

As the women disappeared into the living room, a silence fell over the kitchen. Hudson slid onto Violet's stool and braced his arms on the cool surface of the island, leveling his gaze at his brothers.

"Go ahead. I know you've been holding it in this whole time."

Levi and Noah burst out laughing. "Who would pay for a nude portrait of you?" Levi gasped, his hands on his stomach.

"Hey, it's art," said Hudson. "It's not like I started an Only Fans page or something."

"It would be Homely Fans if you were on there," quipped Levi, sending Noah into another fit of laughter.

"No, more like Lonely Fans," said Noah, wiping at his eyes. Hudson rolled his eyes.

"I need to sanitize my brain from thinking about it," said Levi, and he took a long pull on his beer.

“Maybe you’re just jealous that someone is paying two hundred grand for a painting of me. And she requested me, specifically.”

The laughter stopped. “Two. Hundred. Grand?” asked Levi, his eyes bugging out of his head. “Seriously? And does this patron of Violet’s need another model?”

“Seriously. Violet can start her program and I can make sure the shop is good to go for the foreseeable future.”

“That’s...wow.” Noah shook his head. “I can’t blame you for doing it for that kind of cash.”

“I did it for the money, and for Violet. Starting this program is really important to her, and it gave me a chance to spend time with her after...you know.”

“You banged the night of dad’s thing and things got weird?” supplied Levi with a smirk.

Hudson pointed at him. “Yes. That.” He sighed and pushed a hand through his hair, looking at each of his brothers. “How did I not see it for so long?”

“Because you weren’t ready to,” answered Noah with a shrug.

“You know, when Mads and I first got together, she wasn’t ready to see the truth of what we could be, either. Not everyone’s working on the same schedule. Don’t beat yourself up for the past. I know you love to make yourself feel bad about things, but this isn’t something worth feeling bad over. Not when you’ve got the girl now, and a future to look forward to.”

“You went through a lot, with Jessica and everything. You needed some time,” said Noah.

Hudson tipped his head. “I ran into her yesterday. Violet and I were out grabbing coffee.”

Levi grimaced. “How was that?”

“It was...fine, actually. Everyone was civil and polite. She seemed flustered that I was with someone. She and her new fiancé broke up. Violet said hi, I told her to take care. And it

didn't feel like anything at all. Like talking to a stranger. And then I look at Violet and it's like..."

"The whole world looks different." Noah raised his eyebrows knowingly.

"Exactly. It's like...like I wasn't even seeing in color, and I didn't even realize it."

There was a sniffing sound, and Hudson spun, finding his mom standing in the doorway to the kitchen, her hands clasped in front of her chest.

"Oh, my boys," she said, her voice wavery. She walked over and kissed each of them on the top of their head. "Seeing you all so happy makes me so happy. You're all such wonderful men, and I know your father would be so proud of you all. And seeing all of you in love...what more could I ask for, except maybe a grandbaby?"

They all laughed. "Don't worry, Mom," said Noah. "It's in the plans."

After dinner, they all sat back with steaming mugs of tea, chatting happily. Felicity shared a funny story about one of her students, Noah talked about the cabin he was planning to buy upstate, and Madison and Levi did their best to gross everyone out with work stories. Hudson shared the story about the asshole who'd come into the shop, who'd spit on Violet after she'd stood up for Hudson and what he'd been through, earning her approving looks from everyone. After they were finished, Violet insisted on helping with the dishes, chatting happily with Veronica and Levi as they all washed, dried, and put away.

As they were leaving, his mother pulled him in for a hug. "She's a keeper," she whispered in his ear. "But I think you already know that."

He nodded. "I do."



Violet unlocked the door to her apartment, her keys jangling in the quiet hallway. Hudson followed her inside, his presence exciting and calming all at once, just as it always is.

She shrugged out of her jacket and turned to face him. “Will you stay? Tonight?”

The corner of his mouth kicked up. “Of course.”

“Good. Because I have a confession to make.” She bit her lip and grinned at him.

He arched an eyebrow. “And what would that be?” He crossed his arms over his chest, making the muscles in his forearms pop.

“I’m not wearing any underwear.” Her cheeks heated as his eyes raked over her. She was wearing a pair of fake leather leggings and a flowy green blouse.

“Very naughty, kitten,” he murmured, stepping closer but not touching her. “What am I going to do with you?”

She arched up on her toes, her lips scraping over his jaw. “I think you should spank me.” She nibbled on his skin. “And then lick me.” She trailed her tongue over the tattoo on his neck. “And then fuck me until I scream your name.”

He lifted a hand and tugged on a curl, and then lowered it, dragging it down her throat. Slowly, he started unbuttoning her

blouse, his face a mask of concentration. But she could hear the ragged edge his breathing had taken on.

Once her blouse was open, he pushed it down over her shoulders, then popped open her bra. Her nipples were hard little points, begging for attention, but instead of touching her or sucking her, he trailed his hands down her stomach, slipping his fingers into the waistband of her leggings. Dropping to his knees in front of her, he worked them down over her hips, so slowly that she could feel herself growing restless. Finally, she stepped out of them, the cool air swirling around her heated skin. He kissed her thighs and then stood, backing towards her sofa. He sat down in the middle and then crooked a finger at her. She walked over, completely naked, basking in the way his darkened eyes were devouring her. When she was close enough, he took her hand and guided her to lay across his lap, her body stretched across him. She inhaled a shaky breath, need and lust and adrenaline all spiking through her.

He palmed her ass, massaging the flesh, pulling her cheeks apart. “This is definitely a very spankable ass,” he said, and his voice had taken on that low, growly tone that always made her wet. “Has anyone ever spanked you before, kitten?”

She shook her head, a whole body tingle working its way through her at the way he was massaging her ass. “No, but it’s something I’ve always wanted to try.”

He gave her ass a little swat, making the flesh jiggle. She gasped in surprise but didn’t move. Then he rubbed the area he’d swatted, making her sigh and go boneless against him.

“I’ve never done this before either, but the idea of seeing my handprints on this gorgeous ass has me hard as fucking concrete.” He swatted her other cheek and then soothed the sting with his talented fingers. And then he smacked her ass, hard. Not too hard, but with a lot more intensity than before.

“Oh, God,” she gasped, bucking in his lap as the sting radiated through her, melting into something hot and delicious. Something that made her clit feel like it was on fire. “Yes.”

He smacked her other cheek, just as hard, sending more of that pain/pleasure shooting through her. “Tell me if it’s too

much,” he said, trailing his fingers over the backs of her thighs.

“It’s not,” she said, shaking her head. “Please, don’t stop.”

He rumbled out an approving growl and then spanked her again, and again, slowly but steadily ramping up the intensity until her ass was on fire and her pussy felt like it was dripping.

“Your ass is the most gorgeous shade of pink right now,” he said, smoothing his palm over her stinging skin. “How does it feel?”

“Good,” she sighed out. “It’s this knife edge of pleasure and pain.”

“Can you take more?”

She nodded, thrusting her ass higher in the air. “Mark me, Hudson. Make me feel you for days.”

“Violet,” he groaned, and then his hand came down on her ass harder than before, the pain almost chasing away the pleasure, but then the warming bloom returned, more intense than before. He spanked her again, hard, bringing his palm down on her tender flesh over and over until she was a squirming, moaning mess. She could feel the outline of his hand on her skin, and an intense sense of belonging washed over her.

“I can see my handprints on you and it’s driving me fucking wild. You drive me fucking wild.” He spanked her again, the hardest ones yet and she moaned and arched into him, dancing on that edge that had her clit feeling enormously swollen. “Come here,” he growled and pulled her into his lap. The denim of his jeans abraded her sensitive skin, but when his mouth crashed into hers, she didn’t care.

This was the closest she’d ever felt to another person. The most cared for she’d ever felt. The most desired and needed and cherished. How had she thought he wouldn’t protect her heart? This was *Hudson*.

He stood with her in his arms, and her arms and legs wound around him. She kissed him, slow and deep as he walked them to her bed, and she felt as though she was

floating. Buzzing. Alive and full and happy in a way she hadn't thought was possible.

They tumbled down to the bed, and he reached behind him, tugging his shirt off over his head and tossing it aside. She reached for him, pulling his face back to hers, needing his mouth like she needed air. The kiss grew hotter and needier, and he took over. She could feel the urgency in his kiss, and she melted into it, giving herself over to him.

He rolled them so that she was on top, straddling him, and he slid his hands up her stomach and to her breasts, capturing each of her nipples between his talented fingers. He rolled and squeezed, making her moan and writhe against him.

“Jesus, that feels good,” she panted. Every single tug on her nipples was like a straight shot to her clit, making it pulse greedily. He groaned and pushed up onto his elbows, sucking one of her nipples into his mouth while still playing with the other, tugging and pinching. She wove her fingers into his hair, her eyelids heavy. “Oh fuck, don't stop. Please don't stop.”

He dragged his mouth over her soft skin to her other nipple, scraping his teeth over it before sucking it into his mouth. She whimpered and arched her back into the heady sensation. He tortured her with his lips, his teeth, his tongue, until her breasts were heavy and throbbing, her pussy clenching almost angrily.

“Hud, please. Please,” she begged.

“Please what, kitten? Tell me what you need.” He flicked his tongue over one of her nipples and she let out a shuddery moan. “You want my mouth? Because I can smell how turned on you are and it's making me fucking hungry.”

And just like that, she was on her back again, her legs splayed. Hudson hooked his arms under her knees, spreading her open even wider.

“Oh, shit!” she moaned as his tongue swirled over her clit, and she knew this wasn't going to take long. She was already so tight and achy, so swollen with how turned on she was that she could already feel the first teasing pulses of an orgasm

building. He dragged his tongue down from her clit to her entrance, sliding his tongue inside.

“So wet, kitten,” he murmured, fucking her slowly with his tongue before slowly licking his way back up to her clit and sucking it into his mouth. He licked at her, teasing her clit from all sides. It was intense and perfect and more than she could take.

“Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit,” she gasped, her hips shooting up off the mattress as her orgasm hit her with the force of a hurricane, stealing her breath and making her lightheaded. He licked at her slowly, dipping his tongue into her pussy before teasing around her pulsing clit. He swiped his tongue over her clit and she jerked, tugging at him as pleasure so intense it bordered on pain shot through her.

“Hud, I can’t. It’s too much.”

“Mmm,” he murmured against her, gently kissing all around her clit before licking it again. It was so intense that she couldn’t breathe, but after a few minutes, the exquisite torture melted into nothing but pleasure. Her back arched, her hips restless on the bed as she chased his mouth with her needy pussy. He sucked her clit into his mouth, and it was like an explosion went off inside her. Like dynamite going off and obliterating absolutely everything.

“Hudson!” She screamed his name as her body bowed off of the bed. Her pussy spasmed and pulsed and she fell back onto the mattress, feeling completely boneless. And then he was right there, holding himself above her as his cock notched at her entrance. She nodded shakily, encouraging him, and he eased into her. She was so damn tight from having come twice in quick succession, and she sucked in a sharp breath as she struggled to stretch around him.

“Look at me, kitten,” he said, his voice low and rough. “I want to see your pretty eyes.”

She wrenched her eyes open, wanting to obey. Needing to see him, too. Sweat dotted his hairline, his muscles bunching and flexing as he took another inch. He slid all the way out and then back in, his cock sinking deeper this time.

“Such a good girl for me,” he murmured. “You take me so beautifully. Fuck.” And then he thrust forward, filling her completely. He dipped his head and kissed her, giving her time to stretch around him.

“God, I’m so full,” she moaned.

“So fucking hot and tight.” He pulled back, the drag of his cock against her sensitive walls enough to make her toes curl and her eyelids flutter. “You feel so damn good, Violet. So perfect.”

He fucked her slowly, pulling his cock all the way out before sliding back in. He made a low growling noise when she hooked her legs around him and started to move faster, some of his control slipping. Watching his calm, collected demeanor fade into something darker and barely leashed was quickly becoming one of her favorite pastimes.

He shifted the angle of his hips and she gasped. “Oh, fuck. Right there. Don’t stop. Don’t stop,” she breathed, clinging to him, her hips surging to meet his. It was like lava was pouring through her as she shook her head from side to side, senseless with how good she felt.

“Do you want to come again, kitten?”

“I don’t...yes, but I don’t...” Her head moved back and forth as she writhed beneath him, practically clawing at him. He started to fuck her harder and deeper, his hips slamming against hers. The bed jolted, a staccato rhythm as the headboard crashed into the wall.

“Come, Violet. Come all over my cock. Want to feel you squeezing me, dripping all over me before I fill up your pretty pussy.”

She made a completely undignified sound at his dirty, filthy words, and she screamed his name again as she came. Floating. She was fucking floating. She gasped for air as her pussy squeezed him, milking his thrusting cock.

“Such a good fucking girl,” he growled and slammed into her one last time, his cock jerking wildly inside her. He slowed his movements and then collapsed beside her. Then he pulled

her into his arms and kissed her forehead, and the gesture was so tender, so sweet, and so in contrast from the rough, dirty sex they'd just had that it made her head spin a little.

“Shit, Hudson. That was incredible,” she said, stroking her hand up and down his chest, tracing the lines of his tattoos with the tips of her fingers.

“You're incredible,” he whispered.

A few moments later, she fell asleep in his arms. Safe, sated, and with the world wrapped around her finger.

A few days later, Violet was bouncing with excitement as she carefully maneuvered the box containing the bubble-wrapped portrait out of the taxi. As she stepped out on to the curb, she narrowly missed a steaming pile of dog shit, but managed to avoid it at the last second. That morning, she'd carefully assembled the finished portrait, fitting the frame around it, and then wrapping the entire thing in protective packaging before sliding it into the box. After weeks of hard work, the last thing she needed was for something to happen to the portrait right before she was about to deliver it to the client.

She walked up to Eunice's front door, set the box down and then rang the bell. Hopefully the butler—whose name she didn't know—could help her carry it up the stairs.

The silence from behind the door was thick, and heavy, making the house feel empty. But Violet knew that wasn't possible. Eunice was expecting her. They'd emailed just yesterday, and she'd been so excited to finally add the portrait to her collection.

She rang the bell again, listening to it peel through the house before fading away. Finally, after several moments, there was a set of heavy footsteps, and the door swung open. The butler stood there, looking completely disheveled. His hair was askew, as though he'd been running his hands through it, and his face was pale. A five o'clock shadow clung to his jaw, and the top two buttons of his shirt were undone.

Bags hung under his eyes, and his shirtsleeves were rolled up to his elbows.

“Oh, it’s you,” he said, his voice completely flat. “What do you want?”

Violet gestured at the box leaning against the wall. “I came to deliver the painting. Is Eunice here?”

At that, the butler’s face crumpled and his shoulders caved in, his body like a building imploding. “No. She...she’s dead.” He let out an anguished sob and then pressed his fists to his eyes.

Violet’s eyes were wide, her heart slamming into her ribs as she tried to process what she’d just heard. “She’s dead?”

He nodded and then gestured for her to come inside. She picked up the box containing the portrait and followed him in, setting it down in the foyer near the Kandinsky she’d admired the first time she’d come here. She shrugged out of her jacket but didn’t hand it to the butler, and instead just slung it over the polished banister.

“There’s tea,” he said and started toward what she assumed was the kitchen, so she followed him, glancing around without really seeing anything. Her ears were ringing, and all she could do was replay the man’s words over and over again. The rest of her mind was completely blank. There were no thoughts. Only the feeling of complete and utter shock.

He gestured for her to help herself to the teapot on the marble counter, so she did. “Um, what happened?” she finally asked, cradling the tea cup in her hands. It was the same set she’d used the last time she’d come to visit Eunice, the memory pulling at her and making her hands tremble.

“She died in her sleep last night. I...I found her. This morning.” He pulled a handkerchief from somewhere and dabbed at his eyes. “At least she went peacefully, warm in her bed. But I...” His reddened eyes met hers, and Violet felt a deep pang of sympathy for him. “I served her for twenty years. What am I going to do now?”

Even though she didn't know his name, Violet moved toward him and laid a hand on his arm. "I'm so sorry for your loss...Mr...?"

"Harry. Harry Boyle."

"I'm sorry for your loss, Mr. Boyle," she repeated. "I can't even imagine how upsetting that must've been. To find her, and to lose her."

Violet's lungs constricted as she spoke, the reality of the loss washing over her and then pulling her under. Violet had little experience with death—three of her four grandparents were still living, and her mother's father had died when Violet was just a child. She'd never lost someone she cared about as an adult, and she was at a total loss as to what to do or say or feel.

"This is even worse than when her husband died," said Harry, leaning against the counter. "At least I still had her. But now she's gone, and..." His face went slack this time, and he shook his head. "They were like family to me."

She swallowed and patted his back, feeling woefully unequipped to handle this situation. "I'm sorry, Harry. She was a special lady. I only knew her a short time, but she was one of a kind, without a doubt."

He sent her a watery smile and nodded. "That she was. That she was."

"Do you...need any help? With...I don't know. I don't really know what all you might need help with, honestly. But it seems like you're on your own."

"That's very kind of you, but no. Eunice's arrangements were already made long ago. She's to be cremated and there will be a celebration of life in the near future. You should come, of course."

She sipped her tea and nodded. "I'll be there." She glanced around the kitchen, the silence of the house heavy and oppressive. "God, this is hard."

"It is. Indeed it is."

They drank their tea in silence while Violet wondered if there was something more she could do or say for poor grief-stricken Harry. She rubbed at her aching chest, hoping that Eunice was at peace and reunited with her husband.

She lost track of time in the kitchen with Harry, the seconds ticking by as she drank the tea without tasting it.

“Can I ask you a personal question, miss?”

“Sure. And you can call me Violet.”

“Miss Violet.” He cleared his throat softly. “What do you think happens after we die?”

She smiled sympathetically. “I have no idea. Maybe there’s a heaven, or maybe we join some immense consciousness out in the universe. Maybe it’s just like being asleep. Or maybe it’s different entirely. What I do believe is that no matter what happens, it’s peaceful.” She gave his hand a squeeze. “She’s at rest.”

“And hopefully with her beloved Richard.”

“I hope so, too.”

“Although he may have a thing or two to say about her dirty bird collection.”

Violet froze at that. She’d been so swept up in the loss of Eunice and in comforting Harry that she’d completely forgotten the original reason for her visit. “Oh my God, the painting,” she said quietly, pressing her fingers to her lips. “What do I do with the painting?” As soon as the question was out of her mouth, she wished she hadn’t asked it. As if Harry didn’t have enough on his plate.

He shrugged, but not unkindly. “I don’t know, Miss Violet. Perhaps you can sell it to someone else?”

“Perhaps,” she said weakly, sinking down onto one of the stools. The money she’d been counting on wasn’t coming. She was back to square one when it came to her dream of helping kids with learning disabilities. But even worse was the fact that the money wasn’t coming for Hudson, who’d been counting on it to renew the shop’s lease.

She stood and paced from one end of the kitchen to the other, suddenly feeling restless. It was horrible to think about money when a woman had died. And yet Violet couldn't ignore the panic rising in her, making her breathing quick and shallow, making her pulse pound in her temples.

She fumbled for her purse, rummaged through with unsteady fingers, and pulled out one of her cards. She laid it on the island and slid it toward Harry. "Please let me know if there's anything I can do to help. I mean it. I'm going to go." There was nothing left for her here now.

He nodded and took the card, slipping it into his pocket. Violet's entire body felt tight and rigid as she moved through the kitchen and back into the hallway. Her shock at learning of Eunice's passing had faded to grief tinged with panic. The money wasn't coming. The commission was finished, but the client wasn't here to enjoy it. God, she wished that Eunice had just gotten to see it. She'd been so excited about it.

And now she had to figure out how to tell Hudson that she couldn't help him save his business.

She reached the front hall and picked up the box. And then, with one last look, she left Eunice's house for the last time.



Violet blew into the tattoo shop like a storm, the door falling closed behind her, helped along by the gust of wind that had accompanied her in. Hudson looked up from behind the front desk, where he was currently going over the day's schedule and checking inventory. He knew that she'd been going to see Eunice to deliver the finished portrait this morning, and his palms were sweaty with anticipation. Nervous excitement charged through him, and he stepped out from behind the counter.

"How did it go? Did she like it?" He froze when he saw the look on Violet's face, her eyes puffy and red, her jaw slack.

"I don't know. She died last night."

Hudson's mouth fell open. "What?"

Violet set the boxed portrait down, leaning it carefully against the wall and then met his gaze. "She died in her sleep last night."

He blinked slowly. "I...wow. I'm sorry. I know you liked her."

"I did." She glanced around the shop, even though they were the only ones there. They didn't open for customers until eleven, and none of the other artists would be in for at least another hour. "I just..." She bit her lip, shaking her head. "There's no money, Hudson. I'm sorry. There's no money, and she's gone." Her face crumbled and he crossed the distance to

her, pulling her into his arms. “She never even got to see it, and she was so excited.”

“I’m so sorry, Violet.”

“I feel like such an asshole for being worried about the money. She died. A person is literally dead, and all I can think about is how I let you down.”

“Hey.” He slipped a hand under her chin. “You did not let me down in any way, shape, or form. You worked hard on that painting, and you seized an opportunity when you had it. It didn’t work out because of circumstances beyond your control.”

“But how are you going to renew the lease? You need the money by January, right?”

He sighed. “Yeah. But I’ll figure something out. I always do. I mean, I’ve got the deposit money, so that’s something.” And he was certain that by the time January rolled around, he’d figure something out. Maybe he’d have to lease out chair space to new artists. Maybe he could negotiate a payment plan with the landlord. Maybe he could look for investors. Maybe he could take out another loan. There were options. He was a survivor, and even though this was a massive bump in the road, he’d survive this, too. “I feel worse for you, Vi. Not only did you pour yourself into that painting, you were going to use that money to make your dream come true.” His throat closed up as he spoke, his heart breaking a little for her. She’d lost someone she cared about, and her dream had once again come up against an enormous hurdle.

She shook her head, her eyes shining. “I don’t need that money to keep a business afloat; you do. I’ll find another way to make the money for the project. I could take on another commission, or…” She shook her head. “Like you said, I’ll figure something out. I don’t know what yet, but I will.”

He pressed his forehead to hers. “Whatever you need, babe. I’m here.”

She slid her arms around his waist. “Same. I’m here.”

For several moments, they stayed like that, arms wrapped around each other, comforting each other. He smoothed his hand up and down her back, and she sighed, pressing her face into his chest. “I can’t believe she’s gone,” she whispered.

“I know. Even though she was old, from everything you told me, it sounded like she was in good health.”

“I know. I guess...I guess you never know.”

“You know, whatever you’re feeling right now is completely valid. After my dad died, I learned that everyone grieves differently. My mom’s grief looked different from Noah’s, and Noah’s looked a lot different from mine or Levi’s. Just let yourself feel it all. It’s all valid.”

She let out a little sob, and he tightened his arms around her. “She was just so cool and fun and smart and had lived this amazing life, and then one night she went to bed and that was it. The end.”

“I know. It’s hard. It’s shocking. But it won’t always feel like this. I promise.”

She blew out a breath. “I don’t know what to do now. I don’t know how to help you. I don’t know how to raise the money for my program. I don’t know what to do with this nude portrait of you. I don’t know what to do next.”

“You could try to sell the portrait,” he said with a little shrug. “I don’t mind.”

She shook her head. “I...I don’t know. I don’t think that would feel right. Not...now.”

“What do you mean?”

She looked up at him, a shy smile on her face. “Well... you’re mine, and I don’t really feel like sharing your naked body with the world.”

Something that felt like golden sunshine poured through him, and he tightened his arms around her. “You feeling possessive, kitten?”

Her eyes went soft at his use of the name he only called her when they were being intimate, and she nodded slowly. “I

am. I don't want to share you. But..." She looked around the shop. "If it means saving your business, then of course, I will."

He kissed her softly on the mouth and then took her hand, leading her over to the coffee machine. "Maybe it won't come to that. Let's make some coffee, sit down, and talk through all of the options, both for the shop and the program."

She nodded, and he made them each a cup, and then they retreated to his office, where they sat together for the next hour, pouring over numbers, looking at grants, and brainstorming ideas. And every single time they talked about what she wanted to do with her program, her entire face lit up, only to fall when they circled back to the problem of the money. He hated seeing her heart break, again and again. She'd been through so much, and now she'd lost this, just when it was at her fingertips. Not only that, but she'd lost a friend, too.

By the time they'd finished their coffees, one thing had become absolutely crystal clear to Hudson. Whatever the shop's finances, he had to find a way to help Violet with the money for her program.

A few days later, Hudson stood on the front stoop of Violet's childhood home, which was a detached Tudor-style in Forest Hills, a small suburb sandwiched between Brooklyn and Queens. The fall leaves were gone now, the colors all faded to a muted brown and covering the ground. Violet raised her hand, shifting the pumpkin pie they'd picked up at a local bakery, and rang the bell. They'd taken the bus instead of his bike, both because of the cooling weather, and because Violet had planned to stop to pick up the dessert she'd ordered, and the bike wasn't exactly pie safe.

The heavy wooden door swung inward, and a man with sparse light blond hair and the same gray eyes as Violet stood there. "Hey, pumpkin," he said, grinning at Violet, and she

smiled and handed him the pie. He took it and set it down on a small console table and then hugged his daughter.

“Dad, this is Hudson,” she said, gesturing at him. “Hudson, this is my dad, Mark.”

Those big gray eyes turned to him, shrewd and appraising. “Ah, yes. The tattooed, motorcycle riding man. Mmm.” He picked up the pie and headed toward the kitchen, and Hudson turned to Violet with raised eyebrows.

“I have some work to do, I see.”

“Don’t worry, he doesn’t like any of my boyfriends.”

His eyebrows rose even further. “And how many boyfriends have you had, kitten?”

“Not many.” She hooked a finger into the beltloop of his dark jeans. “And none like you.”

A woman appeared from the direction of the kitchen, Violet’s father at her shoulder. “...said you were going to be nice,” she hissed, shaking her head. She smiled when she saw Violet and pulled her in for a hug. And then she turned to Hudson. “Hudson, welcome to our home. It’s so nice to meet you,” she said, smiling warmly at him. “I’m Lisa.” She had shoulder-length blond curly hair shot through with streaks of silver, and Hudson loved getting this glimpse into Violet’s life and who she was.

“Thank you for having me,” he said, trying to ignore the nervous energy spilling through him and making him want to fidget. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Well, when Violet mentioned that she was dating someone AND that it was getting serious, we just had to have you over for dinner.” Hudson glanced over at Violet, a grin pulling at his lips. The fact that she’d told her parents that they were getting serious filled him with a kind of floaty warmth. “I don’t think Violet’s ever really been serious about anyone before,” she added. “Anyway, dinner will be ready shortly. Why don’t you make yourselves comfortable in the living room. Maybe Mark could fix you a drink?”

Hudson followed Violet into the living room with its big bay window that looked out onto the front lawn and sat down on the light gray sofa beside her. A fire crackled softly in the stone fireplace. Mark moved to the small bar cart in the corner.

“Glass of wine, pumpkin?” he asked Violet, and she nodded.

“Sure. Thanks.”

“And for you, Hudson?”

“I’ll have the same as Violet. Wine sounds nice.”

He poured them drinks and then sat down on the opposite sofa, staring at Hudson. He’d dressed nicely in a navy blue v-necked sweater and tan pants, but now he was wondering if he’d overdressed. Or underdressed. Either way, under Mark’s gaze, he felt as though he were under a microscope.

Lisa came back into the room and took the glass of wine that Mark held out to her. “Well, cheers,” she said, holding up her glass. “Welcome, Hudson.”

They all drank, and then Mark lowered his glass. “So, Hudson. You and Violet.”

He nodded, meeting’s Mark’s gaze. “Yeah. Me and Violet.” He leaned forward slightly, bracing his forearms on his knees. “Anything you want to ask me, go ahead. Because I’ll tell you right now, I adore your daughter. I’d do anything for her, and I know you feel the same. So please, ask away. Anything you like.”

He could tell that he’d caught Mark off guard, and that boosted his confidence a little. But everything he’d said was true. He did adore Violet, and he understood that they might have reservations and need to get to know him.

“You own the tattoo shop, right?” asked Lisa when the silence had started to stretch into awkward territory.

“I do. I opened it a few years ago now.” He glanced over at Violet. “I think Violet’s the best artist we have.”

“Do you make it a habit to date your employees?” asked Mark, and Hudson grinned, shaking his head.

“Never. Violet’s the only employee I’ve ever dated.”

“I don’t think it’s...right,” muttered Mark. “Someone dating their superior at work.”

At that, Lisa sputtered on her wine, leaning forward and holding her hand over her mouth. “Are you serious?”

“What?”

She stared at him, her mouth open. “Honey, I was your paralegal when we started dating.” Then she winked at Hudson and Violet.

“Oh, hmm. I suppose you were. That was a long time ago.”

“Still. Glass houses and all that.” She shot him a pointed look, and he shrugged. “Don’t be a hypocrite. It doesn’t suit you.”

“I know, but it’s Violet, and he’s her boss and he’s all tattooed and...” He shook his head. “This is hard for me.”

“Dad,” said Violet with a slightly exasperated tone. Then she shoved up her sleeves, displaying her colorful tattoos. “I’m all tattooed, too. This is what I do for a living. In fact, I even did a couple of Hudson’s tattoos. You’re being a little silly.”

Lisa laid her hand on top of her husband’s and smiled sympathetically. “You have to let go sometime. She’s twenty-eight.”

“How old are you?” he asked Hudson, his gaze once again sharp and assessing.

“Thirty-three,” answered Hudson.

“And you’ve never been married?” he asked.

Hudson shook his head. “No. I was engaged several years ago, but it obviously didn’t work out, and I couldn’t be happier about that.” He smiled at Violet, and she smiled back, making him feel so completely whole he didn’t have words to describe it.

“What happened? With your failed engagement, I mean?” asked Mark. Lisa shot him an incredulous look, and then he added, “If you don’t mind sharing.”

Hudson took a sip of his wine. “We just weren’t right for each other. No one cheated, there was no big betrayal.”

“We actually ran into her a few weeks ago when we were getting coffee and she was nice,” said Violet. “It was all very civil.”

“At least you figured that out before the wedding,” said Lisa. “And it sounds like there’s no drama.”

“There isn’t. I wish her well, but that’s it. I’m with Violet now, and I’ve never been happier.”

The conversation continued, but the edge was gone. Mark still peppered him with questions about his own family, his hobbies, and interests.

“Violet, honey, do you think you could give me a hand setting the table?” asked Lisa, standing. She gave Mark a very pointed *I’m watching you buddy so you better behave* look before disappearing into the kitchen with Violet.

“I have one last question for you,” said Mark, sitting back and resting his ankle on his knee. “What exactly are your intentions with my daughter?”

Hudson met his eyes. “I intend to marry her and spend the rest of my life making her as happy as possible.”

Mark blinked slowly, and then nodded. “Well, then. No beating around the bush there.”

“No, sir. I love Violet. She’s smart and fun and sweet and the best person I know. I feel so incredibly lucky that she’s chosen to be with me. My goal is to spend every day being worthy of that choice.”

“You’re not messing around here, are you?”

“No, sir. I’m not. I’m very serious about Violet. In fact... can you keep a secret? Because I’ve got two. And one of them involves that motorcycle I know you’re not a fan of.”

Mark smiled, the first real, genuine smile since Hudson had set foot in his house.

“Do tell.”



Three weeks later

Violet stepped into the same restaurant she'd met her agent Andrew at what felt like ages ago. It was the morning after that first night with Hudson, when everything had changed, although she'd been too scared to accept it. Before she'd fallen for her best friend, and he'd fallen for her. Before she'd met Eunice. Before Eunice's cheeky, lively end of life celebration. It was amazing how much could happen in the span of just a couple of months. But her entire life was different now. *She* was different now. Maybe it was all the orgasms. Maybe it was the love and acceptance from Hudson. Maybe it was letting someone in and the sky not falling around her. Maybe it was all three. But she was a new person. A happier, more confident person.

"Violet, hi," he said, rising from his seat and giving her a quick hug. "I was surprised to get your call. I thought..." He trailed off. "I was just shocked when you asked me to sell them all. You were so adamant that you'd never part with them."

She smiled ruefully and shrugged out of her coat. "Some things are more important than sentimentality, I suppose." The server came and they each ordered a latte, just like last time. "Anyway, how did it all go?"

While she'd decided that it was time to part with the paintings, she hadn't wanted to take part in the auction. She'd wanted to be as uninvolved as possible to make it a little less

sad. But she didn't regret doing it. She'd do anything for Hudson, and she could always paint more. In fact, since she'd let herself fall for him, it felt as though her creativity had really blossomed, and she was painting and sculpting more than she ever had.

"First of all, the *New York Times* did a small write-up on the auction and named you one of NYC's top up and coming artists, and said that any art aficionado needs a Violet MacAllister in their collection." He reached into his satchel and pulled out a neatly folded copy of the newspaper and slid it across the table to her. "I saved you a copy."

"Wow," she said, taking it and slipping it into her own bag. "Thanks. That's pretty cool."

"You seem unfazed," he commented. The server brought their lattes, and they each took a sip.

Violet shrugged. "I'm excited to build my art career, but it's not the only thing going on in my life. I guess having that balance...balances you out," she said. "No one thing feels more important than anything else. It all works together. In fact, everything is better when all of the pieces fit and support each other."

"You haven't even asked me how much money you made."

"Okay, fine. How much money did the auction make?" She hoped it would be enough to make a dent in the amount Hudson had to come up with for the lease renewal.

Andrew wiggled his eyebrows and grinned, pulling an envelope out of his satchel. She took it from him and opened it. And then she stared, sure that her dyslexia was fucking with her.

"This is a check for \$101,000 dollars." She glanced up at him. "Right?"

He nodded. "It is. Twenty-eight paintings sold, most for between four and five thousand dollars. That's all yours."

"Oh. My. God," she whispered, staring down at all of the zeroes.

“Still regret parting with them now?”

“I’ll miss them, but no. This money is going to save something important to me.”

“Oh?” He cocked an eyebrow at her, sipping his latte. “I thought you’d use it for your after school arts program.”

She shook her head. “I still want to look for commissions to make money to fund it, but this money is for something a little more pressing.”

They finished their coffees, and then she left, needing to get back to Brooklyn.

By the time she arrived at the tattoo shop almost an hour later, her heart was pounding in her chest, her palms sweaty with excitement. She couldn’t wait to give Hudson this money and ease all of his worries. Being able to help him felt incredible, especially after everything he’d given her over the past couple of months.

She got off the subway and started walking towards the shop. Thanksgiving was just around the corner, and the air had a distinct chill in it now. The sky was heavy with clouds, the trees mostly bare, but the gloomy weather did nothing to dull her mood. She turned the corner, and she saw Hudson standing out front of the shop. She smiled as she watched him, but then it quickly turned to a frown. What was going on?

He was on the sidewalk, talking to another man, gesturing at his bike. Then they exchanged papers, and Hudson handed him the keys. The man put a helmet on and hopped on the bike, revving it as he drove away. Violet started to walk a little faster, praying he hadn’t just sold his bike to fund the shop’s lease renewal. Oh God, what if she was too late?

She started walking faster, not slowing even when his face lit up when he saw her and he lifted his hand in a wave.

“You didn’t sell it, did you?” she asked, moving at a full out jog now. “Please tell me you didn’t sell it.”

He glanced up the street. “The bike? Yeah. I sold it.”

She closed her eyes and swallowed, and then reached into her bag for the envelope. “Hud, baby, you didn’t need to do that. See, I—”

“Yes, I did,” he said calmly. “If I hadn’t, I wouldn’t have been able to do this.”

He pulled a check from his back pocket. “Consider this your first donation.”

She took it with shaking fingers, and unfolded it. It was made out to her, in the amount of forty-thousand dollars.

“Hudson, what—” She shook her head, trying to understand.

“For your program. The portrait didn’t work out, and I know what starting that program means to you. So I wanted to help.” He took a step closer. “There are other bikes. But there’s only one you. I want to give you everything you’ve ever wanted. Everything you’ve ever dreamed of. Here’s the money. Run with it. Help those kids. Be amazing.”

Violet swallowed against the tears building. “You didn’t have to—”

“I know. I wanted to. I really, really wanted to.” He cupped her cheek, tracing his thumb over her cheekbone. She moved closer to him, letting the sensation of being so completely loved wash over her. A smile spread across her face and her stomach fluttered uncontrollably.

“You are amazing,” she said, and feeling so loved, so cared for and safe, made the world look more beautiful than it ever had before. To be loved, Violet now knew, was to see with the heart. And the heart’s eye was purest of all. “Thank you. You’ll never know how much this means to me.” She arched up on her toes and kissed him, the fall wind gusting and swirling around them. “I have something for you, too.”

She stepped back and reached into her bag, pulling out the check from the auction. “I sold some of my paintings.”

His eyes went wide. “Vi, you said you wouldn’t ever...” He shook his head. “Why?”

“To save the shop, of course.” She held it out to him. “Here.”

He took it and slowly opened it, his mouth falling open slightly. “You...you sold all of your paintings? For me?”

She nodded. “I know what the shop means to you, and the portrait didn’t work out. Now we can keep it, and you can renew the lease.”

“Vi,” he said softly, shaking his head. “I’m speechless. I can’t believe you did this for me.”

“I can’t believe you sold your bike for me,” she laughed, tears once again pricking her eyes.

“It’s worth it to help you make your dreams come true.”

She took the check and slipped it into his pocket. “I couldn’t agree more.”

“I love you, Violet MacAllister. I love everything about you. I love your brain. I love your laugh. I love your body. And I especially love your heart.”

“I mostly just love your body,” she said, and they both laughed. “And I guess that other stuff’s pretty great, too.” She reached up, scratching her fingers through his beard. “I love you with every beat of my heart. I love that your soul feels like it’s the twin of mine.”

“The twin of mine,” he repeated. “Very poetic.”

“You must be rubbing off on me.”

“I still can’t believe you sold your paintings for me,” he said, pressing his forehead to hers. “And that you did it to save the shop.”

She shrugged. “I love you. Just like you want me to have everything, I want you to have everything. This was how I could give it to you, and I’d do it again in a heartbeat.”

“I love you, Violet. I love you,” he murmured, and then he kissed her, soft and sweet and full of promise.

THE END

Thank you so much for reading Hudson and Violet's story! If you're wondering about the *second* secret Hudson mentioned, make sure to download their bonus epilogue. To get access, all you have to do is sign up for my newsletter (if you're already a subscriber, don't worry, you'll get a link where you can download this bonus content). [Click here to subscribe!](#)

And don't forget to go back and check any of the previous books in the series you may have missed! [Click here to get caught up.](#)

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For complete information on all of Tara's books, visit www.tara-wyatt.com/books.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tara Wyatt is a contemporary romance and romantic suspense author. Known for her humor and steamy love scenes, Tara's writing has won several awards, including the Golden Quill Award and the Booksellers' Best Award. In 2018, she was a RITA® Finalist for her novella, *Until the Sun Sets*.

When she's not hanging out with your next book boyfriend, she can be found reading, bingeing something on Netflix, and drinking wine. Tara lives in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada with her husband, daughter, and the world's cutest dachshund.

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