



REBECCA RATHE

SPARK

MICAH & LUKAS

A PROGENY DUET NOVELLA

Spark

Micah & Lukas' Story

Rebecca Rathe

*For my ratchet readers- thank you for
everything you've done for me this year*

*your support truly means everything to
me.*

Lukas

September

Walking into my first class of the day, I'm surprised at how many students are here already. I took too long meeting with the Senior guidance counselor, discussing whether or not skipping out on team sports would hurt my college applications. Now I'll be the very last to sit down, since everyone filing in behind me doesn't hesitate before taking a seat. Usually, the seats up front are the last to be filled, but maybe it'll be different with the advanced placement classes on my schedule.

Towards the back, there's one empty seat left. There's just a backpack and, I grimace as I look closer, a letterman's jacket, hanging over the chair. Whoever is sitting here must be one of the students standing around chatting in a tight circle on the other side of the class. And they're a jock, which could make my experience in this class a lot rougher if the teacher is going to pair us together for the entire year.

The teacher walks in, and the people socializing scatter to their seats.

That's when I notice *him*.

As if in slow motion, Micah Williams turns around and catches my eye. There's a pretty girl attached to his side, as usual, and he pulls her in a brief hug before making his way to the seat next to me.

Oh.

Micah Williams—king of Barnaby Falls High School, varsity football captain, all around good guy. Everyone loves him, teachers and students alike. I've known him for a year or so, watched and admired him like everyone else. Aside from having biceps that are larger than my thighs, he has a larger-than-life personality in general, a presence that you can't deny. It's hard not to be enamored by him.

"It's Lukas, right? I'm Micah," he says, and it takes me way too long to shake myself out of my trance and realize he's

made it all the way across the room and is standing in front of me. Smiling at me with his twinkling eyes and a wide grin.

Speaking to *me*.

Shit. He's speaking to me, and I'm sitting here like an idiot, dumbstruck by Adonis himself.

I sputter, and then attempt to act normal again.

“Sorry, yeah, Lukas is right. We’ve had some classes together but never talked.” *Six classes together last year, actually, but who’s counting? And we’ve never talked because I turn into a bumbling idiot in your presence and I wanted to spare both of us the embarrassment.*

My hand reaches out to grasp his, and the moment our hands touch, there’s a spark. And by spark, I mean an actual spark. A tiny pop of electricity and a tiny flash of light.

“Ouch, sorry. I’m all staticky. Anyway...Don’t you normally sit in the front?”

And you normally sit in the center, constantly surrounded by a crowd of adoring friends. You never goof off though, always with your books out and your notebook at the ready. One of the few people in class that still takes handwritten notes instead of typing on a laptop. You always know the answer when called, and are generally first to volunteer to give oral reports and presentations.

I don’t say any of that aloud, though. I smile and shrug. “I wasn’t fast enough today, I’m afraid. Had a meeting with Ms. Weston.”

He grins at me, but then the teacher introduces herself and starts going over the syllabus. As she passes them out, she smiles at the two of us.

“I suspect this will be the dream team this year,” she says before raising her voice. “That’s right, students, wherever you are currently sitting is where you will remain. You are sitting next to your lab partner and study buddy for the entire year.”

There are a few groans, but most of the students cheer or high five each other. Micah looks over at me and grins again,

the dimple on his left cheek showing itself.

“I guess you’re stuck with me, then.”

There’s something about the twinkle in his eye that shoots tingles down my skin and right to my crotch. My face flushes and I scoot a little closer to the table, trying to hide the evidence of my sudden erection.

“I’ve had worse lab partners,” I try to joke back.

“I dunno, man. I’ve heard this class is tough. It’s probably the toughest of all the AP’s I’m taking.”

“How many are you taking?”

He cringes. “Six,” he chokes out.

“Damn, you weren’t kidding. I just spent forty-five minutes with Ms. Weston trying to talk me out of five. I almost dropped this one for that exact reason.”

“I’m glad you didn’t,” he says, and I have to avoid his gaze while I pack up my books. Every time he looks into my eyes, my blood rushes through my veins like I’ve had too much caffeine.

But I can’t help myself. Like magnets, my eyes are drawn to his.

“Me too.”

Senior year is going to be...interesting.

Micah

October

“Aw, come on man—it’ll be fun!”

“It’s not that I don’t believe you, it’s just that...I don’t believe you. Parties just aren’t my thing. Crowds are not really my thing.”

I look up at Lukas and try to think of a way to change the conversation. His differences are more obvious at times than others, but I don’t want him to be uncomfortable being himself around me.

Since we’re standing right next to each other reshelving books in the library, the amount of height he has on me is a lot more obvious.

“How tall are you exactly?” I’m just over six feet, but I still have to look up at him.

He smirks down at me. “Around six-five. Why?”

“I’m not used to feeling small,” I laugh.

“You’re not small by any means,” he says, and I’m caught off guard by how much that comment affects me. I’m not exactly sure what it is about Lukas Anderson, but I feel like everything he says or does lives beneath my skin.

Lukas coughs, eyes wide. “I just mean, you’re really buff.” He stutters and coughs, “Jesus,” and it’s hard not to laugh.

His face is beet red, and I wonder if all of his thoughts go as far south as mine do. I’m sure it’s just my teenage male brain, but my thoughts can go from innocent to X-rated in no time. Never mind that I don’t tend to have any of these types of thoughts around anyone else, but Lukas seems to draw it out of me.

“Uh, thanks?” I say, purposefully awkwardly, to get a laugh and redirect my thoughts.

I like watching Lukas laugh. I don’t think he does it enough. He seems pretty serious, and generally uncomfortable.

But I've noticed when it's just the two of us, he seems to relax a lot more. Here in the library, our shared elective, for example—he is cool as a cucumber, smiling and conversing. He looks me in the eye more here. I've noticed he doesn't do that much.

Tuesdays and Thursdays are my favorite days of the week because I get to spend two hours working next to Lukas at his most relaxed, authentic self. I wonder how many other people get to see that.

I startle and jump when a hand lands on my shoulder.

“Jesus, Mindy, you scared me,” I laugh apologetically.

“I'm sorry,” she says, her hand still on my arm, squeezing lightly as if trying to comfort me. “You were in a daze. It looked like you were staring at Luke.”

“Lukas,” I correct her. “I guess I was just staring off into space. It gets so quiet in here, it's easy to get lost in your thoughts... Did you need a book?” I know she's not here for a book, but a guy can hope.

“I was just making sure you were coming to my party tomorrow night,” she says, shifting her body so that her chest is close to mine, her lips in a pout.

My eyes cut to Lukas, who is shelving books on the next aisle over. I get the impression that he's intentionally giving us privacy. Which is really thoughtful, but also disappointing and I'm not sure why.

“Uh, yeah, Mindy. I plan to go. I was just trying to get Lukas here to come be my wing-man.”

“Oh,” she says, a slight frown on her face. “Well, sure, of course he can come too. As long as it means you'll be there.” She smiles flirtatiously and rubs her hand along my bicep. “I can't wait to show you my costume...”

With that, she turns and saunters away. My eyes stare at the way her hips sway, her round butt and tiny waist perfectly fitted into a pair of tight skinny jeans. I'm just wondering why my mind and body don't seem to have a reaction to her looks when she turns around and catches me staring. She winks, having caught me in the act, and as usual, I wink back.

It's better to let them think I'm flirting.

"She seems nice," Lukas says next to me, grabbing a few more books off the cart.

"Yeah, she is. A little touchy-feely for me, though."

"You don't seem to mind."

I just chuckle, but I think it must come out about as darkly as I actually did mean it, because Lukas backtracks.

"I just mean that you...mask well."

"Mask?"

"It's, um, when you're able to cover up certain feelings or behaviors to appear more socially acceptable."

"You know a lot about that, yeah?" It's definitely an apt description of how I see him act around other people versus how he is when it's just him and me in the library.

"Yeah, sort of."

Lukas

November

“Hey Lukas.”

“What’s up, Stretch?”

“Lukas! Glad to see you made it, man.”

For a moment, I stare blankly at the group of people sitting up front and center in the stands, waiting for the game to start. I’m a little disoriented. The band is directly behind this section, adding to the overwhelming noise of the football stadium. And people are talking to me—*me*. Like I’m their friend.

It occurs to me that I have been spending time around all of these people, so it isn’t as if they are unfamiliar. I just thought they were only nice to me because of Micah. Hell, maybe they’re still only being nice to me because of Micah. But it’s...nice.

“Come sit next to me,” a pretty blonde girl with pink streaks in her hair says, patting the empty bleachers next to her. What is her name? Something with an ‘S’?

I smile awkwardly, cutting my eyes up to the part of the stadium that I’d intended to retreat to. The very top of the bleachers behind where most of the parents are sitting, including a couple that I’m pretty sure are Micah’s parents. The man looks strikingly similar to Micah, except more severe and unsmiling. He must not be having a good day. The woman, chatting animatedly with someone next to him, has kind eyes like Micah’s.

“Come on, Lukas,” the girl says again, scooting down a bit to give me a little more space.

I don’t want to be rude, and I honestly do kind of enjoy the friendly reception I’m getting. So, forcing myself to relax my shoulders and smile, I nod and join them on the bleachers. At least I’ll have a good view from here.

“There’s a lot more people here than I anticipated,” I say, trying to laugh off my obvious discomfort.

“It’s homecoming! It’ll be standing room only in minutes. Watch.”

She’s not wrong. The stadium fills to capacity and there are people sitting in camping chairs around the fence line. It’s incredibly loud, especially as the crowd revs itself up for the team to make their appearance. A commentator, who I’m pretty sure is one of the athletic staff, comes out on the field with a microphone. He starts naming the starting players, winding the crowd up for the name they’re most excited to hear.

“And now! Captain of your Barnaby Falls Blue Flames Varsity Football Team, Number 66, Micaaahhhhh Williaaammmss!”

The crowd goes absolutely nuts as Micah runs out onto the field, raising his arms to pump everyone up even more. I find myself standing, clapping and even holding my hands to my mouth to shout with the crowd.

In one moment, everything around me is intense and loud and overstimulating, but then it changes and in the next, it’s like the world moves in slow motion. I watch, transfixed at the casual way Micah acknowledges a whole crowd of people screaming their heads off for him, watching him run up and down the sidelines in his tight uniform, holding his helmet under his arm as he smiles and waves to all of his friends.

And then he stops. Right in front of me, he pauses and looks right at me. He’s surprised to see me, so much so that it feels like he’s focusing only on me for a frozen moment in time. Shooting me a wide grin, he reaches up and fist bumps me, which feels both completely unnatural and also amazing. *In this huge crowd of people, he noticed me?* I’m suddenly very glad I agreed to sit here.

Micah’s eyes cut over towards his parents, a brief flash of an unrecognizable emotion in his expression before he resumes his greetings, reaching over to bump fists and do elaborate handshakes with the other guys around me. *This*

must be how he greets all of his friends that come to see him, I think. I'm not special, but I'm still glad to be part of it. To be in his orbit at all.

He reaches up and tugs on one of the girls' pigtails with blue and black pom-poms in them. I notice that he cuts another look over to his parents when he does this, and then he's running back to the field to get started.

Trying to avoid staring at his muscular ass in front of everyone, I look over at his parents before taking my seat and accidentally make hard eye contact with Mrs. Williams, who is watching me curiously. My cheeks flush, although I'm not sure why I just got caught staring when I very pointedly wasn't.

The game is vastly more interesting than I thought it would be. The first few tackles make me wince and worry, but I let go of that soon enough. Micah's athleticism isn't surprising to me. He's captain of the football team for a very good reason. But seeing him play in person is captivating. The way he weaves through the field, somehow anticipating every move of the opponents rushing toward him, is almost inhuman.

"Just wait until basketball season," the girl next to me, who told me earlier her name is Staci *with an I*, says with a knowing grin. I look away and pretend I'm not unusually enamored by one particular player.

Before I know it, the game is over, and everyone is gathering their things to leave. During the excitement of watching Micah play, I'd forgotten the stress of being surrounded by so many people. But now I'm feeling closed in and panicky, my eyes darting around for a quick escape.

"Lukas!"

I hear my name being called through the crowd, but it sounds muffled, the rushing of my blood making too much noise to pinpoint where the voice is coming from. Staci grabs my arm. I startle and nearly lurch myself away from her, but manage to pull myself together and smile apologetically.

"Sorry, I'm not great with crowds."

She nods understandingly. “My brother is autistic,” she says. Her words are kind and probably not judgmental at all, but my brain automatically reacts and all I can think about is whether anyone else notices. Whether *Micah* notices.

Staci points to the sidelines. Micah is standing there, calling out to me. The moment I notice him, I feel calm again, and he gestures me down.

“Come on, you can escape easier this way.”

“Am I so obvious?” I feel embarrassed and worried about what Staci said.

“You said crowds aren’t really your thing, and you’re here, smack dab in the middle of a pretty damn large crowd. And I know how loud that band was, right behind you. I’m honestly impressed and surprised you came.” He doesn’t sound like he thinks less of me for being an antisocial weirdo.

“You said it was an important game. I wanted to be a supportive friend.” My eyes track a single bead of sweat, glistening as it rolls down his temple and over his strong jawline.

Micah looks at me with genuine appreciation. “That’s... really awesome. I know you stepped outside your comfort zone for me, and it means a lot.”

The grin on my face is so wide it hurts, and I know I probably look like a huge dork. Micah has a way with people. It’s not just me, I’ve watched him. He makes you feel like you’re the only one in the room, the only one he wants to give his attention to.

“I didn’t even see you on your phone once,” Micah teases me. I have a habit of looking things up whenever a question occurs to me, which happens kind of a lot.

“The game was so engaging, I got completely wrapped up in the excitement. Also, I looked up all the rules before I came.”

“You probably know more about the rules than I do.”

“I know that you’re amazing,” I blurt out. The words completely bypass any sort of filter, which is honestly unlike me, because I typically overthink every sentence that comes out of my mouth.

My face is frozen in what I’m sure looks like horror, the cold November air stinging my eyes that refuse to blink.

Micah stares back at me, an odd expression on his face. He doesn’t look upset or uncomfortable. In fact, I’d almost think he looks...wistful.

After a few long moments of silence, Micah’s mouth, which has never captivated so much of my attention before, stretches into a grin.

“I’ve got to go hit the showers... Any chance you want to brave the after party?”

He barks out a laugh at the look I give him.

Micah

December

Why do old rich ladies wear so much goddamned perfume?

My head is starting to pound. It's too hot in this house. There's too many people, the rules and expectations of "high society" are stuffy and weighing down on me.

"Micah?"

Damnit.

My spine straightens as my father walks around the corner. Even though I'm inches taller than him, he still commands every one of those inches. My father is larger than life, with the ego to prove it. And it's not as if he hasn't earned it—he's a prominent surgeon at Barnaby Falls Medical Center and is damn good at what he does.

Being a prominent member of society in a town like ours comes with expectations, my mother always says. We always put on a good front. And me hiding in the pantry during my parents' swanky Christmas party is not the front they expect from me.

"Sorry Dad, I was just on my way back out there. I got a head full of some strong perfume and just needed some air."

He looks disapprovingly at me, but that's pretty normal. "You have a guest, it seems. Your mother is entertaining them in the foyer, and I'm sure she has more important guests to attend to." Who the hell would show up here? Pretty much all my friends know to stay clear of "The Williams Manor" as they call it. Stuffy parties and being openly judged aren't most people's idea of a good time.

Oh, no—*Lukas* wouldn't know better.

Nodding politely at my father, I move as quickly through the house as I can without being too obvious.

“Lukas, you made it,” I say with a strained smile. He’s standing just inside the door with my mother, who is not even trying to hide her disdain for this person she met minutes ago at most. “I see you’ve met my mother...Oh, those are nice.” She’s holding a really beautiful bouquet with white poinsettias, bright red holly berries, and some other wintery looking flowers and foliage that I can’t identify, all wrapped in a sparkly silver bow.

I’m trying to take the edge off the frosty reception by talking nonsense about florists—my mother usually loves complex arrangements like this and probably spent an embarrassing amount of money on the ones currently on display for the party that aren’t half as nice as this one.

“My mother and I put it together, actually. We went to the downtown Farmer’s Market this morning and picked out the flowers. I hope they’re appropriate. I wasn’t sure what to bring.” The way he blushes is incredibly endearing. I have to shake my head and avert my eyes before my mother gets suspicious.

Not that there’s anything to be suspicious about.

Lilah Williams, continuing to look down her nose at a man that dwarfs her by over a foot, makes a non-committal noise and dismissively passes the bouquet to a passing waiter. I listen to her heels click down the hall, and then hold back a laugh when I hear the “ooh’s” and “ahh’s” of the guests when they see the flowers.

“If nothing else, the satisfaction of hearing my mother lose even the smallest battle will make this entire night tolerable. So, thanks for that. But what are you doing here?”

Lukas looks confused. “You...invited me. Didn’t you? Did I misunderstand? Oh my God, I’m sorry. I thought you meant all of us, and I didn’t want to be rude.”

I press my lips together, trying not to laugh at his discomfort. A chuckle escapes me despite my efforts. “I’m so sorry, man. This is my bad. I absolutely did extend an invitation to the whole group at lunch the other day, and you were one hundred percent included in that invitation. I failed

to warn you of what my other friends already know, and that is that holiday parties at my house are the worst. Most of the time, the invitation is more sarcastic than anything.”

“Oh.”

Poor Lukas looks highly uncomfortable and embarrassed. I feel terrible.

“I am really glad to see you here, though.” I lower my voice to a whisper. “My father just caught me hiding in the pantry to get away from these people.”

There’s an awkward silence that gets worse by the moment. I know he’s feeling embarrassed, but I’m mortified. I lower my voice and lean into him, smelling his soap and musky cologne. “I’m sorry about my mother. She can be... overbearing. And rude, honestly.”

“It’s okay.” He smiles and I believe he means it.

I notice a limo pull up outside and immediately want to escape before the CEO and owner of the hospital my father works for walks in the door. My father always parades me in front of him like some kind of show pony.

“Are you hungry? There’s a ridiculous buffet. We can grab some snacks and sneak out for a few?” My parents will be pissed, but I decide I don’t care. I’m more concerned with making him feel comfortable, and I genuinely want to escape this stuffy, overly-perfumed hellhole.

“That sounds great.”

I lead him to the dining room and hand him a plate—real crystal, of course. He looks over at my food as he adds a couple cream puffs to his plate.

“Is that a preference or a choice?”

His plate is full of the usual holiday treats, rich desserts, cheese, and savory delights. Mine has raw fruits and veggies and a few plain baked chicken wings.

“A bit of both, I suppose? I feel good when I eat well, so I don’t mind it, but I keep a pretty strict diet and exercise

regiment. I mostly just eat raw veggies and lean meats most days.”

“It’s Christmas.”

I shrug. “It’s also the middle of football and basketball season. Scouts are sniffing around, and my father likes to judge whatever he sees me eating. Gotta maintain that 6% body fat.” My response comes out a bit more sarcastically than I meant it too, but Lukas doesn’t judge, just nods.

Once we’ve made a plate and filled some uselessly tiny, ornate mugs with hot mulled cider, I lead Lukas out onto the enclosed porch. Typically, no one comes out here until a few hours into the evening, and then it’ll be filled with a bunch of cigar smoking old men talking about how to rule the world.

For now, though, it’s blessedly empty and there’s an inviting fire roaring in the hearth.

“This is all so...fancy,” Lukas says. “It’s nice, I mean. Just maybe I wasn’t dressed well enough for the occasion.” He eyes my uncomfortably starched dinner jacket and shoes so polished you can see your reflection.

“You’re fine. Most people don’t have ridiculously formal holiday parties like this. I think you look nice. The sweater vest suits you.” It sounds teasing, but I actually mean it. His argyle sweater vest, paired with his thick-rimmed glasses, gives off a very sexy professor vibe.

My face falls as if I’d just said that out loud. *What was I thinking? Not sexy, just, I mean, like...good-looking. I can appreciate that he’s a tall and handsome guy that looks nice in his outfit...*

“Are you okay?” Lukas’ voice startles me out of my internal panic. “You look like you just missed a free throw.”

I laugh. “And with the basketball references now! Who are you? Surely not Lukas ‘Nerd-Alert’ Anderson?!”

“What?!” He laughs back. “No one calls me that...do they?”

“No, I’m just messing with you. But seriously, it’s cool that you’ve been hanging around with all of us, and coming to games.”

“It’s a lot more fun than I thought it would be, and I’m starting to get used to socializing more. I don’t know how you do it all, though.”

“What’s that?”

“Football and basketball, an intense advanced academic schedule, volunteering, maintaining meaningful friendships... all of it. It seems like a lot.”

I shrug. “I’m used to it.”

“Do you ever just, I dunno, let loose? Do something just for the fun of it?”

A chuckle escapes me. “I honestly can’t remember the last time I did something just for the fun of it,” I say honestly. “I do like playing sports, and my friends are nice, even most of the ones that I started hanging out with because my parents know their parents and they’ve been deemed ‘appropriate’. It’s not a bad life.”

“Your parents seem like they have a lot of expectations for you.”

“They do, but they mean well. They’re setting me up for success.” Even as it comes out of my mouth, I can taste the lie. Even the hobbies I’ve wanted to pick up along the way have turned competitive and had expectations attached. My parents, especially my father, are obsessive about me being the absolute best at everything. Every second of the day is a push to be faster, better, smarter.

I do it to myself, too. When I was ten, I thought I wanted to try boxing, just out of curiosity after seeing an old photo of my father in the ring. I didn’t need my father to push me to be the best, to train faster or harder, or carve out what little personal time I had to pursue greatness. I did it to myself before he had a chance to. I thought I could make him proud.

Lukas gives me a sympathetic look. He’s so observant.

“You see right through me, don’t you?” I whisper.

He looks at me deep in my eyes for a few moments, and then breaks eye contact to look down at his plate. Holding out a cream puff, he says, “I dare you to eat this.” My dick twitches at the way his eyes darken, a playful smirk on his face.

Lukas

January

“Hey honey, you headed out?”

“Not just yet. I’m having a quick snack before I pick Micah up for his birthday surprise. The kettle’s hot if you want tea.”

Mom grins when she notices I’ve put out a cup for her, her favorite loose-leaf tea already in the infuser, which looks like a small man sitting in a hot tub. She’s had a headache all day again, and this tea helps sometimes.

“This is perfect, thank you.”

She knows, without asking, that I’m near brimming with things unsaid. Things I both want to say out loud and am afraid to. Her eyes meet mine after she’s filled her cup, wrapping her thin fingers around the mug and holding her face to the steam the way she always has.

“Do you think my gift is too much? Or dumb? I don’t want to put more pressure on him to hang out with me.”

“Honestly? I think the gift is lovely and thoughtful, as are you. And I also don’t think that you are likely to put any pressure on Micah that he wouldn’t like.”

Her words are innocent, but the twinkle in her eye is mischievous.

“Oh my God, don’t go there.”

“Oh, come on. Don’t be such a prude. I’m old and married and boring, so you have to let me live vicariously through you.”

“I told you before, there’s nothing to be prudish about. Nothing’s going on between Micah and me.”

“Bullshit.”

“Really mom?”

“I’ve been watching the two of you together for months. The way you both look at each other when you think no one is watching. The way you lean into each other when you’re studying. The way you are both obviously completely comfortable with each other in a way that I know that you aren’t around anyone else.”

“I like him, you know I do. But I don’t think it goes both ways. Didn’t you sit here and listen to me cry about the fact that he was on a date with Mindy James last month?”

“Well, maybe *he* goes both ways, ever think about that? And also, once again, I call bullshit. I don’t just notice the way you are around him, Lukas. I notice the way he is around you. And there is no possible way he’s not interested.”

“I don’t know. I’ve definitely had moments where I thought there was something there, but then he turns around and flirts with a girl or wants to go work out.”

“Oooh...you should do that.”

“What?”

“Go work out with him. First of all, it’d be hot—don’t give me that look, son. We’ve established that I’m old and married, but I’m not blind. Second of all, it’d be an interesting test to see how he reacts to you with your shirt off.”

“No. Nope. Stop. I’m not having this conversation with my mom.”

“Frank!” she calls out, because she can’t help but dig her heels in and make it worse.

My dad pokes his head in the kitchen, torn from grading his papers to listen to my mother’s ridiculous theories on how to make Micah love me.

“Your son is too embarrassed to discuss his love life with me, so I thought I could use some backup. I was telling Lukas that he should go work out with Micah, and show off a little.”

His expression goes blank for a moment, but then he actually seems to be mulling it over. A grin crosses over his face and his eyes almost twinkle. “That’s not a bad idea—then,

when you catch him staring, give him a totally confident wink.”

“Yessss,” squeals my mom.

“You are the weirdest parents ever, and I’m leaving now.”

My mom kisses my cheek as I pass her on my way out the door. “Check in if you’re going to be late.” She gives me a meaningful look. “Don’t be afraid to be authentically you. If it turns out we’re wrong about him, then at least you know.”

“But then I risk losing my best friend,” I remind her.

“Happy Birthday,” I say, smiling as Micah walks towards my car. “Great game last night.”

I mean it, too. Watching him play football is entertaining, but I think basketball is my favorite. The way he controls the ball, confidently weaving through the other players and defying gravity the way he jumps.

He smiles back at me. “Thanks. And thanks for coming to the game, too. It was a good win. Dad says the scout from Cambridge was impressed. Would have been more impressed if I hadn’t missed that three pointer, but hopefully it doesn’t hurt me too much in the long run.” I’ve parked one street over from his house.

Shaking my head at the level of perfectionism that is expected of him, I try to change the subject.

“Sorry I ran out so fast last night. I figured you had a lot of celebrating to do with the team anyway. I was going to come chat, but I saw your parents and thought better.”

He gives me an apologetic look. I know it makes him uncomfortable that his parents are so rude to me, but I brush it off and joke about it so he knows I don’t think less of him. “You said you had a surprise for me?”

“Well, it’s your birthday, right?”

“You didn’t have to get me a gift.”

“I didn’t, not exactly anyway. You still have a couple of hours free?”

“Yep. My parents are both at the hospital today. They have a fundraising meeting with the hospital CEO, Jackson Adley.”

“Doesn’t that guy basically own the town?”

“Pretty much. He’s kind of an asshole, too, to tell you the truth. But he got my parents out of the house on my birthday, so today he’s a hero.”

Laughing, I open the door for him. “If I’d known they weren’t home, I would have pulled up closer.” Usually, Micah meets me to study or hang out, but I want to drive him to his surprise. I didn’t want to upset his parents, though, so I parked one street over.

“That’s alright, it’s not that cold. Am I dressed appropriately for whatever the surprise is?” He’s wearing dark blue jeans, a fitted light blue t-shirt under an open black zip up hoodie, and a grey baseball cap with the blue Cambridge College logo. The shirt is snug enough across the chest to show off his incredible definition.

“Perfect,” I say as casually as possible while working to swallow all of the excess saliva in my mouth. “I don’t know how you aren’t freezing though. Get in the damn car.”

The ride there is blessedly short, and incredibly uncomfortable. I’m so aware of Micah’s close proximity, his arm only inches away from mine, close enough that I can feel his body heat. There’s a moment where I almost think his arm twitched infinitesimally closer to mine.

“So, where are we headed?” I almost startle when he speaks. The atmosphere in the car is so thick that it feels like we’ve been in here for an hour, but we’ve barely made it out of Micah’s neighborhood.

“It’s a surprise! Something just for the fun of it,” I say with a mischievous grin. “Oh! That reminds me though...” At the next stoplight, I reach over to the glove box and pull out a bandana that I fold over a few times. “Come here,” I say, reaching to put the bandana over his eyes.

I have to stretch to get the right angle, and find myself tantalizingly close to Micah's face. His breath is warm against my skin, making my lips and the tip of my tongue tingle with unrealistic anticipation.

Micah's lips part, his breaths shallow, and the impossibly thick air gets heavier. The windows even start to fog a little as I freeze to the spot, with my arms around his head and his mouth so close to mine.

A car behind us honks its horn and I jump, hitting my head on the low ceiling of my small sedan. Clearing my throat, I return my attention to the road and focus on getting us to our destination. We don't speak the rest of the way, and Micah's hands remain in his lap.

When we arrive, I pull into the parking lot and then run around to help Micah out of the car, worrying that a blindfolded reveal is stupid. What if he hates it or thinks it's stupid? What if I'm working him up to think this is some kind of elaborate thing, like a surprise party on a yacht? Although it's definitely too cold for anything like that.

Stop overthinking it, Lukas.

"Okay," I say, leading him forward until we're in front of the building. It's an old train station warehouse that they've converted into a family fun center. I'm not sure exactly what it was used for back in the day, other than holding shipments that came in through the railroad. "If this is totally lame, we can leave and do anything else. It won't hurt my feelings in the least."

Micah bounces on his heels, an excited grin stretched across his face.

"Alright then," I say, trying to make my nerves less noticeable. I stand behind him and untie the bandana. "Welcome to Barnaby Fall's first rage room, The Hot Mess Express."

Micah looks around at his surroundings. The back of the building is old brick, with the Adley family crest faded into the side. The front is painted haphazardly in a graffiti style,

with neon colors and black splatters. The awning over the door looks like the nose of a train.

“What’s a rage room?” He looks equal parts intrigued, amused, and excited.

“One hundred percent honestly, I’ve never been. But it’s a place where you go to destroy things. Apparently, it’s very fun, and cathartic.” The expression on his face is unreadable. “I think they have indoor mini golf and stuff like that too if you don’t like it. I didn’t want to get you anything academic or sports related because I figured everyone else would—”

Micah cuts me off. “This is probably the most thoughtful gift anyone’s ever given me.”

“Are you sure? Because I—”

“Lukas, shut up. I love it. Thank you.”

A warmth spreads through my veins at his words, and I can see in his eyes that he really means it. We stand there for a few moments, and I am struck by how often this seems to happen to us. Is it me? Or is the tension mutual, like my mom seems to think?

When we first enter our rage room, staged to look like a dorm room, with trophies and football paraphernalia, I worry that this is too on the nose.

“Wow, they read us well. Or did you ask for this?”

“I promise I didn’t,” I laugh. “This place is brand new, so I’m sure they have a few different set-ups. I can ask to switch if you want?”

“Are you kidding? This is perfect.”

We start tentatively, giggling like children every time something smashes. But before long, we remind each other that we’re supposed to destroy everything, and we get into the swing of things.

Around twenty minutes in, Micah is really going to town with a baseball bat. He’s hitting the trophy display with an intensity and urgency that makes me stop. It’s then that I realize the way his face is contorted, like he’s in pain.

He smashes into the trophies again and again, and then starts yelling—a broken, anguished roar—until all the fight drains out of him and his arms go limp. The baseball bat falls from his hands and his body droops.

Without a second thought, I drop the crowbar that I came in with and cross the room in three quick strides. I wrap my arms around his shoulders and hold him, dropping to the ground next to him.

Sobs wrack through his body, violent tremors shuddering through his wide, muscular shoulders until I worry that he'll come apart at the seams. I hold my arms around him, tightly like I'm physically holding him together, until he is swallowing deep breaths. His face is swollen and wet, tears and sweat soaked through his t-shirt.

I hold him like that until he's limp in my arms and our time runs out, a buzzer sounding from an intercom at the corner of the room. Micah looks up and notices the tiny camera, which seems to jolt him out of his stupor. He stands and silently holds a hand out to help me up.

Rather than asking him if he's okay, I thump him on the back. I figure he'll be more comfortable with a "manly" show of affection, but he surprises me by coming in for a full hug. He wraps his arms around me, his head leans into my chest.

The hug is quick, but it does something to my insides that I'm not sure I understand. It's like there was a piece of something missing that's been put into place. Or like I'm taking a first deep breath after holding it for a long time.

"I got into Cambridge," he says quietly, sadly.

Micah

February

Valentine's Day is fucking stupid.

Every single class gets interrupted by a freshman cheerleader, dressed as Cupid, handing out roses and tiny heart-shaped boxes of chocolate. And every single class my name gets called, a heap of candy that I'm not going to eat is piled on my desk, evidence of an embarrassing number of admirers—some anonymous, some not.

And every single class, my heart drops to my stomach to think that Lukas is watching this, again and again. I'm not sure why I care, but it's the thought that hits me every time. Is Lukas watching? Does Lukas care? Is Lukas jealous?

Not that I want him to be jealous. I just want him to know that I'm less interested in these girls than I am eating these overly sweet fake chocolate confections. I only like the fresh baked goods he sneaks me during study sessions at his house.

No. Wait.

Lukas doesn't care if a girl sends me a Valentine. It's not like...*that*. I'm not...I'm not concerned if he's jealous, really. I just care about his friendship.

With a deep sigh, I stuff my backpack with what feels like one hundred tiny heart-shaped boxes, getting ready to leave for the day.

"You're popular," a voice says behind my locker door. I shut it and Lukas is leaning against the wall, looking...nice. The cuffs of his shirt are rolled up on his forearms, showing off some surprising tone. Does he work out?

Lukas doesn't look upset in the slightest, grinning at me teasingly. "Now, don't lie. How many of those are you going to shame eat before your date with Mindy later?"

I wince. "It's not a date with Mindy. It's a group thing. You were invited too, remember?"

“Yeah...I’m not real interested in being the odd man out. And you might not think it’s a date with Mindy. But I’m pretty positive Mindy thinks it is.”

I start to shake my head.

“I overheard her during English Lit earlier. She was whispering all about what she’s going to wear to ‘Staci *with an I*.’” I can’t help but smile every time he calls her that. “You might want to show the appropriate amount of appreciation for the level of cleavage she plans on showing you, because if not, she’s going to start making assumptions.” He says this sarcastically, but I can also see that he’s giving me a warning.

My eyes divert their attention away from Lukas as I scoff, starting towards the front door. “Why do so many girls think that all guys just want to see ass and titties instead of being a decent person? Not that she isn’t nice enough, just...I don’t know. I’m not really into the whole ‘throwing herself at me’ show.”

“So, you like a little chase, then?” His lips turn up in a small smirk and I laugh, doing an exaggerated waggle of my eyebrows.

Once our laughter dies down, I elaborate. “I just, I don’t know... A little mystery makes it more exciting, right?”

It’s his turn to scoff now. “I wouldn’t know, but noted.”

Noted.

Like, noted for me? Or for the next time he’s interested in a girl?

I wave at him as I get in my car, parked next to his like it has been every day since the beginning of the school year.

Later, when Mindy tries to kiss me, Lukas’ voice echoes in my head. I drive home, my head swimming and overwhelmed.

He’s all I can think about, but not just in that way. He makes me feel good. He always understands what I’m going through and what I need. And right now, I need to hang out with my best friend.

The phone rings twice before he picks up. “Date was that good, huh?” he asks sarcastically. Is it wishful thinking to hope that he’s been thinking about me today?

“Wanna go work out?”

“What?”

“I need to blow off some steam, and I wanted to see if you wanted to come with me. I can swing by your house and pick you up in less than ten minutes.”

“Uh...yeah, sure, okay.”

The school gym is almost never empty, even as late as it is. It’s technically closed, but all the starting players on the varsity team have a key code to come in whenever we need to. Our code tracks when and how often we come.

“This is swanky,” Lukas says as I buzz us in.

“Donated by the one and only Dr. Michael Williams,” I reply.

I thought there would be people here. I wanted there to be people here. To distract me from my errant thoughts, to remind me of the dangers of making those thoughts too obvious. Not that I care what anyone on the football team thinks of me, but backlash could upset my standing on the teams as well as make things harder at home.

Lukas is looking warily around at all the equipment. “Want to warm up with some cardio?” I ask, moving to the treadmills.

He’s surprisingly graceful, considering how tall and lanky his body is. His steps are slow and steady, not hurried in the way I get. He’s not in competition with himself or anyone else, he’s simply enjoying his workout.

“Someone chasing you?” Lukas jokes.

Thirty minutes in, we’re both sweating enough either way.

“Okay, I’m warm,” I say, stepping off the treadmill and grabbing a couple of water bottles from the small fridge. I turn

to toss one to Lukas, but I end up dropping it on the ground.

Lukas is removing the hoodie that he was wearing. When he pulls it over his head, his shirt rides up, exposing a few inches of surprisingly chiseled abdomen.

My mouth is dry.

I picture, for a moment, walking over to him and putting my hand on his stomach, feeling the hard planes of lean muscle. I want to tease him about hiding *that* beneath his reserved style of clothing. But instead, I find myself wondering what else he could be hiding beneath his clothes. The black sweatpants he's wearing certainly show off more shape than his straight cut jeans or cargo khakis ever do. I can tell that his legs, while certainly still lanky, are as leanly muscled as they are long, and there's more curve to his ass than I've noticed before—not that I've made a point of looking. Quite the opposite, actually.

More intrigued than I want to let on, I find myself testing his strength and athleticism. He doesn't push himself to do anything quite as big or as fast as I do, but he's strong. I can bench more, but he can do more chin-ups than I can. Before long, we're testing and teasing each other, dripping with sweat and laughter.

“Alright, alright—one more. How many handstand push-ups can you do?”

“I'll bet you a late-night greasy diner burger that I can do more than you,” he says cheekily. And then, as if he knows I'm weak, he removes his shirt. His bare chest is glistening with sweat, the lean muscles popping out and defined by the last hour of exercise.

He notices me looking and winks. Fucking *winks*.

In an effort to use bravado to hide my embarrassment at being caught, not to mention my shock at his cheeky confidence, I lift an eyebrow before removing my own shirt.

I don't spend a lot of time looking in the mirror or anything like that. I'm a pretty modest guy overall, but I also know that I work hard and my body shows it. Hell, my father

measures my body mass once a month to make sure I'm in "peak shape".

It makes me feel good to see Lukas stare at my chest like that. My eyes zero in on the way his prominent Adam's apple bobs when he swallows. Our breathing picks up despite coming off a break, and I can feel my pants start to tent.

I need a distraction. Now.

Clearing my throat, I gesture to the wall and count down to get started.

I make it to twelve, balancing myself on the wall to try to get my bearings to do one or two more. Lukas shakily gets two more in before one of us knocks into the other and we end up sprawled on the ground. We're breathing heavily and laughing, our heads next to each other, bodies sprawled out in the middle of the floor.

"So where are we—" I turn my head as I'm speaking, meaning to ask where we're having lunch, but Lukas turns his head at the same time and we come face to face. My nose hits his and I freeze, stunned.

I can hear Lukas' heart beating hard in time with mine. His breath flutters across my mouth, and I find myself breathing in to capture it, secretly taking a piece of himself.

Lukas twitches, moving closer, and fear tremors through my body.

I can't kiss Lukas. I can't. *I can't.*

I cough, clear my throat, and chuckle awkwardly, pretending nothing happened as I stand and stretch out my sore muscles. Like I hadn't been millimeters away from pressing my mouth to his and living out my deepest fantasies.

Instead of looking Lukas Anderson in the eyes and admitting that I've been in love with him, definitely since Christmas, if not from the very moment I met him, I toss him a towel and suggest a rain check on the late-night diner.

Lukas

March

How should I tell him? Will he think it's weird? Or pathetic? Or creepy?

"Lukas?"

A deep voice startles me enough that I fall off my bed, hitting my head on a bookshelf. "What the—"

Micah peers in my doorway, eyes wide. His gaze moves around the room until it lands on me, sprawled out on the ground and bleeding.

"Oh my God, are you okay?"

Of course he doesn't know that I was laying in my bed, staring up at the ceiling fan, thinking about him. But I know, and my face heats. My shoulders shake with silent laughter, caught up in my own amusement and embarrassment.

"I'm fine, you just scared me," I say through my laughter. I look up at him as he kneels next to me, dabbing the cut on my forehead with a tissue. "Where did you come from?"

Before he can answer, my mother walks in with her tea tray, only it doesn't have any tea.

"What's going on here?" I ask her, pointing to the tray. There are coconuts with little umbrellas on the tray. "Mom?" I ask again.

"Hold on, wait for Dad," she says, handing each of us a fruity beverage. I sniff it warily. Pina Coladas? Virgin, I hope. I narrow my eyes at my mother.

"Oh, hush Lukas. There's nothing in them. I can't drink, anyway." She has to take a lot of pills for vertigo and headaches, so she sadly had to give up her nightly glass of cabernet. But we've enjoyed trying new teas instead, so she doesn't feel like she's missing out.

My dad pokes his head in. "Is it surprise time?"

“Yes!” My mother actually squeals and bounces on her toes, clearly bursting at the seams to tell us whatever it is they have planned. I’m not sure if I should be afraid or not.

“Well, go ahead hon—”

Mom barely gives him a chance to open his mouth before she blurts out, “We’re going on a cruise!”

“That’s great, Mrs. Anderson. Congratulations!” Micah smiles, genuinely happy for them. A genuine grin spreads across my face when I realize what they’re up to.

“Micah—It’s *Lorraine*. And you’re coming with us. If you want to, that is. We’d like you to.”

“What? You’re serious? I couldn’t—” A look of shock crosses his face, and I love my parents even more right now for giving me this moment.

My father claps him on the shoulder affectionately. “You’re part of the family, son. We wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Mom holds up an envelope, passing us a pamphlet for an all-inclusive cruise and holding up four tickets. “It’s a done deal, Micah. You boys are graduating and moving off to Boston. We have to celebrate! Unless you truly don’t want to come, which we would of course understand, but we’d really like you to.”

My eyes widen at my mom’s accidental slip, but no one seems to notice. I haven’t had a chance to talk to Micah yet about our plans after graduation.

Micah reaches for my mother and wraps her in a hug. “I’d love to. Thank you for including me.”

We clink our coconut glasses together before my mom starts shooing Dad away, passing him the tray and pushing him out the door. As she turns to *very purposefully* close the door, her eyebrows waggle and she gives me a few exaggerated winks. Thankfully, Micah’s back is turned, so he doesn’t see my mother’s ridiculous display. It’s all I can do to keep a straight face, but a slight blush starts to creep up my neck.

“Holy crap. This is amazing,” Micah says, sitting down on the edge of my bed and flipping through the pamphlet. “I’ve never been on a cruise.”

I doubt Micah has ever been on a vacation at all. His parents are all work and no play, and they expect the same from him.

Smiling, I straighten up my bookshelf where I fell and knocked off some books and a framed picture of me and my parents when I was six.

“Your parents are really something special, you know,” Micah says softly.

“Yeah, I know. We’re lucky to have them.” He doesn’t miss the connotations of my use of “we”, smiling up at me.

He pauses, and a confused look crosses his face. “Wait... what did your mom mean by ‘you boys moving off to Boston’?”

“Ah, caught that, did ya?” I clear my throat, my nerves creeping back up again. “I, uh—I was waiting for the right time to tell you. And if you don’t want me to, it’s totally cool, I realize it might be a bit much, but I was thinking about you going off to Cambridge and—”

“Lukas, whatever it is, it’s fine. Spit it out.”

“I applied to UMass and got in on a full scholarship,” I blurt.

Micah’s eyes widen, and for a moment I start to panic. *This was too much. He probably feels stifled and uncomfortable, and now he’s in my room with me—closed in my room with me, the door could be locked for all I know, I wouldn’t put it past her...*

The breath is knocked out of me in a lurch as Micah’s chest runs into mine. He squeezes me in a tight hug for a moment, backing off just in the nick of time. I sit down on the windowsill to hide my ever-present reactions to Micah being physically close to me.

“I think this might be the happiest day of my life,” he says with a huge, toothy grin that lights up his face.

Mine too, I think.

Micah

April

“I think you’ve got physics down,” I assure Lukas, putting down the flashcards. I love that he prefers the “old school” methods of studying. Or maybe he just knows that’s what I like, and he does it for me. I wouldn’t put it past him.

“Maybe. I still want to go over Thermodynamics one more time. But let’s take a break with English Lit?”

“You thinking that analyzing Shakespeare is a break is precious.”

Mrs. Anderson comes into the living room holding a tray. “How about a snack?” There’s a veggie and hummus plate and also some kind of tiny pies.

I smile at Lukas’ mom. She’s so welcoming and supportive of Lukas, and has made me feel like part of their family. I eat dinner with them once or twice a week and spend all the time that I’m not in class or practice here, but they’ve only encouraged me to come more often rather than make me feel like an imposition. I’m more comfortable in the Anderson house than I’ve ever felt on my own.

“Now *that* is a break. I was wondering if I was going to get a chance to test out what smelled so good.”

“I’ll take a break if you eat a whole egg tart,” Lukas taunts, putting down his Lit notes and watching me with keen eyes. This man loves to get me to eat stuff I shouldn’t. It’s like a hobby or something.

“Challenge accepted.” Lukas narrows his eyes at me. “What exactly is an egg tart, though?”

“Ooh, you’re in for a treat if you’ve never had these. They’re one of Lukas’ favorites. I thought they’d be a nice treat for the last study session before exams.” I smile when I hear Lukas groan about the reminder that exams are tomorrow.

I grab one of the tarts and take a small bite. It’s still warm on the inside and is possibly the most delicious thing I’ve ever

eaten. I'm in trouble with these. I grab a second tart before pushing the plate away.

"Is it gym day, then?" He laughs.

"Well, it was supposed to be, but I have a better idea. I'll be right back."

I step into the hallway and pull out my phone.

A cheerful voice picks up on the second ring. "*Barnaby Falls Day Spa, how can I help you?*"

"Hi, my name is Micah Williams and I have a reservation for next month. Something's come up, and I'm wondering if there's any chance you have any openings today?"

"*Let me see what I can do. Do you mind holding?*"

"No problem at all." The phone clicks and soft tonal spa music plays. In the other room, I can hear Lukas bantering with his mother.

"Your dad and I have a fancy dinner party tonight, so we'll be out late. Probably won't be home until one, two o'clock in the morning." Something about the way she says it, very pointedly, is both confusing and amusing.

"Mom. For the love of my quickly waning sanity, will you please stop? He's going to hear you!" He hisses at her. I chuckle, wondering what they're bickering about.

The woman comes back over the phone. "*Mr. Williams? I can actually fit you in, but you would have to upgrade your service to a couple's package. And we'd need you here within an hour.*"

A couples package? That could be awkward. But it doesn't have to be. I don't see how it could be any different from being in a spa together in general. We'll just be in the same room for stuff. No biggie.

"I'll take it. You can charge it to the card I put on file. And we'll see you very shortly."

I pass Mrs. Anderson on my way back into the living room, chuckling and rolling her eyes. "Good luck with that

one. He won't be able to relax until exams are over. Apologies if he's an ass when he gets all worked up." She raises her voice for the last part so that Lukas can hear her and gives me an affectionate pat on the arm.

"No worries, Lorraine, I can handle him." She smiles when I call her by her first name, but there's something else behind the smile that I can't quite discern. "I have a plan. Have fun at your dinner party tonight."

I walk back into the living room and say, in my most stern coaching voice, "Alright Anderson, up! We're taking a break, and you're coming with me."

"What? No, we need to study—"

"No, we've done enough studying." Lukas' grades are just as good as mine. He's just not taking quite as many advanced placement classes as I am. I need my grade point average high above a 4.0 to appease my father and impress Cambridge. If I'm willing to walk away from a study session with exams starting tomorrow, we're good. "I said *now*, Lukas." His eyes dilate a little as he stares at me open mouthed. I've never used this tone around him before, and I'm pretty amused to see his reaction, but I also feel the need to say something less... suggestive. "Let's go, bro."

He blinks away the shocked look and stares at me warily as I lead him around the couch and to the front door. I pause for a moment, then turn on my heel and grab another egg tart before I tear off through the front door. Lukas chuckles and seems to loosen up a bit.

We make it all the way to my car and halfway across town before he speaks up. "Where exactly are you taking me?"

"I decided to give you your birthday present early. It was supposed to be for after exams, but I think now is better."

Lukas

Micah holds out a blue envelope to me.

I take it and pull out a “We did it!” card. Inside the card is a gift certificate. For a spa.

Shit.

Plastering a sincere grin on my face, because I really am so thankful for such a thoughtful gift, I reach over to give him a one-armed hug, but pat him on the shoulder instead. “Thanks, Micah. That’s really thoughtful.”

There’s no way I’m telling him that I’ll never use it. I’ve never been to a spa, but the idea of letting strangers touch me is terrifying.

“You’re almost a good liar,” he says back with a sarcastic grin.

“What?”

“You hate it. And I knew you would. Which is why I booked a special package. There’s a massage where they only touch you with hot stones, and it’s set up so you can go with someone else, like your mom or dad or whoever. The rest of the day is essentially alone time in a suite with a big sauna and a massive jacuzzi, where no one bothers you at all until you’re ready to order lunch or beverages or whatever you want. You can even play your own music if you want.”

I gape at him. How much did he spend on that? No, I don’t want to know.

“This is too much, Micah, I can’t acc—”

“Lukas, you don’t know what you’ve done for me this year. You always have my back, you’ve come to every single game despite hating crowds, and you’ve honestly become the best friend I’ve ever had. Your family has become closer to me than my own. You’ve been so stressed about these exams, I thought it would be good for you to unwind.”

“I—”

“We’re already en route, Lukas. You can’t say no. Relax, have fun. Enjoy letting go—like the way you helped me let go with the rage room.”

It’s the first time either of us has mentioned his mini breakdown during the rage room. I felt bad that it ended that way, but I also think that maybe it was cathartic. Maybe he’s right, and this could be cathartic for me, too. And as much as I hate admitting it, pushing myself outside of my comfort zone has been good for me this year.

I nod, uncomfortable with the gift but accepting that he’ll literally force me in those doors. He reads the look on my face and throws me a boon.

“There is one caveat...you’re stuck hanging out with me. I had to bump up to a couple’s suite to move the reservation.”

I burst out in awkward giggles.

Couples? I suddenly find the world outside my window fascinating, turning my head to look over my shoulder. Anything to hide my face as I process Micah agreeing to do a couple’s massage for me.

The steam from the room and the heavy scent of eucalyptus burns my eyes for a moment, but as it sinks into my skin and into my lungs on each inhale, I feel yet another level of relaxed. Hell, I may be too relaxed.

I was a little freaked out about the massage at first, so much so that they recommended a cup of CBD tea. After that, it was honestly amazing. The hot stones radiated warmth into every knot and sore patch. I didn’t even mind when the masseuse started massaging me with their hands.

We laughed when they called us in for our couple’s massage, but my awareness of him only feet from me was distracting. I flat out denied turning over on my back when it came time to “flip sunny side up,” as the masseuse described it.

“Sorry I was wrong about it just being stones,” Micah says sheepishly, sitting down in the thick steam. I choose a seat

across from him, self-conscious about only wearing a towel. Micah has been laying across from me for the last hour, wearing nearly nothing. At one point, he let out a satisfied groan that made me instantly hard, and I haven't fully recovered from it yet.

"That's okay, it was nice. This is better, though," I say almost sleepily. The hot steam, paired with my deep level of relaxation, has me leaning back against the seat comfortably. My neck stretches back to rest my head against the wall and I take a deep, cleansing breath.

I'm not sure if I heard a sound or just felt a disturbance in the force, but I look back up to find Micah watching me with his eyes hooded. I think I must be mistaken; he's certainly never looked at me like that before. But then he lowers his hand to cover an unmistakable bulge in the center of his towel.

It's like my eyes are glued to his hand on the towel. To the hard outline of his length pressing up against the soft cotton, long and thick.

There's a part of me that is worried it's a mirage, that my eyes are mistaken. Or maybe I'm having a bad reaction to the CBD, or an allergic reaction to whatever they used to make the steam so heavily scented.

My own hand has found its way to my lap, and I can't decide if I'm trying to hide my raging erection or touch it. I want to touch it.

I want to touch him.

A heavy blanket of fog between us, the heat in the room increases to oppressive levels. My breaths become more shallow, and my heart rate increases at the awareness that I'm suddenly getting less oxygen. At the awareness of him.

His legs part slightly and his hand slides beneath the towel. I grip my towel like a lifeline, allowing a light squeeze to my throbbing cock.

Micah's head lays back, his eyes closed and body relaxed. The towel still covers him, but the smooth motion of his arm is telling. He's stroking himself, maybe five feet away.

Without thinking too hard about it, my hand falls to the opening of my towel and slips beneath. I let out a breathy moan of relief, grasping my cock firmly around the base and wrapping my fingers around. Never taking my eyes off Micah, my hand starts to move. Slow, firm strokes, matching the way Micah's arm moves as he jerks himself beneath the towel. Little shivers of pleasure zip up my spine.

Some illicit porn god somewhere hears my prayer and Micah's towel falls open, the material sliding off his muscular thighs. His legs open wider and his movements become more intense. My mouth drops open, the weight of my tongue suddenly too heavy to keep my lips together. The haze of the steam is thick, but I can see his thick cock jutting from his body, his hand moving up and down in long, slow strokes. I want to weep as much as my cock is. The sheer sight of his muscular body, bare and glistening with droplets of sweat and water, is almost too much to bear.

It's more beautiful than my teenage wet dreams could have ever fathomed.

I let my towel fall too, feeling brazen as I watch Micah's salacious display. The sight of him alone is enough to make my balls tighten, but I'm determined to hold on and enjoy every moment of this show. My hips scoot forward, legs falling open. I lean back, slowing my strokes, squeezing the dripping tip before spreading the pre-cum along my length as I watch him.

The air continues to grow thicker, heavier, headier. Neither of us makes a sound until the speed of our strokes increases, the percussive slapping sounds of skin hitting skin reverberate off the tiled walls.

My breath catches when Micah turns his head to look at me. His eyes are hooded but seemingly aware. The moment our gazes collide, I erupt. An orgasm hits me with the blunt force of an oncoming train, and I moan as I watch Micah's chiseled abdomen contract. Thick ropes of cum shoot up from his lap, splashing on his legs at the same time I feel my own release land, hot and sticky, across my stomach.

We hold each other's gaze for a few moments, breathing heavily as we come down. I actually see the moment that the fire in Micah's eyes goes out, like shutters closing me off from the passion I'd seen there only seconds ago.

He blinks and averts his gaze to the floor. His face contorts for a moment, similar to the way he looked before he broke down at the rage room. Abruptly, he stands, returning the towel to his waist and storming from the room.

I wait for a few minutes to give him time to cool off, using a few bottles of water to wash away the evidence of our shared moment.

When I open the door to exit the sauna, the air outside assaults my overheated skin. It's both uncomfortable and a relief. The heat was starting to make me dizzy...or, I suppose, it could have been the whirlwind of disorienting emotions and an intense orgasm.

Despite feeling overwhelmed, I also feel a sort of clarity that I hadn't before. For the first time, I have actual confirmation that Micah feels at least some sort of way towards me. He wouldn't have reacted that way, wouldn't have looked me in the eye as he brought himself to release, if he didn't. Right?

"Micah?" I call out. This area of the spa is completely private, usually reserved for honeymooning couples, apparently.

I walk past the large inlaid jacuzzi tub, towards the front of the suite. Micah is walking out of the showers as I enter the room. He turns his robed back on me and walks into the changing room.

I take the opportunity to rinse off under the cool stream of a shower, bringing my body temperature and my mindset down to a respectable calm. Wrapping myself in a thick terry cloth robe, I have a seat on the small couch and wait for Micah.

It takes him a while, but he finally emerges, dressed and ready to leave.

“Are you okay?” I ask him cautiously.

“Fine,” he answers shortly. “I’ll, uh, I’ll see you at school tomorrow.”

“Are we just going to pretend that didn’t happen?” I ask, not unkindly or accusingly. I need to know what’s expected of me, how to move on from the mind-blowing moment that just transpired between us.

Pretending it didn’t happen might hurt my ego and my feelings a little, but if that’s what he needs from me, I can manage it. I at least have the knowledge that he’s at least a little bit into me in that way. There’s *hope*.

“What? Jerking off in the sauna? That didn’t mean anything, Lukas. I realize you don’t spend a lot of time around other guys, but shit like this happens amongst friends. It doesn’t mean anything.”

The way he repeats himself makes me think he’s trying to convince himself more than me, but the harshness of his words still makes me recoil.

I stutter for a moment, at a loss for words. “You’re fooling yourself if you think I can’t see through you, Micah. You spend so much time trying to deny what’s between us. But you aren’t usually this cruel.”

“And you aren’t usually this stupid. Clingy and weird, yeah. But you’re smart. Smarter than to think that this,” he gestures between us, “could ever be a thing.”

My eyebrow raises, a falsely confident expression to challenge his bravado. He stares back, his face a steely mask of indifference. A perfect imitation of his father.

That he could even pretend to be so unfeeling is surprising.

Nodding, I walk silently into the changing room. I hear the main door slam and know that Micah has left.

Tears come a minute later, unbidden, as I pull my clothes on. At least I held them in until he left. At least he won’t see how hurt I am by his words.

Micah

May

Lukas stands in front of his parent's graves, looking down into the deep holes and looking like he might want to crawl inside with them.

The service ended over half an hour ago, but he hasn't moved since the portion of the service where he sprinkled the dirt over their caskets.

He's not crying, but I imagine he might not have any tears left. I wipe a few of my own tears away while he's distracted, feeling their loss acutely, and knowing that my pain is nothing in comparison to his.

It's been almost two weeks. Exactly twelve days, to be exact. Twelve days since I gave in to my weakness in that sauna. Twelve days since I took my insecurities out on him and cruelly pushed him away.

Twelve days since I ignored my phone ringing, sending it to voicemail each time I saw his name pop up.

Eleven days since I saw the news footage of the car accident. A hit and run that pushed their car off a steep cliff.

The moment I saw the footage I dropped everything, ran from my house with my parents yelling behind me. I sped the whole way to his neighborhood, and all but crashed into his front yard in my hurry to get to him.

I ran inside the front door and found him sitting on the hallway floor outside his parents' bedroom. He barely reacted to me bursting through the door. He just sat there staring at their bedroom door. After a while, he registered my presence, looking up at me with sunken, vacant eyes.

"They're gone," he said in a hoarse whisper. And then I just held him, as if I could hold the pieces of his heart together, as he broke down.

The next day, I called the school and arranged for us to be able to retake our exams. Given the extenuating

circumstances, their deaths were big news, and the fact that the two of us are the best students in the school, they allowed us to retake them the following week. Somehow, we both still managed to do exceptionally well.

I helped him arrange the funeral, calling his family members and giving them the necessary details. I defied my parents each day that I left and went to him. I stood by his side as he said goodbye to the most supportive, loving parents anyone could have.

And I'll stand here for as long as he needs me to.

Lukas

June

I look up at the podium and watch as Micah gives his speech, his cap and gown somehow making him look even more like the All-American archetype that he is. Like him, his speech is perfection. It's exciting, empowering, emotional, and energizing all at once.

He looks right at me as we move the tassels from our caps from one side to the other, a tiny gesture that signifies such a big moment. When it comes time to throw our caps, he simply removes his and holds it over his heart, facing the direction of the two empty seats that were supposed to be reserved for my parents.

I stand there dumbfounded, focusing on him as the auditorium erupts.

However cruel his words were that day at the spa, he's been there for me. He's held my hand and my heart as I tried to find my footing. He made sure I got to my exams, and I managed to do well enough. My scores weren't as high as they should have been, and I lost my ranking as salutatorian. Other than missing out on getting to sit up there with Micah, I think it might be for the best anyway. Hell, I think even if I had made the grades, I might have turned it down.

The noise starts to be too much, a tingly, overwhelmed feeling taking over my scalp. My eyes dart back and forth. There's so much movement and sound in the room that it all starts to blur. My breaths seize up in my chest.

Micah appears out of nowhere. "Lukas. Hey, look at me, Lukas. I'm here. Come on." He takes me by the hand—*by the hand, in public*—and leads me behind the stage. The dark backstage hallway is blessedly empty aside from a lone janitor who doesn't pay us any mind.

I'm struggling with this stupid gown until finally I manage to basically rip it from my body. I pull my sweater vest over my head before leaning back against the wall. The

coolness of the cinder blocks seeps into my skin through my thin t-shirt, and I slide down to sit on the floor.

“I’m sorry,” I say quietly. I’m overwhelmed, overstimulated, and embarrassed.

“Never be sorry,” Micah says, squatting down in front of me. He’s removed his gown as well, but managed to neatly drape it over his arm. He’s wearing a crisp white dress shirt and black slacks that would probably make me drool if I weren’t so distracted. If anything, it actually makes me feel more overstimulated. But that’s not his fault, so I don’t mention it, and just look away.

The click of heels echoes down the hall and Micah stiffens. I don’t have to look up to know who is coming.

“Micah, son, it’s time to go.” His mother’s sharp voice is just short of scathing.

I get up off the floor to greet her, always trying to be as polite as possible so they don’t have a reason to hate me more than they do, but she won’t even look in my direction. She ignores my presence entirely.

“I’ll meet you at home, Mom. I won’t be late. I just need to finish up here.”

“Micah Lyle Williams, you are going to walk out of this auditorium with your father and I, shake hands with important members of society who have taken time out of their busy schedules to be here. And then we’re going to go home, where the caterers and a dozen staff have your graduation celebration all set up and waiting. You need to be there to greet your guest like a gracious host. If your...*friend* decides to make an appearance, that is at his discretion, although I’d hope he would clean himself up first.” She looks at me for the first time, but only to assess my appearance and find me desperately wanting.

To be fair, I’m sure I do look a mess. I was sweating profusely before we escaped back here. I’ve wavered between not sleeping at all and sleeping too much, and I know I’m overdue for a haircut.

“Mom, his parents just died,” Micah whispers harshly.

“It’s fine,” I say, picking up my discarded robe and grabbing my cap from Micah. He grips it tighter, forcing me to look up at him. I try to let him know with my expression that I’m okay. “I hope you don’t mind if I miss the party. Please tell everyone congratulations for me.” I turn my attention to Micah’s mother, truly out of fucks to give. “Mrs. Williams, always a pleasure,” I say as I start down the hallway.

“Wait! Lukas!”

Micah jogs over to walk next to me, his mother’s clicking heels bringing up the rear. “Come to the party, please. Or I’ll skip it. I don’t think you should be alone.”

“It’s been almost two weeks, Micah. I’ve made it this far thanks to you. I need to learn how to move on from here.”

“But, I—”

“Micah. I’m serious. I’m fine. Go.” I look him directly in his eyes so he knows that I mean it, that I’m not upset and I’m going to be okay. I don’t want him to worry about me. He has enough on his plate.

In my fervent desire to escape this hellhole, I nearly trip over another student, who is removing his gown and hanging it on a rack with a “borrowed” sign. He barely reacts when I all but run right into him, and just grunts when I apologize to him.

Micah tries to make eye contact as he walks past with his mother. She stares at the guy next to me, who is almost as tall as I am but stockier, and purses her lips as she assesses him in much the same way she did to me. She’s clearly judging his black jeans and boots and tattooed arms. He glares at her, and she lifts her chin to look down her nose, marching away.

How does someone our age have so many tattoos? Not that I’m judging. The artwork is pretty fascinating, as is the ability to pump permanent ink into your skin with needles. I’m trying to remember his name—Louis? *Luis*? I think it’s Luis.

“Don’t mind her, she’s a bitch,” I say, and I half hope she heard me. It feels oddly freeing to just say what I want out loud.

The guy gives me a little smirk before turning away.

Micah

July

“This heatwave is stupid,” I complain as Lukas hands me an ice-cold bottle of water. Instead of drinking it, I roll the sweating bottle over my face and neck. It’s not enough, so I open the bottle, take a few gulps, and then dump the entire rest of the bottle over my head.

Lukas chuckles and hands me another bottle from the cooler, prepared as always to make sure everyone around him is comfortable, especially me. Right now, he’s encouraging everyone to hydrate so they don’t get sick. We arrived a bit late to hang out on the beach with my usual group of friends, and most of them are already drunk.

“At this rate, they’re going to miss the fireworks later,” Lukas says, watching Brian lift Mindy over his shoulder and run into the lake. She shrieks loudly as he holds her over the water, threatening to dunk her under.

I’m really glad those two started hooking up, because she was starting to get aggressive before the school year ended.

I’m also really glad that Lukas is starting to come out more. I certainly don’t expect every day to be a good day, or for him to just get over any of the trauma from the last couple months—but seeing even a hint of a smile is wonderful. Spending time with him makes me feel less stressed about how weird my father has been acting, especially since he’s taken some time off for the first time I can remember due to some incident at work. Neither of my parents will talk about it.

All my father cares about, since school is out and my spot at Cambridge is guaranteed, is that I’m keeping up with my workouts and chasing girls. The only way I was able to escape to come out here was because I could honestly say that there were going to be a ton of girls.

Speaking of girls... A group of them in the tiniest bikinis known to man—I think they must have had to superglue the tiny triangles of fabric because it defies logic how they could

remain in place—is sunbathing just a few feet from our spot. I’ve been listening to them giggle about Lukas’ “dad hat” and long sleeve shirt—which, to be honest, I gave him some shit about on the way here, but at least I did it to his face. To his credit, because I know he can hear them if I can, he’s not at all phased by their comments.

They stop giggling when he removes his shirt, though. I get an odd sort of satisfaction out of hearing their gasps and whispers as they get a glimpse of his strong, lean muscled body. He’s so tall and lanky, and always wearing loose clothes or layers, so you’d never guess at how shredded he is. It’d be impressive even if it weren’t so shocking, but the added effect of his unassuming nerdy appearance unveiling *that* body is something else.

Lukas pulls out a tube of what is probably 200 SPF sunblock. I don’t even get a chance to agonize whether I should help him with it before one of the girls jumps up and offers to rub the lotion onto his back.

I do everything in my power not to make eye contact with Lukas. Because I don’t want to laugh at his discomfort at the idea of a gorgeous, mostly naked woman touching his body. But I also don’t want to betray the surprising sting of jealousy that arises at the sight of someone else trying to cozy up to him.

He awkwardly accepts the help, but I can see the wheels turning as he calculates how much sun damage would be worth being touched by a stranger.

The girl is a little too obvious, pressing her breasts into his back as she reaches up on her toes to rub the lotion on his shoulders. It’s not until she is massaging the sunscreen lower, skimming just beneath the waistband of his shorts that he jumps away from her.

It’s not the reaction that she’s expecting, nor does she seem to know how to react to being rejected. She side-eyes him all the way back to her towel, and I distinctly hear the word “gay” being muttered. It makes my whole body seize up in terror and I almost consider having a few beers myself.

“I’m gonna go for a swim,” I say, knowing that Lukas won’t follow me until his sunscreen has had the appropriate amount of time to soak in. I avoid his eyes as I walk to the shoreline.

I’m acutely aware of his eyes tracking me. It both excites and terrifies me.

I spend the majority of the day giving Lukas space, making sure to talk and flirt with any girl that speaks to me. He mostly stays under our umbrella, reading, but sometimes when I look over at him, I catch him watching me. I find myself making eye contact at various points during the day. It feels like a long, drawn-out tease.

Despite all the people surrounding us, despite barely talking to each other, I almost feel like it’s been just us here all day. I can’t remember any of the conversations I have even as they’re happening. I’m only aware of him.

When night falls and the fireworks display begins, I find myself watching him rather than the explosions of lights and colors in the sky. They’re better in the reflection of his eyes, anyway.

My breath catches when his eyes shift and lock on mine. He looks at me with curiosity, staring back at me as the fireworks boom and flash. When he turns his face back to the fireworks, I’m left wanting answers about what he’s thinking.

As the grand finale erupts across the sky, I pretend to watch, turning my face away from Lukas. My heart beats harder than the explosions of the fireworks when he leans back in his chair, his hand falling to rest near mine.

Somehow, the slight pressure of his hand so close to mine is more intense than watching him come in the sauna.

Lukas

August

“They were actually really good,” Micah exclaims as we walk away from the amphitheater in the park. The town’s autumn festival is in full swing, and the live music this year has been stellar.

“Do you think maybe they got some younger blood on the committee this year?”

Usually, they hire a jazz band to play at these events. And while the band is usually good, it’s just not as entertaining for the younger crowd. This time they hired a local cover band and showcased a few solo artists between sets. There were people out dancing on the lawn in front of the stage that they erected for the event.

“Don’t think I didn’t notice you singing along. What other talents are you hiding?”

My eyebrow lifts, unable to keep my sarcastic, dirty thought off my face. Micah laughs.

Neither of us has tried to bring up the “incident” in the sauna, but since the death of my parents, things have definitely changed. He’s opened up a lot—we both have. I can still see him tense up when people are around us, but he’s gotten a lot more friendly and almost flirtatious when we’re alone. I like to take advantage of these moods when I can.

Micah’s phone pings, and I’m glad for the distraction, so I don’t have to admit to being a former choir boy. Not that there’s anything wrong with that, but I’m not going to start playing the dancing monkey game where someone asks me to sing for them. It’s awkward as hell. I only sing in a group setting, when other people are singing too. I don’t even sing alone in the shower.

“You remember when I went golfing with my dad a couple of weekends ago?” I nod, remembering that he wasn’t looking forward to an entire afternoon at the Country Club with his father. “Well, the CEO of Barnaby Falls Medical Center, Mr.

Adley, happened to be joining us, along with a few other big wigs. I asked him if he had any recommendations for internships, and he called his secretary right away. Looks like I might have something lined up in Boston, probably changing bedpans or something, but a foot in the door is a foot in the door.”

“Oh wow, that’s awesome. Congrats.”

“That guy is weird, though. He and my father spent most of the day discussing my accomplishments like I’m some kind of show dog.”

“He seems intense.” I’d only seen the guy up close once, at Micah’s parents’ holiday party last year. He walked in like he owned the place, and it was like he sucked all the air out of the room.

“You should meet his son,” Micah scoffs. “He doesn’t give off the same creepy vibes that his dad does, but I don’t think I’ve ever seen him smile. I’ve probably seen him at a hundred events over the years, but never once spoken to him. He just keeps to himself and looks angry all the time.”

“I can’t imagine that it’s easy having that guy for a dad,” I say sympathetically. If anything, Micah would understand that. He nods.

I decide to change the subject. “Can you believe it’s all over? I mean, I realize that high school was pretty awesome for you, but everything is about to change.”

“College will be a new beginning for both of us.”

“Speaking of college, I did a thing...”

Micah laughs. “What does that mean? Should I be afraid?”

“Depends on your opinion of me putting my parent’s house up for rent and definitely moving to Boston for college.”

He looks at me for a moment, and at first, I’m afraid that I’ve gone too far by bringing up our future together. But we walk under a tree lit up with twinkle lights and I can see the smile on his face. A genuine smile, that lights up his eyes and makes me hopeful for the future, too.

“Watch out Boston, here we come,” Micah says.

We laugh and talk all the way through the park, until we come to a small path that isn't lit by the luminaries. Without a word, both of us turn down the path and head away from the lights. Silently, only the sounds of our steps crunching in the fallen leaves, we walk until we find ourselves in a clearing. There are trees densely packed all around us, with low-hanging branches and unkempt foliage that tells me this part of the park isn't regularly maintained. The grass in the center of the clearing is long, and the moon shines brightly overhead. It's bright enough that I can clearly make out the features of Micah's face as he closes his eyes and turns his face up, as if the moon had warm rays like the sun.

When he opens his eyes again, I don't look away. He's too beautiful not to stare at, his smooth dark skin, full lips, and athletic build that is apparent even through his clothes. It's dark enough that I can't see the depth of his amber eyes, but I can feel them on me nonetheless. If I'm not mistaken, he's looking at me in much the same way. Like we've never seen each other before, or at the very least, haven't let ourselves truly look before.

I've rarely had the chance and the confidence at the same time. I feel confident and safe in this clearing now though, my skin tingling with the awareness that something is in the air tonight. With my hands in my pockets, I continue to watch Micah, trying to gauge what he might be thinking. What he's feeling in this moment.

Is his heart beating the way mine is? Is he as acutely aware of our seclusion in this little copse of trees off the beaten path? Does he feel the heavy sense of rightness and belonging, the air filled with promise and a buzzing excitement that vibrates through my bones?

Micah watches me back, looking at me like he never has before. I feel something heavy in his gaze that makes my mouth and eyes water. I swallow deeply, trying to control my nerves. My eyes remain on Micah, but I nervously clean my glasses with my shirt.

Micah's mouth opens and I wait for whatever it is he has to say, but he closes his mouth again. He takes a deep breath, sucking in oxygen like he'd forgotten how good it feels to breathe when you're not surrounded by the judgment of other people.

His eyes fall to my mouth, and I swallow down my nerves. It's now or never, and if I'm wrong, that's fine. But I don't think I am.

I bolt across the clearing and kiss him. Or at least, I try to. He's just standing there, frozen to the spot.

Too fast, Lukas, you should have asked first. A wave of embarrassment and sadness rushes over me like a hot wave. I freeze too, my hands cradling his face, my mind working overtime to figure out how I'm going to fix this. What apology could be enough to make up for crossing a boundary like this?

But just as I gather the wherewithal to step back, Micah's body relaxes, and he melts into my kiss. His lips move against mine, gently. His mouth opens slightly on a sigh and I take advantage, my tongue delving into his mouth. A groan escapes him as our tongues entwine, and I am well and truly done for.

Something inside me breaks free. A new Lukas shows himself as I momentarily feel more sure of myself than I ever have.

My body moves against Micah's, pressing him into a tree and taking. I take every kiss, every frenzied swipe of his tongue, every desperate grasp for more. I take it and savor it like it'll never happen again. Micah's moods regarding our relationship have been mercurial, and while I certainly understand why, I also want to show him what he's missing if he turns away from this now.

I trail my hand down his body and grip his ass firmly, pulling him against me. I want to feel how hard he is for me, and I want him to feel me in turn. His arms wrap around me, pulling me even closer, until our bodies are melded together. Grinding into each other, grasping with all we have.

One of Micah's hands grips my erection through my pants and an involuntary moan escapes with a huff of breath. He strokes me through my pants and I buck into him, desperate for the friction, for his touch. His fingers struggle with my belt buckle, and it occurs to me that we should slow down.

As much as I want him, as much as I want to show him how good I know we can be for each other, I don't want to make any rash decisions that he could regret. He pauses, looking down at my belt with a look of surprise on his face. Too afraid that the shutters might go up at any moment, I rest my forehead against his and breathe in the fleeting moment.

Even if he walks away from me now, I'll forever remember the smell of dried leaves and something fragrant, like jasmine, intermingled with the scent of our sweat and lust. I breathe it in like a drug addict, blinking away the prickling behind my eyes.

Be strong, Lukas.

"I don't know what I'm doing," he says.

"Me either," I whisper, chuckling awkwardly. "Here, let's sit and cool down for a minute." He needs time and space to work out what just happened, and I don't want him to regret it, so I'm going to make sure he has what he needs to move forward. Hopefully, with me.

"I, uh...I wasn't expecting that," I admit. I don't usually make rash decisions or just go with my gut, but I suppose I can be opportunistic when I need to be. I smirk at my own ridiculous thoughts.

Casually, like it's the most normal thing for us, I reach over and take his hand. Holding his hand in mine feels so right, like it's always belonged there. His expression is unreadable, looking down at our entwined hands.

"It was unexpected," he says quietly, "but in a good way..." The way his statement trails off betrays a lack of confidence that I find surprising.

Surely, he knows how I feel about him, how I've always felt about him? It occurs to me then that where Micah has

taken the lead in everything else, it's my turn when it comes to this side of our relationship.

"A very good way," I assure him, pulling him in for a kiss. I keep the kiss light and sweet, wanting him to feel my love for him and not just how my body reacts to him.

We stay like that for a while, sitting on a low-hanging branch, pressed against each other and just soaking in the moment. It feels...momentous. Like my whole life has just begun, which is a sharp contrast to how I've felt since my parents died.

I realize how late it is, and I know we need to leave the park, but I'm also not ready to be apart.

"Do you want to go back to my house?" I ask. *Shit, that came off crass.* I quickly follow it up with, "we don't have to do anything, just talk." I don't want him to feel like I'm in a hurry to get in his pants, or feel pushed in any way at all. I truly just want to *be* with him.

"Yeah, I'd like that," he said, smiling at my anxious response. I'm glad he understands me when I put my foot in my mouth.

I pull back a bit as we walk out of the trees, thinking that Micah might not be comfortable with anyone seeing us so close at this time of night. There's probably no one left, but better safe than sorry.

Sure enough, the moment we exit the trees, Micah is making a beeline back to the path. Once he reaches the main trail and sees that everything is dark and quiet, he looks back apologetically.

"I'm sorry, I just...I'm not ready."

I nod, expecting this. Honestly, I was expecting worse. I'm just glad he hasn't run away from me entirely yet.

"It's okay. This is new and I think it's fair we get comfortable with each other before we try to take things public."

Will he ever want to take things public? I'm not sure. He might want to wait until college. I open my mouth to say something about how different it will be when we get out of this town and away from his parents, when he asks a question that I'm not expecting.

"Did your parents know?"

My heart lurches whenever I think about them, but I like remembering them this way. All the wonderful ways they supported me and loved me.

"They always treated me like family." He says this like he's had some kind of epiphany.

"Yeah, they knew. They knew from the beginning how I felt about you." My eyes tear up a bit, but I smile at the happy memories of how they were with him. "They really loved you, you know."

I chuckle, thinking about all of their crazy antics, trying to push us together. "They supported me while I tried to figure out how to tell you, or tried to figure out if you felt the same way. Mom got a kick out of encouraging me to shamelessly flirt with you just to gauge your reactions." I laugh, remembering how they danced around the house gloating when I told them that they were right about the workout. "I wish they were here so I could tell them that it finally happened." *They'd be so happy for us.*

"That you finally broke me, huh?"

I don't know what comes over me, but that confidence from the clearing surges through my veins. Now that I've had a taste, my mind runs through all manner of scenarios that heat my blood. "I haven't broken you yet," I say under my breath.

Micah hears me, barking out a disbelieving laugh before gaping at me. As if he caught on to the meaning of my little joke a beat after the punchline.

The heated look in his eyes makes it feel like I'm pumping lava through my veins, and I have to walk off toward the car before I push him up against another tree.

The drive back to my house is nerve-wracking. It's all I can do to keep my eyes on the road, and I'm overthinking this new dynamic. I'm not sure whose hand moves first, but our fingers touch and then weave together, and the nervousness I was feeling has abated some. Whatever happens next, this is good. *This is right.*

I keep repeating that to myself as we walk through my front door. I grab a couple glasses of water and join him on the couch, careful to give him enough space. I don't want him to feel pressured or overwhelmed, so I pull back, even though all I want to do is go back to that moment in the clearing.

He coughs and laughs awkwardly, and I'm struck by how damn cute he is when he's nervous like this. I don't know why, but it makes me feel more confident.

And when I find him watching me with unmistakable heat, I can't help but raise an eyebrow. He opens his mouth to say something, but stutters. I want him to tell me what he's thinking, what he's feeling, what he wants. *Explicitly.*

Keeping my voice as casual as possible, trying not to betray the rampant hormones rushing through my bloodstream, I ask, "What do you want to do next?" It sounds like I'm asking if he wants to play a board game. When he doesn't answer, I actually suggest a board game—I'll do whatever makes him most comfortable. "Do you want to talk about it, or avoid it? Want to play a game or something?"

He shakes his head, but still doesn't say anything.

"Do you want me to take you home?"

"No," he says sharply. I exhale a little, his reaction reassuring me that he does want to be here.

"What do you want, then?" I need him to tell me what he wants, how he wants to proceed. I just want to make him happy.

"Kiss me again?"

He hesitates before he makes the request, but I'm halfway across the space between us before he finishes the sentence. I

force myself to slow down, breathing in the moment, before crushing my mouth to his.

My mind and body are overcome by a barrage of sensations. Emotionally, I feel so elated that I could cry. Physically, I've never wanted to be so close to another person. My skin tingles as gooseflesh breaks out all over my body, and although I started this kiss slow and sweet, it grows into something hotter. With every gasp and movement of his mouth, I grow hungrier. When he opens his mouth, my tongue delves inside, tasting him like I could swallow his soul through his tonsils.

Our bodies melt, fitting seamlessly together. I press harder against him and feel the growing evidence of his passion.

I'm not sure how long we lean into each other, but I savor it. I use every press of my lips and stroke of my tongue to learn what he likes, pulling soft moans from his throat that are nearly my undoing. More than once I worry that I might come prematurely, and eventually I have to pull back to breathe. The way he looks at me, the way his lips look rubbed raw, it's overwhelming.

"Was that...okay?" I ask on a shaky breath. He nods, but doesn't say anything. I worry that I'm pushing too much too fast. "Are you sure, because I can pull back or stop or..." I don't know what, but whatever he wants, it's his.

"No, I just...I feel..." I've never seen Micah Williams at a loss for words, and my brain goes into overdrive thinking about what I should do next to help make him more comfortable. Maybe I should give him some space?

Before I convince myself that I've made him totally uncomfortable, Micah pushes me back against the cushions and kisses me like a man possessed. We're all tongues and lips and teeth and I just need more.

I lose control of my faculties at this point, letting pure instinct roll Micah beneath me and grinding into him. His thick hardness strains the front of his jeans. His hands grip my ass and pull me into him. I press my hips into him and roll. He moans when I grind into him harder and damn if I don't want

to hear that sound again and again. Pressing my throbbing cock against his, I thrust the length of myself against his body the way I imagine I would if there weren't clothes holding us back.

Micah lets out a strangled sound that makes my stomach clench, and as hurried as I feel, I pull back. I'm desperately trying not to lose myself to the lust I feel and go too far or too fast.

If Micah knows I need reassurance that he's okay with everything that's happening, he delivers. He kisses me deeply, slowly and methodically. It lets me know that he's with me, consenting and wanting to keep moving.

Micah pushes me so that my back is against the cushions, his head on my bicep. My fingers roam over his body in light strokes, unable to stop touching him. I watch his face and take in what touches get the best reactions, learning his body one bit at a time. His hands and fingers roam too, rubbing my erection through my pants and then finding their way to my belt buckle.

My heart beats at a rapid pace as Micah reaches inside and palms me through the fabric of my boxers. I buck into him and kiss him hard, gasping when he slips his hand beneath the elastic and his hand wraps around my cock. His hand pumps and I can't think. All I can do is lean back and feel.

Micah spends time learning how to touch me, squeezing and stroking in different rhythms until I'm shuddering against him. An orgasm surges through me, like hot electricity shooting from my toes. I press my head into Micah's shoulder, thrusting wildly as Micah's hand gets covered in my cum. Tremors wrack through my body and he looks down at me like I'm some fascinating creature. I kiss him to take the weight of his stare off me, and then get up and pull Micah with me.

I clean us up as best I can with my shirt, planning out my next move. I know what I want to do, but I'm nervous. Can he feel how nervous I am?

Lowering my weak knees to the floor, my trembling hands push the shirt up his torso, feeling the strong, taut muscles. He

takes over, breaking the kiss to pull the shirt over his head while I turn my attention to the button on his jeans. Slowly, shakily, I pull down the zipper and reach inside. Saliva overflows my mouth when I release his thick cock from his boxer briefs, getting an eyeful of the impressive girth. It juts straight up from his body, as proud and beautiful as he is.

“Jesus, you’re perfect,” I mutter.

Micah lifts his hips so I can pull his jeans and underwear off his body. I can’t take my eyes off him, noting the thick vein that runs from root to tip. It pulses, almost in time with my own heartbeat.

He holds himself impossibly still and silent, letting me stare and study him, until I tentatively run my tongue along the ridge of that vein. He tastes like rain smells, and smells like shea butter and some kind of spice.

The moan that comes out of him almost sounds pained. “Was that...okay?” I ask, worried that I’m doing this wrong. “I’ve never...” I trail off, because he knows I’ve never been with anyone else before—in any way. I’ve never had so much as an under the jungle gym peck, and we seem to be surging past all the bases. But I can’t stop now, unless he wants me to, of course...

“You’re perfect, everything’s perfect,” he whispers, reaching down to cup my face. When I meet his eyes, I can see it all. The emotion, the heat, the hunger. “I’m just so close...”

An odd sense of pride washes over me. The thought that I could bring such a man to make these sounds, to make his voice tremble like that.

Turning my attention back to Micah’s cock, I slowly wrap my fingers around the shaft. The slit at the top is weeping. I absentmindedly spread the wetness around the tip. *What does that taste like?*

My hand smooths over his shaft, more pre-cum dripping, lubricating the movements as I pump him the way I would myself. His head falls back against the couch, his breaths short and shaky. Without his eyes on me, I get brave enough to wrap

my lips around the top of his cock, swirling my tongue through the sticky pre-cum. It's slightly salty and almost metallic, with a sweet aftertaste.

His hips buck up from the couch, surprised, as I take him as far into my mouth as I can. Slowly, I raise and lower my head, taking him a little farther into my throat each time.

My eyes flick up to see him watching me, eyes hooded and intense. "Lukas, I...I'm going to come."

Those words are almost enough to make me come again, and I bob up and down on his cock as I decide what my next move will be. A big part of me wants to make him come with my mouth, to taste his release and swallow it down and make it part of me. But I want to watch his face, I want to see what he looks like when he shatters.

I watch him intently as I hollow my cheeks, sucking hard as I remove my mouth from his cock. I wrap my hand around the base of him, forming a tight fist around his thick length and pumping hard until Micah's body seizes.

The memory of how he looks in this moment will live with me forever. The glazed look in his eyes, mouth open as if in shock.

His body jerks, thick ropes of cum erupting from the end of his cock and making a mess all over his lap and my arm. I feel a little embarrassed that I didn't think to be ready for it; I was so wrapped up in watching his face that I didn't watch his cock as he came. We both look down at the mess for a moment before I remember my already dirty shirt, and I wipe the evidence away.

There's something about this small act of care that fills my heart with joy. As I crawl back up on the couch and pull him against my body, I feel content and like all is right with the world.

As long as we have each other.

Micah

“I’m headed to the gym,” I call out, grabbing my keys and escaping through the back door before anyone can question me.

I can hear my mother calling, shuffling down the hall to interrogate me once again about how much time I’ve been spending “God knows where”, but I pretend not to hear. Instead, I rush to my car and crank it up, all but peeling out to flee as quickly as possible.

I’m not going to the gym. Honestly, I haven’t been to the gym in weeks. I’ve spent most of my time at Lukas’ house, living out every one of my teenage hormonal fantasies. We’ve stroked and sucked each other dry, day after day, and I don’t think I’ll ever get enough. I can’t stop, and I don’t want to.

I have a surprise for Lukas today that I hope he’s going to like. I found campus housing that we can live in together. There’s still some planning I have to do on my part, getting switched from the dorms and moved in without my parents realizing who I’m moving in with, but I think I can manage it. It’s not going to be like it is here, with them constantly lurking around, looking over my shoulder, asking questions.

They’re definitely starting to suspect that I’m not being entirely honest about my whereabouts, but I’m 18 and headed to college next month. It’s not as if they can have a lot of say.

When I arrive at Lukas’ house, I pull around back. Their house—well, his house now—doesn’t have a garage, but he put up pavers around the side of the house so my car isn’t so obvious in the driveway. It makes me feel guilty that he has to help me cover my tracks, hiding from my parents and anyone else in town that might notice just how much time I’m spending over here, but it’s all we have right now. And I’d be lying if I didn’t admit that it’s kind of fun, sneaking around. I know what I’m doing is wrong in the eyes of my parents, but it also feels really right.

When I’m with Lukas, I feel like I belong.

The door is unlocked, as it usually is when he knows I'm coming over. I'm early, but I couldn't wait anymore. Ever since I got the call from campus housing an hour ago, I've been bouncing off the walls, ready to come over and surprise him.

"Honey, I'm home," I call out sarcastically.

It sounds like he might be in the shower. My nose leads me to the kitchen. Something smells delicious. A peak in the oven looks like meatloaf, and there are potatoes all prepared to boil. Assuming this is his mother's recipe, which he knows is one of my favorites, dinner is going to be amazing. It looks like it's just gone in the oven, so there's about an hour left.

I should run out and get him something special before he realizes that I'm here. My ears perk up when I hear him humming in the shower, though, and my curiosity finds me lurking in the hallway. The door is cracked, steam billowing out. The smell of his soap invades my senses and goes right to my crotch.

No longer self-conscious after weeks of our horny escapades, I open the door, stripping off my clothes as I make my way across the bathroom and step into the shower behind him.

He jumps in surprise, but seems happy enough to see me. I don't even bother to say hi, reaching for his dick and pulling him closer to me like it's a handle for me to jerk him around with. He doesn't seem to mind though, rolling his hips into my hand and pulling me against his chest.

So far, Lukas has been the one to take control. For someone so awkward and shy in everyday life, he's been rather domineering and I find it incredibly sexy. When he straightens himself up to his full height and looks at me intensely, asking me what I want—forcing me to use my words to tell him how to pleasure me. I shudder against his kiss just thinking about it. He's found his confidence in me, in my body. I love that I can give him that.

The way he makes me speak up for myself, refusing to allow me to be shy or self-conscious about my wants and

needs, has given me a new confidence, too. It's taken a different kind of power and strength to let myself go, to find security in the way he takes care of me.

We're perfect this way. Part of me wants to hide what we have from the world because I'm worried about their judgment, but there's also a part of me that just doesn't want to share. I want to drown in this bubble we've built around ourselves.

Right now, though, I want to drown myself in his cum splashing down my throat.

My lips and tongue trail down his wet body, all the way down his tight abs, across his hip bones. I kiss and nip a path all the way around him, finally sinking to my knees and taking him into my mouth. Lukas groans and leans back against the tile, his hands swiping the water from my eyes as I look up at him.

Gripping his hips, I pull him against me. His cock hits the back of my throat and I notice three things simultaneously. One, I would probably do anything to make Lukas make that sound again. Two, it hurt a little when his cock slammed into my throat and made my eyes water, but I didn't feel the need to gag. And three, I really, really, liked that.

Lukas is pulling back, but I follow him with my mouth. I try shaking my head, try telling him what I want without words, but that isn't what he wants and needs.

I release his cock with a pop, watching it bob in front of me like it knows how much I want it. Lukas pulls me up, and I allow it, but only so I can look him in the eyes and tell him what I need from him.

"Fuck my throat," I whisper against his lips.

His eyes widen, Adam's apple bobbing as he swallows harshly. Licking his neck, I give the enticing ball of his throat a light bite. There's something so damn sexy about his Adam's apple. I've been obsessed with it since the first time I saw him, even before we formally met, but now I can admit it to myself and to him.

“I could hurt you—” I groan against his neck, feeling the vibrations of his voice through my mouth.

Shaking my head, I repeat myself. “*Please* fuck my throat. I want you to. I’ll tap out if it’s too much, I promise.”

He knows how much I have to work myself up to ask for certain things. My embarrassment over wanting him to touch my asshole in our first days of experimenting with each other nearly made me run away, but we’ve moved past that now. He said he wants to please me, no strings or judgment attached. I remind him of that conversation in the way I look boldly into his eyes.

There’s a flicker of pride there, and I know he understands. I feel proud of myself too, actually. It feels like a moment of growth or maturity that I never realized I was lacking.

Keeping my eyes on his, I sink to my knees again. Nuzzling against his cock, I lick him from the base to the tip, savoring every inch of his length. Finally, I take him in my mouth and sink down, bobbing on his cock slowly, but with more pressure each time. When I’ve got the hang of having him as far back in my throat as he can go, I reach for his hand and put it on the back of my head.

I give him a hard look, speaking to him through my expression. Do it.

Lukas starts to move, tentatively at first, but gains confidence as I spur him on. He’s still quite gentle when he takes my head between his hands and guides me up and down his cock. It’s me that surges forward faster, showing him how hard I can take it, until his knees start to quake and he loses a bit of his control.

Snapping his hips, he drives himself deeper into my throat. Tears are pouring out of my eyes from the pressure, washing away with the spray of the shower. My own cock is throbbing, so I take it in my hand, pumping in time with Lukas’s thrusts until he stills, crying out my name as he holds me against him. A gush of thick, hot fluid fills my mouth and I swallow with him still buried deep in my throat.

“Fuuuck,” he groans. The sounds he makes drive me, and I pump my cock furiously.

“Wait,” he says, pulling me up. “I want to try something, too.”

Fair enough. I let go of my aching cock, pushing it against his hip as I kiss him. Can he taste himself on my tongue?

He kisses me deeply, and the thought of him chasing his own taste drives me wilder. He could do anything he wants to me in this moment. I desperately want him inside me. I am well and truly ready, and about to tell him, but he turns me around.

“Hands on the wall,” he instructs gently. *Oh fuck, this is it.* I’m ready, but I’d be lying if I said I’m not nervous. Will it hurt?

He must sense the tension in my body, because he chuckles low in his chest. “I’m not going to fuck you yet,” he says quietly. The dirty words take on a deliciously dangerous tone coming out of his mouth, and I want him more now than I did a second ago.

“I’m ready,” I say firmly.

“No, I’ve been reading up on this.” Of course he has. I almost roll my eyes, but then even his nerdy research brain comes out sounding so dirty that I almost come without being touched.

“I’m going to lick you here until you cum,” he says, running a finger down my crack. “But later, we’re going to see how many fingers you can take, stretching you and working you up to take my cock. It’s going to be slow and you’re going to cum again and again before you’re ready to take me.”

My breath hitches. *Jesus Fucking Christ, who is this man?*

His hands push my shoulders down so that I’m bending over more, sliding down my wet back as he sinks to his knees behind me. I feel like maybe I should be more nervous and embarrassed that this man is literally eye level with my asshole, but all I am is turned the fuck on.

I feel the heat of his mouth on the underside of my balls first, his hot tongue flicking over the flesh between my dick and ass. It sends a jolt of pleasure through me and I straighten my legs to chase the feeling.

“Don’t lock your knees,” Lukas mutters, tapping my legs, but not waiting for me to relax again before he continues, licking me from the root of my cock to the top of my ass. My knees tremble with the effort not to lock them. He hums his satisfaction.

Lukas’ hands wrap around the back of my calves, moving up the insides of my legs and around the back of my thighs. My muscles twitch, unable to anticipate what he’ll do next.

My breath seizes in my chest when his hands grip my cheeks, spreading them. So many thoughts assault me at once—What do I look like down there? Am I clean enough?

But then the ability to form conscious thought is wrenched from my body the second I feel Lukas’ tongue on my hole.

The way his tongue flicks against me is some kind of devil magic. I manage to hold myself together until he pushes it inside me, thrusting his tongue into the most intimate part of my body. My whole body tightens and I can’t even choke out how close I am. Lukas reaches between my legs to fist my cock just as I erupt with a strangled yell, pumping until the last drop of cum spurts from the tip.

When he releases me, I turn to rest my back on the tile, breathing heavily and trying to form coherent thoughts. The oven buzzer starts to ring out.

With a smirk, Lukas stares me in the eyes as he licks my cum from his fingers. “Oh good,” he says between licks, “dinner’s ready.” And then just casually leaves the shower like he didn’t just rock my world.

Lukas

“Yess,” Micah hisses out. “Please, Lukas. I’m ready, I’m ready.”

There’s not a bit of hesitation in his voice or in his eyes this time as he begs me for my cock. He’s been begging me for a week, but I’ve been patient, wanting his mind and his body to be one hundred percent ready.

I did a lot of research—and no, I’m not just talking about porn. I read blogs and articles, and joined anonymous forums to ask pointed questions about how things work and how to do things right. Micah has enough to worry about, enough to second guess, without the added stress of me desperately wanting to sink inside his perfect, round ass. I don’t want to hurt him, and I don’t want him to regret a single moment.

Everything has to be perfect.

I’ve been building up to this point, starting slow with my tongue, then a finger, then two... He started assuring me he was ready, but I could still see hesitance in his eyes.

There’s none right now, though. His glazed eyes are fixed on mine, determined and demanding. I swallow and his eyes track the movement.

Truth is, I’m nervous too. I want so badly to make it good for him. I’ve wanted this for a very long time, and I finally have him. Miraculously, he seems to share the insatiable need I have to fold us together and never let go.

“Lukas, please,” he repeats, and I nod. This is it. This is the time.

This is the moment that we’ll bind ourselves together in every sense of the word. It’s the moment that I’ll make him mine.

I move from his side to settle myself between his legs. He bends his knees on either side of me, his thick cock jumping in time with the beat of his heart.

We're already lubed up, he's been taking three of my fingers for the past twenty minutes, but I still put more lube on my fingers, pushing them inside his ass. Watching my fingers move in and out is hypnotic.

"I can't wait to watch my cock disappear into your ass," I say. Micah clenches around my fingers.

I pour more lube into my hand and rub it over my cock. Positioning myself over him, I rub my cock over his ass.

"Open your eyes," I say, lining myself up. "I want to see you."

He complies, his amber eyes locking on mine as I start to push. I watch his expression to make sure I'm not hurting him, but also to see *that*, right there. The moment I push through his tight ring, his eyes dilate and his breath catches.

Slowly, inch by painstaking inch, I bury myself home. When our hips are fused together and there's no space between us, I hover there as long as I can keep my composure. I take Micah's mouth in a deep kiss, stroking my tongue into his mouth when I start to roll my hips.

Every moment is an experiment and an exercise in control. The knowledge alone that I'm inside him right now is enough to make me lose it, but I'm determined to make this perfect. To make it last because this time—the first time—won't be something he's ever able to forget.

My fingers know how to find his prostate, but it's different being buried inside him. The tingles and overwhelming sensations wrapping around my cock make it hard to discern what I'm rubbing against. But I know the moment I hit it, because Micah clenches and cries out.

I roll my hips into him, pulling myself all the way out before driving back in.

"Are you okay?" I ask him, beads of sweat dripping off my forehead onto him.

"Fuck, yes. I can't...I'm going to come, Lukas."

My hips jerk at the words, drawing another cry from Micah. Sitting up a little straighter, I experiment with touching him while I'm driving in and out of his tight hole.

“Oh fuck, Lukas.”

With my hand pumping his thick, hard cock, my hips speed up. The rhythmic sounds of skin slapping against skin, moans, and heavy breathing fill the room.

“Baby, I'm going to come,” I tell him, and I can feel both our balls tighten.

“God, yes, Lukas. Come inside me. Come inside me.” He keeps repeating it like a mantra as he pants, until he's yelling out his release, erupting in my hand. The tight clenching of his ass around the base of my cock pulls my orgasm from my body.

Micah

Sweat pours over my eyes as I glance sideways, looking for a path around the player in front of me. I dribble, passing the ball between his knees and knocking it to an open teammate. They shoot, but it gets blocked and the ball is back in play.

I've been trying to make time to play pick-up games every other day or so to get my father off my back. He logged into the security system at the gym and found out I hadn't been going when I said I was. I brushed him off by saying I'd been working out at the community college rec center, where I've volunteered to teach kids how to play in the past.

Brian stands in front of me near the free throw line.

"Why is Anderson watching you like he's ready to eat you for dinner?" I startle for a moment, but quickly cover it up with a casual bravado. He's just trying to throw me off my game, so I throw him a curve ball.

"Because I'm fucking delicious, that's why."

Taking advantage of his surprise, I sidestep him, dribbling the ball closer to the hoop and dunking it just to be a showoff.

He's still looking at me in wide-eyed surprise, but I decide I don't care. It's not like Brian ever speaks to my dad, and we're leaving for Boston in two weeks.

Lukas doesn't say a word as he tosses me a towel and follows me out to the parking lot. "God damnit, I love watching you play," he says, eyes roaming over my sweaty body appreciatively.

"You'd think you'd be used to it by now." I laugh, but his words make me feel good, confident, sexy.

"I liked it before, but now I know what I was missing before, and I'm fucking obsessed." He stops me with a hand on my shoulder, bending his head down near my ear and lowering his voice. "Every move of your ripped muscles just reminds me what your ass feels like beneath my hands when I

suck your cock, or the way your back muscles look when I've got you bent over the couch."

Fuck.

Obsessed is a good word for it. I don't know how we both haven't dried up or rubbed sores into our dicks from using them so much. Even when my ass is sore, it feels good, and I can't imagine ever stopping.

"If you don't stop looking at me like that, we're not going to make it home," I chuckle. I'm serious. I want him. Now. I'll have to get him in the shower with me so I don't have to wait long.

"Don't tease me, or I'll pull this car over and take your ass in that alley over there."

I chuckle, low in my throat, and adjust my obvious reaction. The look he gives me is heated, dangerous almost. The car lurches as he jerks the steering wheel sideways, pulling into the alley behind the sports center.

"I'm all sweaty," I laugh. I'm aroused as hell, but I'm pretty sure I stink.

"I don't think you get it," he says, pulling his hard cock from his pants to show me how serious he is. That's honestly all I need to see to convince me to care less, but he keeps talking. "I like it. I want to lick the sweat directly from your ass. Nothing about you is unappealing to me, but sweaty Micah is honestly my favorite. I love the smell of you, the way you taste."

He parks and moves his seat back as far as it will go, his dirty words spurring to pull my basketball shorts and underwear down my legs.

He leans forward to take me in his mouth, but I need him. "Fuck me, Lukas. Now."

His eyes dilate and he starts to shimmy out of his pants as I climb over the center console and onto his lap. I reach down to pull the lever for the seat back, letting it fall back.

Lukas rips open a packet.

“You have lube?” I say, surprised.

“I figured it was best to always be prepared.”

“Fuck, I love you,” I say, and I mean it.

As I sink down on his cock, Lukas groans into my mouth. “I love you, Micah Williams.”

My hips rock, abs and thighs contracting as I raise myself up and down his shaft. My phone starts ringing.

Lukas curses.

“Ignore it,” I say as I fuck myself on his long cock.

The phone keeps ringing over and over, and I have a brief moment where I consider if there might be some kind of emergency, but it can wait.

Lukas lifts and snaps his hips into me as I drive myself down. The whole car is rocking, the windows fogged, moaning and the smacking of skin on skin drowning out the incessant ringing.

“Fuck, Micah!” Lukas calls out as he slams into me in jerky movements. I ride his orgasm, jerking myself as I rock my body on his spurting cock.

With strength that shouldn’t surprise me, Lukas lifts me off his softening cock and shoves his shoulders under my legs. With my ass pressing on the steering wheel and my neck craned awkwardly, I half sit, half stand over the passenger seat with one foot up on the center console. There’s cum dripping out of my ass and down my thigh.

Lukas takes me into his mouth and I thrust with wild abandon, trusting that he’d tap out if he can’t take it. He shoves three fingers in my dripping ass, shoving his cum back inside me and rubbing against that magic spot. In just a few thrusts I shout a warning before I come, hard, into his mouth.

I collapse back into the passenger seat, not bothering to worry about the mess leaking out of me and onto the leather.

“Fucking hell,” I say breathlessly.

It was quick, it was dirty, and it was fucking intense.

He smirks over at me as he pulls his pants back up, checking the rearview mirror. When I bend forward to grab my shorts off the floor, he grabs my chin and pulls me in for a deep kiss that makes my spent cock twitch.

“We better get moving before someone comes to investigate the noise,” he says, chuckling.

Oh shit, the horn. I was sitting on the horn. Anyone could have come and checked the noise. I laugh, feeling dangerously brave.

I have my shorts back up before he maneuvers out of the alleyway and back out onto the road. There are six missed calls with voicemail and eight angry texts from my parents. Opening the first voicemail, I listen to the message.

My father’s yelling is barely intelligible, but he’s more worked up than I’ve ever heard him. All I can make out is that something happened at work, I’m falling down on my responsibilities, and something about...about me being with Lukas...

“Fuck, Lukas. I need you to take me home. There’s something wrong. My dad’s on a rampage.” Normally I drive when I go to Lukas’, but he called me and told me he was down the street. He’d showed up with breakfast and good conversation, and I just got in the car with him, not thinking any better of it. *Not thinking.*

I haven’t been careful enough. I’ve done almost nothing to cover my tracks, and we’ve definitely been seen out together. We don’t touch or act “together” when we’re out, except once last week when we were one town over for dinner. We’d held hands, walking down the street like it was normal. It’d happened organically, without either of us deciding to reach out. I’d felt so fulfilled and happy in that moment.

What if someone saw us?

I think about my stupid comment to Brian on the court.

Lukas turns down the next road and starts heading toward my neighborhood. My phone is still pinging with notifications, still ringing, but I can’t manage to pick it up and hear his

voice. I need the three minutes it'll take to get there to think, plan, calm my nerves.

“Hey—” Lukas reaches over and takes my hand. I don't pull away. I just stare at the way our fingers entwine.

I really thought I could just spend the rest of my life wrapped around this man.

“Hey,” he says again as he pulls up outside my house. He normally parks one street over, but this is obviously an emergency. He doesn't try to pull me in for a kiss or hug, but he squeezes and runs this thumb over the top of my hand. “I love you, Micah Williams.”

My chest makes a sad scoffing sound, but my mouth can't form words. I'm too nervous about what I'm about to walk into.

“You are weeks away from moving out of here and into a new life. Whatever is wrong, whatever he's upset about... He can't make you do anything, and his opinion doesn't matter. Tell him the truth or tell him as many lies as you want. We're almost free.”

Heat prickles behind my eyes as I look into Lukas' deep blue stare. He means every word, I know he does. But he doesn't know my father. If there's any way he suspects...

“I'm going to park in our spot for a while in case you need a quick escape,” he says as I open the door and climb out.

“Nah,” I say with a false confidence. “I'm sure it's fine.”

“Sleep at my house tonight?” Lukas asks me hopefully.

I give him a smile that I hope reaches my eyes. “Yeah, I'll be there.” Actually, that might be perfect. Maybe what I need to do is march in there and just tell the truth. This is who and what I am, and you can take me or leave me. I'll pack a bag and stay with Lukas until it's time to move into our apartment. Our apartment.

A real smile touches my lips and I bend down, lean across the seat, and pull Lukas' face to mine. “I love you. I'll see you soon.”

Straightening my spine, I walk up the sidewalk to the front door.

They can't hurt me.

Lukas

Is everything okay?

It's been an hour since I've heard from Micah, I've already sent half a dozen more texts just like this one. I've been parked down the street the whole time. I know Micah can handle himself, but his father kind of scares me and I hate that he's in there dealing with his bullshit alone.

I try calling, but it goes straight to voicemail. I don't leave one, he knows why I'm calling. And I'm sure it's fine. I'll see him later tonight.

That gives me an idea.

There's still time before the bakery closes. I'll grab some treats and light some candles so he can vent and then relax. And then we can start making plans for the move. He's already helped me start packing some of the house, tons of boxes put in storage to get ready for the new renters, some put aside for our place. The furniture is staying, so it's an easy move.

Our place.

Yeah, focusing on the future is what we both need right now. It'll cheer him right up.

I pull away, driving by their house on the way out of the neighborhood because I can't help myself. His bedroom light flips on, and I watch his shadow move past the window. Seeing him, even just his outline, helps calm my nerves a bit.

Micah

My fingers push apart the blinds to peek out onto the street. I can see the spot where Lukas usually parks from here, but thankfully the car isn't there. I worried that he'd be sitting there waiting for me even though I said not to, and I'm glad he's not. I don't think I could handle seeing him at any distance right now.

The rest of the street is quiet. There's one pair of tail lights leaving the neighborhood, but otherwise everyone is inside for the night, spending time with their families. Maybe watching a movie together, or eating a late dinner.

Probably not getting screamed at and dressed down for an hour. Probably not getting pushed and told to grab their gloves so they can prove their manhood.

Apparently, my father got a call about me from Coach Lee at the rec center. Mostly good things, like my form is looking impressive, and he's glad to see me relaxing before I start school. That Anderson boy is a good egg. He wanted to congratulate me on my full ride basketball scholarship. He'd been in contact with the head coach and talked me up some. And he wanted to know where I was going to be living, since he'd been told I switched from the main residence hall near the athletic center, and he wants to send me a care package.

My father made a grave mistake at work after that phone call, he was so distressed to hear that I'd been lying to him, keeping things from him. Then tonight, when I didn't answer my phone, my mother called the rec center to see if I'd been there like I said I would be. I was, but I'd just left with Lukas Anderson.

After that, they got on the computer and pulled my phone records. My texts. The tracking software that comes pre-installed that none of us had ever had reason to use before.

All the proof they needed to see that their worst fears were true.

The first thing my father said to me when I walked in the house was to point at the car driving away and growl out, "Is

that him? Is that the fa—”

“Don’t.” I said. He can hate me if he wants to, but I wasn’t about to listen to him use hate speech towards the man that I love. Because I do love him. Maybe I always will. He can call me what he wants, although I doubt he’ll ever say it out loud, ever acknowledge that his son was with another man.

I stood my ground at first, which is honestly a feat for me. I’ve been raised to be respectful and obedient, and more than once in my life, I’d learned the consequences of not following through with those expectations. It’s hard for me to talk back, to speak up for myself. But I did, at first.

I even purposefully poked the bear, half hoping they’d send me away and disown me. I earned my full ride scholarship; they can’t take that away. I don’t need them to provide for me. I can get a job and I’ll be living with Lukas. We’ll take care of each other, support each other. They can love me as I am or watch me leave.

I learned just how much power and influence my father has tonight.

I learned that not only is he in close contact with the head coach at Cambridge, but he also has some connections at UMass. I learned that not only does he have the contacts necessary to take away everything I’ve worked so hard for, but that he could hurt Lukas’ prospects.

I don’t think my father would do anything to cause me to fail. He’s too concerned about our outward appearance of perfection. Too concerned about proving to the world that we deserve to be on top, that we’re better than everyone else. I called his bluff on that.

But he had me when he brought up Lukas. And just to prove that he knew people that could make things happen, he showed me a letter he’d printed from campus housing, not only confirming the cancellation for accommodations, but thanking him for bringing their attention to a potentially problematic resident.

I was mad when he showed me that. But then he showed me another letter, one that he had written but not yet sent, to the dean at UMass. I didn't need to read the accusations to know that he would follow through.

He might not hurt my prospects, but he would absolutely make sure that Lukas suffered.

I think my father could see the moment that the light went out in me, the moment that I succumbed to the realization that he'd won. After that, I kept my head down, nodding curtly and answering "yes, sir" to his list of demands as he spoke down to me from his tufted, high-back office chair, a king on his throne to be revered and feared and obeyed most of all.

I'll be leaving for Cambridge tomorrow. I am not to contact anyone, least of all Lukas, unless it is to make a phone call to break things off for good. I'm expected to maintain a perfect GPA and attendance level. I'll be signing up for no less than three extra classes to make sure that my course load is enough to keep my head in the right place.

To seal my fate, he spat, "go get your gloves," and walked to the basement.

When I was younger, teaching me to box had been his way of teaching me discipline. I never held back, because I wanted to prove to him how strong and quick I was. I wanted to make him proud. It's been years since I've boxed him, though.

Wrapping my hands, I know I'm not going to be able to fight back. He's old and weak compared to me, even if he thinks he's better. I have to put enough into it to make it believable, but for the most part this is a sanctioned opportunity for him to hit me. Which is fine. I think I need the pain to dull how much my head and heart hurt.

My mother stops me on my way downstairs. "You know we just want the best for you, son. Your father has been under a lot of pressure at work, and his nerves can't handle thinking that you might fail. He's put everything he has into shaping your future, but you have to understand that it's not just your future. This legacy that he has built, that we have painstakingly cultivated, is at risk of crumbling. It's your

responsibility to make sure that doesn't happen. We're counting on you."

She kisses me on the forehead before continuing her way upstairs.

I hope the punches hurt more than this.

Lukas

November

The Cambridge campus is bigger than I thought it'd be. I mean, I knew it wasn't small, but I didn't expect it to be so—confusing. Crowded. Chaotic.

It's the same reason why I decided not to go to UMass. It was my plan to still go, so I'd be close to Cambridge if Micah ever called, but at the new student orientation I realized that I didn't want to be there. There were too many people, it was too overwhelming, and there was no reward of having Micah to come home to at the end of the day. When he was with me, I could push myself to get outside my comfort zone. But what is the point now? The only comfort I have is my home, my routines, my solitude.

I transferred to Barnaby Falls Community College and pissed off my intended renters by breaking the rental agreement. I paid them a hefty sum and helped them find other accommodations because I felt bad, but they were still pissed.

I've spent months in a deep depression, wondering what I did wrong. I called, texted, emailed—but he changed all of his numbers or blocked me.

I showed up at his house after the first day of no contact. I needed to know he was okay. But he'd already gone. His mother informed me that he and Dr. Williams had left early that morning, that he'd decided to check in to his dorm room early.

“Don't try to contact him. Do you understand me?” She'd spoken down to me like she always had. Like I was a pest of some sort, a bug to squash.

I didn't answer, stepping back to walk away. Before I could turn, she reached out and grabbed my elbow. It was all I could do not to push her away.

“He's better off without you. He's on the fast track to a very successful life. He doesn't need the distraction.”

“I love him. Do you understand that? He’s happy with me, happier than he’s ever been. Why would you want to prevent that?”

“If you really love him, you’ll move on. He has bigger and better things to accomplish. And it’s not as if you had a future with my son. He might have had his...*dalliance* with you, but he’ll do what’s best for his family. A successful surgeon with a *wife* and kids to pass his legacy onto.”

“He can have that with me,” I said quietly, soaking in her meaning as she walked back to the door. “The world isn’t as backward as you think it is.”

“How nice that you live with such privilege to think so,” she said before slamming the door on me.

The next few days were spent desperately trying to reach Micah. Then I received a letter in the mail informing me that my scholarship was under review, with no explanation why. My orientation was a week later, and the chaos, paired with the headspace I’d been in, chased me right back home.

I’ve tried telling myself that if he wanted to reach out, he’d find a way. None of my information has changed, not my address or my phone number or my barely existent social media presence.

But after months of trying to convince myself, I just can’t force it anymore. I need to see him, to know he’s okay. I need to have a chance to say the things I need to say.

I find an empty bench outside the freshman dorms and pull out a notecard. What had started as a hastily scribbled note, an exercise to get it out and make myself feel better, became a fixation. I wrote and rewrote it, put it on a notecard so that I could practice saying what I needed to say. I don’t want to lose my nerve or forget anything important.

I practiced it the entire drive here. Now I’m spinning my wheels, imagining how I could approach him that would get him to listen.

In my best daydreams, he sees me and smiles, and simply walks up to me and hugs me. Then we apologize to each other

and live happily ever after.

I'm sure it won't be that easy.

Doors open on the buildings all around me, and I'm assuming that means classes are being dismissed. I stand up, hoping to catch him coming or going. I've been here for three cycles of students walking by, coming to or from classes.

Finally, I see him. Across the crowd, leaving the other side of the dorms where I think there must be a cafeteria, since people are holding to-go containers. He's wearing a uniform and carrying a gym bag, so he might be on his way to basketball practice.

If I called out, he'd hear me. He'd turn around and see me.

But I watch the way he is talking and laughing to the people around him. I see the way a pretty girl with dark brown hair in a high ponytail has her arms wrapped around one of his biceps.

And he looks...at home. Untroubled. Happy.

All the words I'd practiced on my way dissolve on my tongue. The notecard drops from my hands. I bend down to pick it up, but it gets trampled and torn by the crowd. When I look back up, he's gone. I pick up the pieces of my notecard, and my heart, that I can and drop them into a nearby trash can.

Micah

The last few months have been a blur. I'm on autopilot, walking through life and doing all the motions without really feeling or noticing. Whenever I start to feel or think too hard, I force myself to study more or work out.

I've made a few friends, mostly people that my father introduced me to when he brought me up. He stayed for a couple days and introduced me to some new Country Club approved friends, including the dean's daughter.

She's nice enough, pretty enough. She's just not...

Him.

No matter how much I fill my time and my brain, I can't get rid of the memories and the feelings. The way he made me feel supported and proud, and loved. The way he touched me...

Every day, I wonder about the consequences of going against my father. Or what would happen if I just sent Lukas a letter, so I could explain myself? At the time, I thought avoiding confrontation was best; I was worried that seeing him or hearing his voice would lessen my resolve to do the right thing.

And now it's been months and I see how much of a mess I made with my cowardice. He must be pissed that I just ran off without so much as a warning. And it's cowardice that keeps me from calling now. Because what could I say that could excuse it?

I tried finding him at UMass, but he wasn't in the student directory. Which I took to mean that he was so mad he didn't want to be in the same city as me.

In some ways, it's easier, because I don't have to force myself to stay away from him. I just remind myself that he probably hates me, and go on with my life. Go on living in a blur of classes, studying, basketball, classes, studying, boxing, more studying. The harder the classes, the more tutoring I sign

up for, the less I have to think. And the more I hit and get hit, the more I sweat, the faster I run, the less I have to feel.

And it's working. Mostly.

Awareness pricks at my back, and I turn around. For a moment I think I see him, but in a flash he's gone. He's so tall that there's no way I'd miss him. But still, just that flash of familiarity has me shaking off the manicured grip of the dean's daughter and dropping my gym bag.

Lukas?

At first, I take just a few tentative steps, but then I'm rushing across the lawn to get to the other side. The crowd of students coming in and out of the cafeteria is chaotic. I think I see the back of his head, his blonde hair and the profile of his black-rimmed glasses, but I push through the crowd and he's not there.

The crowd passes me as I stand there, blinking, disoriented. I need to do something to get more sleep. Maybe I *should* talk to the school clinic. I'm seeing things now.

"Micah! What the hell?" Hailey is making her way up the sidewalk, my gym bag over her shoulder. "Are you okay? You dropped this and just ran off."

"Yeah, sorry, I just...thought I saw someone I know."

"You look upset," she says, and tries to wrap her arms around me but I don't attempt to hug her back.

"Nah, just tired. I'll see you later, though. I'm going to be late to practice." I start to walk away without looking her in the eye.

When I get to practice, I have to run extra laps for being late. Which is fine. I need to clear my head. I'm changing my shoes, and there's a piece of cardstock or something stuck to the bottom.

It's a ripped note for someone, and once again I think about visiting the school clinic to get help with my insomnia.

Because the handwriting is familiar.

No matter what, I'll love you until—

Lukas

Almost Two Years Later

Book in hand, and my portable hammock slung over my shoulder, I trudge my familiar path through the park. I don't know why I still come here, but the clearing where Micah and I first kissed is the only place I feel comfort. I walk this path nearly every day when the weather is nice, and often enough when it isn't.

It's probably pathetic, but it's not like he'll ever know.

Micah hasn't contacted me in two years. It's been almost that long since I saw him on campus, living his life like nothing ever happened. Sometimes I'm angry about it, and I've spent a fair amount of time trying to figure out what I did wrong. But mostly I've come to terms with it, and at the very least I have the memories.

Better to have loved and lost, and all that jazz.

I've both changed in the last two years and haven't. I try to stay busy, but I tend to close myself off from other people.

My parents left me a surprising amount of money in their will. I haven't touched most of it, but I used it for my first classes at the community college since I couldn't transfer my scholarships, but that all got figured out by my second semester. I take a heavy course load to keep busy and get ahead, and I have a teaching position in the liberal arts department.

I spend all of my time at school, either in classes or working, and I've started doing projects to renovate my parent's house. And when I have a free hour or two between classes, I come here to read or take a nap. To remember.

The path to the clearing is a little overgrown, but I never point it out in case they figure out what magic spot they're missing out on. I'm selfish like that, I suppose.

I stop short when I step into the clearing.

My heart forgets to beat as I look over and see Micah sitting on the low-hanging branch, the very same one that we sat on two years ago. He looks the same and somehow different. He's obviously been working out—a lot. His biceps and calves are more defined than ever. His broad chest and arms are bunched with tension, the muscles straining as sweat makes his shirt cling to his body.

Exactly the way I always liked him best.

He's holding his head in his hands, and I can see the pain coming off of him in waves. My heart drops and I want to reach out to him, to hold him, to support him.

Instead, I swallow down the rejection of the past two years. Schooling my features to conceal my conflicting emotions, I just greet him.

“Well, I didn't expect to find you here.”

Books In This Series

Progeny

The Progeny Duet is the story of a woman who wakes up in a hospital, surrounded by five strangers. She knows she's been running from something, and there are clear signs that she's been through trauma, but other than that she can't remember a thing about herself, even her name.

The five strangers all feel an unexplainable pull toward her. When someone comes looking for their Jane Doe, it becomes apparent that she is in danger. So they take it upon themselves to hide her away while trying to pick up the pieces of her past. Along the way, they discover that they are all connected in a dangerous web of conspiracy. When one of their new family is taken, they have to figure out how to save them while taking down a powerful and dangerous man.

[Progeny](#)

I don't know who I am or what happened to me.

I know that I've been running, but from what I don't know. And I know that the five men surrounding my hospital bed are important, possibly even precious to me, but they all swear they haven't met me before.

They say they feel it too, this familiarity, this connection.

So when danger comes looking, these five strangers take it upon themselves to hide me away while we put together the pieces of my past. What we find instead is darker. A twisted conspiracy that ties all six of us together in an unexpected and terrifying web of danger.

Progeny is a multi-POV contemporary reverse harem romance (MMFMMM). Please read the author's notes at the beginning of the book for any potential content warnings.

Retribution

I came to warn them, but instead I put them in the line of fire.

Now one piece of my heart is missing, while the other pieces are forced to leave behind everything they've ever known to protect me.

The truth about who I am and where I came from weighs on me. Is anything real?

All I know for sure is that the people responsible for bringing me into the world are the very ones putting the only family I have ever known in danger. But I will stop at nothing to keep them safe. I will use everything they gave me against them and risk everything to take them down.

Little do they know, a reckoning is coming.

Retribution is the follow up novel to Progeny. The action and the spice in this sci-fi/ contemporary MMMFMM novel are turned up as Six and her men face the unknown.

Books By This Author

F*ck The Patriarcy: Getting Smutty For A Cause

11 smutty stories from 11 different authors- there's something for everyone!

100% of proceeds go to NARAL Pro-Choice America

Included in this anthology is IGNITE, a Progeny world novella that tells the full story from the perspective of fan favorite side character Tony. This version of the events of the main story does contain spoilers, so you may want to read Progeny and Retribution first!

This anthology is only available for a limited time! Grab your copy before it's gone on February 8th, 2023!

Books By This Author

Revelations

Diya Steele, born of violence and condemned to the prejudice of heaven and hell alike, wanders the earth consumed by fear. Fear of the realms determined to kill her, and fear she will hurt innocents if she ever loses control.

The Dzhavo, a fearsome team of elite demons, are ordered to capture Diya and bring her in to face the Legion. Instead, they keep her for themselves, determined to get answers from her by any means necessary. Fighting through their lust with brutality, they discover nothing is as it seems.

With Earth caught in the crosshairs of a war between realms, Diya and the Dzhavo must find a way to work together to save the world.

How far will Diya go to save the worlds that branded her as an abomination? Will the Dzhavo be able to overcome the lies they've been told and trust the one person that might save them all?

Is a relationship built on fear and desire strong enough to keep them fighting for each other, or will their prejudices keep them from stopping the evil that threatens the world as they know it?

Revelations is a DARK paranormal MMMFM romance where five main characters, including monsters and demons, find love together. The path from enemies to lovers is a torturous one, and the story contains sensitive content. Please visit the author's bio to find a link to necessary content guidance.