

THE

HAPPINESS IS JUST A TO-DO LIST AWAY

HAPPY

LIST



FROM THE AUTHOR OF PROJECT HERO

BRIAR PRESCOTT

THE HAPPY LIST

BRIAR PRESCOTT

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Gray

There are some things I excel at:

- Exercising rigid control over every aspect of my life
- Making sensible decisions at every turn
- Being organized, predictable and responsible to an abnormal degree

In short, I'm boring as hell and in desperate need of a change.

Luckily I have my best friend by my side and a newly written to-do list to guide my way through the murky waters of finding happiness.

It's all very promising at first, but as weeks pass, I start to realize that the best part of my day has always been Kai.

And when I see him out on a date with some guy?

Let's just say I'm definitely not happy about it.

Kai

I'm back in Boston after ten years of traveling, and I've fulfilled all my goals:

- See the world

- Figure out what to do with my life
- Get over my impossible crush on Gray

Check, check and check.

Life's good until I accidentally find Gray's happy list, which contains some very interesting things that friends never ever do with each other.

And as weeks pass, it becomes clear those not-so-innocent parts are the ones Gray is determined to explore with me.

In short, I'm screwed because no matter how hard I try, I can't resist him, and pretty soon it becomes clear that I'm not as done with my crush as I thought I was...

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*This book is out in the world largely thanks to Layla. She read the first drafts and was rooting for Kai and Gray from the start, urging me to write with her enthusiasm for *The Happy List*.*

Without Layla, Gray and Kai would still be stuck half on my hard drive and half in my head, so I don't think I can adequately express how thankful I am for Layla's friendship. Layla, this one's for you because you tolerated all my whining and pessimism these last few months.

(Seriously, though, how haven't you dumped me yet?)

GRAY

People can be extremely inventive. Take, for example, an anechoic chamber. It's a room that absorbs all sound inside it and lets no sound in from the outside. Complete and total silence. Silence so all-encompassing that after a bit, you'll start hearing your own heartbeat and the blood flowing in your veins. Your stomach rumbling and the hissing of your lungs when you breathe.

It's not an especially comfortable feeling. Spend enough time in a chamber like that and the ringing in your ears becomes deafening. If you move, your bones seem to make too much noise. Eventually you'll lose your balance because the quiet fucks with your spatial awareness.

I can relate. Boy, can I relate.

The room around me is so silent that I could hear a pin drop. I swear I can hear the vein in my brother's forehead pulse. I can't see him, but *I can hear it*.

I can even hear his thoughts. *Please don't let Grayson do something embarrassing.*

Sounds about right. Or I imagine that's what's going through his head. It's not that I have a lot of experience. This is the first time in my twenty-eight years I've broken the unwritten rules of decorum my brother follows religiously, so

it's no wonder the guy looks shocked. To be fair, I don't think it's the breakup that bothers Con so much as the unexpected social situation it creates that he doesn't have a clue how to navigate.

I turn my attention back to the brewing storm that is my girlfriend. Well, an ex-girlfriend, I suppose. If nothing else, the public humiliation has just sealed the deal for good.

“What?” Cecilia says slowly, breaking the weird as fuck anechoic chamber effect. I look down at the stony face of the person who, in the very near future, is going to dig her key in the side of my car and scratch a dick on it.

The country singers that threaten to destroy a cheating boyfriend's property, cut off the sleeves of his suit, and pour marinara into his laptop case are Cecilia's guilty pleasure, so I hope one day she can remember me fondly as the man who gave her the chance to live out the fantasy of bashing somebody's headlights in with a baseball bat.

In the grand scheme of things, saying no to a very public marriage proposal might be relatively close to cheating in the list of unforgivable relationship sins, so I'm basing my thought process on the assumption that the punishment is about the same in both cases.

“Cee...” I say, but I follow it up with nothing. I don't know how to fix this situation. It's not that I want to hurt her or break her heart.

But I don't want to get married either.

She lets go of my hands, and her jaw twitches as she looks to the side at the family that has gathered around us.

In hindsight, I should have known something was going on. Who the hell throws a leap year party? Twenty-ninth of

February might not happen every year, but it's hardly a cause to gather up family on both our sides and rent a whole restaurant for the occasion. Now that I think about it, the fact that it's *Marmolada*, the place where Cee and I had had our first date, should have tipped me off sooner.

Technically speaking, it's my birthday, too. But I don't like birthdays. I've never celebrated them, so all in all, a surprise engagement party, disguised as a surprise birthday party, disguised as a leap year party is not the greatest idea. I don't mention it, though. I think I've done enough damage for one night without throwing shade at Cee's party planning skills.

"What do you mean by no?" Cecilia whispers as she glances toward the crowd of parents, siblings, aunts, uncles, grandparents, nieces, and nephews that surround us. She's furious. The twitching nostril is a dead giveaway.

"Can we maybe talk about it somewhere else?" I ask quietly, turning my back to my brother and Cee's parents, who already have similar expressions of disappointment on their faces.

"I asked you to marry me," Cee says unnecessarily. By this point, the chef is peeking out of the kitchen to witness the whole train wreck of a proposal in person, so she really doesn't need to clarify what's happening.

"But why?" It's clearly the wrong thing to say because I'm almost certain smoke will start coming out of her ears any moment now.

"It's leap day. Women can propose."

She glares at me and raises her chin like the whole problem with the proposal is the fact that I'm too much of a

macho douchebag to put up with the fact that she's the one doing the asking.

"Cee." My voice is so low that I'm practically whispering.

Her hands move to her hips.

"We've been together for two years, Grayson!" she snaps.

I guess having this conversation in private is out of the question. I glance to the side. Everybody is staring at us. Everybody has identical scandalized expressions on their faces. Everybody, except for my grandmother, that is. She observes the whole thing with a sardonically raised eyebrow. She's also the only marginally friendly face in the crowd.

There are a lot of people here. Cecilia has a large extended family and a hell of a lot of friends. If this debacle of a proposal here doesn't end up as a YouTube clip, I'll be very surprised.

Cee's father takes a step forward.

"Maybe you two should go and talk in private," he suggests.

"Yes!" I say too loudly, inviting even more stares. We Quinns are not known for our social skills. Case in point, Con looks like he'd find it infinitely more preferable if the floor would swallow him whole, and he's not even the one who's getting the full attention of every living soul in this place.

"If you'll excuse us," I add in a more subdued tone as I grab Cecilia's hand and pull her toward the small hallway that leads to the bathrooms. We're followed by murmurs and whispers the whole way there.

"Jesus Christ, Grayson." Cee pulls her arm free from my hold once we're hidden from the view of our families. She

crosses her arms on her chest and starts tapping her high-heeled shoe on the marble floor. “What is the matter with you? You embarrassed me in front of everybody we know!”

“I’m sorry.” I rub the back of my neck. “I’m just... Marriage, Cee? I thought we agreed that it’s not something we’re pursuing.”

The sentiment falls on deaf ears as Cee steps closer and places her palm on my forearm.

“It’s normal to feel nervous about big life changes.” Her tone is placating. Sweet, even. It’s the tone of a mother calming her child down before a meltdown.

“We’ll just have a longer engagement to give you time to get used to the idea.” She smiles as if everything has been decided with that one sentence, and then she’s turning around on her heel, ready to get back out there to receive all the congratulations and wave off the little blip that was my initial refusal to say yes. I’m already hearing jokes about cold feet in my head.

I shake my head, stopping her. “I don’t want to get married.”

It’s a fucking surreal feeling to have a very sudden and clear realization like that. It feels as if a wall has tumbled down. The idea of marriage has been hovering somewhere in my mind, but I’ve always postponed thinking about it because that was clearly the job for future Gray.

Cee blinks rapidly before she puts one hand on her hip and waves the other one impatiently in the air. It’s like I’m a toddler that refuses to cooperate.

“Then what, Gray? What’s the plan? We’ll just go on like we used to, not moving toward anything? What about when

we have kids?”

“I don’t want kids.”

The conviction in my voice surprises even me. The bombs of truth are exploding between us with deafening clatter.

I don’t want to get married.

I don’t want to have kids.

I don’t want the life Cecilia has clearly planned for us.

I don’t want the white picket fence and the house in the suburbs. I don’t want couples’ nights with our neighbors that would inevitably follow. I don’t want the two point five kids and a golden retriever puppy. I don’t want a goddamn minivan. I don’t want any of it.

“I don’t understand,” Cee says, looking genuinely confused. “It’s what people do.”

“I’m sorry.” I’m unable to think of anything better to say. I don’t think there’s any way to lessen the blow. That’s what I get for lying to myself and by extension, everybody else.

I am an asshole. A coward. Vermin at the bottom of a thick layer of mud. I should have been honest. I should have told the truth. I should have *realized* the truth sooner. I should have never started a relationship with Cecilia.

It seems we’re on the same page because she raises both her hands in the air.

“Well, then what’s the point of even being together if we’re on two completely different paths?”

And for the first time this evening, I truly, one hundred percent agree with her.

What’s the point, indeed?

Silence stretches between us, endless and uncomfortable. What do you do in a situation like that? Apologize? *Sorry I don't want to marry you* seems a bit callous.

“Aren't you going to say anything?” Cecilia demands, so I juggle with different options and naturally come up with the wrong one. It's a special gift that I have.

“Do you want me to pay for the evening's expenses?”

She stares at me without blinking for a few moments before she grits out, “Oh my God, Gray. How is it possible to be so obtuse?”

She whirls around and stalks out of the hallway, but before she's about to cross to the floor of the restaurant, she turns around and says, “Can you just leave, please?”

I hear the click-clack of her heels as she walks away from me.

I struggle for a moment about what to do, but then my grandmother peeks into the hallway. She makes her way toward me in a measured pace, hands clasped behind her back, amusement written all over her face.

“You know, I don't usually condone hit-and-run cases, but this time, I think it just might be warranted,” she says.

“You sure about that?” I glance toward the restaurant once more. The hope in my voice is unmistakable. I stuff my hands into the pockets of my dress slacks.

“Go on. I suspect no one in there will miss you.”

The statement sounds true enough, but the glint in my grandmother's eyes is more than a little unsettling. She's up to something. That's usually not good. Then again, finding out what it is would require staying put, so the hell with it.

Curiosity killed the cat, and I suspect if I stayed here for a minute longer, a similar fate might await me, too.

There's a problem, though. I need to walk through the restaurant to get to the front door.

Unless... I hide here until everybody's gone? It shouldn't take long. I'm relatively certain the party is off. My brother sure as hell didn't look like he was in the mood to celebrate neither leap day nor my birthday when I last saw him, so there's a decent chance the place will clear out in no time.

"Cecilia and her girlfriends are going to drink and figure out how to create a voodoo doll of you," Gran says, dashing all my hopes of a speedy escape.

"I guess I better make myself comfortable since it looks like I'm going to stay here for a while," I mutter and squeeze my eyes shut for a moment.

There's an impending headache at the back of my skull, and I can already tell this one is going to be a whopper.

"Don't be silly, dear."

I raise my brow at Gran, daring her to come up with a better solution.

"The men's room has a window." She gives me an evil smirk and tilts her head toward the bathroom door.

"Really? That's your solution?" I ask, even though I'm already considering it.

"I once left a man at the altar, you know," Gran muses as she locks her shrewd gaze on me.

Okay. That's more like it. I can definitely get behind the hey-I've-been-an-asshole-too-in-my-day-and-everything-turned-out-just-fine approach.

“And he forgave you and realized that in the end, it was for the best?” I ask.

Gran rolls her eyes. “Oh Jesus, no, boy. He called me the one that got away on his death bed. What I meant to imply was that if I can get through the bathroom window in a wedding gown, surely you can manage in pants.”

She steps closer, pats my arm, and winks at me before she walks out of there. I follow her retreating form until she disappears back into the restaurant before I sigh and push the door to the men’s room open. Better to get this over with so I can get the hell out of here.

Getting out of the window is surprisingly easy. I’m outside in no time at all.

What I don’t expect is to end up standing next to a bunch of trashcans in a gated little corner. I stare at the padlock before I shake my head and snort. Locked in with the trash. Seems befitting.

I jiggle the gate, but it’s to no avail.

This night is just out here to fuck with me now.

I shrug off my suit jacket and roll up my sleeves to start climbing over the fence when I hear an amused voice.

“Need some help there?”

KAI

Gray whirls toward me, and for a moment he looks at me like he's seeing a hallucination. But then, a smile starts to creep on his face. It's hesitant at first, like he's still not sure it's really me he's seeing, but as I step closer, it widens until it takes up his whole face.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he asks.

He looks elated to see me, so I smile back like a loon. Fuck, it's good to see him.

“There was this tingly feeling in my brain that said you needed rescuing, so here I am.” I lift a bunch of keys and swing them back and forth on my finger.

Gray shakes his head, affection written all over his face. “I'm so glad to see you that I don't even care if you stole them or not.”

I scoff. “Please. I don't steal. I borrow.”

“Since you haven't yet returned them and have acquired them without asking anybody for permission”—he looks at me as if to check the validity of his claim, so I nod my head to confirm that, indeed, I have *not* technically asked to borrow the keys—“it right now counts as stealing.”

“Ooh, lawyer talk,” I say. “That gets me so hot.”

He rolls his eyes at me as I grab the padlock. I have no idea which one of the keys works on this one, so I'm just going to have to guess and try.

"You're awfully judgy for a person who'd have to spend the next however many hours sharing his personal space with a dumpster without me," I say.

"I'm not judging. I'm preparing to argue your case."

"See, that's why you should always befriend lawyers. Free legal services for life." I stop in the middle of fitting in the next key and raise my brow at him. "Although, you do realize that as my best friend you're supposed to argue *for* me and not against me. So... just to clarify, you're on my side by doing the prosecutor's work for them?" I ask.

"It helps me prepare for all those rebuttals I'm going to have to make. Although, I have to do some reading. Criminal law is not my forte."

"I guess I'll just rot in jail until you do, then," I say with a shrug. "You know, like true friends who steal stuff for each other and always have each other's backs do."

The second key doesn't work either.

"After the pumpkin pie incident, you should be well aware I always have your back," Gray says. I smile at the memory and the teasing note in his tone.

"At least we have scientific confirmation model rockets *can* fly through the window and land in a pie. Knowledge is power, Grayson. You should be thanking me for acquiring that particular insight."

"Yes," he says dryly. "I was very thankful for the punishment that followed. I especially enjoyed the no-

Christmas-presents-for-you-young-man part of it. Con did an excellent job with the delivery of that line.”

I raise my finger in the air. “Okay, number one. Nobody asked you to take the full blame. And number two. You did get a present. *I* gave you a PlayStation.”

“You gave me your old PlayStation because you got a new one for Christmas.”

“I don’t remember you being that critical when you unwrapped my very thoughtful gift.”

“Duuude,” he drags out. “You used the box of your new PlayStation, so I was led to believe I’d received a new one.”

I wave him off. “It’s not like I ever played without you, so in the end, does it really matter? It’s the thought that counts, you ungrateful ass.”

Fifth one’s the charm, and the lock clicks open. I pull the gate open and Gray steps out, but instead of running toward freedom, he stops in front of me, and before I can prepare myself, he pulls me into a bear hug. I melt against him.

Finally. Home.

“I’m so fucking glad you’re here,” Gray says.

“Me too.” It’s strange to say the words and actually mean them. Boston and I have a love/hate relationship. My best memories are from this city. Every single one of them includes Gray, of course. But it’s also the place that holds my most painful memories. It’s the place where I lost my parents.

I push those thoughts aside. More than a decade has passed, and while you never really get over a loss like that, I’ve learned to live with it.

“So you climbed out of a bathroom window, huh?” I force my attention back to the present. “Classy.”

I waggle my brows at Gray as he laughs and pushes at my shoulder.

“Come on. My car is parked on the next street.” I motion with my head to the general direction of where I left my car and start walking.

“You’re like my very own knight in shining armor.” Gray falls into step beside me.

I glance at him, and he grins back.

“I am very noble,” I agree before I yell out, “On to my iron steed,” and start jogging to where I parked my Hyundai, my laughing best friend following me.

We arrive to my car in minutes. It’s another shitty vehicle in a line of many. This one’s been with me for a while now, and I’ve gotten a bit attached. Sure, the windows don’t roll down properly most of the time, and there’s a whole ritual that’s required to unlock the car even on a good day.

The Hyundai is also a bit temperamental, so I would bet that should I happen to get stranded in a snowstorm, that would be the moment the windows would refuse to roll up.

But I swear to everything that is holy, good things happen when I’m in this car. I’ve taken it on several cross-country trips, and not once has the car broken down on me in the middle of nowhere. It always considerately waits until I’m near an auto repair shop before it dies.

It’s the car I drove to Denver where I got my life-changing apprenticeship three years ago with a crotchety woodworker, Al. He was the grumpiest person I’ve ever met, but for some

reason, he took a liking to me which resulted in him giving me an unpaid internship in his woodwork shop.

I got my first commission from somebody other than my sister while driving this car, and a couple of more followed shortly after, which means that I have a small but loyal client list.

The plan to finally come back home was formed mostly while driving this thing.

Basically, the Hyundai is a good-luck charm, and nobody can convince me otherwise.

Gray eyes the car and shakes his head. “You do know they sell cars that have been produced in this century?”

I shake my head. “So snobby. You should be bowing at my feet for providing the escape vehicle.”

“Does that mean we get to ditch it when we’re done using it?”

He eyes me with a badly concealed expression of mirth as I perform my usual routine of turning the key in the lock until the car is finally willing to cooperate with me. Luckily, I don’t have to resort to climbing in through the trunk. It wouldn’t have been the first time, but somehow I’d like other people, even if the only other person around is my closest friend on earth, not to witness that particular humiliation.

Gray has to pull the door shut twice before the door stays closed. “Any chance this thing will fall to pieces under us mid-ride?”

“Shh,” I say as I pat the wheel. “He’ll hear you.”

“He?” Gray arches his brow. “Aren’t vehicles usually a she?”

“*He* seemed more appropriate when considering how much time I spend inside him.”

Gray leans back in his seat and chuckles. “Of course.”

I turn the key, but it’s as if the car has sensed my earlier praise, and absolutely nothing happens. I try again and again, but after the sixth failed attempt to start the car, I think it’s safe to say that we’re not going anywhere anytime soon.

I sigh and let my head drop against the headrest. “Hyundai, you fucking tease.”

“Man, I’m sure glad I didn’t hire you as a getaway driver for when I’m ready to follow through with those bank robbery plans I’ve been perfecting. This was your audition, by the way,” Gray says. “You failed.”

I raise my index finger in the air. “Careful, your lack of creativity is showing. I would have rocked that bank robbery. Think about it. What’s more inconspicuous than two regular guys having some regular car trouble? Huh? The answer to that is nothing. Nothing is more inconspicuous, which means the cops would drive off on their merry way to chase the robbers, and we could be off to buy our very own tropical, private island. Your lack of belief in me also means I’ll get the title of the king of the island, by the way. You can be my humble servant. Your first task will be to build me a throne and call me master.”

“Yeah, like I would buy an island,” Gray scoffs.

“Oh, then what’s your plan for all those diamonds and bars of gold we’re going to steal?”

He rolls his eyes. “I thought we were robbing a bank, not becoming old-timey pirates.” A sparkle of mischief dances in his whiskey-brown eyes. “And the obvious answer to your

inquiry is that I'd invest it responsibly in low-risk stocks, of course."

I shake my head. "I can't even express how much I hate everything you just said. In fact, it might be my new least favorite sentence, and I've heard *I don't like blow jobs* uttered to me while I was going down on a guy."

Gray roars with laughter as I send him a sour look.

"I was seventeen," I say loudly, doing my best to speak over the laughter. "I hadn't perfected the vetting process yet, so I made some questionable decisions. That has happened to all of us. Don't even try and tell me every single one of your sexual encounters has been a raging success. Especially in the beginning."

Gray shakes his head with a wide smile. "That's a lot of words for *I'm shitty at blowjobs*."

I push his shoulder with my hand, but that only makes him laugh again.

"God damnit, I've missed you so much," he says with a shake of his head once he's calmed down a bit.

I look down at my hands for a second, ignoring the tiny jump my heart does at those words. Stupid leftover crumbs of a once-upon-a-time feeling.

"Likewise," I say, directing my mind back to the practical decisions that need to be made. "We should probably call AAA."

"You know, for all the shitty cars you've had over the years, it's pretty remarkable that you've acquired zero knowledge on how to repair them."

“I’m just doing my part for the economy,” I say absently. Where the hell did I put my phone? The damn thing always seems to hide itself from me.

“How do you figure?”

“Well, Grayson. I’m providing work for the mechanics. Could I learn to tinker with cars myself? Sure. But that would take away jobs from hardworking Americans. Why do you hate your country and the good people who are trying to make a living here?”

“Sure. If you put it like that,” he says just as I find my phone.

“Aha!”

I dial and wait. The reply on the other end of the line is not comforting.

“They’ll be at least an hour,” I say as I put the phone away. “Something about Saturday night rush and lots of calls.”

Gray shrugs. “I’m not in a hurry.” He perks up. “You know what we should do? Get takeout and have a car picnic. Like the old days.”

I shrug. “I could go for a burger.”

In reality, I’m not that hungry, but a car picnic with Gray? Sign me up. We used to have them all the time back when we first got our licenses. We’d grab the cheapest food we could find—we were teenagers and constantly out of money, after all—and drive out of the city, exploring. Obviously driving and exploring are out of the question right now, but it’s not like the appeal of the car picnic was ever seeing new places. Spending time with Gray was what mattered.

We get out of the car. I don't bother locking it since it'd just be unnecessarily time-consuming to later try and unlock the fickle asshole. Plus, the car doesn't start, so if somebody comes here while we're away and is first able to start the Hyundai and then drive away with it, I'm gonna just say that they have my blessing to steal my car because they've earned it. Owning the Hyundai might just be a fitting punishment for theft.

It takes us no time to find a little hole-in-the-wall burger place, although we make sure to walk in the other direction of the restaurant Gray just escaped. We take our food to go and make our way back. Lo and behold, nobody has deemed the Hyundai worth stealing, and there's no tow truck in sight, so we push the front seats back as far as they'll go and make ourselves comfortable.

It still feels like the old days, even though one of us is a successful lawyer, and I'm... I'm still me, I guess. No huge changes to report. No real accomplishments either, to be honest.

At least not yet. I finally have a plan to do something with my life, so I guess I've got that going for me. But just looking at Gray, it's becoming painfully obvious that one of us has done some serious growing up in the last decade.

Which makes this evening all the more confusing. For all intents and purposes, marriage definitely seems like the next logical step for Gray.

“So what happened back there?” I steal one of Gray's fries. Nabbing Gray's food is also a part of the tradition.

He sighs. “How much did you see? Wait. You never told me how you ended up here tonight.”

“Cecilia invited me.”

Gray winces.

“Oh good,” he mutters. “Of course she would do this incredibly considerate thing and invite my best friend because she knows how much you mean to me. I’m even more of an asshole than I initially thought.”

I shake my head. “You’re not an asshole. You don’t want to marry her. That doesn’t make you a bad person. It is what it is.”

“I don’t think anybody in there will see it in the same light. And it’s not that I don’t want to marry Cee specifically. It’s that I don’t want to get married at all.”

“Maybe you can explain it to Cee?” I suggest.

Gray rubs his palms over his face. “I mean, maybe, but... It’s just that I should be able to imagine myself with her when we’re eighty.”

He stares out the window for a long time before he adds, “I can’t.”

I debate what to say and come up with nothing helpful. “How long have you felt this way?”

He shrugs. “A while, I guess. I haven’t really admitted it to myself until now.”

“Well... at least now we know timing isn’t your forte,” I say.

Gray snorts and then groans as he thumps the back of his head against the headrest. He turns his head to the side and looks at me.

“Was it bad?”

“Oh, it was... something.”

“Sooo... terrible?”

“Let’s just say my secondhand embarrassment quota is filled for quite some time.”

He snorts and shakes his head.

“Do you think I made a mistake?” he asks, chewing on the inside of his cheek like he always does when he’s thinking hard about something. “Cee... She’s great. Smart, accomplished, ambitious. She’s always cool and collected. She’s a lot like me. But marriage? I don’t see myself ever wanting it. I should, right? I mean, nothing was inherently wrong in our relationship, so why couldn’t I just do it? It’s the next step. Plus, she’s my only real relationship to date, and I couldn’t even make myself move in with her. Now that I think about it, I’m having a hard time figuring out why she even wanted to be with me. It doesn’t sound like I’m exactly a catch.” Gray straightens himself. “You know what? I’m judging her just a little bit for sticking up with me for as long as she did. Sure, I’m an asshole, but she obviously has really low standards.”

He looks so defeated, and I don’t know how to make it better.

“Do you love her?” I ask.

Gray is silent for a long time, but I wait patiently. I’m used to it. Gray needs to think his answers through. He would never just blurt things out. That’s not his style. He weighs every word like everything he says is part of a speech that is later going to be deconstructed and studied by future generations.

“I guess,” he finally says, and the answer is thoroughly unlike Gray. This is one of those momentous aspects of life he

should know for sure. Gray has always moved through life with quiet certainty. It's something I've always envied because for most of my life, I've waffled around, trying to find my way.

"I love her, but I'm not in love with her," Gray says. "I don't think I've ever been in love. At least not the version they describe in books and movies. Fuck, she's my only relationship where I actually felt *something*."

He stops talking abruptly and glances at me from the corner of his eye like he's embarrassed before he shakes his head like he's trying to get rid of his own thoughts.

He takes a deep breath and sends me a self-deprecating smile. "That turned heavy really fast. Can we pretend it's a normal night without any unexpected marriage proposals and broken hearts?"

The broken heart comment stings a tiny bit, but I smother the feeling as soon as it registers and smile at Gray.

"So that'll be just the regular craziness for tonight's entertainment package, then, sir?"

"Please."

"Shit, I've got to cancel the strippers and flamethrowers I booked, then."

"Yeah, I'm thinking let's reschedule those and take it easy tonight," Gray replies.

I nod. "I can do that."

He laughs and finishes off his food. I don't steal the last few fries because I'm a good friend like that. He seems to need them more than I do.

"How long are you in town for?" he asks after a while.

I scratch my head. I'm not sure this is the right moment to bring it up, but on the other hand, if there's anything that'll take Gray's mind off the disaster that is his personal life, this might just be the ticket, so I go for it.

"About that... I was actually thinking about sticking around for a while."

For a fraction of a moment, I'm afraid he's disappointed, but then he lets out a big breath. Tension leaves his body in a rush. It almost looks like he's deflating, but all the while, he's smiling like this one sentence has made his whole life better.

"You're moving back?"

"An actual home base would be nice for a change," I say with a shrug that I hope to God looks nonchalant and doesn't expose that in reality I'm more than a little nervous about Gray's reaction. It's not that I expect him to be unhappy about the news, but I've been away for so long that there's always a chance me moving back will somehow mess up our dynamic.

But Gray's wide smile stays in place.

"Man," he says, huffing out a big breath. "That might be the best news I've received in... I don't know. Years."

My shoulders relax and all the stupid nervousness is swept away.

"Do you have a place to stay?" Gray asks. He has his organizing face on.

"I'll find something."

He cocks his head to the side and immediately says, "Move in with me?"

It's probably not a good idea. Considering my weakness for all things Gray, I should not risk it. A smart person would

say no and find his own place.

I'm not a smart person, though, so I nod and say, "Sure."

GRAY

Genetics is a strange thing. Take my grandmother. She's always comfortable in her own skin, always confident, and I have yet to see her stumped by a social situation. By all accounts, my parents were the same.

And then there's Con and me.

The social gene skipped our generation altogether, and it's especially dire in Con's case, which is why he often comes off as uptight, standoffish and way too brusque to be likable right off the bat. He's an acquired taste.

I don't mind, though.

What I do mind is him pounding on my door the first thing on Sunday morning.

I pull the front door open and stare at him.

"Why? Just... why?" My voice is all scratchy from sleep. It's barely five in the morning, and I only arrived home about four hours ago, after dropping Kai off at his sister's house. He's going to stay there for a few days before moving in with me.

Con frowns. "Why what? I haven't even said anything yet."

I let it go and motion him inside. He follows me to the kitchen and takes a seat at the table.

“Coffee?” I ask.

“No, thank you. I can’t stay long.”

“Why? Do you have more people to wake at the crack of dawn?” I ask as I stare at the coffee machine, willing it to speed up.

Con frowns. “It’s morning.”

“It’s not even five o’clock.”

“Yes, well, I have a busy day ahead.”

I sigh and grab the cup as soon as the machine is done. I down a healthy swig of the piping hot liquid. Who needs taste buds anyway?

“What’s up?” I ask as I take my seat on the opposite side of the table, trying to ignore the throbbing numbness on my tongue.

“I thought we should discuss last night,” he says.

Oh. Fun.

“What about last night?” I ask carefully.

“I assumed you’d want some advice on how to fix this thing,” Con says, and I’ve gotta say, my suit-clad, non-smiling, straitlaced older brother is not exactly Cupid.

I’m also not awake enough for his level of efficiency.

“I don’t think there’s anything to fix,” I say.

Meaning, I don’t think I *want* to fix anything. I don’t say it out loud, though. It’s always been difficult for me to stand my ground when it comes to Con. The fact that he’s raised me

from when I was twelve means that he considers himself more of a father figure to me than a big brother, so I rarely contradict him. Partly from habit, and partly because I feel guilty that he had to transfer colleges and change his whole life to come back home to take care of me after our parents died, which means I have the dutiful, well-behaved son act together.

“That’s just stupid. You’ve been together for two years. Cecilia is smart and accomplished. What more could you want?” Con looks genuinely perplexed.

I rub my palm over my face. That’s a loaded question that I don’t know how to answer. Cee and I weren’t unhappy together. Not by a long shot. But I also know that there was something missing between us.

Or maybe there’s just something fundamentally wrong with me. One or the other.

“Gray?” Con prompts.

“I don’t know,” I say in response to his earlier question. “We want different things from life, so we wouldn’t have worked out in the long run.”

“Of course you won’t with an attitude like that,” Con scoffs. “You two need to talk and figure this thing out.”

“Since when are you a relationship guru?”

“I’m just trying to help.”

“You’re just trying to do that thing where you think you know better,” I say tiredly.

Con looks affronted.

“I just want what’s best for you.”

“Even I don’t know what that is, so it’s a pretty ballsy move to think you do.”

Con purses his lips for a second before he stands up.

“You should get some more sleep. You’re being cranky and unreasonable.”

“I wonder why that is?” I mutter.

Con ignores me. I follow him to the hallway, and watch him put his shoes on.

“You never told me what those urgent chores were that drove you out of bed at the crack of dawn,” I say.

“I’m going to work,” he says and straightens himself.

I gape at him. “At five in the morning on a Sunday.”

“Like you weren’t planning to stop by there later,” he scoffs.

Con nods his goodbye and leaves, but I stay frozen in the hallway for the longest time.

I *was* planning to stop by the office and work. That’s my great Sunday plan for myself. Well, it’s more like a routine by now. I was also at work last weekend. And the weekend before that.

Jesus fucking Christ.

How sad is that?

“Connor is asking for the Westhill Sporting Goods contracts.”

The sound of Con’s assistant’s voice makes me blink and look up from the blank screen of my laptop that I’ve been

staring for the last... however long it takes for my laptop to go to sleep of its own volition.

“The Westhill?” I ask, trying to comprehend what he’s just said.

“The contracts you were supposed to be evaluating.” Jamie walks to my desk with a frown as I wake my laptop up again and start looking for the file I need.

“Are you okay?” he asks after a while.

I glance up at his frowning face and nod.

“Yeah. Why?”

“Usually by now I’d already be back in Connor’s office, handing over whatever he demanded I deliver to His Highness.”

“I’m fine. Just a bit distracted.”

Or a lot distracted, if I’m being honest with myself, which I’ve heard is a thing people are supposed to do.

Jamie hesitates for a second. “Is it because of Cecilia?”

It’s been a week since Cee and I broke up. Or she dumped me. Or I dumped her. The details of who gets to claim the status of the dumper are still up for negotiation. Not that I’m going to be putting in any claims. It doesn’t really matter either. Still, the news has made its way around the office, and whenever I walk somewhere, I’m followed by whispers and painfully awkward smiles. Everybody has heard of what I’ve done, and people are trying to make up their minds about whose side they’re supposed to be on.

Strangely enough, that’s not the reason why I can’t seem to get my act together. It should be. But instead, I’m having an existential crisis about the way I’m living my life.

“Maybe you should take some time off?” Jamie suggests, clearly under the impression that my heartbreak isn’t allowing me to function properly.

“That’s really not necessary.”

He hums thoughtfully while I try my best to figure out where those damn contracts are.

“It’s still a huge change,” he continues.

I don’t think I’m giving off the vibe that I want to talk about this. Do people even do that? Does anybody break up with their girlfriend in a very public manner and then later want to discuss it with their colleagues?

“Uh-huh,” I mutter. I’m two steps away from starting to fake-type to get him to leave my office.

“Well, if you ever need somebody to talk to, I’m here,” Jamie says.

He means well, I’m sure of it, but there is no way I’m ever taking him up on that offer.

I finally locate the file I need, but then I remember that I printed the contracts out because I’d had a headache last night and the light of the screen made me feel like somebody was chipping at my temples with a pickax, so the files on my computer will be of no use to me. I’m really not on top of my game today.

The stacks of files, folders, and loose papers on my desk means the search for the contracts will most likely continue for a while longer. I vaguely remember throwing the stack of papers on my desk in the morning, but that was at least three messes ago, so who the hell knows under which stack I should look first.

“You can tell Connor I’ll drop them off in a minute,” I tell Jamie, but he just takes a seat in one of the chairs in front of my desk.

“I don’t have anywhere to be,” he says with a shrug.

“Don’t let Con hear you say that.”

He laughs. “What’s he gonna do? Fire me?”

“He threatens to fire you on a regular basis. Who knows? Maybe one day he’ll follow through?”

“Doubt it. You’d all be helpless as newborns without me.”

“Somebody is very confident today.”

“I’m just well acquainted with my better qualities.”

Jamie grins at me, and I can’t help but chuckle.

“Any plans for the weekend?” I ask as my search for the elusive documents continue.

“I’m trying to figure out college. I predict nonstop fun.”

“I didn’t know you were thinking about going back to school.”

He shrugs. “I’ve considered applying for years, and last weekend, I had a serious conversation with myself. I was stern but loving as I went all, ‘James, if you don’t do this now, you never will, so just get off your ass and figure this crap out.’”

I nod. “Good for you.”

“You don’t sound that happy for me. I’m not going to take your job, so you don’t have to worry about that,” he jokes. “No offense, but corporate law isn’t the most titillating career option.”

“Phew. My job security *was* the first thing that came to mind. May I also remind you that you work for a law firm?”

“I’m just a measly assistant. Besides, that happened totally by accident. I could have just as well ended up being a PA to... Santa.”

“Santas have PAs?”

“Duh. A billion kids and just one night to deliver the goods? He better have an army of PAs to make it all come together. I bet underneath all that jolly energy Santa is full-on Meryl Streep in *The Devil Wears Prada*.”

“I’m so grateful you chose us.” I press my palm to my chest.

“Don’t thank me. I needed a job, and you guys were the first ones to cough it up, so here I am. The fact that I’m working for a bunch of lawyers is just a sad twist of faith.”

“You’ve been taking paralegal courses,” I point out.

“And I’ve hated every moment of slogging through those ever since Con made me sign up.”

“You’re fired,” I say tonelessly.

“Finally. Good riddance.”

“On second thought, keeping you around and drowning in work is a much better punishment. You’re rehired.”

He rubs at his chest. “Damn. That hurt.”

“I have to go find Con and tell him I’ve cracked you. He’ll be so pleased.”

Jamie just laughs and settles in as I keep moving papers from one stack to the other.

“What do you like about corporate law?” Jamie asks after a while.

I lift my head, startled by the question.

“I... I...” I stammer before straightening myself. “I enjoy the challenge of analyzing difficult situations and making choices that would result in the best possible outcome for my clients.” I recite the bullshit answer I spewed out at my law school interview. That puppy has really come in handy over the years whenever somebody asks the dreaded why-do-you-like-your-job question.

Jamie frowns. “Is that your final answer?” he asks.

“Yes?”

“Okay,” he drawls and sends me a suspicious look.

“What?” I ask.

He raises his palms. “Nothing.”

I drop the folders I’m holding. “You clearly want to say something, so come on. Out with it.”

“Nothing,” he repeats, but almost immediately after, he adds, “It just sounds like one of those stock answers. What’s your biggest flaw? Oh, I’m a perfectionist, and I’m physically incapable of taking money for overtime.”

“I’m a problem solver at heart,” I protest. If I was my employer right now, I’d fire myself.

Jamie just raises his brows at me. I drop the folders on the desk and take a seat, suddenly feeling tired as hell.

“Okay. Here’s the thing,” I say. “I’m not one of those people who gushes about their job like their career is the next best thing since free Wi-Fi. But it’s also not something I

agonize over. In fact, I don't think I'm alone in my lukewarm feelings about my job. Do you love your job?" I look at Jamie.

He shrugs. "We already established this here is not the dream career for me, but that's why I'm trying to make changes."

"Right," I say, even though that feels like a slight against me because I'm doing fuck all about changing anything, really.

"The thing is," I continue, "TV shows and movies have made being a lawyer much more interesting than it really is. I bet a lot of people in my field have, at one point or other, imagined themselves standing in the court room, giving a passionate speech, taking a stand and making a change."

"You don't even need to be a lawyer to do that," Jamie says. "In fact, I may have yelled *You're out of order* at my elderly neighbor, Magda, just last week. She had a heart attack shortly after. I'm about sixty percent certain it might have been my fault. You should never ever startle an eighty-year-old. Just saying."

"Please tell me it's not one of those stories that ends with *and then she died*."

Jamie snorts. "Magda? Please. The woman is indestructible. She was back banging her broom against her ceiling slash my living room floor two days after. Said she escaped the hospital because the doctors were a bunch of know-it-alls, and she'll drink her bloody coffee if she damn well wants to."

"Good for Magda."

"Sure. What's me doing my best Dustin Hoffman impression to my octogenarian neighbor have to do with law, exactly?"

“Just... people end up disillusioned pretty quickly. Very few people end up smack-dab in the middle of a dramatic courtroom battle, and I imagine the same principle applies to a lot of other jobs, too.”

Most of my work is done outside of the courtroom, and it includes copious amounts of reading, writing, and paperwork. It can be, and often is, tedious, kind of boring and monotonous. Especially in corporate law, which is coincidentally my specialty, so good choice, past Grayson. I commend you for your tolerance of tedium.

I busy myself with stacking some papers so I wouldn't have to see Jamie's perceptive gaze.

“You're still young,” I say, using my best grandfatherly tone. “All I'm saying is, don't build your expectations too high when it comes to your career. Most jobs are a lot more boring in real life than they are in brochures they hand out during job fairs.”

Jamie frowns. “It sounds suspiciously like you hate your job” is his blunt assessment.

“No.” The denial is immediate.

I don't... I don't love my job. But I'm good at it. Do I enjoy corporate mergers and drafting documents day in and day out? Maybe not, but the job satisfaction is usually there in some form, at least.

“Oh really? What's your favorite aspect of your job?” Jamie challenges.

“I—”

I draw a complete blank.

“Yes?” Jamie says.

“I like to help.” I sound so delightfully incompetent. If I were a photo, I’d be the generic male figure they stuff in photo frames they sell at the mall that people throw away as soon as they get home.

I don’t know what it says about me, but I actually am pretty good when it comes to dealing with routine and forcing myself to accomplish tasks I’m maybe not thoroughly passionate about. I’ve never been one of those people who has trouble concentrating. I’ve got a lot of practice when it comes to forcing myself to complete boring tasks. I’m not as smart as Kai, so in order to stay on top of my class, I had to make a real effort. Hours and hours of studying every day, sometimes well into the night. So no, I have no trouble forcing myself to apply myself.

Although, this last week I’ve only been dragging my feet, and I’ve gotten nothing done. Where I usually approach my days with the efficiency of a robot, ticking off items from my to-do list with ease and efficiency, after my talk with Con on Sunday, I just feel restless.

“Well, I guess corporations need help, too,” Jamie says diplomatically.

“Yes.” We stare at each other. Jamie looks almost as if he’s disappointed in me.

I’m not expecting to change the world with my work, but shouldn’t there be at least some sort of a feeling of accomplishment involved in the process?

Now that I think back on my career, have I ever felt like I was doing something worthwhile? I guess it’s nice people won’t get screwed over due to faulty contracts, but the thing is, I work for one of the top law firms in Boston. My grandfather started it way back when, and my hourly rate is so high that I

exclusively cater to large corporations and people who have enough money to bring their business to us, which translates into shit ton of personal wealth in layman's terms, so it's not like I'm actively helping those in need. If anything, I'm probably the one who helps those corporations and wealthy individuals screw over other people.

"It's honest work." I raise my chin higher. There's a creeping suspicion inside me that Jamie might be onto something here, which is scary as fuck. I don't want to think about it right now.

"Sure." Jamie nods. I nod, too.

Mercifully, I manage to locate the contracts. I shove them toward Jamie with barely disguised desperation. I just need this particular voice of truth out of my office right this second.

Jamie claps the roll of contracts against his palm and motions toward the door with his head. "I guess I'll be going then."

"Uh huh."

This time I do fake type. All pride has left the building.

Three hours later, I shrug on my jacket and pack my bag. The conversation I had with Jamie is still lingering somewhere in the back of my brain, but despite that, my mood is improving by the second.

I'm on my way to help Kai move in with me. He's been staying with his sister and her husband for the last few days, and they would love to have him stay permanently, but since Monica and Ivo live in Northampton, the commute to Boston

would be way too long. Plus, Kai is a city boy at heart. He loves his sister to bits, but there is no way he'd remain sane in Northampton.

It takes me two hours to drive to Monica's house. Kai has been staying with Mon and Ivo whenever he visits in between his travels, so most of his stuff is there, packed in boxes in the garage.

I park the van I've rented on the street and get out of the car. The garage door is open, and I can hear swearing and loud bangs coming out of it. Monica and Ivo are lounging in two wicker chairs in front of the garage. It's March, so they're bundled up in winter coats and scarves, and they both seem to find nothing odd about hanging out in their driveway.

Monica stands up when I approach them.

"Hey, stranger!" She throws her arms around my neck and proceeds to hug the hell out of me. And then she smacks me on the chest with her gloved hand. "Why is this the first time we're seeing you this year?"

"You saw me on New Year's, so that's a blatant lie."

"Pssh. Technicalities."

"I live for those." I hug Ivo, too, before I turn toward the garage. "I assume the swearing is courtesy of your brother?"

"He decided to sort through his stuff. He seemed to think it would be the polite thing to do. Based on the frustration levels in his voice, he's not happy about the decision. He's been at it for two days already. The swearing has been getting increasingly creative. You should grab a chair. It's pretty entertaining. We have beer."

I shake my head as I look toward the garage entrance. "I think I better go and check it out."

“Careful. It’s like entering a bear cave,” Ivo calls after me. “You might never come back alive.”

I raise my fist in the air as I walk past them. “I eat danger for breakfast.”

Their laughter follows me all the way inside, where Kai is hidden from view behind a mountain of boxes. It looks like he’s created his very own maze in here.

I follow the curses and find him in the back of the room, staring at the floor, where he’s obviously spilled something that looks like a shit ton of marbles mixed with sheets of old notebooks that look frayed enough that I guess there has been a mice problem at some point.

Kai’s hair is messy like he hasn’t combed it yet today. It’s a shade of red I’ve never seen on anybody else before. Not exactly bright red, not exactly auburn. It’s a mix of the two, creating a sort of a muted crimson shade.

When we were younger, Kai used to hate his hair, but it suits him. It makes him look almost ethereal. I’ve never said it out loud, fearing I’d sound stupid. But he does.

He’s dressed in a pair of sweats and my favorite sweatshirt from college he borrowed once and conveniently forgot to return. It fits him better anyway. Kai’s an inch shorter than my six feet, and he has this sinewy strength about him.

I’m suddenly hit by how much I’ve missed him, and since I don’t want to act like an idiot and start hugging him for no apparent reason—done that one already, after all—I concentrate back on the task at hand. Moving. That’s why we’re here.

“How’s it going?” I ask.

Kai looks up at me, scowling so hard that it looks like he has a unibrow.

“I’m tempted to burn this place down.”

“Cool. Arson charges. I don’t get a lot of those, so at least it’ll be interesting to find a way to spin this.”

“Can I just dump everything?” Kai whines.

“It can’t be that bad. You’ve been traveling for the last decade. How much crap can you possibly have accumulated?”

“Apparently a lot.” He lowers his voice and glances toward the garage entrance. “I don’t think it’s all mine. I think Mon has been sneaking her own stuff here just to mess with me, so I’ve been hiding some of this shit in her closets and shelves. Do not open the door of that closet.” He points to the corner. “In fact, don’t even walk past it. You’ll cause an avalanche.”

I’m not going to touch that hornet’s nest. I want to be able to plead ignorance once Monica, inevitably, goes to get her revenge.

Kai, on his part, looks extremely proud of himself. Yeah, still not going there. I roll up my sleeves and grab one of the boxes. “Come on. Let’s get this over with so we can go home.”

Kai grins.

“What?” I ask.

“Nothing.” He looks down at his feet for a second like he’s embarrassed. “I just like the sound of that. Home.”

There’s a strange jolt in my stomach. I ignore it as I push another box his way. “Get to work, then.”

Monica and Ivo stand next to the van as Kai pushes the last of his belongings in and slams the sliding door shut with a loud thud. We made good progress, and now the boxes that we take with us only contain necessary items.

Ivo pretends to wipe a tear from his eye. “It feels like we’re sending our only son off to college. They grow up so fast.”

“It kind of does,” Monica muses. “Did you have the sex talk with him and slip the condoms in his bag?”

“Right after I gave him his first sip of beer after I was done telling him he was a man now.”

Monica pats her husband’s cheek. “You’re a good father.”

“I mean, I don’t disagree,” Ivo says with pretend modesty. “Also, we should have more kids now that we got the first one out of the house. Look at our little boy, all grown up. I think he turned out... adequate. Right?” Monica nods as Ivo continues. “Sure, he’s a bit screwed up, but he’s the first one. You know, like the first pancake. You always mess that up. The next ones will be better.”

Kai looks affronted. “Excuse me. I’m at least a third pancake. If anyone’s the first, crappy pancake, it’s Monica.”

Monica ignores Kai as she taps her finger against her chin and looks at Ivo. “You know, now that I think about it, it was really clever of us to test our parenting out on this one.” She flicks her thumb at Kai. “Now when we have kids of our own, they can just flourish because we’ve already committed all the grave faux pas of childrearing.”

They high-five as Kai steps forward and says, “Whoa, whoa, whoa. What do you mean faux pas? I’m perfect. Besides, I thought we agreed that Monica is the first pancake?”

I lean back against the door of the car. This is going to take a while. I’ve always envied the Morgan siblings. They have lost a lot in their lives, but somehow they’ve come out on the other side without any visible dents, and they have their ability to laugh at themselves intact.

“I may have some burnt edges, but I’m still edible,” Monica says with a shrug.

Ivo slides his arm around Monica and waggles his brows. “You’re delicious.” He leans closer and murmurs into her ear. “Especially with a bit of whipped cream on top.”

I imagine I have the same horrified expression on my face I can see on Kai’s.

“Is this what it feels like to walk in on your parents having sex?” I ask.

Kai makes a face. “Oh good. You made it worse.”

Ivo has graduated to whispering what I presume are dirty things into Monica’s ear and kissing her neck, so Kai and I bid a hasty goodbye.

Before Kai can get in the car, though, Mon hurries toward him and throws her arms around him.

“Can’t... breathe...” Kai wheezes after a little while, but Mon doesn’t let go just yet.

“Thank you for doing this,” she murmurs into the side of Kai’s neck.

“Doing what?”

“Moving back. I’ve missed you so much.”

Kai hugs her a bit tighter and kisses the side of her head.

“You don’t need to thank me for coming back. It was long overdue.” They smile at each other, and Kai wipes his thumb over Mon’s cheek. “Everyone I love is here.”

Everything goes warm inside me as Kai catches my eyes over Monica’s shoulder. This feeling of truly belonging is something I’ve only ever associated with Kai.

Kai clears his throat and takes a step back. “Or, you know, everyone I love. And Ivo.”

“Hey!”

Kai laughs and steps back from Mon. “Now go and start making these babies you were going to replace me with.”

“Dinner next weekend,” Monica calls after us just before Kai pulls the passenger side door shut. He salutes her and then we’re off.

“It’s kind of nice they’re so in love after almost ten years together,” Kai muses as we leave Northampton in the rearview mirror.

“They’re lucky to have each other,” I agree.

I can feel Kai’s eyes on me, and when I glance toward him, he looks deep in thought.

“You think you’ll ever have that?” he asks after a little while.

I snort. “I just turned down a marriage proposal. I’m thinking a happily ever after is not in the cards.”

“Mmm,” he hums thoughtfully, but he seems to be far away in his own mind again.

“You want that?” I ask after a while.

He’s quiet for a long time, but eventually, he just shrugs. “We’ll see what happens.”

I want to know more. It doesn’t happen often, but right now, I have a feeling Kai is leaving something unsaid. I’m about to ask, but he turns toward me and grins, changing the topic.

“I dumped the marbles on Ivo and Monica’s bed. All of them. Under the sheets. You think the dinner invite still stands after they find them?”

“Based on the driveway foreplay we just witnessed, I’d be extremely surprised if they made it to the bedroom.”

“Well, you’ve ruined it now.”

I laugh as I take the next turn to the highway. The rest of the trip goes quickly. Time always flies with Kai. We joke and laugh at the stupidest shit, which is pretty much the only time I let myself do something like that. It’s par for the course when we’re together. Kai is the one person that sees below the stiff outer layers and takes me as I am.

I’ve never been good at making friends, which is most likely why Kai is my only real one. He caught me before adolescence kicked in, so I dove into our friendship with the ease that all kids do, and somehow when most childhood friends grow apart over the years, we got even closer. The fact that we took separate paths after high school, with Kai heading off to travel the world and me going to college and then law school, didn’t change that either. Even when Kai was on the other side of the world, we still talked and texted all the time.

We get to my apartment right before it starts to get dark and spend another thirty minutes dragging all of Kai’s stuff

into the guest room.

My apartment has a weird setup where the master bedroom is pretty decent when it comes to size, but the second bedroom is more like a glorified closet, which means that even though Kai doesn't have too much stuff, the room immediately looks like hoarders have moved in.

“On second thought,” I say, inspecting my surroundings, “we should have left your stuff in the living room.”

“It's fine.” Kai clears his way to the bed with some difficulties. “I'll just stack the boxes on top of each other and pretend it's a wall.”

“You could also just unpack everything,” I suggest dryly.

“Ah, the traditional approach. Well, I guess we'll see tomorrow which option calls out to me.” Kai looks around and frowns. “You sure you're okay with me staying here?”

“Of course,” I say. My heartbeat quickens uncomfortably. What if he doesn't like my place? Is he thinking about moving out already? But I just got him back!

I force my tone into something neutral. “Why? Did you change your mind? Because I'm warning you right now, I'm not carting all your crap back to Northampton, so if you want to leave, you're on your own.”

Kai laughs. “That decides it, then. I guess I'll stay.”

Phew. Crisis averted.

“Cool,” I say.

Kai snorts.

“Cool,” he echoes with a roll of his eyes.

For the first time in years, I feel like everything is exactly as it should be in the world.

KAI

Over the years, I've had the dubious pleasure of living with all kinds of people, so I've gotten accustomed to pretty much all the quirks anybody can have.

There was the guy who insisted on handwashing his socks and underwear in the kitchen sink, not giving a crap if there were dishes there or not, and then he'd dry them by hanging them on doorknobs all over the house because it helped keep the heel in the right shape.

A couple of years ago, I rented a room from two dudes who almost blew up the kitchen while experimenting with producing moonshine.

Another member of the highlight's reel was the girl who insisted everybody in the apartment change their sheets a minimum of twice a week. She had a chart on the wall, and you'd get a frowny face sticker next to your name when you failed to comply with the rules.

The point is, it always takes time to get used to somebody's quirks.

Not with Gray. With him, everything is simple. We fall into a rhythm like we've always been living together. I'm normally an optimist, but even I didn't think getting used to

living together would happen so seamlessly. But we're a week into our new arrangement, and there have been no setbacks.

In the almost twenty years we've known each other, we've never lived together. I've stayed in his place, of course. A week here and there every now and then when I started feeling homesick and lonely, but officially being roommates somehow feels different, so even though I know Gray through and through, I always figured there might be some irritating habits he's been hiding.

I was wrong. Living with Gray is easy. Everything with Gray is easy.

Well, almost easy, I concede as I walk into the kitchen on Friday morning and find my roommate in front of the stove, making breakfast.

Gray's a multitasker. His morning routine is like some kind of a weird juggling act where every move is timed to perfection to waste the least possible amount of time, so he combines showering and shaving with preparing breakfast, which means I regularly get to see him in nothing but a towel. It's almost impossible not to stare.

The dark blue towel is wrapped around Gray's lean hips. His shoulders are dotted with droplets of water, and the muscles on his back create a fascinating display as he moves around the kitchen, stirring, lifting, pouring.

Gray used to be a skinny kid, but he has filled out over the years, so now, he's all sharp lines and hard muscles. He's not overly buff, but there's strength in his body.

I can't keep my eyes off him.

His dark brown hair is still wet from his shower, and I feel a very unwelcome urge to slide my fingers through it.

This here is the part that ruins some of the overall ease of living with Gray. These unwanted echoes of my long-ago crush. It's nothing too worrisome, though. Once everything settles and I'm thoroughly used to living with Gray, those remnants of feelings will disappear.

They better.

Still, I take an extra moment to stare at Gray's lower back. And then my eyes move even lower...

"You want some of this?" Gray asks without looking at me, and I almost swallow my tongue as I croak out some sort of a nonsensical sound that makes Gray turn around and look at me as if he's checking I'm not about to choke to death.

I clear my throat and try again. "What?"

"Omelet," he says, waving the spatula toward the pan. "There's enough for two."

Oh. He's talking about breakfast. Yeah, that makes more sense. I force my thoughts far, far away from the gutter.

"Of course. You know my favorite kind of food is—"

"The food you don't have to make yourself, yes," he finishes my sentence for me. "Keep an eye on it, would you? I'll go get changed."

I stare at the pan like I'm afraid it'll burst into flames if I turn my gaze away, but I get a whiff of his shower gel as he passes, and it does shit all to help me keep my mind off Gray's bare skin. I'm not sure what's up with me this morning. I'm not crushing on my best friend. That's been done and dealt with years ago. But I can't argue that he's hot, so honestly, can anybody really blame me for looking? Didn't think so.

The half-naked mornings really are the only real drawback of living with Gray. I've conquered the ill-advised feelings I developed while we were in high school, and I don't have any plans to revisit that shit show. It's never a good idea to fall for your best friend, but for your straight best friend? That's epic levels of no. And I've learned my lesson. I really have. It's just that sometimes life likes to fuck with me and throw a mostly naked Gray in my way just to test me and see if I still possess the iron will that helped me get over him the first time.

So far so good.

Gray comes back to the kitchen, blessedly more dressed than before. Not that he doesn't look fucking fantastic in his dark suit pants and a white shirt. I've always liked guys in suits. I hate wearing one myself, but Gray in a suit? I could definitely—

My thoughts screech to a halt. Yeah. I'm not gonna go there.

Instead, I plate the food and carry it to the counter, pushing one omelet in front of Gray. He, in the meanwhile, has already grabbed the utensils and poured us both a glass of orange juice. We're working in tandem like a well-oiled machine.

We both take our seats. I take the first bite of food and hum with enjoyment. The man is a god in the kitchen.

"I should have moved in years ago," I mumble. My own skills in the kitchen are on the lower level of decent. I won't poison anybody, but I won't be taking home any awards either. Still, I hate cooking. Loathe it. Lucky for me, we've somehow wordlessly divvied up kitchen duty so that Gray takes mornings, and I'm left with dinner, and while the arrangement works well for me, Gray is definitely getting the shorter end of

the stick since most days, he'll have to be satisfied with takeout.

“What have you got planned for today?” I ask through a mouthful of food. My lack of table manners only makes Gray smile.

“Paperwork,” he says without elaborating. Much of what he does falls under the client-attorney privilege, so there are rarely any juicy details. “What about you?”

“It’s time to get the grown-up ball rolling,” I say. “I have an appointment with a realtor. I’m going to find myself a workshop.” I think about what I said for a moment. “That sounds way too professional. I’m going to find a room with a roof and four walls where I can stick some pieces of wood together and pretend it’s furniture.”

“That was one hell of a self-promo,” Gray says with a snort, but he turns serious in the blink of an eye. “You don’t have to downplay it. People are paying you to create things for them. Something they’ll keep in their home and look at every day. It’s impressive.”

“A relatively small number of people have paid me,” I correct him. “And I’m pretty sure a bunch of them was Monica pretending to be somebody else, so I don’t think it counts. Not to point any fingers, but Helga from Pennsylvania sounded suspiciously like when Mon tries to imitate Ivo’s voice when she’s had one too many glasses of wine.”

Gray ignores me and gestures toward the living room. “The end table you made me is the classiest thing I own.”

“That’s kind of sad,” I say as he throws me a stern look.

“My point is, your work is beautiful. And you deserve a nice place where you can create it. It’s art, Kai.”

I'm not going to lie, hearing him say that makes me feel all warm inside

"I guess," I say.

"No. No *I guess* about it. You need a proper workshop, and to make sure you get it, I'll come with you."

"I'm capable of navigating the choppy waters of commercial real estate on my own, you know?"

"I want to help."

Like I can ever say no to that. I pretend to think about it for a moment before I sigh and say, "Fine."

"This will be great. You'll see."

It's not that great. I have a limited budget, so a lot of the places are out of my price range, especially since I still have to buy tools for myself. Right now, I own almost nothing. It's not like I'm able to stuff a table saw in the trunk of my car and bring it with me everywhere I go.

I'm financing this thing with the help of my meager savings, and as a backup, I have the life insurance money from when my parents died. It's been sitting in my account, and I've never touched a dime of it, but I think it might be time. I'd like to think Mom and Dad would have rooted for me on this one, so maybe it's not a betrayal like my brain keeps insisting if I use some of that money to make something of myself?

Or maybe it's the dumbest idea in the history of ideas.

I can't look past the fact that this whole endeavor is pretty reckless and risky. I'm jumping into this thing head first. I

have no connections in Boston and only a tiny client list. Why the hell did I ever think it was a good plan?

“Well, that was a bust,” I say as we leave the fifth property.

We’re in Gray’s car, driving back home. Gray glances at me but doesn’t say anything.

“You’d think we’d have more options in a city the size of Boston,” I grumble.

“I thought some of them were pretty promising.”

“No.” I shake my head. “No. They were very much lacking in several important departments.”

Another side-eyed glance that makes me all fidgety.

“Care to elaborate?” Gray asks.

“It’s... technical.”

He raises his brow at me, and I look away.

“Lighting,” I say after several beats of silence have passed. “Have to have good lights to see the wood.”

Gray’s lips twitch.

“We’ll cross the dungeons off our list. What are we talking about in terms of lighting? Skylights? Floor-to-ceiling windows? Projectors on every wall?”

“Just... good lights. In the ceiling.”

“That *is* technical,” Gray draws. “No wonder you thought I wouldn’t get it. Hey, as a lighting expert, what are those things called in the ceiling of my office? I’ve been referring to them as little suns and asking the maintenance to fuel my tiny suns every time one of them burns out, and then I yell *a star is born* when it shines again in the morning.”

“Fuel my tiny suns sounds simultaneously dirty and like a self-burn,” I mutter as I glare at Gray.

He just shrugs. “That sometimes happens to us folks that don’t know all that technical mumbo-jumbo. So you want more tiny suns in your ceiling?”

“Yes,” I say in a measured voice.

“Well, then that third workshop would be kind of ideal. It’s cheap, and as the landlord said, he’ll let you renovate it to your liking. I’m thinking that means we can add some lights.”

“The third place? You mean the one with unreasonably small toilet seats?” I ask. Saying that out loud, I’m starting to get why the real estate agent muttered something about picky assholes when we left.

Gray knows something is up, though.

I’m expecting him to bring up my strange behavior in three, tw—

“You want to tell me what’s up?”

He’s even quicker than I predicted. Impressive. Then again, Gray has always been ahead of the curve in most things he does.

I huff out a breath.

“I’ve been doing some thinking.” It’s a struggle to admit the fact that I’m starting to doubt myself. “Maybe it’d be wise to find a job so I’d have a steady income, and then I can start this thing slowly on the side.”

Gray glances at me for a second, and then he pulls to the side of the road so abruptly that I grab on to the dashboard to get my balance back. I bang my head against the window, and the passing blare of car horns indicates that Gray has pissed

off a lot of people with that maneuver. He doesn't seem to care the least bit as he turns toward me.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Knocking some sense into you."

"Literally?" I rub at the side of my head.

He ignores my grousing.

"Why are you doubting yourself all of a sudden? You were excited about this. Having your own workshop is all you've been talking about for the last year."

I cross my arms over my chest and slouch back in my seat. I don't know where to start, but Gray has no problem waiting until I gather my thoughts into something that resembles a coherent sentence.

"It's the first thing I've ever taken seriously," I admit after a while. "What if I suck?"

He shrugs. "There's always a chance that's true. In the spirit of honesty, there will most definitely be people who will look at your work and think, *what a talentless asshole.*"

"Oh wow. I feel so much better now."

He raises his brow. "You want empty platitudes, or do you want the truth?"

"Empty platitudes all the way," I say with a straight face. "Slather me with compliments and praise. I was under the impression that it was in the job description of a best friend?"

"No," he scoffs. "You know I'm not a groupie, right?"

"Wait. People who aren't rock stars get to have them, too? Why wasn't I informed during the orientation?"

"You don't need meaningless praise," Gray says sternly.

“I don’t know. I could use some ass kissing right now.”

“No you don’t. Here’s a little mental exercise for you: What’s the worst thing that could happen if you go through with starting your own business?”

I take a moment to picture the worst-case scenarios. There are a lot, so it’s difficult to only pick one.

“Nobody wants to buy my stuff,” I eventually say. “I’ll end up with a boatload of, I don’t even know... chairs that’ll remind me of my failure for years to come. Eventually I’ll start conversing to the chairs because I’m so bitter and lonely, and before you know it, I’ll start treating them as my children, and you’ll start receiving Christmas cards from me and my family of chairs. I’ll die surrounded by my chair children, and you’ll have to transport them all to my funeral and set them up next to the grave, which is both sad and convenient because my human mourners, the few there might be, can sit on my kids.”

Grayson just stares at me for a long time. “Well, that escalated quickly. Exactly how many chairs would there be? I might need a bigger car.”

“So you agree that this is going to happen?”

“Yes,” he says tonelessly. “Obviously this *is* the most likely outcome.”

“Well, fuck me. It’s like being a cat lady only a million times worse. A chair man. But not the successful kind.”

Gray lets out an impatient breath. “You’re not going to end up befriending a bunch of chairs.”

“Of course I won’t. Weren’t you listening? They’ll be my *family*. Oh shit! I’m going to give chair sex a whole new meaning.”

“Jesus Christ,” Gray mutters and looks to the ceiling as if seeking help. “Okay. First of all, I thought the chairs were going to be your children? Because if that’s the case, you’ve managed to make this whole thing even more disturbing.”

“I’ll obviously pick one of the chairs to be my lawfully wedded husband. I’m not going to be a single father, Grayson.”

“Sure. Congrats. I’m just gonna throw it out there that I will be busy whenever the wedding is,” he says.

“Don’t worry. You’re not invited. We’ll elope.”

Gray looks scandalized. “I’m your best friend!” He shakes his head as if trying to clear it. “Forget I said that,” he adds quickly and takes a deep breath. “Let’s... put that particular train of crazy aside for a while. Just, push it far, far away from our minds. To another galaxy, if at all possible.”

I snort. I already feel lighter. It’s the Grayson-effect in full swing. He places his palm on my shoulder and squeezes it.

“I’m in your corner, no matter what. You really want to work in a bar again? Go for it, even though, may I remind you that you hated it because you’ll be grumpy without adequate sleep? So just for fun, let’s imagine for a second that you won’t find a job, and instead, you’ll give yourself a chance and go for it. I mean, the alternative is that you’ll become one of those idiots who touts his could-have-been success story like those quarterbacks that peak in high school, and frankly, I’d prefer the failure and the subsequent chair children to having to listen to you going on and on about how you could have been somebody great for the next fifty years.”

He lets out a deep breath once he’s done with his tirade, and I follow his example. I stare out the window for a while

and let Gray's words play in my mind on a loop. In the end, the nerves gradually lessen. Gray believes in me. I can do it. I repeat it like a mantra a few more times to pump myself up.

“So the point you're trying to get across,” I say slowly, “is that you think that third space—the one in Eagle Hill—is the one I should go with?”

Gray snorts and shakes his head. “Yeah. That was my roundabout way of giving that place my blessing.”

I'm still not a hundred percent confident this won't end up being a mistake, but the excitement I felt before about owning my own business is making its reappearance. It's not even a slow progression. It just tumbles over me like a wave, and I remember the thrill I got when somebody bought the bookshelf I'd built. My first commissioned work. Seeing that payment land in my bank account and realizing that yes, this is what I've been looking for, this I what I want to do, was better than snow days in school, Christmas mornings, and birthdays combined.

Gray is right—as usual. I need to try.

I mean, there's still a bit of apprehension left. Renting a workshop is something that hints at permanence and stability. Long-term plans. A commitment. I haven't done anything like that in at least a decade. But I can't deny that I've been getting tired of always being on the move, and the permanence I once scoffed at has become infinitely more appealing. Scary, too, but I guess I can always go back to my vagabond lifestyle if it turns out settling down isn't for me after all.

“I kind of feel stupid now for losing my cool,” I admit.

“Oh man, I hate to break it to you, but I never thought you were cool.”

I flip Gray off as he laughs.

“What? I’ve seen you barf in the bushes after we tried out smoking. And then when you felt dizzy and sat in it...” He shakes his head. “Face it, cool was never going to make its reappearance after that.”

“You only saw all of that because you were puking right next to me,” I scoff.

We both laugh at the memory of our thirteen-year-old selves giving cigarettes the old college try. Gray turns serious a moment later, though, and squeezes my shoulder once more. It’s difficult not to lean into the touch.

“We all have our moments. You talked me down the ledge before taking the bar, so I guess we’re even,” he says.

“Oh yeah.” I perk up at the memory. “You were planning to move to Kyrgyzstan and become a goat herder.”

“I still don’t understand why you didn’t stop me when I ordered all those Russian language textbooks,” he says with a small smile like that time is a fond memory for him, too.

“I was being there for you with my mature, sobering influence.”

“You got me drunk.”

“But you passed the bar, so you know, means to an end. You’re welcome.”

He just laughs and shakes his head, but when he finally removes his hand from my shoulder and starts driving again, I wish I could pull it back and keep it there.

GRAY

Kai's new workshop is definitely a work in progress. We've spent the last week whipping it into some sort of a shape. Kai has been practically living there, and I've shown up every day as soon as my workday is over.

The space is filled with trash. Liberal amounts of it, which Kai claims to be a blessing in disguise, and he's spent days happily sorting through everything, putting aside even the tiniest scraps of wood he can find in that mess.

The owner allowed us to put up a partition wall that divided the space in two. Kai is planning to use the front as a sort of an office space. He'll have his computer and desk there so he can create drawings for his clients and meet them to discuss the material and cost and everything else needed, and the back part of the room is going to be the workshop.

Today, we're going to finish cleaning the place. We've sorted through all the crap and most of the stuff we're going to throw out is now in the front room, since Kai has already started painting in the back. Technically, I'm supposed to be at work, but I cut my day short. By about eight hours or so. It's an uncharacteristic move on my part. I'm usually a stickler for rules.

Without Kai, I would have shown up on senior skip day. Now that I think about it, Kai is usually the sole reason I allow myself to have some fun, so it's befitting that the first time I call to work and lie about being sick is to help him out.

I park my car on the street and make my way to the workshop. The front room looks just the same as it did last night, but the loud noise from the back makes it clear where the owner resides.

Kai doesn't notice me at first. Somehow, in the sixty minutes he's been here alone, he's managed to acquire a bunch of wooden dining chairs, all of them looking like their best days passed at least three decades ago, and he's already taken one apart.

I clear my throat and quirk my brow as he whirls toward me.

"Slacker," I say.

He scratches the back of his head and shrugs one shoulder with a self-deprecating smile on his lips.

"I *did* start cleaning," he says. "I took a couple of bags of trash to the back, and then I saw these. Some sucker figured they'd use the free trash container." He's practically vibrating with glee. "Joke's on them. Can you believe somebody wanted to throw these away? I know they look shabby right now, but once I get the paint off and replace a few of those spindles here, those will look awesome. Look at those lancet arches and quatrefoils. It's exquisite craftsmanship. And somebody just threw them in the trash. It's fucking madness!"

His cheeks are flushed, and his eyes are sparkling with excitement as he points out the elements.

“Sure,” I say. “I know the meaning of the words you just said. Amazing flufferguts, indeed. Top-notch work.”

He laughs as he points to the upper part of the backrest. “See those circles here? That’s quatrefoil. Four overlapping circles. Four leaves. It was all the rage in Gothic architecture, and it’s done really beautifully here. Delicate but sturdy.”

I’m far from artistic, but as usual, when Kai points those things out to me, I see what he means. These chairs represent exactly the thing that Kai appreciates about his job. The chair will be beautiful to look at, and at the same time it’s a functional item that will have a purpose. I’m bound to think that the fact Kai found those chairs and that they will be the first items he’ll work on in his new workshop means good luck.

I tell as much to Kai, and he laughs. “I thought the exact same thing earlier. You don’t believe in that stuff, though, so what gives? Alien abduction? Body swapping? Concussion on the way over?”

“It’s just your general bad influence on me, I think. I pretended I was coming down with something so I could come and help you.”

Kai puts the chair leg he’s been holding down. “Really? I approve. I mean, you didn’t have to, but I approve.”

“I thought you would,” I say with a laugh as I turn around. “Now come on. I’m all yours. Put me to work. I’m ready to do anything you want.”

A sudden clatter from behind me makes me turn back toward Kai. I raise my brows at the sight of Kai on the floor on his hands and knees.

“Stumbled,” he mutters as an explanation before he gets up.

I frown and take a step closer. He avoids my gaze as he wipes the dust off his hands.

“You all right?”

“Fine.” He swallows hard as his gaze flicks toward me, but he looks away just as quickly. “Clumsy is all. Come on. We should get to work. They’ll pick up the dumpster later this evening, so we need to get this place cleaned up or I’ll have to pay for another week.”

He’s acting very strangely, but before I can ask about it, he’s out the door. Kai slowly relaxes back into his usual self as we make numerous trips to the dumpster out back.

Kai is all about reusing and repurposing, but even he can’t make anything from all the crap lying around here. That doesn’t stop him from grumbling the whole time about waste while wondering out loud if he maybe *could* do something with whatever we’re throwing away at that moment and hasn’t just come up with the perfect idea yet.

The less stuff remains, the more anxious he gets to save at least something. On the next trip inside, he looks longingly at the remaining paint cans.

“I could maybe try and—”

“That paint has practically turned to stone by this point,” I say.

“The ducts would make a goo—”

“Whatever you saw on Pinterest, I can guarantee you, those ducts will not cut it.”

“What about—”

“You hate plasterboard.”

He glares at me. “You just have an answer for everything, don’t you?”

I try to hide my smile as Kai gives the cans one more look and sighs. “Fine.”

It takes five more trips before the place is cleared from all trash, leaving only possibilities behind.

Kai stands in the middle of the workshop and slowly turns around, staring at the grimy walls and tired-looking concrete floors with a determined expression on his face.

“I guess now all that’s left is to make this place into something great, huh?” He glances toward me.

I step closer and throw my arm over his shoulders.

“You’ve got this.”

He grins and nods. “I think you’re right.”

His excitement is palpable in the air, and I’m so happy for him. And proud. But there’s also a noticeable part in me that is envious.

I can’t help but contrast my life with Kai’s. Have I ever been this passionate or inspired about anything in my life? I know the answer to that without even having to really think about it that much.

No.

Have I ever been this full of life?

No.

Has the future ever felt like something wide open and filled with possibilities?

No.

Has life ever been fun?

No.

Do I want those things?

The answer, for the first time in my life, is a firm and resounding yes.

KAI

“To Kai,” Monica says.

We hold our glasses up and clink them together. Monica and Ivo have driven to the city for the night to celebrate with Gray and me. I tried to argue and delay the festivities since there’s still a way to go before the workshop is anywhere ready to open, but Mon just scoffed and ignored me.

I don’t really mind. I can’t deny I’m in a celebratory mood. Things are going pretty smoothly, and thanks to the dining room chairs I rescued from the dumpster, I also have a project lined up, so whenever I start to procrastinate or when doubts about whether the workshop is a good idea or not start creeping in, I work on the chairs and it calms me down pretty effectively, so it’s all good.

I smile and take a sip of the champagne I’ve bought and make a face. I guess there’s a reason you don’t hear more people say, *Give me a bottle of your cheapest champagne.*

Monica scrunches her nose and sits back down on the couch, pushing her glass far, far away from her.

“Really?” she asks.

I shrug. “I’m trying to start my own business. I’m poor.”

“So you asked for the cheapest bottle?” Monica guesses.

“I might have, but you see, cheapness is relative. Was it cheap for me? Kind of. Is it cheap for, say, people of Yemen? Probably not. So I guess what I’m asking is, why so snobby, Mon?”

Gray chuckles from his spot at the other end of the couch. He hasn’t said much since the beginning of the evening. Now that I think about it, he’s been kind of quiet the whole week. Not that Gray has ever been a raging extrovert, but even by his standards he’s been subdued.

“You all right?” I ask him quietly, moving closer to him as Monica and Ivo keep joking about my poor wine selection skills.

He smiles, but even that looks distracted. “Sure. Just got a lot on my mind.”

“Work?” I ask.

Gray has always been an overachiever, and working for his brother has only worsened that tendency. Growing up with Con as the father figure meant there was always the silent pressure to be perfect and do more than what is expected. Gray has always been on a silent quest to earn Con’s approval. It’s been going on for years, and watching it from the sidelines sucks because unless I want to open the floodgates and spew out every shitty thing I think about Gray’s brother, I have to stay silent and just be there for Gray.

Gray shakes his head. He straightens himself and forces a grin on his face that might fool everybody else but not me.

“It’s nothing. Just too many thoughts in a too-tight space,” he jokes, tapping at his temple. Then he downs the rest of his questionable champagne and stands up. “So we’re going out?”

he asks, drawing Mon's and Ivo's attention away from each other. "To celebrate," Gray adds as if it wasn't clear.

My sister's eyes light up, but I'm even more suspicious than before. Gray wants to go out voluntarily? The man isn't exactly a hermit, but he's definitely more of a homebody. Always has been.

Monica's fist lands against my upper arm, jolting me from my thoughts.

"You in, Kai?" she asks.

Gray is already in the hallway, throwing his jacket on.

I guess we're going out.

"You've never been bar hopping?" Monica stares at Gray like she's seeing an alien life-form.

Gray shakes his head.

"Not even in college?" Ivo pipes in.

Gray shrugs, looking a bit embarrassed. "I was usually studying."

"I guess it's decided, then," Monica says with the conviction of a general ready to lead the troops into battle. "Tonight, we shall barhop."

And that's what we do. The problem is that Monica has clearly decided to go a bit overboard in her quest to introduce Gray to the grand tradition of drinking in multiple establishments in one night.

By the fourth hour, we've gone through four bars, and everybody's buzzed. Well, half of everybody. Gray is a step

over that buzzed line, firmly on his way to drunk, which is interesting to witness. He's very talkative all of a sudden. Monica is not far behind Gray on the drunkenness scale because she's the one who's been doing shots with Gray to *give him the full barhopping experience.*

In the fifth bar, I make the executive decision to stay put until it's time to go home. We're also going to need water. Lots of it.

"Boo," Monica yells in my face after I've announced the plan to everybody. That's what I get for being the responsible grown-up. I'm not even going to address the surreal feeling of having your older sister boo you for not letting her destroy her liver in one sitting.

We take a seat in a booth, and I volunteer to go get the next round, which means a big pitcher of water in addition to the shots Monica demands I get.

By the time I'm back, the three of them are arguing about... cows, I think? Or beef? It's hard to say.

"Those cows get massages on the regular," Monica insists as I slide the drinks on the table. "Beer and massages. If I was reincarnated as an animal, I'd want to be one of those cows."

Gray shakes his head and raises his finger. "They do not get massages. Or, okay, some of them might, but it's not done to make the cows feel better. Your reincarnated cow-self wouldn't be living in some sort of a bovine spa. It's just that farmland is in short supply in Japan, so the cows can't just roam freely, and the massage is a way to make the beef more tender. They'd be preparing you for slaughter, Mon."

Mon shrugs. "Eh, it'd still be a massage on the regular. Better than being reborn as a coyote."

“I don’t know,” Gray muses. “You could roam, wild and free. Do what you want.” There’s a dreamy expression on his face.

“But massages, Gray!” Mon practically yells in his face as if speaking louder would get the point across better. Drunk-people logic is in full force tonight.

Gray just shrugs. “I don’t get why people go all crazy about massages.”

“How is that possible?” Monica asks.

Another shrug. “I don’t think I’ve ever had one.”

That makes even me gape at Gray, not to mention Mon and Ivo.

Monica recovers first. “Again. How is that possible?”

“Never had the time, I guess?”

“But... a massage,” Monica says.

Gray just rolls his eyes. “I don’t do a lot of things, so it’s not that surprising, really.”

Monica’s eyes widen as she looks around the table. “Ooh, you know what we should do?”

“Drink more water?” I suggest as I push a glass toward Gray, which he completely disregards in favor of the shot Monica hands him.

They all ignore me as Monica leans forward and says, “Never have I ever—” She thinks for a moment. “—hitchhiked.”

Everybody is tipsy enough that for a moment we all seem to have trouble catching up to what she’s suggesting, but then

Ivo takes a drink, and I cave to peer pressure and down my shot as well after Monica lifts her brow at me.

Gray takes his glass in hand and looks at Mon. “Do you drink when you have done it or not?”

“When you have,” Mon says.

“Okay.” Gray puts the shot glass back down.

“Really?” Ivo asks. “Never?”

Gray shakes his head.

“Me next,” Ivo says. “Never have I ever done a keg stand.”

I guess it’s another shot for me, and Monica takes another drink as well.

And so it starts. On the next round, I get beers for everybody instead of shots because I’m inherently a nice person, so alcohol poisoning isn’t something I figure should be on the agenda tonight, but even with beer, I’m starting to worry about my liver.

The questions turn increasingly more personal in nature, and I suspect come morning I’ll be regretting the fact that I’m learning way too much about Monica in the process, but pretty soon I’m too drunk to do more than give it a passing thought.

Never have I ever kissed a stranger.

Never have I ever gone skinny-dipping.

Never have I ever had a one-night stand.

It takes me a while to put my finger on it. I know something is off. I can feel it, but I’m a bit buzzed, so the brain activity has definitely slowed down. I watch Mon down another shot, and it hits me. Gray hasn’t taken a drink since the beginning of the game.

“Seriously, G,” Monica says and burps, interrupting my train of thought.

“Classy,” Ivo comments with a snicker, but she ignores him, her whole attention on Gray. “Not even in college?”

Gray shakes his head. “No one night stands.”

“You should!” Mon insists. “You so should. It’s fun. Trust me.”

“Hey! Sitting right here,” Ivo complains.

“No, I mean, you’re the best ever,” Mon says and pats him on the cheek, but she’s way past drunk already, so she misses the cheek by a lot. I think she might be seeing double because she keeps patting at the air until Ivo moves his face in front of her palm.

“If you think about it, we kind of started as a one-night stand,” Monica continues, and Ivo perks up.

“Oh yeah. Good for you for picking me up in that frat party.”

Monica goes in for a kiss and misses again, and I snort as I watch her almost fall out of the booth before Ivo catches her.

“One more,” Mon exclaims, undisturbed by her near face-plant. She sends me a sly look. “I’ve got a good one. Never have I ever had a threesome.”

I’m the only one that takes a drink this time as Mon whisper-yells, “I knew it!”

She stabs her finger dangerously close to my face, and I pat it away, afraid I’ll lose an eye otherwise. She just laughs and leans against Ivo.

Gray turns toward me. “You have?” I can’t decipher the look in his eyes. It’s almost as if he’s mad at me, which is weird.

“Of course you have,” he says with a shake of his head.

“I was in—” I try to remember the country, but I draw a blank. “What’s the one next to the other one?” I ask, looking from Gray to Ivo to Mon. “The one that looks like a rabbit?” I squint my eyes, but everything is hazy inside my brain. I snicker because I realize that squinting my eyes won’t make the brain-haze go away.

“Finland?” Gray supplies helpfully.

I snap my fingers. “Yes. I love you.”

Oops. That came out wrong. Ah well, it’s out there already, so I throw my arm over Gray’s shoulder and yell, “I love this man.”

There are at least three Grays swimming around in front of me right now.

“I really do,” I repeat, patting him sloppily on the chest. His really wide, firm chest. Is that a nipple? It most definitely is.

Although, even through all the alcohol in my blood system, I realize I probably shouldn’t grope him, so I draw my hand away.

“Good to know,” he says with a small smile.

It’s sometime around three o’clock when we decide to call it a night. We’re not that far from Gray’s apartment, so we walk home. The cool air helps a bit with the drunk situation I’ve got going on. Or at least I don’t feel the need to confess my love to anybody else anymore.

Our neighbors will not be happy about all the noise we're making as we stumble up the stairs. I should bake them something to apologize. Pot brownies make people mellow, right? I'm feeling very inspired about the idea almost immediately, but before I can suggest we go and gather some baking supplies, pronto, Gray pushes me into the apartment.

I vaguely remember that in the beginning of the night, I was the least drunk of all of us, but now it seems Gray has taken my initial position as the responsible one. It's too bad. He deserves to relax more.

"You should be really drunk," I tell him as I lean against the wall to get my balance back. Somebody really fucked up when building this place. The floors are stupidly wavy.

"I drank more tonight than I have in years. Does that count?"

"You should be stupidly drunk," I insist. "Really, really drunk. Like singing out loud drunk."

"I think it's time to go to bed," he says, which is not exactly a promise to go and do more shots, but I let it go and follow him to my bedroom.

Only when we get there, my bed has already been occupied.

"I don't remember there being so many people here before." I poke at Mon's cheek to wake her up. She swats at me half-heartedly.

"Go sleep on the couch," she mumbles. "We didn't fit."

I'm pretty sure I heard Ivo mention something about a hotel at one point, but clearly they forgot to actually go there. Neither of them has even removed their shoes in their haste to pass out in my bed, so Gray does it for them. He's even nice

enough to go and look for an extra blanket from the hallway closet and throw it on top of them.

I yawn and head back to the living room, but when I pass Gray, he grabs my arm and stops me. “Don’t be an idiot. The couch is uncomfortable to sleep on. We can share,” he says.

Together? In one bed?

Gray turns around in the doorway and looks at me. “I swear, I’m not going to hog the blanket. It was once, and I was twelve. You should really get over it already.”

I’m having a hard time figuring out why it feels like such a bad idea, so I follow Gray to his room, and after a little while, we’re both under covers.

I’m almost asleep when he sighs. The soft sound puts me on high alert immediately. I turn my head to the side and watch his profile in the dark.

“What?” I ask.

“What what?” he parrots.

I turn to my side, and even lying down, I manage to sway a little, but I get my balance back by pressing my hand against Gray’s chest. His very nice, strong chest with its soft hair that feels so much better without a shirt covering it and—

“Kai?” Gray’s amused voice makes my eyes snap up.

Oh. Right. Gray sad. Need Kai to make stuff better.

I pull my hand away and study the outlines of his body in the dark.

“You sighed,” I say. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he says after a moment of hesitation.

“Liar, liar, pants on fire.”

I can't see the eye roll, but I know it's there.

“What are we, five?”

“Just tell me. I'll fix it,” I insist. My statement loses some earnestness from the fact that it's followed by a loud hiccup, but I bravely power through.

Gray lets out a deep breath, and after another moment of silence he asks, “Do you ever feel like you've been living life the wrong way?”

“No.” I know this isn't the answer he's looking for even before I say it, but it's true, so that's what I say. We don't lie to each other in favor of unpleasant truths.

But in a very uncharacteristic move, Gray immediately tries to back out of the conversation. “Me neither. Never mind. Good night.”

He starts to turn to his other side, but I stop him with my palm on his side. “Whoa. Not so fast.”

“It's really late,” he tries once more.

“Better speak quickly, then.”

Another sigh. He's got a lot of those in store for tonight.

“Never have I ever done anything,” Gray finally says. The words are slow to come, like he's not sure if he wants them to get out. “I think that sums it up.”

“That's not true,” I say with a frown. “Look at you. You've got a successful career. You own a damn apartment in Boston at twenty-eight. I mean, that in and of itself is an accomplishment. A lot of people our age still share an apartment with approximately eight roommates.”

He snorts. “I actually have a roommate,” he says dryly.

“Yeah, but only one. My point is that you chose to let me live here. It’s not something you’re forced to put up with because you can’t afford your home otherwise.”

“Yes, yes, I’m responsible and boring. Those are the things people will love to reminisce about on their deathbeds. And don’t even get me started on how sexy my mortgage makes me. People just flock whenever I start speaking bank terms. 203k loan. Debt-to-income ratio. Fifteen-year fixed loan. Come on, Kai. I dare you to tell me you don’t want to jump my bones right now.”

My mouth is decidedly dry. I’m talking Atacama Desert levels of dry. This is not good. I force my mind away from anything related to jumping or boning Gray.

I push myself up to my elbow and stare down at his shadowy features. “What makes you say that? The boring-thing,” I specify. “Not the b-b-boning and jumping stuff,” I stammer.

Gray lifts his hand and rubs it over his face.

“I’ve never had a threesome,” he blurts out, and I’d be lying if I said that didn’t make my heart jump into my throat and start knocking at the walls of my neck there.

“Oh?” I say faintly.

“It’s... I’ve been thinking about it a lot lately. My life. I really am boring.”

“You’re not.”

“I am! My stories of my wild youth will be about how I stayed in the library past its closing time and got kicked out by the security guard.”

“Security? You rebel, you.” My attempt to lighten the mood fails as Gray shakes his head.

“Don’t mock.”

“That’s not what I was trying to—”

“Is it too soon to have a midlife crisis at twenty-eight?” he speaks over me. It’s like a dam has been broken. “Because I distinctly feel like that’s where I’m headed. I’ve let the best years of my life go by, and all I’ve got to show for it is an apartment and a job I’m frankly not even sure I like that much!”

A genuine hint of panic is creeping into his tone.

“Life is not supposed to be this unfulfilling,” he says, and I don’t know how I haven’t noticed that Gray feels that way. My only excuse is that I’ve been away for a long time, and it’s easy to hide the turmoil inside when your only point of contact are phone calls and text messages.

“I don’t want to be the boring asshole who hasn’t experienced life at all.” His voice has lowered to a whisper.

“You’re not,” I say fiercely, and I know he doesn’t believe me, so I lean over him until I’m practically on top of him. His eyes seem black in the darkness of the room. “No, listen. You’re twenty-eight. Not eighty. Not to mention, if we count your age in leap years, you’re seven, so if you want to try different things and have more fun, then you have plenty of time to do that. You’re not done yet. So you spent your twenties building your career and rocking law school. That’s a good thing. Nobody says you have to do life in a set order. You just got the responsible parts out of the way first, so now you can take some time to do other stuff, too.

“And stop with the best years of your life crap. The best years are the ones you’re currently living. Also, so what if you haven’t done a keg stand? I mean, we can if it’s been a lifelong dream of yours, but a lot of the dumb shit people do when they’re in college is not that great in reality.”

He just stares back at me, so I go on.

“Keg stands, by the way, suck. So do body shots. No sane person should do them. There are better ways to get drunk.”

“I can honestly say body shots have never been on the top ten list of things I’d want to try.” Gray sounds more like his usual self.

“Good. That means we can remain friends.”

“You would have dropped me just for doing a body shot?” He chuckles, and I can feel his chest move beneath me, the rumbling sounds of his laughter vibrating in his body, and suddenly I’m very aware that I’m halfway on top of him. My very naked chest is pressed against Gray’s very naked chest. I start to pull away to a safe distance, but I’m still more than a little buzzed, so my coordination is not something to write home about, and instead of successfully migrating to my side of the bed, I do a face-plant on Gray’s stomach.

Gray grunts, but a moment later, his whole body starts shaking, and then he starts laughing out loud.

“Graceful,” he manages.

“Oh fuck you.” I pinch his side, and the yelp he lets out sounds pretty damn satisfying, so I poke my fingers into his side as revenge and snicker as he squirms away from me, but I lean over him and hold him in place for better tickling access.

It reminds me of the play-wrestling we did when we were younger. Gray tries to retaliate, but I catch his hand and trap it

in mine. He huffs and tries to look stern, which is hard to do when you're laughing. And in the end, it's hard to hold him in place because I'm laughing, too, so he manages to push me off. I land on my back next to him, and it takes a long time for me to get myself under control. Even after a few solid minutes, huffs of laughter still escape.

In the end, Gray throws a sheet over my head as he gruffly says, "Just go to sleep already."

I smile as I settle in again. Sleep comes in no time.

GRAY

Having only recently come to terms with the fact that my life—and I, for that matter—are boring, it seems that I’m out to cement that fact because here I am, a day later, at work on a Sunday. I’m in my office to catch up on all the work I’ve left unfinished during the week.

Only I’m not working. For all intents and purposes, I should be worried about my recent lack of effort and my general lack of motivation.

Instead, I’m staring at a sheet of paper in front of me. It’s pathetic that I can’t even seem to do *fun* without meticulously planning it out for myself first, but here we are.

Then again, I’ve always been good at ticking through to-do lists, so this here might just be my ticket away from the suffocating monotony of my life.

I grab a pen and stretch myself. This is it. Unless I want to end up going through the most embarrassing midlife crisis ever in the near future, I’m going to need to make some changes. Do the things most people my age have already done. Try and create some memories of something other than studying and sitting in my office.

I tap the pen against the desk for a moment and take a deep breath. Here we go. I’m going to go full-on cliché and compile

a bucket list for myself. Only without the added component of death, of course. Maybe bucket list isn't the best thing to call it. It's supposed to be fun, not something I do in preparation of dying. The purpose here is to be happy, not to prepare for the end. So... I guess a happy list it is.

Seems like an apt enough title for describing the goal of what I'm planning here. My first attempts are borderline pathetic.

Crash a party? I don't really feel comfortable at most parties I'm invited to, so crashing one doesn't exactly sound like a raging good time.

Swim with dolphins? What the ever-loving fuck? First of all, I hate when animals are confined for people's pleasure. I'm also not a huge fan of swimming in general. Mainly because I don't know how, so the drowning factor takes some of the pleasure out of the activity. I scramble the sheet into a ball and throw it into the trash can.

My next few lists follow the same pattern of come-up-with-a-stupid-idea-throw-the-paper-in-the-trash.

I lean back in my chair and huff in frustration. Googling bucket lists does not yield any better results.

Pay off your mortgage? I contemplate adding it to the list, just because it's something I'll most likely accomplish, but then I remember it's supposed to be a happy list and not a manual on how to be boring. Too bad. I would have rocked the latter.

Stay the night in a presidential suite? Sounds like a super-festive thing to do alone. This is getting depressing now. Maybe I should abandon this incredibly stupid plan? It's unlikely it'll make any difference to the way I live my life.

And then I think of last night. I remember the uncomfortable feeling that started creeping up my insides when I listened to Monica, Ivo, and Kai laugh about everything they'd done in their lives, and I just sat there and realized with every passing minute that I had absolutely nothing to contribute because my existence is pretty much a row of uneventful years with nothing outstanding to report in a line of too many days that all look the same.

I had tried so hard not to rock the boat that in the process I'd forgotten that some motion was necessary in order to move at all.

Newly motivated now, I grab another sheet of paper and just start writing. *Don't think, just do* is going to be my new motto, and this here is the first challenge. I'm going to get that list compiled, and fuck everything else.

I arrive back home later to find Kai sprawled out on the couch. His mouth is open, his cheek pressed into the pillow, and he's snoring softly. I snort as I look at him. His hair is all messy, and there's stubble on his jaw. He's wearing just a pair of sweats and nothing else. For a moment, my eyes land on his bare back and the way it rises and falls in the rhythm of his breaths. The slight movements are almost hypnotic. I shake my head to clear it and leave Kai be as I go to get changed.

Kai's room is empty when I pass it, so it seems Monica and Ivo have already left. I pull on a pair of sweats and a T-shirt and go back to the living room. I'm willing to bet Kai hasn't eaten anything yet. He has lukewarm feelings toward cooking on the best of days, so I doubt being hungover has

brought forward a strong need to prepare a healthy meal for himself.

I inspect the inside of the fridge, and even though I'd really like to fuck with Kai and serve something like a salad, I'm not that mean.

The thought of what Kai's face would look like if I served him a bowl of salad during his hangover makes me snort as I grab all the necessary ingredients for homemade hamburgers and set them out on the counter.

About fifteen minutes later, I hear a groan from the couch, and then Kai shuffles to the kitchen. He drops into one of the chairs and just stares in front of himself.

"Still hungover?" I ask with a laugh.

"How much did I drink?" he asks. "I want to kill Monica. She made me. It's all her fault."

"You could have said no," I point out.

He sends me a disgusted glare. "Clearly you've never experienced peer pressure when it's executed by a sibling. Just a hint, it's ten times worse than the regular kind."

"Poor baby," I say as I slide a bowl of blueberries in front of him.

Kai stares at me with a funny look on his face until I frown. "Did you fall asleep with your eyes open?"

He blinks and swallows, pulling the blueberries closer to himself. "No." He proceeds to cram so many into his mouth that I'm beginning to think he's trying to choke himself. The hangover must really be a bitch.

I go back to cooking, and for a while we're both silent.

“Where’ve you been?” Kai eventually asks. “I woke up and you were gone.”

“You kicked me out of the bed.” I glance at him over my shoulder with a grin.

“I would never kick somebody as hot as you out of bed,” he says indignantly and grins. The blueberries must be doing their job because Kai sounds more like himself already.

“Good to know.” I laugh. “I was at work.”

“It’s a Sunday.” Kai sounds outraged.

I shrug. Weekends in the office are more of a norm to me than not. It’s the side effect of having no life.

“I needed to catch up on some things.” It’s a lie, but best friend or not, what I was really doing is too embarrassing to talk about.

A happy list.

I’m an idiot.

“Oh shit.” Kai winces. “That’s because of me, right? You’ve been helping me out so much lately. Why didn’t you say anything?”

I’m shaking my head even before he’s done speaking. “Don’t be stupid. Hanging out at your workshop is the highlight of my days, so don’t go and ruin it by insisting I stay away or some shit like that.”

“Then what is it?”

I shrug again. It seems to have become my go-to move. “I’ve just been distracted for some reason.”

There’s a beat of silence before Kai clears his throat. “Is it about what you told me last night?”

So much for hoping he doesn't remember. I turn around and lean against the counter, crossing my arms over my chest.

"About that. Can we maybe forget I said anything? I was a bit drunk and sleep deprived. It's not the best combination."

Kai keeps looking at me, his gaze drilling into me. I have to turn around to get rid of the uncomfortable feeling that he sees right through my bullshit.

"I don't—" he starts, but I speak over him.

"Do you want onion in your burger?"

"Gray," he says in a low voice, but I've already determined my pathetic quota is filled.

"Pickles?" I wave the jar in his direction.

"Can we just—"

"They're crunchy and delicious!" I shove the jar practically into his face.

He sighs. "Yeah, fine. Pickles sound great."

I slap the burger together and slide it in front of him, taking a seat across from Kai. He pulls the plate toward himself and inhales. The expression of pure bliss on his face makes me smile. He takes the first bite and lets out a low groan.

"You want some alone time?" I ask.

"You can watch, I don't even care right now," he replies as he continues to meticulously destroy his food with huge bites that make it look like he's eating for the first time in a week.

"Good?" I ask when he's done.

"Tell me there's more and nobody gets hurt."

I laugh as I push my own burger that still sits in front of me untouched toward Kai.

“You’re not hungry?” he asks.

I shake my head. “Go on. I ate at work.”

It hits me as I watch him inhale the second burger how good this moment feels. I’m a hundred percent relaxed, and my smile comes easier than it does with anybody else. I have no idea why that is, but I’ve already accepted that Kai is the only person who manages to make me feel comfortable in any situation.

I have no clue what to make of it, but maybe, in the spirit of following my new happy list, I should stop overthinking this and just *be* in the moment.

So I pull the bowl of blueberries toward me, lean back, and just enjoy the afternoon.

KAI

“Late, late, late. I’m fucking late,” I chant as I sprint through the apartment.

I’m starting to think I’m not doing this responsible grown-up thing right. I doubt anybody with a good level of maturity would forget they had a meeting about a small-business loan. I initially didn’t plan to apply for one, but on Sunday Gray sat me down after I’d recovered a bit from the hangover from hell and convinced me to at least consider it, so I scheduled a meeting.

And then I conveniently forgot said meeting, which leads me to this moment here, where I’m standing in front of Gray’s closet while he’s at work, because this is the only place in the whole apartment where there is a chance to find a pair of pants that don’t have holes in them. My own wardrobe seems to consist solely of jeans in various states of worn-out. It’s pure luck I have a best friend who is roughly the same size as me and has an affinity for suits.

Not that I plan to wear a suit. There are limits to what I’m willing to go through. But a nice pair of slacks should do the trick of convincing the people at the bank that I’m at least semi-successful at adulting.

I pull out the first pair my eyes land on and tug them on. A quick look in the mirror tells me that I look decent enough, so I dash out the door. I called a cab since I'm not dumb enough to hope the Hyundai will be merciful and cooperate with me today. I'm already cutting it close, so I have no time to deal with the crotchety nature of my car right now.

I slide into the waiting cab and give the driver the address, relaxing back into the seat once the car pulls into the traffic. I'm hoping I'll be able to make it, but unless I want to sprint through the city myself, I can do nothing else but wait now.

My hand slides into the pocket of the Gray's coat—also conveniently borrowed—where I stuffed my phone before I ran out the door. A piece of folded-up paper is stuck to the back of the phone. I frown as I unfold it. The paper has a lot of creases on it. Almost like somebody has scrunched it up multiple times.

I squint my eyes as I read the first line at the top of the paper.

The Happy List, it says in Gray's neat cursive. I blink as I consider the paper in my hand.

Okay, so I have two options here. The first is obvious. I shouldn't read this. I should put the paper back in my pocket and forget all about it. It feels like invasion of privacy to read Gray's words, but the second option—unmanageable curiosity—drowns out every decent thought that goes through my head as I move on to the next line and greedily make my way through what Gray has written.

Have more fun.

Take a risk.

Take a road trip.

Do something crazy.

Make a complete fool of yourself.

I frown as my eyes take in Gray's word. There are a lot of points to this list, varying from pretty ambiguous to more specific.

Change something about your appearance.

Find a hobby.

Get a massage.

I go through item after item, taking in... what? Gray's bucket list? Plan? Secret wishes? What really makes me suck in my breath, though are the last few lines. The three final bullet points are on the other side of the paper. It almost feels as if Gray wanted to hide them.

Have a one-night stand.

Do something sexually adventurous.

Have a fucking fantastic orgasm.

All I can do is stare at those three lines. My throat is dry. The words *fucking fantastic orgasm* circle in my head, and I want to storm over to Gray's office and offer myself up as a volunteer for that particular element of this happy list.

Would sleeping with your best friend be considered sexually adventurous? Fuck! I'm not going there.

I quickly turn the paper back around like not seeing the words would make them disappear from my mind.

A knock on the plastic partition that separates me from the driver jerks me back to reality.

"We're here," the driver tells me with an impatient voice. I look around. I haven't even realized we've stopped in front of

the bank.

I pay him and get out. The cab peels off and drives away. I'm still standing at the curb, the list clutched in my palm, thoughts moving in my head in disarray like a cloud of gnats.

It takes me forever to remember that I actually had a purpose for being here, and by the time I enter the bank, I'm more than a little late.

Things don't get any better from there. I'm distracted as fuck, barely able to pay any attention to what the loan officer is saying. Even that failed meeting doesn't jolt me out of the weird state I'm in, though. A half an hour later, I'm back on the street, slowly making my way to... fuck knows where.

Eventually, I find myself in a park, where I sit down and take the list out again. The paper is wrinkled. I brush my palm over it.

The words are still there. Things that Gray wants. Something adventurous. A one-night stand. A fucking fantastic orgasm.

My thoughts have gone all haywire, my insides chanting, *Oh please let's do it. Let's volunteer as tributes.*

The thoughts are accompanied by desires I thought had died a long time ago. It's ridiculous. Not even that. It's bordering on lunacy to even entertain those ideas, but I can't help it.

I'm being stupid, letting these hopes back in. It's ludicrous to think that if Gray just gave us a shot, he'd be so wowed by my sexual prowess that he'd fall madly in love with me, and we'd live happily ever after.

It's a dangerous thought that has no place being in my head. Things don't work like that in reality. It's approximately

a billion times more likely I'd just ruin our friendship.

I turn the sheet back around and concentrate on the first side. Gray's words from a few weeks ago come back to me so clearly that I almost feel as if he's speaking them to me again right here and now. *Do you ever feel like you've been living life the wrong way?* and *I've been thinking about it a lot lately. My life. I'm boring.*

Another glance at the list makes me smile. This is such a very Grayson solution to his problem. Make a list and tick the items off.

Although... I look down at the paper in my hand. Judging by the number of creases on it, I'm starting to think that there's a very real possibility Gray has talked himself out of following through with the happy list.

The guy doesn't give himself enough credit. He never has. There's so much he's accomplished in life already, but there has been a price, of course, so I can kind of get where he's coming from or where his mind must have been when he compiled this list of his because Gray does work a lot, and as far as I know, he wasn't exactly a campus party animal in college either. The fact that I suspect he wouldn't have enjoyed getting blackout drunk and doing body shots is irrelevant. If he feels he's been missing out, then that's that.

I'm a shitty friend for not realizing sooner that Gray feels that way. He has been there for me through my lowest of lows. When I was freaking out about the realization I was gay. When I lost my parents and my little brother in a freak accident after a carbon monoxide leak in our house. When I was dealing with survivor's guilt because that night I had snuck out to a party, arriving back home in the early hours of the morning, only to be confronted with a tragedy. When I felt guilty for

leaving Monica and Gray behind when I just couldn't bear to stay in Boston for a moment longer.

Gray was there for all of those. A steady presence and a port in the storm and a fucking cheerleader, urging me on when I was doubting myself. I don't think I can ever repay him for everything he's done for me.

But now I'm somewhat steady on my feet. Life is manageable. No great upheavals anywhere in sight. So maybe, just maybe, I can try and give something back. If fun is what Gray is after, I'm pretty sure I can show him a good time. In a strictly non-naked, non-dirty manner, of course.

I straighten myself. This is it. My chance to shine.

I can do fun. I can do risky. I can do adventurous.

And I can definitely help Gray with this list.

KAI

Another morning, another foray into shirtless breakfast preparation, but I power through because the way I see it, one day I'll be immune to Gray's body, and once that day arrives, I need to be able to pinpoint the exact moment it happened because there will be a celebration.

Besides, today is not that bad because I have prime distraction material. The happy list still occupies most of my thoughts. I spent half the night trying to figure out if I should tell Gray that I found it, but in the end, I decided against it. Not that the two of us are in the habit of keeping secrets from each other, but judging on how he has done everything in his power to avoid talking about his midnight confession, I suspect that bringing up the list would only make Gray clam up and refuse to even entertain the thought of following through with the ideas he has in there.

So I'm going to keep my mouth shut, and I'm going to help Gray with his list inadvertently and without being too obvious about it. What could go wrong? And I know that sentence is the highest example of self-sabotage, but not at this particular moment because my plan has absolutely no flaws and it's foolproof in its simplicity.

“We should do something this weekend,” I tell Gray as I slide glasses on the table.

“Sure. Do you need help at the workshop?”

I shake my head. “No. I think we both need a break from work. We should go somewhere. Do something fun.”

“What do you have in mind?”

I shrug, trying to be as nonchalant as possible. It’s dumb. Gray doesn’t know I know about the list, so anything I propose, he’ll just figure it’s something I want to do, and there won’t be any alarm bells blaring inside his brain, alerting him of shady dealings. Logic does me little to no good. Guilt is a bitch. I stomp it down. Gotta look at the big picture. Gotta make Gray happy.

“You want to go camping.” Gray stares at me like I’ve gone insane.

“Yes.”

“In March,” he says.

“It’s the end of March. Almost April,” I say dismissively.

“It snowed last night.”

“Which is perfect. Honestly, winter camping without snow is the worst.” Never mind said layer of snow has already melted into nothing.

Gray blinks like he’s trying to decide if he should contact the authorities and make an official complaint about his best friend’s mental state.

“But snow,” he repeats.

I guess it's time to bring out the big guns. "I used to go with my dad," I say. "It was our guys' weekend. I've been missing it a lot."

Gray squints his eyes at me, but I just stare back, portraying all the innocence of an angel. And not one of those fallen ones. Nope. I'm pure of soul. No manipulation going on here.

I might be going to hell.

"Please," I add.

"Fine," Gray finally grumbles. "I'll come and freeze to death with you."

"It's not exactly what I had in mind, but if that's what you want, we can certainly make that happen, too. We'll be like a remake of Rose and Jack. I'll push you out of the tent in the middle of the night and stare at you with sad eyes until you draw your last, shivery breath before I roll you down the hill and let bears do their thing with your corpse."

"Oh man, where do I sign up?" Gray asks. "This sounds like the experience of a lifetime. In that it'll apparently be the last one I'll ever have."

"You'll be fine. Mon has all the necessary gear, so we'll stop by her place and steal everything we need."

"You're a good brother," he says, sarcasm dripping from every word. "Not to mention a good friend. What the fuck do you mean you'll donate my dead body for bear food?"

"Think of it as a sacrifice. They won't want to eat me if they can feast on you. Besides, you'll be dead, so it's not like you'll mind."

“I just want it noted right here and now that you’re obligated to drag my corpse back to the city.”

I make a face. “But you’ll be all heavy and, you know, dead. I have a feeling that it’ll put a damper on my fun camping trip.”

“It’ll be epic,” he says in a stern voice.

“You’re just going to use me to cosplay White Fang.”

He waggles his brows. “I’ll be Lord Alfred, and you can be Henry. Just be a pal and don’t leave my dead body in a tree, all right?”

“Fine. If you insist,” I say with a mock groan. “So we’re doing this?”

“Sure. Who wouldn’t want a near-death experience, after all?”

I clap him on the back. “That’s the spirit.”

It takes us a couple of hours to get the preparations over and done with, and a small pit stop at Monica’s house, but after that, we’re on the road. We’re headed toward the Berkshires, since this trip has been kind of a spur-of-the-moment thing, and I know that area thanks to the aforementioned camping trips with my dad.

It’s late afternoon by the time we make it to our camping site. The sun is still up, but it’s the mountains, so once seven o’clock hits, it’ll start sinking fast. The plan is to get our camping site set up, spend the night, and then hike tomorrow before we head back home.

It's not the busy season yet. We've seen one other group of hikers, but otherwise we're pretty much alone in this place.

Most people prefer summer for these kinds of trips, but I've always enjoyed winter camping, too. First of all, the lack of people is pretty damn relaxing in and of itself, but I've also always enjoyed the fact that I get to see a whole different side of nature. The surroundings are a lot different from summer where everything is green and lush with life.

March is decidedly grayer. You have to be able to see the beauty. It's not so in-your-face as with some other months.

I look around and take a deep breath. I've missed this.

"For a city boy, you're a sucker for nature," Gray says as he comes to stand next to me.

"Kind of," I agree with a chuckle.

Gray looks around us. Our campsite is surrounded by tall trees. There's a lake about twenty feet away from our tent. The air is crispy and fresh, and I draw it in by huge lungfuls.

"You afraid you're going to run out or something?" Gray asks with a smile.

"I'm stocking up. You don't get that kind of oxygen in Boston."

"I'm not sure that's how it works, but knock yourself out."

"I think March might be the best month of the year." I take another deep breath.

"That's just crazy talk. The only people who actually like March are the kids who had the misfortune of being born in March, and even those poor suckers only like it because they're obligated by the birthday factor. Face it, March is the Martin Freeman of months."

A loud laugh escapes me. “And by that you mean that it’s vastly underrated and people are just too blind to appreciate its true value?”

“Okay, Martin Freeman might not have been the most appropriate example, now that I think about it. But what exactly is so great about March?” he asks, turning toward me. A glint of mirth is twinkling in his eyes. “March has disguised itself as a spring month when in reality, it’s the dying cry of winter.” He gestures around himself and the thin layer of snow that covers the ground. “Exhibit A. The moment February ends, we’re all pumped up with the sweet promise of impending spring, but let’s be honest, March is not spring. At best it’s a shitty preview, and at worst it’s a middle finger from winter. Nobody wins with March. It’s all withered and gray and plain or snowstorms and freezing temperatures you’re not equipped to handle because you’ve already packed away your winter coats.”

“Oh, I’m going to make you eat your words,” I say with a laugh. “You’re going to bow before me, and be all, ‘Kai, you are the master of knowledge, and your judgment is superior to every other human being on the planet.’ Just you wait. Soon you’ll be campaigning for me to be made king.”

“That’s just jinxing it. If nothing else, that tirade just now cursed you to lose,” is Gray’s less than impressed reply.

“You’re going to kneel in front of me, begging me for—” I clamp my mouth shut the moment my brain catches up to my mouth, and I’m bombarded with images of Gray on his knees. In front of me. Begging.

Naked. His wide chest exposed to me. I’d have the freedom to look my fill and take my time with him. My thoughts screech to a halt.

For fuck's sake! Not this shit again.

I've been working so hard to get over Gray. I cannot—will not—let those thoughts back in. I refuse. I freaking escaped to another continent to get over Gray, so I'm not going to jeopardize all that progress by imagining some stupid scenarios that will never come to fruition.

“Begging me for what?” Gray's amused voice brings me out of my thoughts.

“Doesn't matter. We should deal with dinner. It'll be dark soon enough, so it's best if we get all the activities that actually need daylight out of the way.”

“Okay.” Gray's voice sounds puzzled, but I don't give him a chance to address my crazy behavior as I take off toward the tent.

It's fine. This was just... a stupid echo from a long-ago time. Gray's list and especially the certain last three items have messed with my head a bit, but it's okay. The frantic, crazy heartbeat is slowing down already, and the foggy desire that clouded my judgment earlier is already clearing.

Nothing to freak out about here. I've just been very busy, which means that I haven't even had time to jack off, and I haven't slept with anybody in ages. My body is just sex deprived. That's definitely a thing, and I'm going with this theory.

Luckily, there's a simple solution. I just need to go out once we get back to the city and find a hookup.

I feel marginally calmer now. I haven't regressed and fallen again. I'm fine.

We light a fire, and we get a big pot of beef stew going.

It gets progressively colder as the sun dips lower, but neither of us mind as we sit by the fire and just talk about everything and anything.

We take a stroll by the lake while we wait for the stew to cook, and then we eat and watch the sun disappear behind the mountains. The crackling fire is making me warm and drowsy.

“Ready to call it a night?” Gray asks after a while. The fire is slowly dying, and it’s getting colder by the minute.

“Not yet.” I stand up, and without thinking, I reach my hand toward him. “Come on. I’ll show you something that’ll make you rethink your less than favorable stance on March.”

Gray grabs my hand and lets himself be pulled to his feet. I’m just about to pull my hand away when he stumbles behind a branch, so instead of letting go, I hold on. He steadies himself, but when we start moving, he’s still holding on to my hand, and I... do nothing. Gray doesn’t even seem to realize that there’s something out of the ordinary going on, but I swear my skin is crackling inside my glove. I even look down just to confirm nothing is actually lighting on fire.

I don’t need to overthink this. It’s fine. We’re just holding hands. No biggie. I’m a grown-up. I can handle some platonic hand holding. I’ll just... think of myself as a tugboat.

Whoop. Whoop.

I tow Gray toward a little clearing behind the trees that surround our tent. We stop in the middle of it, and I gesture toward the sky.

“Tada.”

Gray just stares and doesn’t say anything at first.

“Fuck me,” he eventually mutters. It’s good to see the sky is cooperating with me on this tonight. The moon is just a faint sliver in the sky, which means that it really lets the stars shine. And boy do they deliver.

The blue-black canvas is filled with millions of tiny lights. Neither of us get a lot of chances to see a sky like this. Living in Boston, the light pollution is heavy enough, so only the brightest of stars are visible, but here, in the total darkness of the night, even the tiniest of dots get their chance to shine. It’s nothing short of mesmerizing.

We stand still for the longest time.

My nose is cold and the tips of my fingers are freezing, but I’m not ready to move yet. I’m not willing to break this magical moment.

“Do you know any constellations?” Gray asks after a while. I glance at him. He has his head tilted back, his silhouette illuminated by the dim light of the stars.

“The basics. There’s Ursa Major and Ursa Minor.” I point them out. “And Cassiopeia, and I’m pretty sure I can locate Draco. What about you?”

Gray hums thoughtfully. “My grandfather had a telescope. He used to set it up in the backyard when I visited.”

“How did I not know that?” I ask.

“We’d just met. I wanted you to think I was cool. Granddad died right around that time, so astronomy fell to the wayside. Anyway, I’m pretty sure I’ve seen every constellation visible in the northern hemisphere at one point or another. I just don’t remember most of them. I think I can find Taurus.”

He tilts his head back again and scans the sky before pointing his finger up. “There.”

I laugh. “Dude, if I don’t know what I’m looking for, it all looks the same.”

He considers me for a moment before he moves behind me. I’m frozen in place as his body presses up against my back. He takes my hand and lifts it toward the sky. “See that bright star right there?”

I lick my lips as I try and produce some kind of a sound of affirmation. I do not succeed, so instead, I nod.

He moves our hands lower and then up again. “See, there’s a V shape. That’s the bull’s face. And that’s the shoulder.”

He points out all the stars, and I nod, but I hardly pay any attention because Gray is right behind me. So close that I can feel his breath against my cheek as he speaks. He says something about Zeus and a princess?

I hope there won’t be a test after this because I will fail. No doubt about it. Unless the test will be about how Gray’s body feels against mine. I’d pass that one with flying colors.

“Kai?” Gray asks. Still right behind me. Still so close.

What the hell am I doing?

I take a quick step forward and put some much-needed distance between us. I can’t stand here and lust after Gray. It’s pointless and hopeless and so fucking stupid.

“You okay?” Gray asks.

“Yeah,” I all but squeak. “Rightie-roo.” Did I really just say that? Jesus Christ. I clear my throat. “This was cool. Zeus. Taurus. Very educational.” I let out a shrill laugh. “We should

go to bed. Tent,” I quickly amend. Best not to think about me and Gray and bed in the same sentence.

I really need to get some shut-eye and hopefully clear my head. Morning will make everything normal again. Of course me and my sex-starved brain would get all hopped up on the intimacy of the dark night and stargazing. It was inevitable. But morning will come. There’ll be harsh, cold light and reality, and then I’ll be fine again.

There’s no other option.

GRAY

It feels like I've only been asleep for a couple of minutes when Kai shakes my shoulder. We didn't go to bed that late, but once we were packed into our sleeping bags, we just kept talking, and I have no idea what time it was once we finally nodded off. It's probably safe to say the new day was already a few hours old when we finally succumbed to sleep.

"Gray," Kai says. "Wake up. I've got something else to show you."

He sounds unnervingly chipper. Usually I'm the morning person, but we've gone through some kind of a role reversal in the last few hours because all I want to do is turn to the other side.

"What time is it?" I mumble.

"Five forty-five."

Jesus Christ.

"Go away," I say.

He just laughs. "Wakey-wakey," he says in a singsong voice a second before I can feel something wet in my ear.

My eyes fly open as I pull away from Kai. I glare at him and rub at my ear. "Did you seriously just give me a wet willy?"

He widens his eyes innocently. “You left me no choice. Would you have preferred a wedgie?”

“I dare you to find my underwear underneath all these layers.” I gesture down at my sleeping bag.

Kai’s lips twitch as he holds out a thermos. “Here. A peace offering.”

The only source of light in the tent is a flashlight Kai has hung up. I take the thermos and open it. The sweet smell of coffee hits my nostrils. I rub my palm over my face and wrestle myself out of the sleeping bag. The early morning air is cold as fuck, even though I’m wearing pretty much all of my clothes, except for the jacket. Even my boots are still on because otherwise they’d be ice-cold and my toes would freeze off. Why exactly did I think it was a good idea to spend the night in a tent in March?

“How long have you been up?” I ask Kai once my mind catches up to the fact that it’s time to face the new day.

“About twenty minutes or so.”

I look around the still-dark surroundings.

“Why exactly are we up before dawn?”

Kai flashes me a smile. “You’ll see.”

“Very mysterious.” I throw on my winter jacket and follow Kai out the tent.

It’s not as dark outside as it is inside the tent. There are slight hints of the nearing dawn in the sky. The blackness of the night is slowly being replaced by the softer blue hues of the early morning.

It’s cold enough that my breath comes out in clouds and my nose feels like somebody is continuously pinching it.

“Shit, it’s cold,” I complain.

“Let’s move. You’ll feel warmer then.”

“There’s a distinct possibility that my balls are going to freeze off.”

“Technically, your balls have to be cooler than the rest of your body, so you’re good,” Kai says.

“There’s a difference between cool and turning your nuts into icicles.”

Kai just laughs at that.

“Where are we going?” I ask as I follow him through the trees.

“Just up that hill over there.” He points to the shadowy outline in the distance.

It takes us about thirty minutes to get to the top of the hill Kai has chosen as our destination. It’s getting lighter, so I can see the lake below. The dark gray surface makes me feel even colder as we stand there.

“Okay,” I eventually say. “We’re here. Now what?”

“Now we wait,” Kai says with a serene smile.

“For?”

He turns his head toward me. “The bears, my human sacrifice. The gods are hungry.”

“Bears are your gods?”

He tuts. “Don’t kink shame, Grayson.”

I push him, and he starts laughing.

“I’m trying not to take it personally that you seem exceedingly fixated on this idea of letting bears eat me,” I

grumble.

Kai shrugs. “The heart wants what the heart wants.”

We stand in silence for a few moments before he nudges me with his shoulder. “You always have to have a plan and you always have to know what the next step is, but right now, we’ll just go with the flow. You can just be. There are no deadlines here, Gray. Just enjoy the moment.”

I consider Kai for a second before I turn my gaze back toward the lake. He’s right. I do always have to have a plan. I’m not even sure if it’s been a part of my personality from the beginning or if I’ve been conditioned to be like that by Connor, but it’s true that I always know what my next step is. I also always have a purpose. I don’t do things just because I feel like it.

Unless I’m with Kai. He always manages to dial down my pedantic, strict side, which is why I probably love every moment I spend with him. Always have.

We stand on the edge of the hill. Our shoulders are pressed together. Kai has his hands in the pockets of his jacket. The tip of his nose is red, and there’s a small smile on his lips. Kai is always smiling. Always happy. It’s as if that tiny quirk of his lips has been installed in his factory settings.

His hair is covered with a beanie. His cheeks have a few days’ worth of stubble. A few strands of hair have escaped from underneath his hat. Everything about Kai is achingly familiar, and I love that about him. He’s the person I feel most comfortable with in the whole world.

“There we go,” Kai mutters, yanking me out of my thoughts. His eyes are still focused on the lake. I pry my gaze away from him and glance toward where Kai is looking. The

sky has gone from deep, dark blue to purple that is gradually turning golden red. The first rays of sun are making their way above the horizon, painting everything around us with rich yellow hues.

I'm trying to remember the last time I looked at sunrise. I've gotten peeks of it from behind my desk at the office when I've started my workday early, but I've never really concentrated on it before. The sunrise in my office has always been just something my brain registers is happening, but it has never made me turn away from work.

Right this moment, I can't believe I've dismissed this sight so many times in my life. I don't think I've ever watched a sunrise just for the sake of watching it. Maybe I never would have if left to my own devices, but Kai has given me this moment here.

I'm not sure what's wrong with me or why this moment here affects me so much, but I suddenly feel like I'm lost at sea. No. Not at sea. I feel like I'm lost in my own life, drifting along, alone and pathetic.

But just as the realization hits, I also dismiss it because it doesn't ring a hundred percent true. I'm not alone. As if to assure myself of it, I slide my palm against Kai's and slowly wrap my hand in his. Kai's head whips toward our hands, and he stares at them for a long time, lips slightly parted. It should feel weird. I'm holding Kai's hand. But it's not. It feels good. Right. Perfect.

He looks like he's about to run away for some reason, but I can't let him. I need him. I need this moment. Otherwise I really am lost. Kai is the only thing that makes any kind of sense right now.

“Is this a part of your ‘March is the greatest month’ campaign?” I ask to distract him. I gesture toward the sun.

Kai swallows and turns his head back toward the magnificent view in front of us.

“Of course.” His voice is gravelly, and the sound makes me feel strangely aware of the fact that Kai has a very nice voice. Smooth and low and sort of... sexy. I blink. That’s a new one. Maybe it’s not the most common way to describe your best friend. And at the same time, it still feels right. I look away.

“So you decided to give me the sun and the stars to prove your point?” I’m determined to conquer the too-emotional-for-my-liking undertones of this morning with humor.

“Technically, I don’t think I can give you the sun. Or the stars, for that matter,” Kai says, pursing his lips. “The closest I could ever get would be to buy you one of those name-a-star certificates. Do you want one? Because in that case I have your next birthday present decided almost a year in advance.”

“Yeah, that’s a scam. Don’t waste your money.”

“Is it?” Kai asks with a frown.

I nod. “The International Astronomical Union names stars, and they do it by the coordinates because otherwise scientists would be confused as hell, so when you buy the right to name a star, only the company you bought it from will recognize your star’s name.”

Kai lifts his eyebrows. “How do you even know that?”

My cheeks heat despite of the cold. “I read stuff. You know how it is.”

Kai nudges me with his shoulder. “Did you buy somebody a star, Grayson?”

I avoid his knowing gaze. “I... might have tried.”

“Oh.” He sounds strange all of a sudden. “Who? Cecilia?”

I shake my head. “No. It was my grandmother,” I admit. “I was fourteen. It was a few years after my grandfather died. I thought it would be a nice way to remember him.”

Kai’s expression softens as he squeezes my hand. “It’s sweet.”

I shrug. “Yeah, well. Connor said it was a hoax and not to waste my money, so I left it at that.”

Kai’s mouth tightens at the mention of Con’s name. He’s not a fan. He didn’t use to mind Con that much, but something has happened over the years, and the relationship between Kai and Connor has gotten increasingly icier.

“It’s the idea that counts,” Kai says firmly. “I think your grandmother would like it. We could still do it, you know? Maybe just don’t mention it to your brother if he’s just going to be an asshole about the whole thing.”

I make some sort of a noise of affirmation. I’m in no mood to bring Con into this morning. I regret bringing him up at all, so I push him out of my mind and concentrate back on Kai, ready to change the topic.

“Top five,” I say.

He looks confused. “Top five what?”

“March. It’s in the top five.”

He smiles. “Yeah? I made you reconsider with my suave moves, huh?”

I nod. “Yup. You seduced me into liking March. Well done.”

Kai throws his head back and laughs. “Go me. I’m gonna have to analyze what I did there. I mean, if I can convert a firm March-hater such as yourself, maybe I can finally score myself a boyfriend with my newfound moves.”

An uncomfortable plummeting feeling in my gut makes me hold my breath. A boyfriend? My Kai in a relationship? No, I tell myself firmly. Not my. He’s just my friend. I should want good things for him. So, I’m going to do a second take. A boyfriend. I let the word settle in my mind. That’s... nice, I guess. Kai deserves somebody great. Somebody he can take on... dates and camping trips and do all sorts of fun things with.

Somebody who’ll replace me.

“Cool.” My voice sounds more like a croak, and Kai gives me a strange look. I smile. It probably looks more like a grimace. I don’t understand what’s happening with me. All I know is that at the mention of a boyfriend, a hot spike of something that felt like a mix of anger and jealousy shot through me. The unexpected cocktail of emotions has left an unpleasant feeling lingering inside me. I’m being an asshole. Kai is the best person I know. I should want him to find happiness.

“So... that’s something you want, then?” I ask hesitantly, not sure why I’m so reluctant to hear the answer. “A boyfriend?”

He purses his lips and looks to the distance. “I think I might,” he says in a soft voice. “It’d be nice to have somebody.”

What am I, chopped liver? I immediately want to ask, but I push the words down. The uncomfortable churning inside my gut is getting stronger, and I don't know what to do with that.

“Ready to get out of here?” Kai asks, seemingly done with that particular topic, and I support that decision one hundred percent.

I nod. “Is it just me, or is it getting colder?” I shiver. It's a beautiful morning. Not a cloud in sight, and the sun is slowly climbing higher, but instead of mild March weather we get a trial run of Antarctica.

“It's not just you. Let's get going. We can turn the heater up in the car and unfreeze our toes,” Kai suggests.

“Sounds like a plan.”

We hike back down to our tent and get in the car. I turn on the engine, and after a little while, the heaters do their thing, filling the inside of the car with a nice, toasty warmth. My toes and fingers don't feel like they're going to fall off anymore.

But as I look at Kai and think about the offhand comment about finding a boyfriend, the strange cold in the bottom of my stomach lingers.

GRAY

I stroll into the office on Monday and find my grandmother sitting behind my desk. She's eyeing me with a curious expression as I walk in the door and place my briefcase on my desk.

"Hey," I say. "What brings you by this beautiful morning?"

She cocks her head to the side and frowns as she looks at me.

"What?" I ask.

"You're smiling," she says and squints her eyes at me.

"Am I?"

"Yes." She keeps looking at me like I'm an alien life-form.

"Well," I say as I unpack my laptop, "people smile sometimes."

"Not you." She stands up, raises her finger, and pokes it against my cheek. "I wasn't even aware you had dimples."

I roll my eyes. "You're exaggerating. I'm not that bad."

"Aren't you?"

I don't say anything because I don't think I have a leg to stand on here.

“What brings you by?” I ask. I lean my palms on my desk and raise my brow at her. It’s not unheard of for her to stop by the office—my grandfather founded the firm, after all—but we usually meet for lunch at her favorite restaurant.

“You canceled on me yesterday,” she says, “so I figured I better check if you’re still alive.”

“You don’t sound too worried about my possible demise.”

“I showed up, didn’t I?”

I chuckle at that. My grandmother is a pretty impressive woman. She’s remarkably similar to Con in her realistic approach to life, but where Con often leans toward callous, my grandmother has this dry sense of humor that softens her sharp edges a bit.

She’s also eighty and wildly independent. Con has tried to talk her into getting a live-in housekeeper for a couple of years now, but Grandma usually just barks at him that she doesn’t need a damn nanny. I’m pretty sure she likes me as much as she does because I refuse to suggest anything of the sorts to her.

“I’m sorry about canceling our lunch date.”

“I hope you had a good reason, at least.” She’s not really mad. She just likes to give me a hard time.

“I went camping. It was sort of an impromptu decision.”

“It’s March,” Grandma says.

“My sentiments exactly, but Kai likes winter camping.” I find that I’m smiling again at the thought of our weekend. “It was actually great. Which reminds me, do you still happen to have Grandpa’s telescope?”

“I do,” she says and straightens herself. “He used to love that thing, so I kept it.” There’s a wistful look in her eyes. The thought of Grandpa always brings out her softer side. The man was the love of her life, after all. Grandpa balanced out Gran’s sharp tongue and straightforward approach to everything.

“Can I borrow it?”

“You can have it. God knows I’m not using it these days, so it’ll be good if somebody will. What does the telescope have to do with camping?”

“We went stargazing, and it reminded me how Grandpa used to take me out with the telescope. It’s one of my best childhood memories, and I want to try and recapture some of the magic, I guess? I could use a hobby. It’d help me balance my life a bit, otherwise it’s just work and not much else.”

“Good for you. You can stop by the apartment and pick it up any time,” Grandma says as she gets up from my chair. “Well, now that we’ve confirmed that you’re alive and well, I have to get going. I’m taking a class on creative writing, and it’s starting in thirty minutes.”

“Creative writing?” I echo as I follow her to the door.

“I watched one of those superhero movies a couple of days ago when I couldn’t sleep, and now I want to start a movie review site to bash it.”

“You need to take a creative writing class to do that?”

“How else am I supposed to come up with the best thinly veiled insults?” she asks as I help her put her coat on.

“You’re an English professor. Somehow I don’t think you’ll have a problem with that.”

“Perhaps not. But it’s fun to ask a lot of specific questions about grammar and style and such and stump the teacher.”

“You’re an evil woman.” My voice is suitably impressed.

She waves me off. “I’m just old and bored. Let me have my fun.”

“Promise me you won’t make anybody cry.”

She pats my cheek and gives me an affectionate smile. “You know I can’t make that promise. Besides, if the teacher is competent enough, he shouldn’t have a problem with the inquiring minds in his classroom, now should he?”

I make a mental note to contact the teacher and warn him about my grandma in advance. Okay, so the class starts in thirty minutes, so I’m probably late for that, but I’ll send him something nice to compensate for whatever Gran will put him through today.

“I repeat, you’re evil,” I say with a sigh.

She tuts. “Now, now. If I were evil, would I have come here to warn you about the dinner your brother is going to ambush you with?”

She opens the door and sails out of my office. I hurry after her.

“What dinner?”

Grandma stops in front of the bank of elevators and pushes at the button. She turns around and looks me up and down. “The friendly get-together he’s arranging to push you and Cecilia back together, of course. It’s on Friday. Mark your calendar.”

I rear back. “What?”

The elevator arrives, and Grandma steps inside. She turns back toward me.

“See? Not evil. Now you have time to prepare.”

I stare at her until the elevator doors close.

Damnit, Grandma!

I park my car in front of Kai’s workshop on Thursday evening and get out. I haven’t seen the man since we came back from our camping trip on Sunday. It almost feels as if he’s been avoiding me, but that’s just stupid.

He’s trying to get his business going, so it’s not like he can sit on the couch every night and entertain me, but I can’t deny that the apartment has felt empty without him. I’ve gotten so used to his presence that when he’s not around, I miss him. It’s strange. Kai has been traveling for the last decade, and sure, I missed him then, too, but now that I’ve gotten used to having him around every day, I suddenly feel his absence ten times more sharply.

The front door is propped open, so I walk inside. Kai is nowhere to be seen, but the loud rock music blaring from the back room gives a clear indication about where the owner of the workshop is hiding.

I make my way to the back and stop in the doorway. Kai’s phone is connected to the speakers. I don’t recognize the band that’s playing, but that’s to be expected. Kai has an exceptional talent of finding every unknown band in the world.

My attention is quickly pulled away from the music, though, as I let my eyes wander over the room, seeking out

Kai. He's nowhere to be seen, but just as I'm about to cross the floor to go and see if he's out back, the door opens, and Kai walks in. He has pulled the hem of his shirt up and is wiping his face with it, so he doesn't notice me immediately.

And I don't make a sound because my eyes have zeroed in on Kai's bare stomach and the way his muscles flex when he moves his arm. It's not the first time I've seen Kai half-naked. We pretty much grew up together, so I've seen him in every form of dress and undress, but I've never really *seen* him like I do right this second.

He's in great shape. All sharp angles and lines. He has a six-pack that wasn't there the last time I saw him without a shirt on, which was... I don't even remember, now that I think about it. It's been a while.

But I've felt those muscles, haven't I? My throat goes dry as the night we went barhopping tumbles into my mind like an unwanted guest. I've tried to pretend that night didn't even happen. The verbal diarrhea is embarrassing as fuck, but that's not what stumps me now. Instead, I remember the way Kai's palm had felt on my side. I remember how he smelled of tequila and his shower gel. I remember the way his hair fell over his forehead as he leaned over me.

But most of all I remember how he felt pressed against me, holding me down while he talked to me. How safe I felt. How calm he was, and how he managed to make my frantic thoughts quiet down like everything was suddenly okay in the world.

And I remember how his heartbeat felt against my skin. How a strange, tingly feeling ran up from the base of my spine, making me feel warm all over.

“Gray?” I blink and my gaze flies to Kai, who’s staring at me with raised brows. By the looks of it, he’s called my name more than once. “Did you freeze? Should I reboot you?” he asks with a laugh.

I shake my head to clear it, but it doesn’t help because I can still see Kai’s abs, and those bastards are distracting as fuck. I don’t know what’s happening to me. I’ve never felt this shaken before. I’ve made an art form out of being cool and collected, but that’s flown out of the window right now, it seems.

“I’m fine,” I say.

Kai doesn’t look like he believes me, but after a few more seconds of staring at me, he shrugs and lets it go, which thankfully distracts me from his body because Kai’s not the type of a person to let anything go. He’s like a hound dog when it comes to detecting when something’s wrong, and once he gets a whiff of something weighing you down, he’ll drag it out of you.

“How are you?” Kai asks as he moves past me and turns the music down. For some reason, he’s not looking at me, but instead, he starts walking around the room, fiddling with the stuff he has lying around here and there. I haven’t seen him in days, but it almost feels as if he wishes I wasn’t here.

Combined with the earlier part where I was... fuck, I don’t even know, checking out my best friend, everything feels very, very awkward. My thoughts screech to a halt. Is that what I was doing? Was I checking out Kai?

I can’t think about it right now. It’s too weird to contemplate while I’m in the same room with Kai, so I push that whole episode to the back of my mind and concentrate on my original agenda of turning Kai into a buffer between me

and whatever is expecting me tomorrow in that damn dinner date.

“No,” Kai says the moment I’m finished recounting what my grandmother has told me about Con’s matchmaking efforts.

“No what?” I ask.

He raises both his hands in the air. “I know what you’re going to ask me, and the answer is no.”

“Are you a mind reader?” I counter.

He rolls his eyes. “I might as well be. I’m not going to come to that dinner. Why would you even want me to?”

“Because with you there, Con won’t be able to do something drastic like lock me in the restaurant bathroom with Cee ‘by accident.’” I add the finger quotes, which makes Kai’s lips twitch before he catches himself and scowls.

“Your brother is way too snooty—oh, sorry, classy—to do something like that.”

“Shows what you know. Con’s been so invested in that relationship that I bet he’s already running tests to see which restaurant has the most secluded bathrooms so that no one would hear our screams.”

Kai snorts and shakes his head. “Maybe he’s hoping you’ll eventually get bored and decide to repopulate the earth,” he suggests.

I make a face. “I don’t think the earth needs our help in that department, so I’ll pass. But this is why I need you there. First of all, you can rescue me if you figure out I’ve been gone for more time than is strictly appropriate to pee. Plus, with you there, it will be that much more difficult to try and get me to

see the light and win Cee back with some sort of a grand, romantic gesture.”

Kai studies me for a long time. “You sure you don’t want to give that option a try?” he asks, looking to the side.

Why is he acting so weirdly?

“Umm... not really?” Even the thought stumps me. I haven’t really missed Cee like I should have, considering we broke off a two-year relationship. I miss her friendship more than I miss us as a couple.

“She still wants to get married,” I add, like my supposed anti-marriage stance is the only thing keeping us apart. I don’t know how to explain that the heartbreak I should be feeling just isn’t there and not because I don’t love Cee, because I do, but I’ve also come to realize over the last month or so that I’m not *in love* with her and maybe I never was. I think about her with affection and I definitely care about her, but I’ve come to realize that I don’t really like us as a couple. Isn’t that just fucked-up? I really am an asshole for not realizing it sooner and stringing her along the way I did.

Kai is staring at me from across the room. It’s not like we’re in each other’s space all day every day, but right now it feels like he’s putting up distance between us on purpose, and I don’t like it.

He looks down at his feet.

“Look, I’d do it if I could, but I can’t.”

“Why?” I frown.

He busies himself with pushing the random pile of stuff he’s been sorting through for the last five minutes back into its original place.

“I’ve got a date,” he says.

That uncomfortable feeling inside me is back full force.

“Oh,” I say as I consider this bit of information. “Somebody nice?” I’m not sure if that’s the right thing to ask, but the words are out before I can think better of it.

Kai snorts before he glances at me for a quick second and mutters, “God, I hope not. I’m pretty sure I vetted out anybody who displayed any signs of being gentlemanly and proper.”

I swallow hard as what he’s alluding to registers, but even though I suddenly feel like I want to smash something, I force myself to smile. Supportive. I’m being supportive. This is fine. Excellent. I’m very excited about Kai’s date. He deserves to have some fun considering how hard he’s been pushing himself to get his workshop up and running.

“That’s great,” I say, and I sound like somebody’s choking me. Kai seems to share that sentiment since he straightens himself and looks at me with a frown, so I send him a smile that most likely mimics the best efforts of Sheldon Cooper and add, “Cool.”

Kai’s still staring at me like I’m a puzzle with a few key pieces missing.

“Cool,” he finally says slowly.

I nod.

So cool.

GRAY

I don't know what it says about me that I'm expecting Con to actually show up on this meddlesome dinner date he's forced upon me because obviously he doesn't. Instead, I get an apologetic email just as I've sat down at the table he's reserved at the restaurant where we're supposed to meet.

He doesn't even bother to come up with a believable excuse. Instead, he cites an unexpected work emergency and leaves it at that, which leaves *me* to wait for a date with my ex-girlfriend, whose proposal I shut down in a very public manner. Lovely. Nothing can go wrong with that one, obviously.

Just in case, I hide the knives from next to Cee's plate. You can never be too careful.

The urge to get back into my car and take off toward Vegas or Alaska or even goddamn Florida is strong. Those are the places people choose to start a new life, aren't they? I could become a beach bum. I'll learn to surf and grow my hair long and adopt the excessive use of the word *dude* into my vernacular.

I don't get the chance, though, because Cecilia walks in the door, and her eyes immediately zero in on me. Climbing out

the bathroom window for a second time in so many months is probably not an option, so I stay put.

I'll keep the window in mind as plan B.

I stand up as Cee approaches me. She looks beautiful as always. Her blonde hair is twisted in a meticulous knot at back of her neck, and her dark blue dress molds to her body. She's tall and elegant and makes heads turn as she walks by. She's everything I should want, but as I watch her approach, I feel melancholy but not much else.

Cecilia smiles hesitantly as she steps into my arms. She places her manicured hand on my shoulder and leans in for a kiss on the cheek. She smells just like she used to—of expensive perfume. It's all very familiar and comforting right now when everything in my life feels doused in confusion.

“Grayson,” she says in that smooth voice of hers that I know so well.

“Cee. It's good to see you.”

We take our seats, and awkward silence settles between us. It lasts until the waiter comes to take our orders.

“How have you been?” I ask after it's just the two of us again.

She takes the lobe of her ear between her fingertips and rubs it for a quick second.

“I still have some of your things at my place,” she says instead of answering my question.

I can't say I've really noticed the absence of anything.

“Actually, that's a lie. I tossed them,” Cecilia adds after a second.

“Good riddance,” I say.

“Except for that signed Death Cab for Cutie CD. I’m keeping that.” She sends me a tremulous smile, and I don’t think I’ve ever felt like a bigger asshole.

“I never meant to hurt you, Cee,” I say quietly.

She blows out a long breath and shakes her head. “It’s fine. Well, not really, but I’m a big girl. I can handle it.” She looks at me and purses her lips. “Your brother, by the way, might be the world’s worst liar. Feel free to pass that information on.”

“Worst liar, you say? But he told me he had an emergency and couldn’t make it,” I say, feigning shock.

“Huh, he told me he forgot a previous engagement at the last minute. I suppose technically that can qualify under an emergency.”

“Does telling one lie to two people mean you’ve only lied once?” I muse.

“You’re the lawyer. You tell me.”

We both smile. Cecilia shakes her head. “God, it’s a bit pathetic when you’re pushing thirty and your ex’s brother has to play matchmaker for you, isn’t it?”

“I’ll drink to that.” We both raise our glasses and clink them together.

Cee places her glass down and meets my gaze head-on.

“Connor may not want to accept it, but I don’t want you back,” she says. “Clearly you don’t want me either, but I’m saying it in the interest of being completely, one hundred percent honest with each other and so there wouldn’t be any more misunderstandings.”

Like the time I thought you wanted to spend the rest of your life with me.

The unspoken words are clear as day between us.

“I thought I did for a while there,” Cee continues. “I guess that’s why I agreed to this whole dinner in the first place, but now that I’m here, I don’t think there’s really anything to salvage between us. I want the real deal and not the relationship equivalent of *Weekend at Bernie’s*.”

“You deserve somebody great.”

She nods and laughs. “Glad we’re on the same page.”

The waiter arrives with our food a moment later. Cee glances at my salmon, then at her filet mignon, and then at me, and raises a brow. It’s an olive branch if I’ve ever seen one.

“Half and half?” we ask at the same time and laugh as we go through the well-rehearsed dance of pushing half of our food on the other’s plate. That little homage to the numerous times we’ve done that exact same thing breaks another bit of the tension between us as we settle in and start eating.

The conversation is halting at first, but Cee and I were friends long before we started dating, so it’s surprisingly easy to slide back into that dynamic. The evening is almost reminiscent of the dinners we used to have when we were just getting to know each other. Slightly awkward, but there’s also warmth and a certain hopefulness in the air.

“Dessert?” I ask after the waiter has cleared our plates.

Cee nods. “Why not?”

We place our orders, and we’ve just settled in to wait when Cee cocks her head to the side and squints her eyes.

“What?” I ask.

“Is that Kai?” Cee asks, gaze trained somewhere behind me.

I whirl around so quickly that I get whiplash. Kai is standing at the entrance of the restaurant. He’s with some guy, but I barely register his presence because my gaze is stuck on my best friend.

He looks different tonight. For one thing, he’s not wearing his usual uniform of torn jeans, sneakers, and a threadbare T-shirt. Instead, he’s clad in a pair of dark gray slacks that I’m pretty sure originate from my closet and a white button-down with sleeves rolled up to his elbows. His hair looks darker in the dim light of the restaurant, and it’s combed back from his face. There’s an easy smile on his face as he says something to the man he’s with. I haven’t seen that smile in days.

“It *is* Kai,” I say slowly, gaze still fixated on Kai. Nervous energy is coursing through me the more I look at him. The guy he’s with presses himself closer to Kai, and my eyes zero in on the way he places his palm on the small of Kai’s back.

My shoulders stiffen. My stomach is filled with tentacles, twisting and turning and squeezing my insides.

“I didn’t know he was still in town,” Cee says.

Kai and his date are following the hostess now, and they’re headed right our way, stopping at the table next to ours. Kai’s eyes widen and he falters for a second when our gazes clash.

Cee is out of her chair and in front of Kai in a second. I push myself to my feet, too.

“Hey, you.” Cee beams at Kai.

“Hi,” he says as he hugs Cecilia. The two of them have always gotten along.

“You’re still in town,” Cee says.

Kai’s gaze whips to mine for a quick second. “I decided to stick around for a bit.”

Cee sends me a curious smile.

“You didn’t tell me that.”

I’m not sure when she figured it’d come up? It’s not like I could have texted her, *Hey, sorry about dumping you and by the way, Kai decided to stay.*

“You two must be over the moon, right?” Cee continues. “You guys have always been like two peas in a pod.”

“Yes. It’s great,” I say distractedly. Right now, I only have eyes for Kai’s date.

It’s not weird. I’m just curious about the person Kai finds interesting enough to spend the evening with. It’s what friends do. Besides, I’ve never seen one of Kai’s dates.

The sight is a bit underwhelming if I’m honest. Black ankle-length skinny jeans—guess he can’t afford pants that are an appropriate length. Weird, dark purple shirt. Blond hair in some sort of a pompadour, which looks pretty ridiculous.

I guess, objectively speaking, he’s kind of handsome. That is if you’re into the whole almost-thirty-and-haven’t-realized-you’re-not-in-college-anymore look. I, myself, would say it’s kind of stupid, but there’s no accounting for taste, obviously. And, hey, maybe he has a superb personality? I doubt it, though. He looks like he only wants to talk about keg stands and... frats and... partying. I don’t really understand what Kai sees in this guy. Where did he even find this dude?

“Gray?”

The sound of my name registers somewhere deep in the recess of my brain. I blink and turn to look at Cee.

“Huh?” I ask like the great conversationalist that I am.

“I said, we’d love it if Kai and Maximus joined us for dinner, right? Seems kind of silly to sit at tables five feet away from each other.”

Maximus? What kind of a fucking name is Maximus?

“It’s Max for friends,” the guy tells Cee with a smile.

Friends? Whoa, buddy! I’ve known you for a whopping minute, and I’ve gotta say, so far I’m not too impressed with what I’m seeing, so I’ll hold off on that friend label for now, mkay?

“We really don’t want to interrupt,” Kai says and widens his eyes at me as if asking me to save him from this mess, but that would be irresponsible of me. As Kai’s best friend, I should definitely vet this Maximus to save Kai from future trouble. It’s what friends do.

“So, we’ll jus—” Kai starts to say.

“We’d love it,” I blurt out. “A double da—outing. With three friends. And Max.” I move over and clap the man on the back once. “That sounds like a spectacular way to spend the evening. What could be better?”

“I can think of a few things,” Kai mutters. “You two have clearly already eaten,” he says more loudly.

“The portions are minuscule; we can go another round. Saves me the trip to McDonald’s later,” I say, earning a stink eye from the passing waiter.

I ignore him as I steer Kai’s date toward our table and push him down to a sitting position.

Kai stomps toward me with a sour look on his face. Some people really don't appreciate the lengths I go to in name of friendship.

We all settle in. Kai is glaring at me, his date looks a bit uncomfortable, and Cecilia seems to regret suggesting anybody should ever eat dinner at all. It's the beginning of a beautiful foursome.

"Have any of you been to this restaurant before?" Cee asks, her good manners kicking in.

Maximus places his arm on the backrest of Kai's chair and smiles at him. "No. But a friend of mine is a food critic, and he's talked this place up for a while now. I was just waiting for somebody perfect to come here with me."

Jesus Christ. I look at Kai, ready to see an eye roll, but instead of acknowledging the stupid-ass amount of cheese that was just spewed out, Kai just smiles at the guy.

I motion toward the waiter and order myself a whiskey. I have a feeling I'm going to need it. Cee raises her brows at me.

"Since when do you drink whiskey?"

"I'm giving new experiences a shot," I say offhandedly as I place my elbows on the table and lean forward. "So, Maximus, was it?" I ask and earn myself another murderous glance from Kai. I should probably start a tally.

"Please, call me Max. Maximus makes me sound like I'm a cast member of *Gladiator*. I don't know what my parents were thinking," the guy says, a friendly smile fixed on his face.

"So it's Max, then?" I confirm. "Like... Grinch's dog?"

“Gray!” Cee says loudly. I don’t know why she looks so shocked by my successful application of mnemonic devices.

“Another drink?” Cee asks, pushing a water glass in front of me.

“Oh, sorry,” I say. “I thought we were aiming for movie-related jokes.”

Judging by the narrow-eyed look Kai sends my way, he doesn’t believe my sincerity.

“Where did you two meet?” Cee asks and presses her heel on top of my shoe. I really don’t know what her problem is. We’re having fun getting to know each other. I mean, just look at us. We’re already teasing each other. Like friends do. I’m merely contributing to our bonding session with my friendly ribbing.

“We met online,” Max says. “I emailed Kai about him possibly building me a bookshelf, and we started chatting, and now we’re here to find out if the connection holds in real life.”

“Connection?” I make a face. Max really needs to lower the level of corniness if he wants to stick around.

The heel drills into my toes again. I move my chair further away from Cecilia.

“That’s sweet,” Cee says pointedly.

There’s more cheese here than in a cheese factory, but yeah, okay, let’s call it sweet.

Max covers Kai’s hand with his and gives him an affectionate smile. “He really is.”

Oh puke.

The whiskey arrives right at that moment, so I grab it from the waiter's outstretched hand and take a healthy swig.

When I lower the glass, I find Kai and Cee staring at me.

"Online," I say, ignoring Kai and Cee. "Lots of perverts there these days, I hear. And scam artists. Identity theft is also rampant."

Kai hits my leg under the table. What is it with people trying to ruin my ability to walk tonight?

"I'm just messing with you," I add to Max and stretch my lips into something that hopefully resembles a smile. I wouldn't want to be rude to my best friend's date, after all.

Said best friend, on his part, looks like he's trying to smile through the pain of wisdom teeth removal.

He lets out a tension-filled chuckle and turns toward me. "Can I talk to you for a sec, Gray?"

He seems pissed off. The date must not be going so well. Looking at Max, I can kind of see why.

"Gray," Kai snaps.

I shake my head. There's no need for us to be rude to Max by leaving him here alone. It's not his fault he's so... annoying.

"I'm good. I'm sure whatever it is, we can talk about it later at home."

Cee whirls toward me. "At home?" she repeats.

"Kai's living with me," I say distractedly. "So what do you do for a living, Max?" I continue.

"I'm doing my PhD in sports medicine," the guy says. "But I dabble in photography on the side. I actually offered to

take some photos of Kai's art once he has more pieces ready."

"Photographer," I repeat. "The real kind or the I-own-a-smartphone kind?" It's important to know those things. I wouldn't want Kai to end up going out with some asshole who only wants to take advantage of him.

Now both Cee and Kai are glaring at me.

"Gray!" Cee says loudly.

"What?" I raise my brow at her.

"Maybe tone it down?" she suggests through clenched teeth.

"Oh. Was I being rude?" I raise my hands in the air. "Sorry, sorry. My sense of humor is not for everybody."

"It's fine," Max says, but he scoots his chair back a bit and gives me a weird look. People these days. So sensitive to some light teasing. I don't think this guy is going to fit our dynamic.

"And to answer your question," Max continues, "I'm not a professional. I just enjoy capturing beautiful things and moments of life."

"That's fascinating." Cee jumps on that topic with a desperation of a shipwreck survivor who sees a lifeboat. "I've always been interested in photography!"

"Since when?" I ask.

"Since always," Cee says through her teeth. "Remember we went to that gallery opening last year?"

I roll my eyes. Kai gives me a warning look before he turns his attention back to the conversation.

"Max's travel photos are incredible," he says. "We were actually in Spain at the same time, it turns out. You should

hear some of his stories.”

“I’ve only scratched the surface,” Max says with a laugh.

Show-off.

I down the rest of my whiskey. I don’t get it. That’s who Kai finds attractive? I mean, objectively speaking, I guess Max isn’t totally off-putting, but he doesn’t seem like Kai’s type. Not that I really know what Kai’s type is. He’s never introduced me to any of his boyfriends, and he’s been single for as long as I’ve known him. This is the first time I’m seeing him with a date.

It’s possible I just don’t know what Kai’s type is. I look at Max again. He’s in the middle of some kind of a story about the time he got robbed by a gang of monkeys when he was in Indonesia.

I guess he and Kai have at least one thing in common. They both love to travel, but I mean, so do I. I’m adventurous. There was that time I went to London. On that patent law conference. That was one crazy week... of nonstop lectures and networking. Maybe that’s not the best example of my carefree, devil-may-care attitude that I definitely excel at and that fits so well with Kai’s personality.

Still, that doesn’t prove anything. I *could* be adventurous and crazy. I probably have it in me. I just haven’t had the time to test out that side of my very interesting and multifaceted character yet, what with all the long days and nights spent in the office. My point is, I’m interesting, too! I’ve got a lot to offer to Kai—I mean, to a potential date.

Unlike Max. He’s definitely one of those people who’s all bells and whistles. No substance to be found here.

“Have you had the chance to stop by Kai’s workshop? He has those old dining room chairs he’s restoring. It’s fascinating to watch him fix up something that somebody else deemed worthy of a trash can,” Max tells Cee. “I almost felt compelled to steal those. I just moved into a new apartment, and the place is empty.”

What the hell?

“He’s been to the workshop?” I whip my head toward Kai.

Kai gives me another one of those strained smiles he seems to have reserved just for me tonight. “Max needs a bookcase. He stopped by to see my work.”

“Doesn’t he know how to use a computer and look at photos?” I ask.

“Some people like the in-person approach,” Kai grits out.

“Taking him out to dinner to make a sale seems a tad excessive.”

Kai pushes himself up from his chair so suddenly that the chair clatters to the floor. “I just remembered I forgot to lock the workshop’s front door. We should go there immediately and check if everything is okay.”

Finally. Kai’s sanity has returned. Bye-bye, Maximus.

I push myself to my feet. “That’s too bad. But definitely an emergency. Well, we should go and lock it.” As far as excuses go, this one is pretty good. Believable. It’s much smoother than when you let your friend call you in the middle of the date with some lame story about a car accident to get out of there.

“No!” Kai says. “You will stay here. Max and I will go.”

I gape at him. “But—”

“Stay!” Kai snaps.

That tone is definitely uncalled for. What next? Heel?

Max’s smile is apologetic. “Excuse us. It sounds like we’re going to have to try this again some other time. It’s been very nice to get to know Kai’s friends.”

What a suck-up.

“Bye!” Kai says without looking at me as he grabs Max’s hand and drags him out of the restaurant as if the place is going to go up in flames any moment now.

“Well, that was weird,” I say as I sit back down. I turn toward Cee and find her staring at me with her mouth open.

“That was weird, right?” I prompt.

“Oh my God,” Cee says slowly, still gaping at me.

Seems like an appropriate reaction, so I nod. “Right? That guy? What kind of a name is Maximus? And the whole *I have a fancy apartment. Make me a shelf, Kai* shtick? It’s a firm contender for the dumbest pickup line in the history of the world.”

I admit, my imitation isn’t the best, but I think it gets my point across.

Cee looks like she’s just had a lightbulb moment.

“What?” I ask after she still doesn’t say anything.

She lets out an incredulous laugh.

“Oh my God,” she repeats. “You’re jealous.”

I rear back. “Wh— Tha— Ho— That’s ridiculous,” I finally manage to sputter.

“Is it?” Cee leans back in her chair. She looks like she’s just solved the crime of the century. “This all makes sense now. You have feelings for Kai.”

“I’m—” I start to argue, but Cee speaks over me.

She slaps her palm on the table, making the glasses clatter. “I can’t believe I didn’t connect the dots before.”

“There are no dots.”

She waves her hand dismissively. “Fine, signs, whatever. They’re all there.”

“Will you stop it,” I grit out. “You’re making this all up. Kai’s my best friend. That’s it.”

“Oh please.” She laughs loudly. “I’ve been in your spot, Gray. Believe me, I recognize the signs.”

“There. Are. No. Signs.”

“What did you think of Max?” The sudden change of topic makes my head spin.

“What?”

“It’s a simple question. Did you like Kai’s date?” Cee asks.

The word *date* makes the tentacles in my gut wrap around my lungs and squeeze.

“He was... adequate,” I say, measuring every word.

“You didn’t think he was cool? Sophisticated? Well traveled? Don’t even get me started on a PhD in sports medicine. The man must be a genius.”

“Sounds like somebody else might be having a little crush,” I say dryly.

“I think he and Kai will really hit it off. They seem to have a lot in common. Plus, Max seems fun,” Cee muses. “Kai deserves some fun, right? Max seems like a real catch. I’m happy for him.”

Unbelievable.

“I’ll give you well traveled, even though I’d like to point out that we have no proof of that aside from the fact that he bragged about living abroad. He can just as well be lying about that, but whatever. But you can’t *seem* fun. You either are or you aren’t, and Maximus definitely wasn’t.”

“Hot, too,” Cee continues like she isn’t even listening to me. “Really nice hair. Supposedly blonds do it better, so Kai is in for a great night, I think.”

“Do what better?” I grit out. “That doesn’t even make any sense.”

“And that body...” Cee fans herself with her hand. “I bet Kai will get a kick out of those abs.”

I’m immediately bombarded with images of Kai and Max together. Rolling on a bed together and moaning like in some sort of a sleazy porn scene. The tentacles in my stomach feel like they’re creeping up to my throat, choking me.

I grab the first glass I can reach and almost drown myself with the large gulp of water I try to force down.

One coughing fit later, I lean back in my chair, trying to get a control of myself, only to find Cee studying me with a raised brow.

“You really don’t see it, do you?” she asks.

“What the hell am I supposed to see?” I snap. “You’re inventing something in your mind that isn’t there.”

She shakes her head and lets out a mirthless chuckle. “Jesus Christ, Gray, get a freaking clue! The moment you saw Kai tonight, you weren’t able to take your eyes off him. You acted like a jealous ass because—news flash—you actually were jealous. And an ass, but that’s beside the point. And don’t even get me started on the fact that you obviously feel something for Kai. I’m starting to think this may have been going on for years, and you’re just too dumb to have noticed.” She takes a deep breath, but she’s not done yet.

“You two are constantly watching each other. The only time you really seem carefree and happy is when Kai is around. We were together for two years and not once did you act like you did tonight when somebody flirted with me. Hell, that lawyer at your office Christmas party was practically shoving his number in my face, and you didn’t even notice! But Kai comes in with a date, and you immediately look like you want to kick Max’s ass. At one point I was actually considering removing all the knives from your vicinity because you looked like you were contemplating murder.” She takes a deep breath, and when she speaks again, her voice sounds marginally calmer. “Wake up and smell the feelings, Gray, because you’ve caught some.”

Before I can even begin to compute everything she has just said, Cee gets up from her chair and grabs her purse.

She lowers herself toward me. She looks both sad and determined at once. Kind of like she’s about to kick me in the nuts and then cry.

The kiss that lands on my cheek is unexpectedly soft.

“Don’t be a coward, Gray,” she says, and then she just walks out of there, leaving me sitting at that table, trying to make some sense of what just happened.

Jealous. Cee thinks I'm jealous.

This can't be right.

Can it?

KAI

I storm into the apartment, ready to give Gray a piece of my mind, only he's not here. I stomp through the living room, pissed off and confused as fuck. I have no clue what happened tonight. One moment I was out on a date with a nice man who, while not making my heart go all crazy, was actually pretty interesting to talk to. Max was nice and fun and easygoing. Not to mention hot.

And I felt absolutely nothing. No spark. No chemistry. A big ol' bucketful of nothing. But that's beside the point.

Gray certainly felt enough for the both of us. Too bad all his feelings fell firmly under the antipathy umbrella. It was surreal, really. And it isn't like Gray is some happy-go-lucky guy who's never met a person he doesn't like. It's just that he's usually so subtle and polite about it that people don't even understand they've been given the cold shoulder. He's like a Southern belle in that regard.

Tonight his behavior came completely out of the blue, though. I've never ever seen him like that, and I'm not even sure if I should yell at him or if I should be worried that there's been an alien takeover.

I huff and take a seat on the couch, throwing my head back and staring at the ceiling. It's been a long day. I close my eyes

for just a second.

The next thing I know, I feel a weird tingle at the back of my neck that makes me open my eyes, only to find someone's face inches away from me, staring at me.

“Aaah!” I yell as I scramble back before my brain catches up to the fact that it's Gray.

“Jesus Christ,” I pant. “What the hell are you doing?”

Gray has pulled back with an apologetic look on his face. “Sorry. I was just...”

“Just trying to see if you can shorten my life by a few years?” I grumble as I rub the heels of my palms over my eyes to get some brain activity going.

“What time is it?” I ask through a yawn.

“A little after three.”

“In the morning?”

He snorts and gestures toward the darkened living room window, as I yawn once again.

“Where have you been?” I ask as the events of the night are slowly starting to come back to me.

He shrugs. “A bar. I needed some time to think.”

“With Cee?” I ask slowly. I don't know if I want to hear the answer to that. I don't know if I can take it right now if Cee and Gray have patched things up again.

He shakes his head. “Cee left a little after you did.”

I hate that I feel relieved at that.

Gray sits down next to me and leans forward, elbows on his knees. He rubs at the back of his neck.

“How was the rest of your date?” he asks after a while. He glances at me from the corner of his eye, and I can’t help but raise my brow at him. He lets out a strained chuckle and looks away.

“Fuck,” he says. “I’m sorry. I was a dick, and... there’s really no excuse.”

I consider him for a moment.

“Yeah, okay. But I still don’t understand what happened back at the restaurant.”

Gray stares at his fingers, tapping the pads together before he glances at me.

“Cee thinks I’m jealous,” he says, and his jaw clenches.

My heart skips at least five beats and then starts working overtime.

“Oh?” is the only brilliant reply I can come up with. I feel hot all over and sort of like my internal organs are making their way upward inside me.

“She might be right.” He refuses to meet my gaze, staring straight in front of himself.

He drags his hand through his hair and just sits there with his fingers clutching the back of his neck. I’m dying to slide my palm over his back. To comfort him somehow, but I don’t dare make a move. Something is happening inside Gray. Whatever Cee told him, a seed of something has been planted. A stupid sense of hope starts making its way forward inside me, even though I don’t want it.

This is not real.

What Gray feels is not real jealousy. It’s not something he feels because he wants to date me himself. He’s just jealous of

the time I spend with Max instead of him. It's a friend zone jealousy, and I need to get that through my thick skull.

"It makes sense," I say.

Gray turns his gaze back to me.

"How, exactly?"

I shrug and hope to God I look nonchalant. "Look, we've been best friends for ages, and now that we're living together, we're practically in each other's pocket all the time. It just makes sense for you to feel all weird when you happen to see me with a date. Jealousy doesn't have to be in the romantic sense. If Max and I work out"—highly unlikely, but that's not the point right now—"I'll be spending a lot of time with him, and he'll have a pretty big part to play in my life. It's pretty natural for you to feel iffy about him. I'd be the same way if you went and got yourself a girlfriend."

At least that last part is pure experience speaking. The green-eyed monster was having a field day when Cecilia and Gray started going out, and I didn't even have to watch Cee and Gray get closer. Oh, no. I made good and sure that I was far away from the States during those first few lovey-dovey months when couples are glued together twenty-four seven.

Gray frowns as he listens to what I have to say.

"Sure," he eventually says, but he doesn't look like he's happy with what he's hearing.

God damnit! I've been so careful for years not to let my ill-advised crush ruin our friendship, so whatever Cee told him, this is not going to be our downfall. It would be the most sadistic prank from fate ever if our friendship would now be doomed not because of my crush but because Gray gets

confused and starts avoiding me or gets so uncomfortable because of it that it'll break us.

I can't let that happen. Gray is the most important person in my life. This is not going to be something that'll fuck us up.

"Maybe you should get back out there, too." The words leave my mouth in a rush. Gray looks at me like I've just suggested he should spend the rest of his days as a male gigolo.

"I bet Mon has some friends we can introduce you to."

I'm pimping out my best friend. Fantastic.

"Maybe set up a profile for you on a dating site?" I suggest.

"Or we can just go out to a bar," I continue. "I can be your wingman." As a proud driver of the crazy train, I'm all committed to moving this thing along.

Gray looks totally perplexed. "Why?"

So we could go back to the status quo, and I wouldn't have to deal with that fucking useless fluttery hope inside me.

I shrug. "Just 'cause."

No wonder I never made the debate team.

"Besides," I continue, "if we do this, you can cross another item off your list."

Gray's head whips toward me so fast that I almost expect it to detach from his neck and roll across the floor like a bowling ball.

"What list?"

My eyes widen as I realize what I'd just let slip.

Sleep deprivation, you fucking bitch.

“Just... the general list of life.”

Gray narrows his eyes. Yeah, there was no hope of him ever going with that nonsense.

“Kai,” he says. He has the tone of a strict parent down pat.

“Gray,” I retort, but if guilty had a voice, it’d be me right now. We stare at each other for a few seconds before I fold like a cheap suit.

“I may know about the happy list.”

Gray blanches. “How?”

“I may have borrowed your jacket and found it in one of the pockets?” I say, my voice going higher at the end there.

“Oh shit,” he says weakly, and I can already tell he’s trying to remember everything he wrote down to try and determine exactly how embarrassed he should be.

“When?” he asks.

“Umm... a couple of weeks ago when I had that small-business loan meeting.”

Gray’s brain is working overtime. It’s all over his face.

He swallows hard. “The camping trip?” he finally says. I should have figured he’d connect the dots.

“Okay,” I say. “The idea may have popped into my head because of the list, but it’s not like spending time with you is exactly a chore for me.”

Gray gets up from his seat and starts pacing back and forth in front of the couch.

“Holy shit.” He rubs his palm over his face. “This is fucking embarrassing.”

I’m up like a bolt of lightning and step in front of him.

“It’s the furthest thing from embarrassing. Hey.” I grab onto his shoulder and stop him. “We don’t get embarrassed with each other. Dude, you’ve seen me at my worst, and at my most pathetic. May I remind you of the time I found out Matt Bomer was taken, and I made a complete ass of myself by getting completely wasted and asking everybody I saw that night if they had Matt Bomer’s phone number? I promise you nothing you want or wish is going to make me think you’re crazy.”

He regards me for a few moments.

“I get turned on by imagining I’m having sex with an alien,” he says with a completely straight face.

I let out a deep breath. “Oh my God! You too? I thought I was alone in this. Do you also decorate your bedroom to look like Area 51? Because I can get you the number of the guy who sells the best alien paraphernalia. I have just two words for you: tentacle dildos.”

“Oookay,” Gray says, and I have to hand it to him, he almost manages to look supportive. My lips twitch, and Gray smacks me over the back of my head as he shakes his head and chuckles.

“Asshole,” he says, but there’s affection in his tone.

“You started it.”

His face turns serious again. “Is there any chance we can forget about that damn list? I have.”

I measure him with my gaze. “We could, but I don’t think we should. Come on, Gray. You want those things. You want to have more fun, and you should get that, so you should do it. Do the list.”

Of course, then I remember that not the entire thing was PG-13, but whatever, I’m already committed to the happy list anyway, so the whole challenge, really, is to make sure Gray follows through. It’s not like I have to do those things myself. I’ll be the cheerleader and the power that nudges him on if he gets stuck in his mind. We all need that from time to time—a person to cheer us on when going gets tough, and I can definitely be that person for Gray.

“I don’t even remember what was on the list,” he says.

“Lucky for you I have the original. Plus, it’s not like you have to follow that thing verbatim. We’ll just take some time and have some fun. It’ll be great,” I say with a nod.

“Sure,” he mutters. “Great.”

He makes a face, and then finally, he nods once. Very slowly. I’m gonna interpret it as raging enthusiasm.

GRAY

“So?”

Con steps into my office and closes the door behind him.

“Hello, Gray. Can I come in, Gray? I hope I’m not interrupting, Gray. How has your day been, Gray?” I mutter. I throw a glance at Con, who’s standing in front of my desk, looking like he’s swallowed a ruler. Just another Monday, then.

“How was dinner?” he asks.

I lean back in my chair and study him. “I had the salmon. It was enjoyable.”

He huffs and rolls his eyes. “And?”

“It had asparagus on the side. Seared in butter. Baby carrots were slightly overcooked,” I say just to fuck with him as payback for meddling in my life.

“Did you and Cee patch things up?” he asks, enunciating every word very carefully.

“Why do you care so much?” I ask.

“She’s a nice person. Your breakup comes out of the blue. Why shouldn’t I care?”

“You know, if you’re so interested in how Cee and I are doing, maybe you should have, oh, I don’t know, showed up to dinner yourself?”

Con squints his eyes at me. The gears are moving. “You’re pissed.”

“Very astute.”

“Because...” Con says, the end of his sentence dropping off. I won’t give any hints. He’ll get there on his own. I believe in him because I’m a good brother. Con should really take a leaf out of my playbook.

“I shouldn’t have intervened?” he guesses.

“No, you shouldn’t have,” I say.

We stare at each other.

“And?” It’s my turn to prompt.

Con looks confused.

“And I should have shown up on Friday?” He takes a wild guess.

“And you want to apologize,” I say pointedly. “Because you feel bad and won’t do it again.”

“Right,” Con says. “That.”

I roll my eyes. “It doesn’t work if you don’t mean it.”

Con looks down in a rare display of guilt. He’s not big with emotions, and even though I know why he is the way he is, from time to time, I just really want to shake him as if I could force him to loosen up even a little bit. I don’t think it would work. Con’s whole existence is all about control.

“I’m...”—he takes a deep breath, avoiding my gaze—“sorry.”

That's a first.

"I shouldn't have meddled," Con adds.

"Why did you?"

"I thought you needed a push in the right direction."

I shake my head. "It's not up to you to decide what the right direction is for me."

"That's not—" He stops abruptly before he meets my gaze. He takes a deep breath before he nods. "You're right."

I must have not heard him correctly. "I am?" I'm genuinely startled for a second. "I mean, I am."

Con nods.

I nod.

It's safe to say we won't be revisiting this topic any time soon. Talking about our feelings is another thing Con and I don't generally do.

"How are things going?" Con asks after a little while.

Oh, well, let's see, shall we?

It's only Monday morning, and my eyes feel like I've rubbed them with sandpaper. I haven't slept for shit those last few nights. First there was Kai's date and all the related crap, and after that, I've spent my nights staring at my ceiling, trying to figure out what that weird, niggling feeling inside me is that appears every time I think of the words Kai and date in the same sentence.

I don't think I can say any of it to Con, though, so I just shrug.

"Same old."

Now that I really concentrate on him, I can see that he looks a bit disheveled. Most people probably wouldn't notice, but he's my brother, so my gaze immediately zeroes in on the minuscule crease on his shirt and the way his tie isn't perfectly aligned with the row of buttons on his dress shirt. Not to mention the huge shadows beneath his eyes.

"What's going on with you?"

"Nothing much," he says.

I motion toward him with my chin. "Your tie is crooked."

Con immediately looks on high alert as he starts smoothing over his clothes.

"Better?" he asks after he's messed his tie up even more.

"Much," I reply and give him a thumbs up. "You look tired."

He sighs. "That's because I never made it home yesterday."

I gape at him. "You've been here since yesterday?"

He nods distractedly, still messing with his tie. "Technically since Saturday, but it's all starting to blur."

"Jesus Christ. Listen to me carefully so you won't miss anything. Go. Home!"

Con looks startled by my tone. "I can't. I've got too much to do. I've got two big mergers coming up, so I need to prepare, and I need to rearrange my schedule and book myself a flight and a hotel for a conference. Then I need to figure out a retirement party for Ida and..."—he frowns—"I could have sworn there was something else." He pulls out his phone, thumbs moving quickly over the screen. "Aha. And I need to send out all of this month's bills."

My frown deepens with every task Con recites.

“Why are you doing Jamie’s job for him?” I ask. I love my brother, but that’s taking the control freak stuff to a whole other level. “Did you fire him again and this time he took you up on it?”

“Isn’t that the dream,” he says dryly. “But no. He has a concussion. Apparently he’s part of some sort of a hockey team, and he got injured during a game. It’s rec league hockey. They compete for a plastic cup!” Con shakes his head with disbelief written all over his face, like joining a team for fun is the most baffling thing a person can do. A few weeks ago, I would have probably agreed, but now I find myself envious of Jamie and the fact that this office isn’t the only thing that defines him.

“Is he all right?” I ask, concentrating back on Con.

“He’s out for the count for the next few weeks. Can’t even open the laptop without puking his guts out from the migraine the blue light causes. I have to hire a temp to cover for him, and I’m not even sure if it’s worth it. We’ll never manage to get them up to speed with everything on time.”

“Have you stopped by to see him?”

Con cocks his head to the side and frowns. “What for?”

“To see if he’s all right?” I suggest.

“We spoke on the phone. He sounded alive.”

I sigh. “He’s been working here for three years. Doesn’t he deserve more than a quick phone call where you demand to know when he’ll be back in the office?”

Con looks affronted. “I didn’t demand. I asked politely. I’m not a sociopath.”

“Good to know,” I mutter.

Con sends me a withering glare before he gets up and starts pacing back and forth in front of my desk.

“Why are you so twitchy?” I ask. “And why are you trying to kill yourself with work? It’s not like Jamie is the only assistant here. I’m pretty sure we can talk to Chelsea, and she’ll be able to help you out, and we’ll just divide and conquer the rest.”

Con stares at me for a moment, looking like he’s trying his best to compute what I’m saying but not succeeding at all.

“Oh, I’m sorry for trying to keep this place running smoothly. Obviously I should just ignore the fact that my assistant is out for the count for God knows how much longer. Excuse me for being slightly annoyed at the fact that this will disrupt my whole schedule!”

The words, as sharp as they might seem, are delivered in a monotone. Con does not lose his cool. Ever.

“God forbid anything disrupts the holy schedule.” I roll my eyes.

Con stops and stares at me. “What’s happening here?”

“I’m just trying to tell you that it’s not the end of the world if your every move hasn’t been planned in advance for five years.”

My brother narrows his eyes at me. I stare back.

“This is Kai speaking,” Con says slowly. “You’re responsible. You’re not flighty and reckless. These are not your thoughts.”

I take an exaggerated glance to my left and then to my right. “Funny. I don’t see him anywhere planting his thoughts

into my head via sinister eye contact.”

“Aha!” Con points his finger into my face. “See? Since when are you sarcastic? What’s going on?”

“Nothing. You’re being ridiculous. Jamie has a concussion and is going to be on sick leave. It’s not the end of the world. You don’t have to stay here for days on end, trying to do everything yourself. You can delegate. We have people here who are more than competent to help out.”

Con looks at me like I’ve gone insane. “It’s a snowball effect. One tiny thing goes wrong, and before you know it everything in your life is just chaos! It’s how it always goes.”

My brother is a prime example of what happens when your parents screw you up.

“I guess it’s too much to ask of you to care about the family business,” Con says, tone icy. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ve got to go and figure this thing out.”

“Con,” I call after him, but he marches out of there.

“I guess I’ll be the nice one who visits Jamie, then,” I say to myself as I turn back to my laptop.

Jamie’s apartment is in Central Square. In the three years I’ve known him, this is the first time I’ve been here. Not even that, I had to ask Con for Jamie’s address. It strikes me as odd all of a sudden, even though it shouldn’t. Jamie and I aren’t friends. We work together, but outside of the office, I have almost no idea what his life is like.

I like Jamie, though. We could be friends. I’ve always told myself I was just terrible at making friends and that’s why I

only have Kai in my life. But what if I'm wrong? Maybe the reason I have so few close relationships is that I haven't let anybody in?

I knock on the front door of Jamie's apartment and wait. Long moments pass without anybody answering the door, so I knock again.

Eventually I hear steps from the other side, and the door is pulled open. A guy who looks like he's just gotten out of bed squints his eyes at me.

"Yeah?" he asks through a jaw-cracking yawn.

"I'm here to see Jamie," I say.

He scratches his stomach and frowns. "Who?"

"Uh... James Ford?"

"Oh," the guy says, and now his hand moves lower, and he starts scratching his balls. That's undoubtedly an interesting greeting. "Dude, I don't know if he's home. I haven't seen him in a few days."

That's not good.

"We need to check on him. He has a concussion."

Jamie's roommate opens the door wider and gestures me inside.

"Go ahead. Third door on the left."

He walks past me and disappears behind another door, and I'm left to my own devices. That's certainly a novel approach to guarding your home from breaking and entering.

I find the right door and knock.

"Yeah?" The voice is unmistakably Jamie's, even though the usual exuberance is missing, so I push the door open and

peek my head inside.

I almost wince at the sight of him. Jamie's sitting on the bed, looking pale as a sheet. There are dark circles underneath his eyes, and a bright purple bruise decorates the left side of his face.

"Hi," I say as I step closer.

He squints his eyes at me as if trying to figure out if I'm real or not.

"What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see if you were all right. How are you feeling?" I ask.

"Concussions suck, man. I do not recommend."

"Duly noted."

I lean against the wall. Jamie's room is tiny. The only thing that fits in here is his bed and a small dresser.

"Did your brother send you to check that I really am out for the count?" he asks, lifting his tired gaze to me.

"Connor was worried about you, too."

Probably. Somewhere deep inside.

It's hard to say with Con. He's not a bad person, but sometimes it seems as if human emotions evade him.

"Sure he was," Jamie scoffs and winces again.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"As okay as I can be, I guess."

"Is there something I can do for you? I don't think you should be alone. Aren't there some kind of rules that you need to be supervised after a concussion?"

“I have a friend who calls me every few hours. He’ll raise the alarm if I don’t pick up.”

“A phone call isn’t exactly the same as real people taking care of you,” I argue. “You should come stay at my place. I have an extra room.”

It’s not strictly true, I guess, but I’m sure Kai and I can share my room for a few days.

“Dude, no offense, but with the amount of time you spend locked in your office, I doubt you’d be my best chance of survival.”

“I’ll take a few days off,” I offer.

He snorts. “Sure you will. Anyway, it’s not important. I’m fine here. I’m past the critical twenty-four hours, so I’m good.”

“You don’t look good.”

“Wow. Talk about kicking a guy when he’s down.”

I roll my eyes. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

Jamie’s phone starts ringing on the nightstand. He takes it and lifts it to his ear without looking at the screen.

“I’m alive,” he says and promptly hangs up.

“I’m sure that eased his mind,” I remark.

“I’ve had eight of these phone calls today already. His mind is fine. Can I do anything else for you?”

“Have I worn out my welcome already?” I tease.

Jamie takes a deep breath.

“Sorry,” he mutters. “It’s just that my head is killing me, and I’m stressed-out because the team is short a player, which

sucks because for the first time we had a shot at not being the losers. This year we actually have a somewhat decent team. I was looking forward to being, like, the sixth or seventh.”

“Shoot for the stars, huh?” I ask with a chuckle.

“We’ve been dead last for the three seasons we’ve played together. Sixth or seventh would be awesome.”

“I didn’t even know you played hockey,” I say, realizing way too late that I might be rubbing salt on the wound, but Jamie doesn’t seem to mind.

“Since high school. I wasn’t anywhere near good enough to play in college, but I do just fine in rec league, and it’s fun.”

“Yeah, I would have never made it in college hockey either,” I say.

Jamie’s head whips up, which makes him wince again.

“You play?” he asks after he’s done clutching his head.

“Once upon a time.” I haven’t so much as put on skates in a decade. Now that I think about it, I’m not sure why. I always loved hockey.

“Are you good?” Jamie asks, looking remarkably more alive all of a sudden.

I shrug. “I was decent in high school, but I’m not sure if skating is like riding a bike. I haven’t played in a long time.”

Jamie just shrugs. “You can’t be worse than the guy with a concussion.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” I say with a laugh, before I register that calculating look in Jamie’s eyes. “Wait. What?”

“You can join the team instead of me.” The poor guy looks so excited all of a sudden. And kind of like he’s about to puke.

I scan the room, ready to dive for the trash can.

“You’re definitely concussed, all right,” I say.

“Obviously.” Jamie taps his finger against his temple gently. “But you could. Or are you opposed to hockey?”

He raises his brows at me, and I slowly shake my head. “No.”

“No, you’re not opposed or no, you won’t play?”

I’ve never been good at being spontaneous. I need a plan to function, and I need to think things through when making decisions.

Joining a hockey team is not a good idea. I don’t have the time, for one thing. Work is always crazy anyway, and now that Jamie is out of the office for the next few weeks, it’s going to get even more hectic. Besides, I’m not sure I’d be much use to Jamie’s team. For all I know, I’d just stumble around the ice and mow people down, securing another last place for the team.

“Yes,” I blurt out.

Jamie stares at me for a long time, and I’m beginning to think he’s going to take back the offer, but then he squints his eyes at me and says, “Well, that cleared up absolutely nothing.”

“I’ll play. I’ll join the team.”

I expect panic to crash over me. I’m almost ready to deal with the dreaded sense of *What have I done?* But it never arrives. Instead, I feel pretty damn good. I’ve done something unexpected. Something selfish, even. Something that is solely for me.

“Great.” Jamie rubs his palm over his forehead. “I’ll call the guys and let them know they can consider me replaced. They’ll be fucking ecstatic.”

“Great,” I echo Jamie.

I check the ohshitometer. Still nothing.

It seems we’re good to go.

KAI

The front door bangs open as Gray rushes into the workshop. He looks windswept and gorgeous, his eyes shining with excitement as he stops in front of me.

“I joined a hockey team,” he announces.

My eyebrows fly up almost to my hairline. “Really?”

He nods, head bobbing up and down like he’s a ventriloquist doll as he loosens his tie. “I have way too much work, and almost no time to sleep for the foreseeable future, but I’m actually excited about this. I already had a call with the team captain, and he seemed cool. First practice is on Sunday.”

“That’s great!”

He’s so excited about this that it’s impossible not to get swept up in the moment.

He leans back against the wall, looking a bit dazed, but he has a smile on his face, and he seems lighter and happier than he’s been the whole time I’ve been back to Boston, with maybe the exception of our camping trip.

“I need some new skates,” he says, still looking kind of like he’s been smacked in the face with happiness.

I laugh and grab my wallet and keys. “Let’s go buy you some, in that case.”

I look down at my feet skeptically. I’m wearing blue hockey skates and holding on to the railing for dear life. I’ve never understood how people are supposed to move with those things on. It’d make more sense if the blades would be so sharp that they would actually cut deep into the ice like a knife into butter, and then the ice would hold me upright. I stare at my skates. Seems like an engineering fail if you ask me. Sure, I wouldn’t be able to turn anywhere and would skate into a lot of walls, but it feels preferable to what I’m doing now, which is wobbling like a newborn foal and waiting for the inevitable moment when my skull meets the ice.

Gray, in the meanwhile, glides across the rink like he’s been born with skates attached to his feet. It only took him about ten seconds to get his bearings when he first stepped onto the ice, and now he’s charging across it like the devil is on his heels. Supposedly he hasn’t skated since high school, but I call bullshit. Whatever it is he’s doing looks a hell of a lot like he’s been practicing daily for the last decade.

As if to prove my suspicions, he skates toward me full speed and at the last moment, performs the perfect hockey stop, tiny shards of ice flying from underneath the blades toward me like little missiles. He laughs at whatever he sees on my face.

“Have you moved at all?” he asks with a teasing tone.

“I have in fact moved,” I say with as much dignity as I can muster. “I came from that bench”—I motion toward it with my

head. There is no way I'll risk pulling my hands away from the sweet, sweet railing—"all the way to here."

Granted, *here* is a whopping ten feet away, but I'm calling it an accomplishment.

Gray shakes his head with a fond expression on his face, crooks his finger and motions me toward him.

"Come on, then."

I eye him with disbelief. "Come where?"

"To me."

"I'm good." I'm surprised I haven't pried off the railing at this point, considering how desperately I'm clutching it.

He shakes his head and chuckles as he glides toward me, erasing the last few feet between us. "I won't let you fall."

He reaches out his hands, and I grudgingly grab onto them.

"I'm pretty sure that despite all your good intentions, I'll be able to manage even with your help."

He smiles at me, and he looks so happy that for a moment I forget that I'm a stumble away from a concussion.

"How is it possible you didn't learn to skate as a kid?" Gray asks. "We live in Massachusetts."

"Contrary to popular belief, it's entirely possible to avoid skating if you're determined enough."

"But we went skating as kids," Gray says with a frown.

"*You* went skating. *I* happened to have a conveniently placed cold whenever you started talking about ice and hockey. In fact, I felt a bit feverish while we were buying your skates. Maybe coming here to test them out was a mistake. I better get back to the bench. This might be serious. I might

have an allergic reaction to skating. I need to get out of here before my face gets all swollen.”

“You lying liar who lies.” Gray pokes his finger into my side.

“It’s unnatural,” I say as I try to squirm away, which only results in me stumbling on my skates and grabbing onto Gray more firmly. “Who came up with something this crazy anyway?” I point to my skates. “What was wrong with walking?”

“I want to say the Dutch?” Gray says. “And walking on ice is slow and depending on the level of slipperiness, dangerous.”

“You don’t have to walk on ice. Walk on the road. We invented those for a reason,” I grumble.

We stop in the middle of the ice.

“Okay.” Gray’s voice is all business now. This does not bode well for my plan to maneuver us toward the exit and escape to greener pastures. Emphasis on the word *greener*. What I wouldn’t give to feel some grass underneath my feet right about now.

“Keep your knees bent and your weight leaned forward,” Gray instructs. “What you want to do is a sort of march in one place and then try and move forward, okay?”

“What I want to do is veg out on the couch and not damage my pretty face by using it to cushion my fall,” I mutter.

“I promise you, you’ll be just as pretty after we’re done,” Gray assures me.

Then the bastard lets go of my hands and abandons me in the middle of the rink. Okay, so he’s only about five feet away, but it feels like a mile.

“Put your hands out for balance,” he suggests.

So it begins. And by begins, I mean I’m falling. A lot. Mostly on my ass, which turns out to be the wrong move. Apparently I’m supposed to fall on my side, and Gray doesn’t seem to get that it’s impossible to direct *falling* because I’m not a freaking cat.

He doesn’t even help me get up because that’s another skill one has to master on their own, according to the coach from hell, formerly known as my best friend. After tonight, I’m giving up all rights for him.

Still, there seems to be a method to his madness because after a little while, I’m able to toddle around the rink with Gray gliding next to me gracefully.

“You’re doing great.” The bold-faced lie does little to boost my confidence.

“I’m like a baby giraffe on heels.” I flail back and forth once again. Gray moves toward me and catches me before I’m about to fall on my face.

“My hero.” I bat my lashes at him, and he laughs.

He takes both my hands in his and holds on to me, skating backward like it’s the most normal thing to do.

“Okay,” he says. “Let’s try the next step like this. It’s called a swizzle. Place your feet so the blades form a V shape.”

I do as he says and earn myself an encouraging smile. I honestly think I’d do anything for Gray’s smile, so yeah, what the hell, I’ll swizzle if there’s a possibility to get more of those bad boys to appear on Gray’s lips.

“Push both feet outwards and then inwards again so that your toes are touching. Like this.” He lets go of me for a moment to demonstrate.

It turns out the forward swizzle is a great success. I bet I look pretty stupid doing it, but as far as I’m concerned, we can call an end to this skating lesson now because this is how I’m going to skate from now on.

Gray has other ideas, though, so all too soon, he has me do a backward swizzle, and then he adds something that’s called a rocking horse, which sounds kind of kinky but isn’t and that forward/backward motion is what breaks my ten-minute winning streak of not falling because my left foot does some kind of a weird wobble. As if in slow motion, I start to go down, but just before I’m about to land on my face, Gray is there, only somehow I manage to trip him with my skate, and this time it’s Gray who’s going to fall.

Ha!

Or, you know, I feel bad.

He lands straight on his ass. I feel vindicated. So much for turning on his side when falling.

The gloating thought does me no good because my balance is gone as well, so I land on top of Gray, face-planting into his stomach with an “Oomph.”

For a moment we both lie completely still. I feel Gray’s stomach rise and fall beneath me. I should get up, but I can’t seem to make myself. I’m surrounded by Gray’s scent and warmth. His body shifts below mine ever so slightly. I swear I can hear his heart bounding somewhere above me.

“Sorry,” I manage to get out. My body rubs against Gray’s as I move, which could turn a bit awkward since the thin pants

I'm wearing are definitely no chastity belt.

“Let me just—” I start to slide down from his body, but my skates are making the otherwise straightforward process at least ten times more difficult than it should be.

My process is halted by Gray's fingers digging into my upper arm.

“Can you just... not move.” Gray sounds like he's had the wind knocked out of him for sure, so I look up to make sure he's all right, but he doesn't meet my gaze. He just stares somewhere above his head, his breaths coming out in shallow pants.

“Sure,” I say slowly.

I freeze in place. Oh fuck, what if I caused some sort of a life-threatening injury by falling on top of him? Maybe he's in pain and there's inner bleeding?

“Gray?” I ask, trying to confirm that he's still alive underneath me.

He doesn't reply, and it doesn't matter anyway because in a matter of seconds, I'm too preoccupied to care because I can feel *it*. Something hard is pressing against my chest. I blink, frozen in spot. The sounds of the rink have quieted by the muffled buzz in my ears as my brain slowly catches up to what is happening.

All neurons and cells go on high alert immediately, and I try my hardest not to make a move and not to freak out because by now I'm about a hundred thousand percent certain I can feel Gray's erection.

I have no idea what happens next. Do I stay in place? Do I get up? The struggle is real because both options are appealing in their own way. Getting up right this second is the correct

option, obviously. It's the right thing to do for my sanity, and most of all, it's the decent thing to do.

There's an unspoken protocol in place for dealing with unintended boners, and it's very simple: you ignore it.

My body hasn't gotten the memo. I stay in place, waiting. I don't know what for, exactly. For Gray to freak out and the hardness pressing against my chest to disappear? But he doesn't and it doesn't, and we've been lying on ice for a really long time by now, and those damn athletic pants I'm wearing are not going to conceal anything. The only reason Gray isn't getting a first-row seat to my cock poking at his shin is the fact that I'm lying between his thighs. That thought does absolutely squat to calm my body down. You'd think lying on cold ice would help, but no. My dick refuses to cooperate. It's so hard that I could probably pound a hole in the ice should Gray and I feel like dipping our feet into ice fishing here. Even the ridiculousness of that doesn't help. I'm doomed.

"My ass is getting wet," Gray finally says in a scratchy voice.

That, at least, breaks the spell. I scramble away from him, executing the perfect roll of shame onto the ice next to Gray.

I manage to push myself into a sitting position, which is good because it lets me draw my knees up and hide the Viagra overdose-worthy erection that still refuses to quit. It takes another few forevers for my dick to catch up to the message that there is going to be no fucking on ice, and then it finally starts to calm down. Small mercies.

Gray pushes himself to his feet with far more finesse than I could ever pull off. I avoid looking at his... general lap area by every means possible.

“Do you need help getting up?” Gray asks. His voice is all weird. There’s tension in it that wasn’t there before. I feel like cursing. The freak-out has arrived. Maybe he even saw how my body reacted and that’s what is causing the pinched look on his face.

I let my head drop forward and close my eyes for a moment. Shit, shit, shit! This can’t become some sort of a thing that’ll make everything between us weird and awkward. It just can’t. I’ve worked so hard for years to make sure my feelings wouldn’t ruin us, so one accidental, misplaced, caused-by-friction erection will not ruin us. I refuse to let that happen.

The smile I paste on my face is anything but natural as I grab Gray’s outstretched arm and carefully get on my feet.

Commence operation Erection-What-Erection-I-Felt-Nothing. Code name EWEIFN, for short.

I force myself to laugh. “Dude, you should have seen your face when you went down.”

Gray cocks his head to the side, a puzzled expression on his face.

“Just...” I gesture in the air with my hand and contort my face into some kind of a grimace. “And then with the...” Another nonsensical hand gesture, courtesy of me. “Hilarious,” I finish with another bark of laughter that sounds about as genuine as the laugh I gave after Mon accidentally kneed me in the balls at her wedding, and I laughed because I didn’t want to upset her on her big day.

“Uh-huh,” Gray says slowly, still eyeing me like he’s hoping to find something, only I don’t know what he’s expecting to see.

“We should get going,” I announce loudly. “All this skating is making me hungry. Let’s go and grab a bite to eat. My treat. Hey! That rhymed. Let’s walk and see if we can find more rhymes. That sounds like prime fun. In fact starting now, nothing but rhymes are allowed. We’ll have our very own poetry night and don’t you dare fight. And go.”

Dear God, Kai, shut the fuck up!

I dutifully clamp my mouth shut. That’s better.

“Kai,” Gray calls after me, but I’ve already lumbered a few feet away toward the exit of the rink, so I pretend I don’t hear him. I just need a second, and then everything will be fine. I can fix this. I can turn us back into normal.

“Kai,” Gray calls once more.

I ignore him. But in the spirit of poetry night, the only answer in my head to Gray calling my name is a loud and decidedly desperate *Why?*

GRAY

I've barely seen the inside of my apartment in days. Ever since Kai and I got back from the rink on Monday evening, it's been nonstop work for me, which is frustrating as hell because I need to see Kai. I need to actually, physically see him to figure out what the hell is going on. I've almost resorted to sneaking into his bedroom and watching him sleep, but so far my last shred of sanity has prevented me from doing that. I already woke him up once with staring at him while he was sleeping, so doing it twice would probably give me the express membership to Creeps United.

It's hard to gauge Kai's state of mind based on the few texts we've exchanged, but I figure the decided lack of texts in and of itself is an indicator that not all is hunky-dory in Kai-land. Even while he was abroad, we texted constantly. This last five days? Not so much.

I have received exactly two messages from Kai. A *No* when I texted to see if he was home, and another *No* when I texted back, asking if he was in the workshop. I gave up after that, deciding that an in-person approach might give better results. I've been pulling way too many all-nighters for it to be healthy, but I've managed to clear enough tasks from my to-do list that I figure a night off will not result in a disaster.

The lights are on when I get home, so the first part of my extraordinarily sophisticated plan to corner Kai is going swimmingly. I put my shoes on the rack and make my way toward Kai's room.

I almost swallow my tongue as I peek my head inside the doorway. Kai is standing in front of the mirror. He's wearing black skinny jeans, the button undone, and... nothing else. Drops of water dot his shoulders, creating patterns with the freckles that decorate his shoulders. His hair is wet from his shower, and my mouth goes dry as I track the journey of a drop of water that makes its way from Kai's lower back to underneath the waistband of his jeans. I'm completely fixated on the invisible track. The sudden need to follow the path with my fingers is overwhelming in its intensity. It almost feels like I'm doused in hot sauce. My skin is burning, and adrenaline is coursing through my system, and I have no clue what the fuck to do about it.

I manage to drag my gaze away from Kai's back with great difficulty, and as my eyes move upward, I find Kai looking at me in the reflection of his mirror. For long moments we just stare at each other. I imagine I look a bit like a deer in headlights due to the fact that I have no fucking clue what is going on with me. Or what *this* here even is, let alone what it means.

I just know that I *want*. Everything inside me is one big ball of need, and it's snowballing out of control so quickly that I can't keep up.

"You all right?" Kai asks. He sounds so calm and unaffected by my inner turmoil.

I nod, unable to produce any words just yet when there's still so much of Kai's skin on display. I suddenly get a very

sharp realization that all this skin was against me on Monday when we crash-landed on ice together. I mean, sure, there were clothes there, but in the grand scheme of things, clothes are a very minimal layer. The thickness of a sweatshirt is what? Let's say 1/16 of an inch for argument's sake. So my athletic pants plus Kai's sweatshirt gives us roughly 1/8 of an inch of material between us. That's nothing. We had practically nothing between us.

Never before has *nothing* felt so significant. That *nothing* fills every inch of space between us. *Nothing* makes the air around us vibrate with unarticulated desires. *Nothing* is everywhere.

It's in the way Kai's gaze stays glued on me. It's in the way I still feel his body pressed against mine. It's in the way my own body reacted to his. It's in the way my heart thumps as I start to remember all these other times Kai has been pressed against me. It's in the camping trip when I showed him the Taurus. It's in my bed when I spewed out my insecurities and fears of not living my life to the fullest. It's in the way he hovered above me that night, and how I'd felt a complete sense of calm as he reassured me that I was fine.

Nothing. Is. Everywhere.

Kai steps closer to me. There's hesitancy in the way he moves. He doesn't barrel over like he usually does. His steps are measured and slow, like he's not sure he's welcome, which is ridiculous because all I seem to want is have him near me. I always have. How have I not realized it before?

"Gray?"

It's hard to hear his quiet voice through the roar of blood in my ears.

“Yes?” I manage to get out.

“You’re starting to freak me out.” He squints his eyes at me as if he’s trying to use X-ray vision to detect some kind of a change inside me he could point out to explain my behavior.

“I’m okay,” I manage to say. “Just... happy to be home.” But I don’t mean home in the sense of the walls that make up my apartment. I’m happy because I get to be near Kai. I’m *always* happy when I’m with Kai, now that I think about it.

“Oookay,” Kai drawls as he turns around and saunters back to his dresser. He takes out a white T-shirt and pulls it over his head. It suddenly registers that what Kai is wearing is not really a hang-out-on-the-couch-with-my-best-friend attire.

My heart starts beating faster, a mix of nerves and fear making themselves home inside me. Where is he going? And more importantly, with whom?

“What’s up?” I ask, trying and most likely failing to sound casual.

Kai refuses to meet my gaze as he looks down at his feet for a second.

“You know. Weekend. I’m going out.” He sounds about as aloof as me, which is to say not at all.

“Out?” I repeat, and even though I couldn’t pull off aloof, I’m doing a banging job with disbelief.

Kai glances at me over his shoulder as he throws on a leather jacket. Things get even more confusing immediately because I can’t seem to stop staring at the way the jacket fits his wide shoulders.

“To a bar,” Kai says.

The confusion I'm feeling evolves into some sort of a jittery panic. A bar? Alone? With somebody? On the one night I get to spend time with him? Who the hell is he seeing?

"Fun!" I sound like a maniac. "Let me just get changed," I blurt out.

Kai's hands freeze where he was adjusting the collar of his jacket as his gaze collides with mine.

"Oh," he says, and I can *feel* the gentle brush-off approaching, but I'm not going to stay here and wait for its arrival. Once that sucker turns up, I'll be long gone. To the bar. With Kai.

"I'll just need five minutes," I call over my shoulder as I sprint toward my room. I'm desperate enough to skip the shower I'd normally take before going out because my paranoid brain is sure Kai would use those minutes to sneak out.

My hands are practically shaking as I tear off my suit and grab the first pair of pants I can get my hands on and a shirt to go with them. In some sort of a twist of faith, I end up wearing the pants Kai wore on his date with Maximus. I have no clue how it makes me feel. On the one hand, I hope to God it isn't some bad omen that tonight will end up the same way the last time those pants made an appearance. On the other hand, though, it feels like I'm claiming Kai to myself because... we've worn the same pair of pants. Crazy town has officially arrived, and I'm campaigning to be the mayor.

I stuff my phone and my wallet in the pocket of my jacket and practically run to the living room. For a millisecond, I'm afraid Kai has already left, which makes a sick dread travel through my insides, but then I spot him standing in front of the

window, palms leaned on the sill, looking at the late-night street below him.

“Ready.” My voice comes out all gruff.

Kai turns around and takes me in. There’s a mixture of something I can’t decipher in his gaze, but he smiles and nods. “You clean up nice,” he says.

“Just nice? My hotness is superior to everybody else, and you know it,” I tease, but where the Kai of a few days ago would have laughed and shot back some kind of a remark about my alleged hotness being perceived only by me, he now looks everywhere but at me and says nothing.

“Should we get going?” I ask into the silence of the living room.

“Yeah.”

We hardly speak the whole way to the bar Kai has chosen as our destination. The place is crowded and lively, music blaring out of the speakers. Groups of people are gathered everywhere, laughing and chatting.

I figure our best bet is to try and find seats at the bar, but Kai has other plans. He stops in the doorway and lets his gaze move over the bar as if searching for something. After a second, he motions with his head, and I follow him. We push through throngs of people, bumping shoulders with strangers until Kai stops.

“Hey, man,” he says, and I freeze in place and almost start laughing. This is just great. Fucking Maximus once again. If I never see that guy again, I’ll die a happy man.

“You made it.” Max gets up from his seat and throws his arms around Kai’s neck, giving him a sloppy kiss on the cheek.

He then turns toward me, and to his credit, he doesn't look put off to see me there.

“And Gray. Hi.”

“Hi. No kiss for me?” I ask, but instead of joking, it comes out gruff because Max's arm is still around Kai. I zero in on the way his fingers clutch Kai's shoulder.

I'm a lawyer, so I should know the answer, but is it legal to rip somebody's arm off? I can't seem to remember.

Max is here with a bunch of his friends who are on the move constantly, people coming and going all around me. Max makes the rounds, introducing those who are currently near us, but for the life of me, I can't remember any of their names as soon as the introductions are done and over with.

Kai sits down next to Max, leaving me the only other free chair in the table, which puts me enough of a distance away from Kai that it'll be impossible for me to talk to him. Instead, I get to watch as Kai sends Max one smile after the other, and soon enough they're laughing and talking, and Kai has obviously forgotten that I even exist.

When I get up ten minutes later to go to the bar, he doesn't even notice. I sit down on one of the barstools and drag my fingers through my hair. For a person who has always prided himself on knowing what he wants and always having a plan, I sure as hell feel adrift right now. I don't know what's going on with me. It's like Cee's proposal has cursed me.

I glance toward where Kai and Max are still deep in conversation. It's almost as if I'm experiencing my first crush, which makes this whole situation even more ridiculous. I'm acting like a middle schooler who can't handle liking somebody a bit too much. Soon enough I'll probably start

acting like an average eleven-year-old, push Kai into a muddy puddle, and call him names to let him know I like him.

“Rough night?”

I look up and find the bartender in front of me.

“You could say that,” I mutter.

“Just a second.” She grabs a glass and pours me a drink. “Here.” The glass slides toward me, and I catch it. Whiskey burns my throat as it goes down. I motion for her to get me another one and down that as well.

“Cheer up,” the bartender says. “It can’t be that bad.”

“Yeah, no. It’s fine,” I say. “I’m happy for Kai. I mean, did I think it’d be just the two of us hanging out tonight? Sure. But this is great, too. I can sit here and chat with you, and he can laugh at Max’s stupid jokes and fawn over his stupid travel photos from his stupid travels to stupid Indonesia. It’s cool. No skin off my back. I can make new friends, too.”

The bartender’s lips twitch as she looks at me.

“I really am fine,” I insist. “The company is better here anyway. You look like a nice, friendly person, who isn’t planning to steal my best friend. What’s your name?”

She smiles as she looks down for a second. It almost looks flirty but not quite. I feel like I amuse her, which is fine by me. At least somebody finds me interesting enough not to abandon me for somebody named Maximus.

“Daisy,” she says and reaches out her hand. We shake over the counter.

“Grayson. Well, Gray for you, because we’re friends now.”

“Nice to meet you, Gray,” she says with a laugh.

“Likewise, Daisy. That’s a nice name. It fits you.”

“Thank you. Although I’m not sure if you’re the best judge about the fit of my name seeing as you don’t even know me. I might be an emo gamer in my everyday life.”

“Emo gamers can’t be Daisys?”

“Dude. No. Obviously the best emo gamer name is Xena Mayday.”

I lean closer and regard her seriously before settling back in my seat. “I don’t know. You just don’t give me Xena Mayday vibes.”

“Not angsty enough for you?” She laughs.

“I’m just saying, there hasn’t been a single tear so far, so I’m starting to question this whole emo gamer narrative you’ve got going on.”

“I cried just before, during my break. Does that help?”

I study her with squinted eyes. “We don’t know each other that well yet, so I’m not sure if you’re joking or not.”

She raises one hand in the air. “Swear to God. I walked into my fiancé cheating on me two weeks ago, so there have been a lot more tears than any emo person could ever wish for. Also emotions. Mostly anger, but that counts, too.”

I stare at her. “Wow,” I say slowly. “You’re just a real downer, aren’t you?”

She throws her head back and laughs before she points her finger at me. “See, I much prefer your reaction to what my friends and family have had in store for me so far.”

“And what’s that?”

“They’ve perfected the sad head tilt.” She cocks her head to the side to demonstrate. “And the close-lipped smile with the followed ‘How are you doing, sweetheart?’”

I tilt my head to the side and smile. “And how do you feel about that, dear?”

She snickers before she straightens herself and aims a smile at somebody somewhere behind me. “Hi! What can I get you?”

“I’m good. Just... standing here.”

Kai’s voice makes me whirl around in my seat. If eyes could shoot daggers, I’d be impaled by now.

“You disappeared on me,” Kai tells me flatly.

Surprised you even noticed is what I don’t say. Because I’m not a dickhead.

“I needed a drink.” I motion in the general direction of my empty shot glasses. Whoa. I drank four of those bad boys?

“Thinking of scratching through the last three items of the list tonight?” Kai throws a quick glance Daisy’s way, before he turns back toward me and smiles. Is it meant to be supportive? Because it’s the blandest, fakest one I’ve seen from him yet. I’m not sure if this is him trying to follow through on his proposition to be my wingman, but if it is, he’s failing at it.

“What are—” Oh shit. Yeah, I remember the things I wrote down on the other side of that paper. Not word to word, but I’m pretty sure there was something about a one-night stand and an orgasm.

I take a quick glance at Daisy. The thought hasn’t even entered my mind. I’ve been too preoccupied with all the crazy feelings being near Kai have evoked in me recently. Plus,

despite what I wrote on that list, I'm pretty certain by now I'm just not a one-night-stand kind of a person. Daisy seems fun, and objectively speaking, she's beautiful, but I don't feel any attraction. Not that that's anything new for me.

"No—" I start to say, but Kai interrupts me with a very grim "Carry on."

I frown as I watch him push through the crowd of people and disappear from my line of sight.

"Trouble in paradise?" Daisy asks with a sympathetic smile.

"No," I say distractedly. "We're just in a weird place."

I don't think it's humanly possible to be more confused, but then I straighten myself. Fuck it. The only way to untangle this mess that I've made of us is to go after Kai and talk to him. Maybe he has some insight on why I'm feeling like such a mess inside. Maybe if I explain... something, we can sort it all out. What that something is will remain a mystery for now.

I would usually need a game plan and a script, but the couple of shots of whiskey have curbed some of the cautiousness I usually display in everything I do, so I don't even stop to say bye to Daisy, I just get up from my seat and push my way toward where I saw Kai disappear from my view.

After a few minutes of searching, I'm starting to think he's left without me. I pass the table Max and his friends were occupying. Max is gone, too, and I honestly don't have a clue if the people that are still here are his friends or a new group that has taken over the table, but I figure it doesn't hurt to ask, so I lean toward the two guys closest to me.

“Have you seen Kai?” I ask. “Or Max?” I add to increase the odds of getting an answer out of them.

“I think Max went to the bathroom,” one of the men says.

I nod my thanks and make my way to the back of the bar. The bathrooms are hidden in a side corridor, and the music is much quieter once I get away from the main area of the bar.

I see them almost immediately. Kai’s back is against the wall, and Max is standing in front of him. It’s not like I’ve walked in on them going at it against the bathroom wall. It looks like they’re just talking, but the effect this scene is having on me is profound because it’s rapidly becoming undeniable that this jealousy inside me is the furthest thing from platonic. The confused jealousy has turned to angry jealousy, and I’m getting a whole new perspective on the troubles Hulk faces with his anger issues. The mix of emotions inside me feels too big to control, and I wouldn’t put rage incarnation past me at this point.

I should walk away, but when Max’s palm slides from Kai’s side to his hip, that idea dies a swift death. Instead, I cough loudly and watch with grim satisfaction as their heads snap toward me.

“Sorry,” I push through clenched teeth. “Did I interrupt?”

I don’t think Max will be my biggest fan after this. Cock block me once and all that.

“Kind of,” Max says, putting his hands on his hips and glaring at me, proving my suspicions.

I don’t pay any attention to him, though, and neither does Kai because he’s too busy watching me.

He lifts one eyebrow. “Strike out?” he asks, motioning toward the general direction of the bar.

“You obviously didn’t,” I reply.

Kai’s jaw clenches. “Was there something you needed?”

And then, he swallows and takes a very deliberate step toward Max. He looks me straight in the eye the whole time, and that takes the wind out of my sails like nobody’s business.

All over-the-top, unfamiliar, crazy emotions disappear as if a balloon has been popped, and the only thing left is a huge, aching void.

This is what Kai wants. My eyes fall on where Kai’s shoulder has met Max’s. This is *who* Kai wants, and I’m standing here with my messy emotions, not even sure what is happening to me. No wonder Kai isn’t jumping at the chance to kick Max to the curb. Why would he? And for what? It’s not like I’m really offering anything here.

This is why you should have a plan, damnit! I marched in here, thinking the solutions to everything would present themselves to me as I went along with things. It doesn’t work like this.

I look away. Seeing Kai and Max together like this is not the type of torture I’d willingly submit myself to.

“Sorry,” I say, trying my best to avoid looking at them.

“Carry on,” I add. It’s a joke, right? I can be light-hearted and fun, too.

I try for a smile and pull off an unnatural smirk. It’s high time I went home. This whole evening has been nothing but one fucked-up moment after another. Hell, my whole week has been like that. I should have stayed in the office. At least there things make sense, and that’s ultimately my lot in life. Boring and sensible.

The bar is even more crowded than before as I push my way outside. The night air is cool, and for the first time since stepping foot in that bar, I feel like I can breathe.

Home is a good five miles away, but I need the walk to clear my head. Maybe then Kai and I can talk tomorrow, and I'll be able to articulate why everything feels off between us.

Only I don't get a chance to do that.

"Gray."

My feet stop immediately. I take a moment before I turn around.

Kai is jogging toward me. The distance between us is decreasing too quickly, and then he's right in front of me.

I peer past him.

"No Max?" I ask.

He gives a derisive snort of laughter and takes another step closer.

"What the hell was that?" he demands.

"What the hell was what?"

"That fucking thing you did back there. What the hell was that about? Why even come to that hallway? What was the point?"

"I—"

But I don't get a chance to say anything because Kai speaks over me.

"Do you just enjoy messing me up?" he snaps and drags both his hands through his hair, clutching the strands between his fingers. "Do you think it's easy for me?" He whirls toward me, and I try to follow what he's saying, but it seems the two

of us are completely out of sync because I have no idea what the hell he's saying. It doesn't stop Kai from ranting on, though.

"I've been trying so hard to be normal around you, but you just have to swoop in and throw me off course every damn time. What's wrong with you? Is it so damn hard to just read the room and stop? I mean, my God! And you're always here. Wherever I look. It's like you're around every corner. And you don't even realize it, and it's just torture because you're so fucking clueless! And the most frustrating part is it's not your fault. Not even a little bit. It's just... It just is what it is."

Kai's voice cuts off, and for a moment we just stare at each other. His chest is rising and falling rapidly, and there's a wild look in his eyes that I've never seen before.

My feet start moving as if of their own accord. The distance between us shrinks into nothing fast, and yet I keep going. Kai's expression goes from startled to freaked-out, but I keep moving until there's nothing between us.

My body isn't mine anymore. My hands find their way into Kai's hair as I slam my mouth down on his.

Time freezes.

Sounds cease to exist.

My heartbeats are slamming against the inside of my chest, each thump like a shot of a cannon inside me.

I'm not sure if what we're doing can even be called kissing since neither of us is really doing anything. Our lips are pressed against each other, and I'm holding onto Kai like my life depends on it, but otherwise we're completely still.

That is until Kai let's out a small gasp, and all the *want* that's been gathering inside me tumbles forward, drowning

every rational thought. I move my lips over Kai's. Slowly. Testing the kiss out.

Something hot starts building inside me. I've never felt anything quite like this before, and when Kai growls and grabs onto me, turning us around and slamming my back against the nearby wall, all the while keeping his lips sealed to mine, the *want* turns into *need*.

Kai kisses me like it's the last thing he gets to do on this Earth. There's desperation in the way he presses himself against me, devouring my mouth like I'm the best thing he's ever tasted.

I can't get enough of this kiss. The way it creates waves of heat that roll over my skin and a zinging pleasure that zips up and down my insides.

Kai is everywhere around me. I'm surrounded by his taste and his smell. His arms are holding me in place, grounding me, allowing me the freedom to try anything I feel like because Kai is here, making me feel safe and good and happy.

I tilt my head to the side and experimentally flick the tip of my tongue over Kai's bottom lip. Kai's tongue meets mine, and impossibly, the burning inside me intensifies. Kai lets out a shuddery breath that flutters over my lips like the wings of a butterfly.

And then he suddenly takes it all away as he lets me go and stumbles away from me.

The kiss has stolen my ability to talk, and even if it hadn't, I don't know what to say. Unfortunately, Kai's ability to walk is still very much intact because he just keeps moving further and further away from me.

“Kai.” His name on my lips is confusion and desire and a plea.

He stops and slowly lifts his eyes to meet mine.

“This shouldn’t have happened,” he says in a raspy voice.

“Why?”

“Because you don’t mean it.”

A bark of laughter escapes me.

“Weren’t you here? Did you think I just accidentally fell against your lips with my mouth?”

The look he gives me makes it clear that this is exactly what he thinks happened.

“I want to do it again.” I have no clue where those words are coming from. I just know that they’re one hundred percent true.

Kai stares at me like I’ve gone insane.

“We’re not doing it again. Once was bad enough.”

Okay. So that deflates my determination a bit. I didn’t actually consider the fact that the kiss might not have been as mind-blowing to Kai as it was for me. I’ve never kissed a man before, and to be fair, I didn’t think the basics would be that different from kissing a woman, but maybe I’m wrong? Or maybe I’m just a bad kisser?

“We should go home,” Kai says, and I’m too preoccupied to put up an argument. Maybe it’s better this way. I obviously need to recuperate and reassess. And maybe practice my technique on my hand. Or on... a mango or some other fruit that is easy to carve into something resembling a pair of lips.

Or maybe something less weird. I’m going to figure it out.

Because throughout this all clusterfuck of an aftermath,
one thing is still clear in my head.

I want to kiss Kai again.

KAI

I fucked up.

I *really* fucked up.

I've done that plenty of times in my life, of course, but this one takes the cake.

It's the fuck-up of the decade.

Scratch that. It's the fuck-up of the century.

The worst thing is, I can't stop thinking about it. The kiss. It's scorched in my brain, and it won't leave me alone.

Luckily, I've had a few days to consider my next move while Gray was occupied with all the extra tasks that have been piled on his shoulders at work.

And I've been using the time wisely. In between freak-outs and daydreaming about feeling Gray's lips on mine again, I came up with a solution.

The plan I concocted is simple and elegant: we ignore what happened on Saturday. It's practically foolproof, which is the key to the success of said plan, since judging by my latest undertakings, I cannot be trusted with a more sophisticated approach to damage control. Talking about what happened is out of the question.

I take one last deep breath and push the front door open.
Commence operation Everything Is Normal.

I place my shoes on the rack. Normally.

I take off my jacket. Normally.

I go to the kitchen, where I hear movement. Normally.

I stop in the doorway and fight off a bolt of desire when I see Gray in his sweatpants and T-shirt, and that, too, I do very normally.

“Hi,” I croak.

Gray looks up and smiles when he sees me.

“Hey.” He pulls the normal off way better than I do.

“How was your day?” he asks.

“Normal,” I say quickly, which is a normal answer that shows that everything is normal.

I need serious help.

“Go get changed,” Gray says. “Dinner will be ready in ten.”

I escape the kitchen like the hounds of hell are nipping at my heels. I lean against my bedroom door and close my eyes. This is going to be even more difficult than I predicted earlier. Now that I’ve kissed Gray and felt his body against mine, it’s impossible to look at him without reliving those stolen moments in my mind.

God damnit, even the way he looked in his sweatpants when I walked into the kitchen practically made me drool.

Sweatpants that aren’t even some kind of a beacon of sexiness! *Come on, brain. Stop sabotaging and work with me here.*

On the bright side, it seems Gray has come to the same conclusion that ignoring Saturday is the best tactic, so that makes my life a hell of a lot easier.

I use up all the ten minutes Gray has allotted me. Changing my clothes only takes about two minutes, and the rest of the time I use to talk myself up. Or down. I glare at my lap. Should have worn jeans.

“Thanks for making dinner,” I say once I’m back in the kitchen.

He smiles at me. “No problem.”

Judging by the jumpy, jittery feeling somewhere around my solar plexus, you’d think Gray had said something dirty.

I distract myself with setting the table, which is something that feels unbearably domestic and intimate, even though we’ve done this exact thing countless of times before. To make sure my thoughts stay in the right path, I make the whole endeavor as noisy as possible, clanking plates and glasses together like I’m about to start the noisiest toast known to mankind.

“What are you making?” I ask.

“Fish tacos.”

“My favorite.”

He flashes me another smile. “I know.”

“What’s the occasion?”

“We’re celebrating. I’m done with the extra contracts Con sent my way at work, and when he tried to throw more overtime my way today, I said no.” The words rush out, and Gray beams at me, looking extremely proud of himself.

“Good for you.” I’m thoroughly impressed. I thought I’d never see the day Gray would say no to his brother. “What are you going to do with all that free time?” I tease.

Gray stops and turns around. He aims a look my way, slowly taking me in as I stand there, holding a glass and a plate.

“I think I can find something to occupy myself with,” he says, and I go freaking hot all over.

Gray just wordlessly turns back toward the stove and leaves me to deal with my dysfunctional brain cells.

I get exactly one minute before he declares the food ready. I take a seat, but Gray moves to the phone dock in the corner of the kitchen counter and puts on music. And not even heavy metal or the greatest hits from Broadway musicals or something equally as unsexy.

No, no. He goes for something that distinctly sounds like a playlist of songs to have sex to, and I can’t even call him out for it because I’m not sure if the songs actually are sexy or if I’m just interpreting them like that in my current state of mind. It doesn’t even matter. What would I say anyway? It’s not like I can point my finger into his face and yell, “You put on Coldplay. The sexiest of all musics! *J’accuse!*”

“How are things at the workshop?” Gray asks.

Oh thank fuck. A distraction.

“It’s going well.” Words rush out with way too much enthusiasm for my normalcy plan, so I tone it down a bit. “I have one order lined up, and I have some plans about advertising.”

“You know what we should do?” Gray asks. “Those YouTube clips where you show how you make something.”

“That’s... not a bad idea at all.”

“I thought so, too.” He leans forward, and I get a whiff of his shower gel. My fingernails dig into my palms as I try to control the overwhelming need to climb him like a tree.

“Instagram, too, maybe,” Gray continues. “We can take shirtless pictures of you in your workshop. People will get a kick out of that.” He waggles his brows at me as I laugh.

“I’m supposed to actually work. There’ll be no aesthetically pleasing nudes there. Just a lot of wood dust and chippings and hard work.”

“Too bad,” Gray says, but before I can react to that statement, he goes on. “We should ask Gran to stop by. She has so many connections that if she lets the word out about the workshop, you should soon be up to your ears in orders.”

“I wouldn’t feel comfortable taking advantage of Margaret like that,” I argue.

“I wouldn’t be forcing her to like your work. We’d just be giving her the opportunity to see it.”

“Yeah, okay. Can I think about it?”

Gray laughs. “Of course. It’s your shop. I didn’t mean to be overbearing.”

“You weren’t.”

“Then why do you have that deer-in-the-headlights look?” he challenges.

Because I desperately want to get my hands and lips on you, and I can’t.

I shrug. “New endeavor. Everything is a bit scary at first,” I say evasively.

On a completely different note, the need to figure out how best to advertise the workshop is a pretty effective method of taking my mind off Gray and the way his mouth moves as he bites into his taco. And the way he closes his eyes and savors the taste. And the way he leans back in his chair and smiles at me.

I scramble up the chair and practically tackle the speaker. A couple of jabs of my finger and AC/DC takes over.

Thank you, Brian Johnson!

Gray raises his eyebrow as I sit back down. “Not a fan of Coldplay?” he asks.

I shrug, trying to look nonchalant. “I haven’t listened to AC/DC in a while, and I just remembered that I wanted to.”

Gray doesn’t comment, and the rest of the dinner passes in relative ease with him asking more questions about the workshop and me trying to concentrate on answering and not on the way Gray licks his lips every couple of bites.

By the time we’ve finished eating, I’m ready to escape.

“I’ll do the dishes,” I say in a tone that allows no arguing. Gray shrugs and heads to the living room. I’m done with cleaning the kitchen pitifully quickly. Damn Gray and his neat-freak tendencies. He could have at least left me some pots and pans to clean or countertops to wipe, but no. All too soon, I’m forced to head to the living room, too. Not that it matters. It’ll be a quick good night from me, and that’s it.

The lights are turned low, and Gray is lounging on the couch with the remote in his hand.

He has two beers on the coffee table, and he smiles at me. “Look what I found.” He points to the screen.

I step closer to the couch. “Is that *Kingsman*?”

He nods and laughs. “I still haven’t watched it. You?”

I roll my eyes. “Like you would ever let me live it down if I had.”

“That’s right. A pact is a pact,” he says with a smirk.

“We watch it together or not at all,” we say in unison.

“I wonder if other twenty-two-year-olds were as lame as us?” I ask.

“Speak for yourself,” Gray scoffs. “I’ll have you know I find pacts cool.”

Gray leans forward and grabs the beer. He holds it out to me and waggles his brows. “We’ve been rescheduling watching this for six years. How about we finally do it?”

Ah, what the hell. It’s just a movie. I take the beer and sit down.

Gray starts the movie. It takes me a little while, but pretty soon it becomes clear that this really is an ordinary movie night and not some sinister, brazen seduction plot concocted by Gray. It doesn’t matter that even the thought is ridiculous. Gray seems to follow my original plan to a T and acts as if everything is absolutely ordinary between us.

So it’s good.

I’m glad.

Happy, even.

This is what I wanted.

Fuck knows why I also feel a stab of disappointment.

KAI

“Jeez, it’s cold here.” Mon rubs her forearms while stretching her neck and peering around the arena. We’re at Gray’s first official hockey game, and Mon drove to the city to cheer him on.

“You’re in an ice rink,” I mutter. “What did you expect? A secret lagoon, sunshine, and hot cabana boys?”

Mon frowns. “Who pissed in your cereal?”

I ignore her question. “Where’s your jacket?”

“I didn’t bring one.”

“Jesus Christ,” I mutter as I pull mine off and hand it over to Mon.

“Seriously, what’s wrong with you?”

I try to shake off the bad mood. Mon looks worried, and none of this is her fault, so I shouldn’t take it out on her.

“I’m fine.”

Desperately crushing on my best friend and sexually frustrated, but fine.

“Errrrrr,” she says loudly like the human representation of the wrong answer buzzer in a game show. “Try again.”

Perceptive sisters who know you really well are the worst.

I huff out a breath and stare at the ice, tracking Gray as he zips up and down the rink, warming up.

“Have you ever done something really stupid?” I finally ask, measuring every word carefully. “And you know it’s stupid, but you still want to do it again?”

Mon studies me for a long, unnerving moment. It almost feels as if she can see right through me. I need my tinfoil hat. Stat.

“You really think I’m going to let you get away with vague bullshit like this? What did you do?” she asks.

“Who says I did anything? I’ll have you know I’m asking for a friend.”

“Uh-huh. What’s his name?”

This shouldn’t take me as a surprise, but I’m a bad liar, so shockingly, I don’t have a list of potential fake friends at hand on a moment’s notice, so I draw a complete blank for a second. Luckily my brain comes to the rescue and draws inspiration from my surroundings.

“Ice—” *Damnit, brain! That’s not a name.* “—iah. Iceiah.”
Saved it.

Mon just raises her brows and looks at me skeptically.

“Iceiah,” she repeats.

“He’s from Minnesota. Those guys love their ice.”

“Enough to name their kids after it. Sounds believable,” Mon says dryly.

“I’ll have you know that both of his parents had a pretty severe speech impediment, so nobody knows if that’s the name they really wanted. Way to be insensitive, Mon.”

“Sure,” Mon drawls. “That’s what happened.”

I can’t help but feel she doesn’t believe me. The nerve.

“Who is he? This Iceiah of yours? You’ve never talked about him,” Mon asks.

“Just... this guy I know from work.”

Monica narrows her eyes at me. “You work alone, genius.”

“I have neighbors. Icy—that’s my nickname for him—has a booming business. He makes banjos. You should hear him play. He does a mean Taylor Swift cover.” Everybody knows that to tell a good lie, you need to be as specific as possible about the details, right? Just in case I add some more. “He’s thinking about expanding. Banjos can only get you so far. There comes a point where you’re going to have to graduate to cellos.”

Monica just stares before she sighs and shakes her head. “So what’s Icy’s big problem? What’s the stupid thing he did?”

I’m distracted for a moment because the game starts. I don’t know much about hockey, other than the fact you need to get the puck to the net, but it doesn’t really matter. My eyes stay glued on Gray and the way he flies across the ice, not giving much thought about the score of the game.

“He—” I start.

“As entertaining as Icy and his banjos were, you can say I,” Mon interrupts.

I roll my eyes, but I drag my palm over the back of my head and start again. “I...”

Monica nudges me with her shoulder when I still don’t say anything. “Just spit it out, dude.”

“Gray kissed me,” I blurt out.

Mon is quiet for a long time. “Okay. I did not see that one coming.” She considers me for a while. “Where’s the stupid thing?”

“What?”

“You said you did something stupid. And then you said Gray kissed you. I’m having a bit of difficulty seeing the stupid part. Or at least *your* role in it.”

“I let him,” I say pointedly. I can’t believe I have to spell this out. I feel like it’s pretty obvious what the stupid part of the equation is.

“Okay. Correct me if I’m wrong, but I was under the impression that consent is a good thing. Let’s recap. Gray kissed you. You kissed him back. You liked it?” She looks at me for confirmation, and I nod. “Yeah... I’ve gotta be honest, I don’t see the problem.”

“How can you not?” I ask, disbelief coloring my every word. “Gray and I *kissed*. He’s my best friend, which is enough of a problem on its own. You don’t just go around and french your friends.”

“That’d be an awesome band name,” Mon butts in. I glare at her before I continue, but she just shrugs. “Just saying.”

“He’s straight!” I say.

“Clearly not that straight.”

Meanwhile, somebody scores. I quickly clap, even though I’m not sure whose team scored a goal. I might be cheering for the enemy. I’m a good friend.

“He says he wants to do it again,” I continue as the whistle sounds in the rink again.

“Kiss?” Mon clarifies.

“Yes, kiss,” I reply impatiently.

“So do it.” Mon shrugs.

I gape at her. “What?” I snap.

“You clearly want to, so if he does, too, just go for it.”

“You’re the most useless sister ever. You’re supposed to be on my side.”

“What is your side again?”

“That it’s a mistake.”

Mon considers me for a while. “And Gray actually says he wants to kiss you again?”

“Yes.”

“So... he’s pursuing you or what?”

“Yes. Or no. I don’t know. He said he wanted to kiss me again. I said no. He said we should go home, and now it’s been almost two weeks, and he hasn’t brought it up again.” I have no idea if my rambling makes any sense to Mon.

“Sounds like he’s not that interested after all,” she concludes.

“Ha! You’d think that, right? But lately...”

“What?” Mon prompts when I clamp my mouth shut.

“It’s almost as if he’s seducing me,” I say in a low voice, feeling exceptionally stupid as soon as the words have left my mouth.

Mon gives me a side-eyed look. “Gray?” she says with a tone filled with disbelief.

“What?” I bristle on Gray’s behalf. “Gray can be seductive.” He’s having major success with me because all I seem to think about is Gray and the way I want to jump him and rub myself all over him every time I see him.

“If you say so. What’d he do? Cover himself with whipped cream and offer himself up as a snack? Or did he give you a paper asking if you want to be his boyfriend and to check yes or no?”

I pinch her side, and she squirms away, laughing.

“He’s been... See, on the outside, everything is normal, right? We’re just buddies who hang out, but this past week, he touches me. All the time. He brushes against me when he goes past me in the hallway, and he throws his arm around my shoulders sometimes, and he sits so close to me on the couch that our sides are touching. He gives me these long looks sometimes. He smiles at me. He makes me dinner and puts on music!”

“Holy crap! The monster!” Monica gasps. “What kind of music? No, don’t tell me. Let me guess. Marvin Gaye’s ‘Let’s Get It On’?”

She starts to laugh, and I send her a sour look. “Laugh away. I’m telling you, that’s not normal.”

Mon smirks. “Sorry. I’m taking this seriously now, I promise. Let’s see, he’s seducing you. Okay. Here’s the thing, do you want him to?”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s a simple question. Do you want to be seduced by Gray?”

I open and close my mouth for a few seconds in shock. “First of all, there’s nothing simple about this. Second of all, it

doesn't matter if I want this or not. We can't go down that road."

Mon cocks her head to the side. "But you want him."

I grit my teeth. "Of course I want him. I've always wanted him, and having him will ruin us because this would just be an experiment for him, but it's the real deal for me." I don't mean to say that much, but it's out there now, and Mon immediately slides closer to me and wraps her arm around my shoulder.

"You still have feelings for him," she says, blinking rapidly like she's suddenly seeing the answer to a complicated equation. "After all these years?"

I whip my head toward her. "You knew?"

"Oh honey. Everybody knew. Well, Gray didn't, but yeah. We all saw it."

My head drops forward, and I groan. "Great."

For a while we silently observe the game. I think Gray's team is winning. *Think* being the operative word here.

"You should talk to him," Mon says.

I give her a disgusted look. "Talking? Really? That's the best advice you can give? Because I was thinking of something more in the line of pretending it never happened and, you know, doing it until eternity."

"Sorry, if the tongue is out of the mouth—and in your case inside Gray's mouth—ignoring it won't work anymore."

"This is the world's worst pep talk," I grumble. "I *don't want* to talk."

She shrugs. "It's the only thing that works, unfortunately."

I consider her words as the whistle indicates the end of the game.

Talk.

To Gray.

About kissing.

Crap.

GRAY

I shake hands with the guys on my team after we've changed clothes. The euphoria of winning is coursing through my blood, and I feel like I can accomplish anything. And all of that because of a rec league hockey game.

I leave the locker room and head toward the exit. My smile is hurting my cheeks as I see Kai standing by the door, waiting for me.

My steps quicken as I hurry to get to him. He's lounging against the wall, looking fucking hot. The thought doesn't stump me but fills me with excitement. I've decided to stop overthinking for now and just go with the flow. It's almost like I've been afraid of heights my whole life but now I'm climbing a ladder and each step upward reveals an even better view, so I just keep going, and it's terrifying but also too exhilarating to stop.

All the little, seemingly insignificant changes I've made over these past few weeks have boosted my confidence to unseen heights, and for the first time in forever, I feel really good about myself.

"Congrats!" Kai says. He takes a tiny step closer. Almost like he's planning to hug me, but at the last moment, he reconsiders. It's enough of an encouragement for me, though,

so I pull him into a hug myself. Fucking hell, he feels good against me.

“Thanks,” I say as I let go of him. “Where’s Mon?”

“She’s going to meet up with a couple of her friends before driving back home, but she told me to tell you she enjoyed watching you fall in the second period.”

I laugh and keep my arm around Kai’s shoulder as we head to the parking lot and to my car, and he doesn’t pull away from me the whole time.

“It was a really good game,” Kai says. “I enjoyed myself.”

“A hockey-hater like you had fun at a hockey game?” I tease.

He just rolls his eyes at that.

We make our way to my car, and I throw my bag to the back before getting in.

“Hey,” Kai says, keeping his eyes so firmly focused on the front window that I take a peek to see if there’s something interesting there. He’s tapping the tips of his fingers with his thumbs.

“When we get home, we need to talk.” He sounds almost as if he’s afraid to say the words, and I get it. I get it more than anybody else in the world right now.

Never in the history of time has the phrase *we need to talk* been followed by something good.

“Sure,” I say, trying to sound unconcerned, but my mind is working a mile a minute.

I’m about a hundred and ten percent certain what this sudden need to talk is about, and because of that, I need to

stretch this car ride enough to come up with counterstatements to everything Kai is going to throw my way in his campaign to convince me that the perfect distance between us should at all times be approximately ten feet, and at no cost should any parts of our bodies—especially our lips—break that rule.

There is absolutely no doubt in my mind this is the direction he's headed toward, and I need to derail him. The two weeks since that kiss have given both of us the chance to think things through and get used to the possibility of there being a new dynamic between us. Or at least that's what I've been doing. I have no idea what's been going on in Kai's head. I'm going to find out soon, though.

Kai is distracted the whole way home, so he doesn't seem to notice the unnecessary extra turns I take here and there and the fact that I manage to stretch the usual fifteen-minute car ride to a whopping thirty-three minutes by driving at the pace of a snail and slowing down before every traffic light to give it the opportunity to turn red before I reach it. There are a lot of horns blaring, and by the time I park the car in my spot, I've seen enough raised fingers to tide me over for the rest of the year, but I don't give a fuck. This conversation matters, and I need to be ready for it.

We get inside the apartment. The tension in the air is unmistakable as we both head to our respective rooms to change. I grab two bottles of beer from the fridge and hand one to Kai, who's already sitting on the couch by the time I get back from the kitchen.

“So,” I say as I settle in next to him. “You wanted to talk.”

He nods, but instead of getting straight to business, he fiddles with the label of the bottle.

“Yeah,” he finally says. “It’s about the”—he waves his hand between us—“you know. The thing. That happened.”

“The kiss,” I supply helpfully.

Kai, who’s in the middle of taking a sip, starts coughing.

“Yes,” he finally manages to squeeze out.

“What about it?” I ask calmly.

“I just wanted to make sure that we’re on the same page.”

“And what page is that, exactly?”

He lets out a slightly annoyed-sounding breath, like he can’t believe he has to spell it out for me.

“That-it-was-a-mistake-that-shall-never-be-talked-about-again,” he says so quickly that it sounds like one very long word. “In fact, I don’t think we’ve put enough emphasis on the last part. In the spirit of never mentioning the... you-know-what again, let’s forget this night ever even happened.”

Well, here we go. I now know what he’s thinking, and where he stands, and the only thing left to do is... completely change his mind. This should be fun.

“Oh, *that* page,” I say. “In that case it would appear that we’re, in fact, *not* on the same page.”

Kai just stares at me. “Okay,” he says after a few moments of silence. “I’m going to ask this just once. Are you shitting me?”

“No, I don’t think I am.”

“Why would you want to keep bringing”—he looks around like he’s afraid somebody might hear him and whispers—“the kiss up?”

“Well, I thought about it. Considered the issue from all angles, if you will,” I say. “And I’ve come to the conclusion that I don’t want to forget that kiss.”

Kai’s jaw twitches as he takes a deep breath and gives me a tight-lipped smile. “Just out of curiosity, have you always been so difficult?”

“It might just be that we’ve never really fundamentally disagreed on anything before,” I suggest.

“That’s a good point. We usually agree on most things,” Kai says with forced pleasantness that looks suspiciously like he’s ready to murder me.

“Indeed,” I agree with a smile and a nod.

At least one of us is being nice and civil about this whole thing.

“If you think about it, this is our first real disagreement. Maybe we should, I don’t know, kiss and make up?” I suggest.

“We’re not going to kiss again,” Kai says.

Ah well, it was worth a shot.

“In fact—” Kai starts to say.

“Is this because I’m a terrible kisser?” I interrupt.

Kai looks completely baffled. “What? No!”

It’s difficult to hide my smile. “Just checking.”

“You weren’t sure?”

“Tastes vary. It seemed like the most plausible explanation as to why you would be so adamantly against repeating the hottest kiss of my life.”

Kai's mouth has dropped open. "You can't just... say something like that," he sputters.

"By something like that, you mean the truth? You'd prefer not to hear about how much I liked the feel of your lips against mine?"

"Yes. No." He huffs out a frustrated breath and rubs his palms over his face. "Holy shit! What are you doing to me?"

"I'm not doing anything. You wanted to talk, so we're talking."

"It's your fault that we even need to talk," he all but growls.

A startled laugh escapes my mouth. "How do you figure that?"

"Oh please. You think I haven't caught on to what you're doing? The touching and the way you watch me, and like it isn't bad enough you make breakfast with only your towel on, now you just constantly shove your abs in my face the whole day long." The last few words are punctuated by him poking his finger in my stomach before he points it to my face accusingly. "You're seducing me."

"And you're underestimating me," I say. "I might have been doing all the things you just pointed out, but Kai?" He lifts his eyes to mine at the sound of his name on my lips. "I'm not seducing you."

He frowns. "You aren't?"

I shake my head. "I'm not."

There's a chance I'm mistaken. To err is human and all that jazz, but I'm as close to a hundred percent certain as possible that it's disappointment I see in Kai's gaze.

“There’s a caveat,” I add.

Kai squints his eyes at me. “Which is?”

“Yet,” I say.

He makes a face. “Oh good. Just what I need. Riddles.”

“I’m not seducing you,” I repeat. “Yet.”

Kai swallows hard and licks his lips. It’s difficult to remind myself why I shouldn’t straddle him and kiss the fuck out of him right here and now. For all intents and purposes, I should feel more off-balance than I do right now, but I just don’t. Instead, I’m calm and determined. I’ve never understood what people mean when they talk about *gut feeling*, but I do now because everything inside me screams that this is right. This is what I want. I know it with unparalleled certainty. The hows and whys might be unclear, but I don’t care about that right now. All my focus is narrowed on the fact that I want Kai. All the little details take a back seat.

“You can’t say that. You’re not seducing me. Period,” Kai argues.

“I was thinking I might give it a shot, though,” I say conversationally. “The thing is, this here is not a spur-of-the-moment thing. I’ve thought about you and me for two weeks now, and I’ve made sure my judgment isn’t clouded.”

Kai snorts and shakes his head. I wish I knew what he’s thinking.

“What do you want?” he asks.

“You,” I say. “It’s that simple.”

“Nothing about this is simple.”

“Maybe not,” I allow. “But it doesn’t have to be overly complicated either. I want to know what this clawing need inside me is, and as far as I can tell, the only way to test it out is to kiss you again.”

“We can’t.”

“Do you want me?”

He closes his eyes and continues shaking his head. “You can’t ask me that.”

“Why not? I usually find that starting with the easier questions makes answering the big questions easier.”

Kai pushes himself to his feet and starts pacing back and forth in front of the couch. He drags his fingers through his hair and clutches at the strands, leaving his hair standing up.

He lets out a slightly hysterical laughter. “Why not? Well, let’s see. First of all, you’re straight!” He points his finger in my face and looks at me expectantly like he’s waiting for me to go, “Oh yeah. That little detail. Well, I guess in that case I’m not attracted to you. Wanna watch a movie?”

I stand up, too, and take a step closer.

“Based on the revelations of the last few weeks, I’d say I’m questioning. Although I’d prefer to call it getting to know another side of myself.”

“You’ve only ever had girlfriends,” he says like he’s presenting evidence in the courtroom.

“Not exactly true. I’ve only ever dated Cecilia, so that ‘girlfriends’ you’re talking about should be singular. I’ve had dates, yes, but...” I stop for a second. This is not about me recapping my measly, disappointing dating life. “Want to know something funny? I’ve been doing a lot of thinking.”

“That *is* funny,” Kai interrupts before he clamps his mouth shut like he hadn’t intended to give in to the urge of teasing.

I grin before I continue. “I never told you the details of how Cee and I started dating, did I?”

“No.” He looks away from me, sounding a bit like he doesn’t want to continue this conversation.

“Yeah,” I say. “I was worried and embarrassed back then about my decided lack of interest in... well, everybody. I went out on dates, but”—I shake my head—“You know what, that part doesn’t really matter. Cee was auditing a company we were representing at the time, and there was a court case involved, so we spent a lot of time together, and we became friends. Everything else—dating and actually being attracted to her—that followed after.”

“What are you saying?” Kai asks.

“I’m saying”—I take a step closer—“that I don’t get attracted to people that easily. In fact, it almost never happens.” I take another step closer. “So I don’t think we can draw any fundamental conclusions about my sexuality. And maybe we don’t have to. I’ve never felt the need to label myself before, so why can’t I just say that I’m more attracted to you than I’ve ever been to anybody else”—I erase the last few inches that separate us and slide my palm down his side, enjoying the way heat radiates through his T-shirt—“and I want to explore whatever this here is.”

My lips are only a hairsbreadth away from Kai’s. “I want you so much it fucking hurts,” I say in a low voice as I look him deep in the eyes searchingly. “Tell me you don’t want me, too, and I’ll back off. Tell me you don’t think about kissing me again, and I’ll never bring it up again. Tell me you don’t want

to have my taste on your tongue. Tell me you're not curious to see what my body feels like against yours."

Kai's eyes haven't left me the whole time I've been speaking, and the moment the last word has left my lips, he lunges and slams his mouth down on mine.

For a moment, I'm so surprised that I don't even dare to breath, but I catch on to what is happening in record speed. My arms wrap around Kai, my heart violently slamming in my chest, and I can feel his heart beating against mine as we're standing there, glued together from toes to hips to chests to lips.

I'm surrounded by Kai. I feel him everywhere, and yet I desperately try to pull him even closer because he's still too far away. Air molecules are having a hard time squeezing between the two of us by this point, but I still want more.

Kai's tongue slides against my bottom lip, and I immediately open for him. I can't get enough of his taste. It's intoxicating.

Kai's fingers move into my hair, clutching at the strands like he's holding on for dear life. My palm is pressed against the small of Kai's back, and my other hand is on Kai's cheek. His stubble scratches my palm, sending shivers of pleasure down my spine.

My rumble of pleasure makes Kai deepen the kiss even more. He has lost all the hesitation from before and has thrown himself fully into the kiss.

Kai gives no warning as he pulls me back toward the couch. We land on it without finesse with Kai underneath me. We kiss like we've been starving for each other. Kai's hands move over my back, sliding up and down. His fingers hook to

the back of my neck, and he's sliding his fingers through the short hair at the base of my neck.

The hard body beneath me is fucking sexy in a whole new way. I want to explore, but our position doesn't give me many options, so I try to roll us around, which isn't exactly the height of good judgment, since it results in me falling off the couch.

I blink as I stare at the ceiling until Kai's smiling face appears above me.

"Smooth," he says.

With one quick tug, I have him just where I want him most—on top of me. He's not smiling anymore. Instead, he presses his forehead against mine.

"What the fuck are we doing?" he murmurs.

I wiggle until our bodies align perfectly before I nip at his lips, making Kai suck in his breath in the process. I think right now it's better to try and lighten the mood a bit.

"Isn't it obvious?" I murmur against his lips. "We're working on my happy list."

KAI

I stare at the way the patch of moonlight moves over the floorboards of my room. The slow journey from one side of the room to the other has taken forever, and I know it because I've been a silent observer of it for hours already.

I flop on my back and close my eyes, trying to relax, but the moment I close my eyes, I can feel Gray against me. Above me. Underneath me. His lips on mine. His tongue in my mouth. His scent lingering on my skin.

His fingers in my hair. His teeth nipping at my lips. His cock pressing against mine...

Fuck!

Images of our kiss are so vivid in my mind that I can still taste him on my tongue.

The night did not go according to my plan. I was supposed to clear the air between us, but instead of standing my ground, I attacked him. And not even with my words but with my lips.

The worst thing is, now that I really know what Gray tastes like, I'm not sure I can ever go back to the way things were before. And the kissing wasn't even the worst part. The worst part was how he hugged me while we were lying on the floor. And the realization that I'd give anything to have him hold me

like that for the rest of my life. The stupid, fucking useless hope is back like I haven't just spent the last ten years doing everything in my power to kill it.

Nope. Instead, I'd seemingly fallen into some sort of false sense of security where I thought my feelings had been eviscerated when in truth they lay dormant, playing the long game, only to tumble back full force after one kiss. My feelings might as well have brought a banner with them, saying, *Gotcha, sucker!*

That's a decade of work down the drain.

And I can already picture how this is going to go. Gray has been making a lot of changes lately. And now he says he wants me, and I believe he means it. I believe he thinks he wants me.

But in reality, he's high on adrenaline. He's ready to charge ahead and be this new version of Gray, and as much as I don't like it, in this scenario I'm one of those new, exciting toys that'll lose its shine once real life kicks in again. Gray wants to bring some excitement to his life, and kissing me probably feels new and different.

The problem with adrenaline highs is that they wear off. Sure, maybe it'll take some time. He'll have his fun with me, and he doesn't even suspect it could end badly because he loves me. I know he does. But real life will kick in, and by that time we'll have made enough damage that our friendship will be beyond repair, and I'll lose him.

The smart thing to do would be to put a stop to it all. Have the talk again. Tell him all the kissing ends right here and now.

But now that I know what kissing Gray feels like, I desperately want more, and as experience has demonstrated already, I'm not that good at resisting him.

Shockingly enough, I don't have a good solution at hand at—I glance at the digital clock by my bedside table—three in the morning. Fantastic.

I turn to my side, stuffing the pillow below my head.

The sound of footsteps outside my door make me shoot up from the bed like I've been hit by a bolt of lightning. There's no consideration about whether or not this is a good idea. I don't think at all anymore. I just do. My heart starts a wild gallop as I pull the door open and run straight into Gray.

His face is barely visible in the darkness of the hallway, but I don't need the light. I know everything about Gray by heart anyway.

“Please tell me you don't spend your nights creepily staring at my bedroom door.” The joke falls flat, even though Gray's lips give the tiniest of twitches.

“Technically it's my hallway, so I can do anything I want here, no matter the time.”

“I suspect your neighbors would oppose a midnight rave.”

“People might surprise you.”

Don't I know it.

“Can I come in?” Gray nods toward my room.

He's wearing a pair of sleep pants and nothing else. The power of the chest is so magnificent that I immediately step aside, letting him pass.

Every sane, logical thought I just spent hours agonizing over disappears because the possibility of seeing Gray naked outdoes everything else. Middle of the night is not a good time for making sound decisions. The late hour halts rational thought like nobody's business.

“Couldn’t sleep?” I ask.

Gray shakes his head as he turns around to face me. He’s only inches away.

“And you want some company?” I stuff my hands beneath my armpits because I can’t seem to think of anything else to do with them.

“I knew you weren’t sleeping.”

“Do you have secret peeping hole?”

He takes a step toward me.

“Your bed creaks when you toss and turn,” Gray says.

Another step.

“The walls are pretty thin,” he adds.

Another step.

“I hoped you would be up.”

“Why?” The word comes out in a rush of escaped breath.

“Because I can’t stop thinking about you. And there’s the added benefit of seeing you half-naked.”

I shiver as I feel his gaze move over me. It takes every ounce of self-control not to tackle him to the bed.

Gray reaches out his palm but stops just an inch from my bare stomach, his gaze a hopeful question on mine. I nod. The tips of his fingers slide over my stomach and up my chest. The touch is feather-light. My skin breaks out in goose bumps, and my breath whooshes out of my lungs.

“You want me.”

I close my eyes and chuckle.

“You’re only now figuring that out?” I don’t mean to say that. Don’t want to emotionally strip myself, but I’m given no choice on the matter. My soul is just as unable to resist Gray as my body.

Gray’s fingertips keep drawing patterns on my skin, gentle, exploratory.

He leans closer and nips at my lips, his teeth grazing my bottom lip. A hint of what’s in store for me if only I threw all caution to the wind.

“I want you, too.”

The words make my chest fill with happiness until I remember that it’s curiosity speaking.

“I can’t believe I’ve never realized how fucking sexy you are,” Gray continues. He flattens his palm on my back and pulls me a step closer. There’s almost nothing between us anymore. An inch of space and some air that is filled with desire.

My cock is tenting the front of my boxers. A slight punch of my hips would allow me to bump into Gray’s erection. It’s getting harder and harder to remember why I shouldn’t allow this to happen.

“It’s just sex, Kai,” he whispers in my ear, enticing me, not knowing that exact sentence describes perfectly what’s holding me back. Because I want more. I want... forever. I mercilessly push that thought aside. I knew this was what it came down to. This is just some fun. Just some exploring. It’s all it can ever be.

And maybe it’s stupid to have all that knowledge and still make the wrong decision, but my resistance is breaking nevertheless. Melting like a cube of ice in a fire.

“Don’t overthink this. For now, take it for what it is—just some fun.” Gray slides his palm over the front of my boxers and fists my cock in his hand.

Well, wish granted. As of right now, I’m not thinking at all. Brain cells have screeched to a halt. Blood has evacuated south. Maybe that’s why Gray sounds like he’s making total sense. Why must I overthink this? I don’t want to think at all right now.

I step closer and push my erection further into Gray’s hand. He sucks in a surprised breath. I’m going to weep like a baby if this is the moment reality hits and it all becomes too much for him.

“Fuck, that’s hot,” he mumbles. I let out a relieved breath. “Why is it so hot?” he asks as he slowly moves his palm up and down my shaft.

I want to say something, but words refuse to come, so I just shake my head and shrug.

He squeezes the base of my dick, and I grab the back of his head, slamming our mouths together. The kiss is intense. Gray holds nothing back as a satisfied rumble leaves his chest, and he reciprocates me with the same level of heat.

I push my own hand between us. I bypass the over-the-clothes bit and slide my hand right below the loose waistband of his sleep pants. The head of his cock meets my palm, and I wrap my hand around him. He groans and swivels his hips.

“Fuck, yes,” he hisses as I start moving my hand up and down.

“I’m only getting started.”

Gray’s hand halts for a second.

“Promise?” he asks.

Instead of answering, I catch his mouth in another fierce kiss. I maneuver us to my bed and push Gray down on it.

This might be a bad idea on every conceivable level, but fuck it, I’m at least going to make the ride memorable.

I pull Gray’s pants down his hips and throw them on the floor. I take a moment to just appreciate the view. The wide chest and the narrow hips. The way his nipples have pebbled. Partly because of the chilly air of my bedroom, but partly—fuck, I hope it’s true—because of arousal.

I start to climb on the bed when Gray points at my underwear.

“Off,” he says gruffly.

I hesitate. In full honesty, I figured it’d be easier for him to get lost in the moment if I wouldn’t have my naked cock poking at his hip while I’m kissing him. I’m not sure what I’m trying to accomplish, exactly. Make him forget he’s with a man? I’m a fucking mess.

Gray pushes himself to his elbows, immediately sensing my uncertainty.

“Take them off,” he repeats. “I want to feel you. All of you.”

A shiver of excitement runs over my skin.

“Are you sure?” I can’t help but ask.

Gray stares at me in the dimness of the room for a few seconds before he pushes himself to a sitting position, leans over, and turns on the bedside lamp. I squint at the sudden light. Christ! He’s body is even more impressive in the soft lamplight.

“Off,” he repeats, more demanding now, and fuck if it doesn’t get me even harder. I’m still not making a move, so he reaches out his hands and hooks his fingers in the waistband of my boxers.

“You think seeing all of you will somehow dissuade me?” he asks in a low voice. “Because I’m pretty sure this”—he points to his still very prominent and very hard cock—“should be a clear indication that everything about you turns me on. Don’t insult us both by suggesting I want to pretend it’s not you on top of me.”

If I ever thought Gray couldn’t read me like a book, I’m definitely cured of that notion now.

He sends me a searching look before he slowly pushes my boxers down. My cock springs free, and Gray sucks in a breath as he looks at me. All of me.

“Fucking hot,” he says hoarsely, and then he licks his lips, and I have to squeeze my eyes shut not to come.

I use the only distraction I have at my disposal as I push Gray down on his back and climb on top of him. I’ve talked myself into a nervous mess about this whole thing by now, so I throw caution out the window and straddle Gray because if he’s about to freak out about my cock against his, I’d prefer he do it now instead of later.

That doesn’t happen, though. Instead, Gray moans the moment my dick touches his. I snort out a laugh, out of sheer relief, and then I lower my head and kiss my way over his chest, capturing his nipple between my teeth and pulling it in my mouth.

Gray’s hips punch up, and he lets out another moan. He throws his head back. “So good,” he says as I continue kissing

his skin.

I inhale deeply, loving the way his skin smells and tastes. I can feel heat radiating from him. Gray tugs me upward until our mouths meet in a slow, burning kiss. Our tongues tangle, the kiss leisurely as if we have all the time in the world to do this.

I slide my hand to the back of Gray's head and tug at his hair until he tilts his head back. The kisses I plant on his neck make him sigh in pleasure. His hands keep sliding all over my back and then lower until he's squeezing my ass. Experimentally at first, and then harder.

My body trembles. "I love your hands on me."

"What about other parts of me?" Gray asks as he slides his hands lower and holds me in place while he starts rolling his own hips.

"Other parts are good, too," I assure him as I drop onto his chest, trapping our cocks between our bodies.

"Good to know," Gray pants out as we keep rubbing against each other.

I'm not ready for this to end yet, so I push myself up to the sounds of protest from Gray. He quickly shuts up when I start kissing him again, moving lower with each press of my lips to his skin.

I need a taste. I'm still not convinced this isn't all just a very vivid dream, but even if it is, it's been damn impressive so far, which means that a blow job in this particular dream will almost certainly not disappoint.

Gray's hands fist the sheets as the end point of my journey registers. There's very little finesse left by the time I reach his

lower stomach. The kisses have turned sloppy, and I'm practically scrambling to get to my destination.

I wrap my fingers around the base of his cock and take a moment to just look and commit this sight to my memory. Gray holds completely still, giving me all the time I want, like he could tell I need it.

I slowly lower my head and flick the tip of my tongue over the head. I shoot a quick glance at Gray. I almost expect him to have his eyes closed or head thrown back. Anything that would allow him to pretend it's not me about to devour his cock with my mouth.

But I find him looking at me intently, every ounce of his attention on me.

“You want this?” I ask.

He nods, but I need more right now. I need to hear his voice.

“Do you want me to suck you, Gray?” I ask again. I have to fight the need to lower my mouth on him right this second.

“More than anything.”

My lips stretch around him the moment the last word has left Gray's lips.

GRAY

My eyes squeeze shut the moment Kai's lips close around me, and a pathetic whimper escapes as sensations course over me. It takes me a few seconds to realize that I fucking well want to see this. I'm not willing to miss a moment of what's happening here.

I've never been this turned on in my life. This feeling like I'm about to bust out of my own skin is new and terrifying in its intensity.

Kai's mouth is almost unbearably hot around me. He pulls off me and drags the flat of his tongue from the base of my dick to the tip. Kai's hands are on my sides, and I grab on to them, linking our fingers. He looks up for a second, a startled expression on his face. Some kind of an unfathomable emotion reflects in his gaze, but before I can gather the few brain cells that are still functioning, Kai lowers his head again and sucks the tip of my cock into his mouth.

The feeling is exquisite. Kai takes his time with me as he sets a leisurely pace, slowly sucking me in and dragging his head back up, making me feel the attention he lavishes on every inch of me.

I feel hot and cold all over. Nobody has ever taken their time with me like this. Kai hums in pleasure like giving me

head is the greatest feeling he's ever experienced. He keeps his gaze locked with mine. The fingers of his left hand are still linked with mine.

It's so wonderfully intimate and everything that's been missing in every single one of my other sexual encounters.

He keeps moving his fingertips over my thigh. Every once in a while, he tugs at the hairs there, diverting my attention for a quick moment, and every time he does it, the pleasure that's coursing through me doubles.

I cup his cheek in my palm. Kai blinks, looking startled again. It's almost as if intimate gestures like those are something completely new to him. There's something weirdly debauched about this moment. My tender caress on his cheek, contrasted with Kai still holding my cock in his mouth.

Kai turns his gaze away first, and when he swallows me down, there's a new kind of determination there. He pulls away for a second and looks up at me.

"I want you to fuck my mouth," he says. His voice is slightly scratchy, and the knowledge that it's because of me—because he's been sucking me off, because my cock has been pushing against the soft back of his throat—almost makes me come. Combined with the invite to fuck his mouth, it's almost too much to take.

"Kai..." It's the only thing I manage to say. I push my hand in his hair and slowly lift my hips from the bed, giving an experimental thrust.

Kai's cheeks hollow as he sucks.

"Oh fuck," I groan as the sensations hit.

I pull my knees up and press my heels in the mattress for better leverage. My hips move up. I give a slow thrust, trying

to find a good rhythm. Kai's having none of it, though. He forces his mouth lower, swallowing around me, and when he pushes his hand between my legs and starts rolling my balls between his fingers, I forget how to breathe.

My hips snap up, and Kai gives a startled cough.

"Sorry," I slur, the words pretty much unintelligible at this point.

"Don't be," he rasps. Determination appears on his face as he opens his mouth wider and lowers his head slowly, taking all of me into his willing, scorching mouth. The head of my cock hits the back of his throat and then, holy shit, he swallows, forcing me even deeper.

He pulls up, and I thrust back in again. Kai's fingers are still between my legs. He's tugging and rolling my balls, all the while keeping up a steady rhythm with his mouth. It's magician-level dexterity.

And then, his pinky grazes the spot just behind my balls. I'm halfway certain the touch is accidental, but the effect is immediate. My whole body shivers, and my cock swells. Kai's eyes fly to mine.

Almost as if in slow motion, he repeats the move, pressing his pinky against me more firmly this time.

"Kai," I gasp, slamming my hips up. My thrusts are uneven and sloppy, but that doesn't stop the wave of pleasure that rolls over me. His name on my lips is the only warning I manage to give.

Kai doesn't pull off. A wicked glint appears in his eyes as he sucks me in, and suddenly he grazes his pinky over my hole.

I come with a shout. Kai's name on my lips lingers in the air around us as I pour my release into his mouth and down his throat.

I collapse on the bed in a boneless state.

Holy shit.

I can't breathe. The air is too thick to force it inside me. Waves of aftershocks make everything around me feel sharp and hazy all at once. The intensity of what I've just experienced doubles almost instantly as Kai straightens himself and takes ahold of his cock.

Kai's erection looks almost angry as he throws his head back and starts sliding his palm up and down. He looks down at his shaft and lets a dribble of spit land on the head.

I suck in a breath. I just came in his mouth. He's jacking himself off with my come. My cock gives a tired twitch. Kai's eyes darken as he lets his gaze wander over me, taking in my body, laid out in front of him, slick with sweat, languid from the mind-numbing pleasure of my release.

The sight of him bowing over and shooting his load all over my abdomen might be the hottest thing I've seen in my life.

But the best part is when he collapses on top of me a second later, and I get to wrap my arms around him and fall asleep with him.

KAI

I've never slept with one of my friends before, so I don't know what to expect when it comes to the aftermath, but it's actually not a big deal. Somehow I'd come to the conclusion it would be awkward and weird.

It's not.

There is a moment of obligatory panic somewhere in there when I remember what happened last night. And then during the early hours of the morning. But then I feel Gray's chest pressed against mine and his hand in my hair, playing with the strands. I'm drowsy from sleep and warm and comfortable, so without thinking, I press closer to him and all the oh-shit-what-have-we-done feelings crawl back into their cave.

"I've never seen hair the color of yours," Gray says after a while, still playing with it. I feel like a cat, ready to rub against him.

"Red?" I ask through a jaw-cracking yawn. I should get out of bed and be productive, put some distance between the two of us, but I can't.

"That's like saying the sunrise is nice. You'll get the general gist across, but the person who's never seen the sunrise will never understand how magnificent it is based on that shitty description," Gray scoffs. "Your hair isn't just red. It's a

mix of fire and caramel and cherries, and sometimes when you're standing in the sun, it almost looks golden. It's beautiful," he says. I feel warm all over as he keeps playing with my hair.

"You remember how Brett Carmichael kept calling me carrot-top in sixth grade and you punched him in the nose?" I ask with a laugh.

"I was trying to woo you. We were sort of friends, but I wanted more, so I needed to impress you. Besides, Brett was a bully. There's a difference between some light teasing and being a dick."

"I especially enjoyed the part where you stood above him while he was lying on the ground and you had that whole speech about how redheads are more efficient at synthesizing vitamin D than other people, so that's why I was a happy person and Brett was a miserable ass." The memory of the twelve-year-old Gray in all his nerdy anger, spewing out facts of vitamin deficiency, still makes me smile. Brett was scary, about twice as wide as Gray and me and a whole head taller, and yet, Gray had stood up for me.

What made the whole incident even more impressive was the fact that neither Gray nor I were some sort of schoolyard vigilantes, hardened by our constant fight against middle school injustice.

We were two scrawny preteens, doing our best not to get noticed too much, but once somebody wronged me, Gray was there, braving the very real threat of a black eye and a broken nose.

"To this day, I can't believe you did that," I say quietly.

"You would have done the same for me."

I'm getting stupidly emotional. This needs to end right now. Too few hours of sleep and a naked Gray pressed against my equally naked self does not a sharp Kai make.

"Besides," Gray continues, "I have to keep you safe. With all this global warming business going on, redheads are going extinct."

I start to laugh. "What? No, we're not. You're making that up."

He tugs at my hair gently.

"That would be the weirdest thing to lie about."

"Fine. Enlighten me. Why am I going extinct?" I ask and push myself up so that I'm leaning on my elbow. There's a boyish twinkle in Gray's eyes as he looks at me. He seems so relaxed and carefree. Just the way he should always be.

"You do realize it's not you per se who's going extinct, right? *You're* not allowed to drop dead for another seventy years or so."

"I'm not allowed? That's a pretty big time commitment. What will I get in return?" I ask, pursing my lips, even though I'm all giddy inside because... Gray doesn't want me to die. It must be love. Jesus, I need a large dose of sanity.

"And here I thought not dying was a good enough of an incentive," Gray says.

"Hey, I'm going extinct here," I say with a shrug.

"Again, not *you*. Just your flame-headed descendants. Red hair is supposedly an adaption to climate. Northern countries, where there are more redheads, don't get a lot of sun, and people have adapted to get as much vitamin D as they can, right?"

I shake my head and smile. “You and your vitamin D.”

He ignores me. “So with global warming, resulting in more sun and fewer clouds, supposedly there’ll be less and less redheads.”

“Okay, but red hair is genetic,” I say thoughtfully. “So... unless all redheads stop having sex all at once, it’d take a long time for us to disappear completely.”

Gray looks at me, and then he suddenly rolls us over so that I’m beneath him. He looks down at me and waggles his brows. “God forbid we stop you from having sex, then. I was going to suggest we get something to eat, but we can’t now.”

I throw my head back and laugh as Gray smiles, looking pretty damn pleased with himself.

“I don’t think us having sex will—”

Gray silences me with a kiss.

“All I heard was that you can’t stop having sex,” he says sternly as he pulls away, leaving me dazed and reaching upward to pull him back to me.

“Fine,” I groan as he lowers his head and starts kissing my neck, sending shivers of pleasure running down my skin. “I guess I’ll do my part for the survival of my species.”

“Your sacrifice is greatly appreciated,” Gray says, lips moving against my neck.

I’m not a hundred percent sold on the idea that me and Gray having sex will rescue the redheads, but I guess with possible extinction on the horizon, we must try every idea.

And as Gray kisses me and grinds his body down on mine, making our cocks rub together, I can certainly promise to do my part as often as I can.

KAI

“Maybe I should have a sign,” I say, staring at the front door.

“Like in a café?” Gray asks.

“Yeah. One of those open/closed ones.”

I’m officially opening the workshop today. The renovations are done. The equipment I need is in there. There’s really no reason to stand in front of the building and discuss signs.

“Your door doesn’t have a window,” Gray says.

“I should get a new door!” I pull out my phone, but before I can start typing, Gray takes it out of my hand.

“You have a perfectly good door in place already.”

“Without a window,” I enunciate. “How will people know if I’m open or not?”

Gray looks to his left and to his right before he points toward the sign next to the door that lists the times the workshop is open.

“People nowadays don’t want to waste their time on reading,” I scoff. “They’ll want an open or closed sign on a door with a window, and I don’t have one, so I think the right

course of action is to postpone opening for now until I get a better door.”

“Nice try,” Gray says as he pushes my windowless door open and walks in. By the time I stalk inside after him, he has the lights on, and he’s also turned on the music.

“Make yourself comfortable,” I mutter.

“Done,” he says easily as he leans against the wall.

“Aren’t you going to go to work?” I ask.

He looks annoyingly relaxed and really fucking hot in his dark gray suit as he lounges there, all sinewy hotness and charm. It’s almost enough of a distraction to take my mind off the fact that I’m officially in business as of today. Not that it really matters that today is my grand opening. There’s really nothing grand about it. It’s just the usual workday for me, but my website went live last night, and technically, people can now step in the door and ask me to create something for them that’ll be in their house, hopefully for a long time. In my dreams I’ll be able to create pieces of furniture that people will want to pass down the generations, and four generations from now, somebody will find something of mine from a storage unit and lose their mind because it’s a Kai Morgan original and worth a billion dollars because I’ve become such an iconic, revered artist.

And now that goddamn windowless door is going to ruin it all. It’s such a shame.

Gray smiles at me. He knows me too well not to have figured out that I’m freaking out about the symbolic significance of the day. That’s why he insisted he’ll come with me this morning. He wants to support me.

From here on out, it's sink or swim, and I'm terrified of going under. What will I do if I fail?

"You're right. I have to get going," Gray says, straightening himself. "I just wanted to give you something before I go."

"Okay?"

He walks toward me and wraps me in his arms. I let out a deep breath and melt against him.

"This is going to be awesome," he says against my ear. "You're the most talented person I know, and I can't wait for everybody else to see it for themselves."

He pulls away way too soon, but he doesn't leave yet. Instead, he pushes his hand in his laptop bag and rummages around.

"I made you something," he says before he pulls out a wooden horseshoe.

I stare at it.

"You made this?" I ask.

He shrugs, looking a bit embarrassed.

"It's not really as impressive as I thought it would be, but after twenty different versions, I had to come to terms with the fact that number fourteen is the best of the bunch. It's for good luck. You can hang it up somewhere. Or hide it. Yeah. Now that I think about it, you'll have people here, and you can't really afford them to think you made this. They'll run straight out the door. This might have been a stupid idea. Let's pretend the hug was the only thing I wanted to give you."

He starts to stuff the horseshoe back into his bag, but I practically tackle him in my haste to get it from him.

“Don’t you dare,” I say as I grab the horseshoe. “This is beautiful.”

I reverently slide my fingertips over the smooth surface. It’s perfect.

“You really like it?” he asks.

“Are you kidding me? It’s the best gift I’ve ever gotten. When did you have time to make it?”

“I was meeting Gran for lunch a few weeks ago, and she said she was taking a cooking class, so I tagged along to the learning center. I saw the notice about the woodworking class, and I decided on a whim I could make you something as a surprise.”

“Great success.” I swallow hard, trying to ignore the horrible, terrifying tenderness in my chest. “I love it.”

We look at each other, and he smiles, and I feel like my heart is filling with helium. The sick lightness inside me is both exhilarating and awful because I’ve been here before. I know where this leads.

But when Gray catches my mouth in a kiss, I let him. And when he smiles and walks out the door, I immediately miss him. And when he texts me twenty minutes later to tell me to have a good day, I swoon.

And when I squeeze the horseshoe in my hand, letting the edges dig into my palm until it hurts, I realize something.

I am so totally fucked.

The next few weeks are busier than ever at work, which gives me the perfect opportunity to ignore thinking about the mess that I've made of my personal life.

I'm living in the moment like the cool kids do.

So what if I'm spending my nights in Gray's bed? That's just some fun between friends.

So what if I can't wait to get home after my workday ends? It's because the sex is awesome.

So what if I can't stop thinking about him? So what if I get butterflies in my belly when I'm near him? So what if his touch makes my heart speed up to a crazy tattoo?

As long as I can keep my new credo of *It's just sex. It's just some fun* in the forefront of my mind, I'm okay.

As long as I understand that nothing between us is permanent, it's going to be fine.

As long as I can keep fooling myself that I'm not in love, I will not end up with my heart in million tiny pieces.

We're sitting on Gray's bed, leaning against the headboard with a pizza box between the two of us. We're both wearing sweats and no T-shirts, and a movie is playing in Gray's laptop that is placed at the foot of the bed.

It's all so easy and comfortable that it's getting hard to remember that this isn't our new reality. Truth be told, I'm not really trying. I can angst about the future tomorrow, too. I doubt the overwhelming sense of worry and the nagging terror that I might very literally be fucking up the most important relationship I've ever had will disappear anytime soon.

After the episode ends, Gray puts the laptop away and sighs.

“I can’t believe the weekend is over already.” He makes a face.

I lean my head on his shoulder and press my lips against the sensitive skin below his ear.

“Cheer up, buttercup,” I say, and he chuckles, rolling himself on top of me.

“It’s work. What’s there to cheer about?”

“Well, you could cheer about the fact that if your workday is over, I’ll wait for you at home?” I suggest. “By the bed. Naked. On my knees.”

He groans and lets his head drop next to mine. “You really think I want to waste nine hours in the office with that kind of a promise? Here’s my counteroffer. We do your idea, but we’ll start in the morning right after we wake up. I could call in sick and we can stay in bed for the next few days?” he suggests hopefully.

I shake my head, trying to remember why I can’t do that. I have a niggling feeling there was something I was supposed to do.

“I have to ship a dining room table tomorrow. It’ll keep me occupied for most of the day,” I finally manage to get out. A heroic act on my part, since Gray is busy kissing my neck, and it’s driving me fucking wild.

“I can come and help. You need to pay me, of course. I don’t work for free.”

“Is that so?” I ask, angling my head to the side to give him better access.

He sucks the lobe of my ear between his lips, and the already familiar tap dance in my chest speeds up even more.

“Don’t worry, it’s just a small fee. I’m not greedy,” he murmurs, lips sliding across my skin gently like the wings of a butterfly.

“I’m a very new business owner. I’m not sure if I can afford you,” I pant.

“No worries. I work for blow jobs. And hand jobs. And... cookies.”

“Good to know I have options.” I roll us over again and throw my leg across his thighs, straddling him.

He sucks in a breath as I start moving my hips back and forth in slow circles.

“So tell me,” I murmur, lips against his chest, planting kisses as I go. “Do you prefer oatmeal cookies or chocolate chip?”

“Ah, damnit,” he gasps as I push my hand between us and squeeze his erection. “I was hoping you’d go for option one or two.”

“Don’t include things you definitely don’t want to acquire when negotiating. That’s business 101 for you.”

“Good thing you’re the business owner of the two of us, then.”

He closes his eyes as I continue stroking him through his boxers.

“Have you ever thought about quitting?” I ask.

Gray’s eyes fly open, and he looks down between our bodies to where I’m still squeezing his dick.

“Really?” he asks. “You want to discuss this right now?”

“You have a better moment in mind?”

“I can think of several. All of them are happening any other time than right now.”

I slide my hand to his stomach and flutter my fingertips over his skin. The way he sucks in his breath and his abdominal muscles tighten every time I do it is mesmerizing, so I just keep touching him.

“So have you?” I ask after a while.

Gray lets out a deep sigh.

“Sometimes,” he admits. “Only then what would I do? I’m a corporate lawyer. That’s pretty much all I know. Fuck, I’ve never done anything else. Even all my internships and summer jobs have been with Connor, and I doubt working for another firm would make much of a difference anyway. Plus, I couldn’t do that to Con. He’s counting on me.”

I can’t touch that one. Con and I don’t really get along. Con has always been there for Gray, transferring schools to come back home and take care of Gray when their parents died, and there’s no doubt in my mind he loves Gray, but the man also has a stick so far up his ass that the thing is poking into his brain.

“I bet lawyers can change professions, too,” I say, pushing Con out of my mind.

“No, no. It’s a lifetime commitment. I signed a contract in blood,” Gray deadpans.

I tweak one of his nipples, and he groans. His fingers push into my hips, and he pulls me against him. I can’t help but let out a shuddering breath at the feel of him against me.

“Do you like being a lawyer?” I manage to ask, even though rational thought is quickly abandoning the premises.

“You’re way too determined for your own good,” Gray says as he keeps moving against me, rolling his hips like we’re in the middle of a horizontal version of bachata.

“Is this coming as a surprise to you?”

“That particular superpower has never been aimed against me, so I’ve never really been afraid of it.”

I can’t help but laugh at that, but then Gray puts his hand to the back of my head and pulls me to him. Our mouths connect in a scorching hot kiss, and he doesn’t let go before I’m definitely done laughing.

Our gazes meet and as if on cue, we both scramble to get our pants off before I settle in on top of him.

We’re all frantic need and desperate movements after that. I lean over to grab the lube from Gray’s bedside table. The cap flies open, and the bottle drops somewhere on the floor after a few seconds, and then my slippery hand is wrapped around the both of us.

“Holy shit,” Gray gasps as I move my hand up and down. He wraps his own hand around mine so that our dicks are firmly trapped between our palms.

Our fingers are slippery, palms sliding smoothly as we move in tandem. We’re totally in sync, Gray and I. He kisses me the moment I feel like I can’t exist another moment without his taste on my tongue. He tightens his hold around my waist just as I’m starting to feel like I might float away. His grasp on my erection becomes firmer based on the hitching of my breath.

I angle my head, and throw myself into the kiss. It's so easy to get lost in Gray. Way too easy for my sanity. I have a feeling this is going to hurt like nothing else once real life kicks in, but I'm already in too deep, and it's hard to let future hurt ruin today's pleasure.

Gray's head thumps against the headboard, but he doesn't even wince. I angle my palm between him and the headboard to stop him from hurting himself again.

His eyes meet mine, and as per some unspoken agreement, we move our hands quicker. It's a bit tricky what with the frantic *need* between us. I press my forehead against Gray's. His breath whooshes over my lips. We're both looking down, and my best friend's cock next to mine, trapped in our hands, is easily the hottest thing I've ever seen. Gray moves his thumb over the heads, swiping up precome.

Goose bumps travel over my back. It almost feels like we're in a bubble. Gray's breaths are choppy, and mine sound the same. His fingers are splayed wide on my back, moving up and down, wiping over my shoulders and then traveling back down to my ass.

I can see his Adam's apple moving as he swallows, and then I can feel the tips of his fingers slide between my ass cheeks.

My breath hitches, and Gray's eyes fly to mine.

"Okay?" he rasps.

I nod so quickly that my hair flops over my eyes. I'm unable to produce any words to say how okay it is. It's getting harder and harder to breathe as Gray prods at my ass with the tips of his fingers.

His explorative touch has a definite edge of uncertainty to it, so I pull my hand away and wrap it only around Gray's cock. I don't need him to overthink this. I want him to enjoy me. Do whatever he wants with me. I want him so out of it with desire that he can let go and just follow his instincts.

I'm painfully hard, and every time I move even the slightest bit, my cock taps against my own fist where I'm jacking off Gray.

Gray's chest is falling and rising in rhythm with the rapid breaths he's taking. He licks over his lips, and then his fingers are gone, and I watch as if in slow motion as he rubs them all over the tip of his cock, which is glistening from the mix of precome and lube.

My eyes practically roll back in my head as Gray looks at me, and then his fingers are back, this time more insistent as he pushes the tip of his finger inside me.

"This feels..." He licks his lips again and swallows hard, but I don't get to find out what he was planning to say because then he's kissing me again, and his finger slides even deeper inside me.

My heart is an unsteady jackhammer in my ears.

Gray's fingers brush my prostate, and I moan. He lets out a shuddery breath and repeats the motion.

His other hand wraps around my cock, jerking me off. I can feel his erection swell in my palm, as he circles his hips below me.

My movements grow sloppy because Gray's fingers inside me are distracting as hell. I can't resist any longer. It's too good.

My head falls back as I push myself down, taking Gray's fingers in as far as they can go. His fist squeezes around me, and I'm done. Ropes of come coat Gray's fist and abdomen as I shout out my release, practically collapsing on top of him. Gray pushes his own hand between us, frantically jacking himself, but I'm too out of it to even feel bad that he has to finish himself off.

Warmth pools between us once again as Gray grinds himself against me and comes with a satisfied groan that reverberates through my bones.

Ten minutes later, we're lying in each other's arms in the dark room.

I'm drowsy and satisfied and almost asleep when Gray rolls us to our sides and throws his arm around me, pulling me against him.

"This was fun," Gray murmurs as he kisses the top of my head.

Yup. Just sex. Just fun.

I'm screwed.

Sleep evades me for a long time.

GRAY

Another Monday, another five days of increasing dissatisfaction with my job in front of me. I'm starting to think the only reason my job seemed even remotely tolerable was the fact that I had no life before, but now I kind of do, and it's getting harder and harder to tell myself that I like being a lawyer.

I force myself to concentrate, but once lunch hour hits, I'm out of the office so fast that I half expect to see a line of smoke at my heels.

There's no time to worry about appearances, though. I have an hour to grab a couple of sandwiches to go and make it to Kai's workshop and back. Of course, by the time I'll be there, I'll only have time to throw the sandwiches at him from the doorway before I have to hurry back to my desk, but I don't care.

It seems I've got some sort of good vibes going because after I grab the food, it only takes me twenty-five minutes to get to Kai, which leaves me a whopping ten minutes of time to spend with him, assuming I'm willing to be a few minutes late back to work, which, after a thorough millisecond of soul-searching, I find that I am.

When I get there, it's pretty much chaos, though. Kai is standing in the front room of his workshop, yelling at somebody on his phone. I stop and stare because I've honestly never seen him that pissed off, and he seals that impression by snapping, "Well, fuck you very much," before hanging up.

He drags his hand through his hair before swearing loudly.

"What's wrong?" I close the door behind me and move closer to Kai. To say he looks disheveled is an understatement. His hair is a mess. There's a smudge of something black below his lower lip. His T-shirt is wrinkled to hell.

Kai glances toward me and lets out a deep breath.

"Hey," he says before he goes back to staring at the wide cardboard-covered package in front of his feet. "Shouldn't you be at work?" He glances at me as I follow him.

I wave the takeout bag with the sandwiches. "Lunch break."

He frowns. "Your idea of a lunch break is to spend it in a cab?"

"I took the T. It's quicker." I nudge the package at my feet with the tip of my shoe. "What's wrong?"

Kai crosses his arms over his chest and glares at the floor. "The shipping company didn't show up. I called them only to learn that they don't have a clue who I am, so I had a long fight with them, and they eventually admitted that they fucked up, but now I have a table that needs to be delivered by the day after tomorrow at the latest because it's a freaking anniversary gift to a couple who's been together for thirty years, and no one to deliver it because for some reason I don't find it very trustworthy when a company tells me that they *might* be able to make it, so now I have to find another place and spend all

my commission on express delivery because I can't afford to fuck this up, and I'll be up all night, worrying because who's to say the place I find will be any better? You're smart, so tell me, can I hire those people that refill ATMs? At least they know how to be responsible. I think."

He's practically pulling his hair out by the time he's done talking, so first of all, I go to him and gently pry his hands away from his head.

Kai looks at me, jaw clenched, a frantic glint in his eyes.

"We'll figure it out," I say as I slide my palms up and down his arms. "Okay?"

"But—"

I stop him with a kiss, and Kai melts against me like that's all he needed to calm down.

He swallows and lets out another deep breath before he nods.

"It's going to be okay." He echoes my words in a low voice.

"Exactly."

"There's a simple solution for this. Somewhere. Probably," he adds, walking in a circle around the cardboard-covered tabletop.

"Well, yeah. It's actually relatively easy," I say. "We rent a van and deliver the table to... Where exactly are we driving this thing?"

"Toronto," Kai replies distractedly before he seems to compute what I've just said and his eyes fly to mine. "Are you serious?"

I shrug. “Of course. I’m always happy to save someone’s reputation.”

Kai swats at my stomach, and I laugh before I rub my palms together, already excited about the prospect of spending all that time together.

“You have work,” Kai reminds me.

“Shit. I do.” God damnit, another notch in the I-seriously-dislike-my-job column.

“It’s fine,” Kai says as he stretches his neck from side to side and rubs the back of his neck. “It’s still a good idea. I’ll rent the van and drive to Canada. Sounds like an easy solution. I like those.”

“No, no, no. I’m coming with you,” I say, already feeling more than a little frantic at the prospect of being left behind. “Just... I need to tell Con, and then we can be on our way. I’ll do it right now if you’ll deal with the van?”

“You sure?” Kai asks.

“In all the years I’ve worked for Con, I’ve only taken one sick day. I’m pretty sure this here qualifies as an emergency. It’ll be fine. Meet you here in, say, two hours? I’ll pack us some clothes at home while I’m at it.”

“I—” Kai clamps his mouth shut. For a moment he looks freaked-out. But then he nods.

“You’re the best,” he says.

“You’re only now figuring it out?” I ask with a laugh.

But Kai doesn’t even smile anymore; he just looks at me with the same freaked-out expression I saw on his face just moments ago before he turns his back to me and says, “We better get moving.”

He still sounds strange, but I guess it's natural. He's worried. It makes sense.

I hurry out the door. A quick detour to the office and we should be good to go.

I barrel into Con's office without bothering to knock. He throws me a glance over the lid of his laptop.

"Where have you been?"

"Lunch."

"Aren't you late back, in that case?" he asks with a quirked brow.

"Yeah, sorry. I was with Kai. He has an emergency."

Con's shoulders immediately stiffen at the mention of Kai.

"Of course he does," he mutters.

I frown. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Con looks up from the screen for a second. "Of course you're going to be irresponsible the moment anything has to do with Kai."

"Okay," I say slowly. It's always difficult to get a good read on Con. He's perfected his stoic façade over the years, so I'm not sure even he knows what he's feeling most of the time.

"I need to take the rest of the day off," I say. "And tomorrow, too. I'll rearrange my schedule."

"You can't just take two days off out of the blue," Con says.

"I realize it's short notice—"

“To be fair, this here is practically *no* notice,” Con inserts and does that irritating brow tilt that always makes me feel like I’m a kid.

“Fine,” I say slowly. “My sincerest apologies, but I don’t have any meetings tomorrow. It’s just a bunch of paperwork and whatever else needs my attention, I’ll be able to handle the day after tomorrow.”

“That’s not how this works” is Con’s calm reply. “You’re supposed to notice me in advance. Preferably two weeks in advance.”

“Yes. Because this is how emergencies work,” I say. I have to go. I don’t have time to just stand here and argue. “I usually get an email beforehand, informing me of unsuspected circumstances occurring in a week or two.”

“You know, just because you’re my brother doesn’t mean you get special treatment.”

“When have I ever expected that from you? You made me interview every time I asked for an internship here.”

“That’s how this is supposed to go,” Con says. “In order to find the best possible person for the job, you interview all the candidates.”

“Yeah, fine. That’s not important right now. Right now, your employee with a perfect track record is asking you to give him a day off because of a family emergency.”

“Only it isn’t a family emergency, so my perfect employee is basically lying to my face,” Con says in an irritatingly calm tone.

“Kai is the most important person to me in the whole world,” I snap. “He *is* my family.”

Connor's jaw tightens. I'm pretty sure I've hurt his feelings, but again, it's almost impossible to tell. I don't care right now. I have to go because Kai needs me.

My brother moves closer to his desk and pushes a key on his laptop.

"No," he says.

"No?" I repeat.

"No, you can't take tomorrow off. I'm sure whatever it is, Kai can handle it on his own. He's an adult. I hardly think your presence will make much of a difference."

I almost laugh.

That's the furthest thing from the truth because I know that for Kai, my presence makes all the difference. Anger sizzles underneath the surface, threatening to break through the surface. Never has Con's unflappable calmness pissed me off quite as much as it does now. Is a little empathy really too much to ask?

And suddenly it hits me. Why am I here? Why am I stubbornly holding on to a job I hate when I could actually do something I'd love? I have no clue what it is yet. Zero alternatives to being a lawyer. But if I stay now, I'll never find out what they are.

I will never know what it's like to wake up in the morning and actually look forward to the day ahead. I will never know what it's like to be proud of what I do. I will never know if I could be great at something. Not just adequate because I work my ass off but actually great.

I've been walking through life, figuring my happiness was some sort of a vanity project. Something to deal with once I

had too much time in my hands, and that's clearly never going to happen, so why even think about it?

When did that kind of reasoning become the norm for me?

I take an absent glance at Connor. I guess I didn't have the best role model, did I? Or maybe this here *is* the definition of happiness to Con, and I just... adopted it in some kind of an ill-advised attempt to be more like my big brother? After all, he was the one who provided some sort of normalcy in our turbulent family life where our parents constantly cheated on each other and made up and took off on months-long trips on a whim, leaving me with the housekeeper. And then they died, and Con had stepped up, and I've been trying to be like him ever since. Only it's not working. I'm not Con, and he'll be disappointed in me, and it'll be difficult to take, but things can't go on like this. I'll be miserable if I stay.

"Grayson! Are you listening to me?"

I turn back toward my brother. He's staring at me, but there's nothing there. Not even a hint of emotion.

"Yes?"

"Shouldn't you be somewhere?"

Well, he's right. I definitely should. I still need to go home and pack, and I don't want to take too long. I bet Kai is still freaking out.

"Like in your office?" Con prompts, looking at me like I'm an idiot.

"No." I straighten my shoulders. "No. I just told you. I need the next two days off."

"And I just told you you can't have them."

I cock my head to the side as I stare Con down. For all intents and purposes, I should be more apprehensive right now. Maybe even scared. Fear has been holding me back from making changes this whole time, so I would have imagined I'd be feeling... something.

Instead, I'm the calmest I've ever been. This feels right. Overwhelmingly so.

"I quit." The words ring between Con and me, sure and strong.

"What?" It seems I've managed to surprise my brother. I feel sort of accomplished.

"I quit," I repeat. "Effective immediately."

"You can't do that."

"Unless you're planning to kidnap me, I'd say I can. I am. Doing it, that is."

Con just stares at me for a long time before he shakes his head and lets out a harsh bark of laughter. "Figures. So... just like that? You're going to choose Kai? You're going to be irresponsible like our fucking parents? I guess the apple really doesn't fall far from the tree."

"When have I ever been irresponsible? My whole life is a sequence of right decisions. And you know what? As a result, I haven't really been living at all. I've been miserable. Also, this moment here? This is not me being irresponsible. This is me putting people above everything else, and this is how it should be. My job shouldn't be something that I'll prioritize over everything else in my life. This office shouldn't be the be all and end all, because at the end of the day, I want to go home to somebody. I want to talk and laugh and occasionally

do stupid shit just because it's fun, and that'll never happen if I continue to follow your example.”

With every word that leaves my mouth, breathing becomes easier.

Con, on his part, looks like he's swallowed something rancid. He just stares at me for the longest time before he turns his gaze back to his laptop. Taking it as my cue to leave, I turn around and head to the door.

“The job isn't going to be waiting for you when you come back.” Con's voice is, once again, devoid of all emotion.

I sigh as I look toward him over my shoulder. “I don't expect it to.”

He nods once, still refusing to look at me, so I walk out the door without saying anything else.

Canada, here we come.

KAI

“This is gorgeous. Thank you so much!”

The woman beams at me as she makes a circle around the table we’ve just delivered.

I catch Gray smiling at me from the corner of the room. It’s probably mostly relief that he doesn’t have to watch me bite my nails and narrate all the outlandish scenarios that crossed my mind about things that could happen that would stop us from making it to Toronto on time. You can only repeat, “Extraterrestrial intelligence is most likely not interested in dining room tables,” so many times before it gets old.

“I’m glad you’re happy with the result.” I slide my fingertips over the shiny cherry wood top of the table. It’s a nice piece of furniture. Something I can be proud of if anybody is ever going to be interested in where the table is from.

“Our parents are going to love it.”

“That’s good.” For the first time today, I can let out a relieved breath.

We chat some more before Gray and I say our goodbyes and make our way back to the van. It’s getting late, and we’ve

been on the road for the whole day.

Gray yawns as we get inside the van and turns his head to the side, facing me.

“Dinner?” he asks. “And then a hotel?”

“Yes to all of that.” I grab my phone and do a quick search. Thirty minutes later, we’re in a twenty-four-hour restaurant, ordering breakfast for dinner.

The place is nearly deserted, so our food arrives in no time at all. I’ve been too preoccupied to eat the whole day, but instead of digging in, I watch Gray.

“What?” he asks when he looks up and finds me staring at him.

“You’re kind of great, you know that?”

He squints his eyes at me. “Is this a ploy to get my pancakes?”

“Yes. It’s an elaborate distraction I’ve created solely for that purpose. I was hoping you’d tear up, though.”

“All these years of friendship and you still haven’t learned that I’m an emotionless drone.”

I roll my eyes. “Sure you are.”

Gray does his best robot voice. “Humans of Earth. I’m here to learn about the concept of feelings.”

I cock my head to the side. “Are you supposed to be an alien or a robot?”

“Either works.”

I snort, and he shakes his head before he dives back into his pancakes. I nudge him with my foot to get his attention. Gray raises his brows at me.

“Thank you,” I say. “For today. For being there for me. You’re like my custom-made superhero. Always there when I need you most.”

He sends me a curious smile like he’s trying to figure out why I’m suddenly stating the obvious.

“You come first,” he says like it’s the most natural thing in the world. “Whenever you need me.”

He turns back to his food like he hasn’t just said something so profound that it makes my insides squeeze and flutter. And he says it like it’s no big deal. Like this is how it always will be between us.

I have to place my fork down because my hands have started shaking like crazy. I hide them under the table.

Gray frowns as he looks at me, sensing with the accuracy of a fine-tuned radar that something is going on.

“Are you okay?”

I nod.

“Fine.” My voice sounds more like a croak, so I clear my throat, trying my best to sound normal. Distraction. I desperately need one.

“I still can’t believe Con gave you time off so easily. I would have bet my savings on the fact that he’d throw a tantrum,” I joke. “Not that I have any savings, so it wouldn’t be much of a bet, but it’s the idea that counts.”

Gray chuckles. “You would have won that bet.”

“Damn, that’s just throwing away free money. How are you here, then? Did you promise to work overtime on Christmas Eve?”

He shakes his head. "I quit."

He lets the statement drop between us and just keeps eating. I stare at him, mouth agape.

Did he just say he quit his job? To come and help me? I must have misheard. That doesn't sound right at all.

"You quit?" I ask so loudly that the waitress snaps her head up from the books she was reading. "Sorry," I call before I snap my head back toward Gray. "Did you just say you quit your job?"

"Yup."

And then he just... keeps shoveling pancakes in his mouth. He looks up after a little while when I haven't said anything and have been just gaping at him for the longest time.

"Aren't you hungry?" he asks.

"You quit your job," I repeat, sounding just a tad hysterical now. I can't explain why this bit of information makes me feel like something has been shaken loose inside me. Or maybe I can. Because if Gray is making this change, how long until he's ready to move on from me?

"Is that a code for getting fired?" I ask. "Because Connor can't do that. You know what? You should sue him."

"I didn't get fired."

"Then it's a prank?" I ask, unmistakable hope ringing in my tone.

Gray raises his brows at me. He looks very calm. I don't understand what's happening here. Shouldn't he be worried or shocked or freaked-out? *I'm* all those things. He quit his job. Another change. How long until he realizes that I'm part of his old life and need to stay there along with everything else?

“Why?” I ask. “Because of me? Because of this delivery? You can’t do that.” I sound like a broken record, but that job is Gray’s life. It’s what he’s been working toward practically his whole life. He told everybody in every middle school career day that he was going to be a lawyer in his family firm just like his big brother.

Gray’s palm covers mine, and I blink.

“Calm down,” he simply says.

I take a deep breath. “You’re right. It’s *you* who quit. Because of me. That’s beside the point. You should be freaking out right now, and I should be the voice of reason. So that’s what we’re going to do. Right now. And go.”

I look at him expectantly, raising my brows and nodding to encourage him to take over. He doesn’t. I guess I’ll start, then.

“There, there,” I say, sounding just a tad panicked, which I guess is an improvement. “I’m sure you can get your job back. You can plead temporary insanity. I can vouch for you, and I wouldn’t even have to lie because this situation actually *is* crazy.”

“I don’t want my job back.”

What is happening?

“I don’t like my job,” Gray says.

“Since when?”

He shrugs. “Since always. I’ve spent years thinking that the people who say they want to go to work in the morning are lying or at least embellishing the truth liberally.”

“But you’re always at work.”

The look he sends me is almost pitying. “Not because I love what I do.”

“And this afternoon you just... decided that you love it extra little?”

“I wouldn’t have driven to Canada for a client,” he says, seemingly out of the blue.

“Huh?”

“You did. You went the extra mile. I don’t. I mean, yeah, I work long days, but I don’t put in any extra effort.”

“Are you sure about that?” I ask, thinking about all the times I’ve called him late at night over the years, only to learn that he was still in the office.

“My work is a chore,” he replies. “I don’t agonize over whether or not I could have done something better. I’m not slacking or half-assing it, but it doesn’t feel personal in any shape or form. I’m not proud of a job well done, nor am I devastated when I fail. I’m just there. Existing. And I don’t want to feel like that anymore.”

He squeezes my hand that he’s still holding. “I thought everybody felt the same about their jobs. Con is practically a robot himself, so I have no idea if he likes what he does, but he sure as hell has never looked overly enthusiastic about it, so I took it as validation of my own lukewarm feelings, but I’ve watched you for months now, and you’re actually passionate about what you do. When you talk about your job, it makes you shine.” He shrugs, looking a bit sheepish. “I figured maybe I deserve that, too.”

I let out a big breath. The remnants of my pretty fucking irrational freak-out are still there, but what Gray just said definitely resonates with me. I understand the feeling of

coasting along, not knowing what you want to do with your life. I've been there, too. For years.

"You do deserve that. You deserve the best job. Something that would make you happy all day long."

Gray smiles like my words have given him the last bit of assurance he needed.

I hesitate for a second. "So... any idea what you want to do with your life?"

"Nope," he says as he nabs a piece of waffle from my plate. "You know what the best part is?" he asks.

"No. What?" I lean back and look at him. It's impossible not to smile at how relaxed he looks.

"I don't need to have it all figured out right now," he says. "You know, I have this best friend type of a person who once said that I'm twenty-eight and not eighty"—I nudge him with my foot, and he smiles—"so I figure I have some time to come up with a plan."

"Sounds like good advice," I say. "You're so lucky you have somebody that brilliant in your life to sprinkle those pearls of wisdom your way."

"Eh, brain-schmain. His main attraction is that he's hot."

I start to laugh.

"Hot, you say?" So much for my never-flirt-with-Gray plan.

I'm an idiot. Kissing him, sleeping with him, thinking there could be more between us—it can all only lead to heartbreak. I'll lose everything once this thing between us has run its course because it *will* run its course. How can it not?

Gray said it himself. *It's just sex, Kai.* The whispered words echo in my mind.

“And fun,” Gray continues, oblivious about the storm raging inside me.

He slides his fingertips over the back of my hand. Tingles run all over my body like tiny wings of a thousand hummingbirds are fluttering against my skin.

“And smart,” Gray adds.

I swallow and force my mind away from my morose thoughts.

“We already agreed I'm brilliant,” I say.

“And sexy.” Gray continues to slide his fingertips over the back of my hand. The invisible hummingbirds are going crazy.

“You already said that, too.” My voice is so breathy it's barely audible.

“It bears repeating. You can seduce me with just a look. I didn't think it was possible to feel this way.”

I close my eyes for a moment, trying to fight back the longing and the too-sharp emotions. The need for more is a living, breathing thing inside me.

Tell him!

“I—”

The waitress appears in front of our table, stopping my words. The moment breaks with a silent clatter that rings in my ears like a gunshot.

“Can I get you anything else?” she asks with a cheerful voice.

Gray leans back and gives her a polite smile. “No, I think we’re full.”

He sends me a questioning look, and I nod.

We pay our bill and walk out of there.

“So...” I start. My voice is scratchy, and I’m very aware of Gray next to me. Even more so than usual.

“A hotel?” Gray suggests as he grabs his phone. “I’ll find something for us.”

It takes him a bit of scrolling, but eventually, he sends me a winning smile, the one that makes the corners of his eyes crinkle.

“Done,” he says.

I squint my eyes at him.

“You look way too cheery for a person who’s just spent the day driving to another country on a whim and who now has to spend the night in an uncomfortable bed in a generic hotel room.”

“Who said anything about uncomfortable and generic?” Gray asks with a laugh as he grabs my hand and starts dragging me toward the car.

“Why are you so excited about this?”

He looks at me over his shoulder, and I swear there’s a mischievous twinkle in his eyes.

“Duh, hotel sex,” he says. “This is going to be fun.”

I can’t help but laugh as I get inside the car.

Yeah. Fun.

It’s just sex, Kai. Just some fun.

I hate every one of those words with fervent passion.

GRAY

“A presidential suite?” Kai asks as he turns in a slow circle, studying the room I’ve booked for us.

I shrug. “It was in one of those bucket lists or fifty before fifty lists or something like that, and I remembered it when I was searching for a hotel.”

“I should have known you researched your list before making it.”

“I needed some inspiration.”

“But it didn’t make the final cut?”

“Back then I wouldn’t have had anybody to share it with, so it would have been just pathetic to do that alone.”

Kai laughs as he makes his way toward the balcony, overlooking Lake Ontario.

He glances at me over his shoulder and smiles. “This view is definitely something.”

“It is.” I’m not talking about the lake, though. Kai, standing in the darkness, illuminated by city lights is... I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything more beautiful in my whole life.

I stop right behind him. His whole body melts against mine when I push my front against his back.

“I’m beat,” he mutters after a while.

“Go take a shower, and then we can put on a movie or jump on the bed or empty the minibar—you know, standard hotel stuff.”

He snorts. “Good plan.”

There’s an immediate feeling of emptiness when Kai pulls away from me.

I take one last glance at the city lights and the darkened lake before I follow him to the bedroom. Instead of the shower, Kai is lying on the bed.

“You were supposed to shower,” I say with a laugh.

He opens one eye. “Do I have to?”

I walk to the bed and lean one knee on it. Kai sucks in a breath as I lower myself above him. He licks over his lips as I drag my nose from the base of his neck to the tip of his ear. I press my lips against the hollow of his throat in a quick kiss.

“Just as I suspected,” I murmur against his skin.

“What?” Kai’s voice is barely louder than a whisper.

“You stink.”

There’s a beat of silence before Kai starts to laugh.

“You ass,” he says as he wraps his arms around me and pulls me down on top of him. He starts wiggling under me, rubbing his body against mine, hooking one leg around my thighs to prevent me from getting up. Not that I was planning to.

“There,” he says after I’m good and hard. “Now you stink, too.”

The day of travel on my skin is the last thing on my mind, but I press another quick kiss on his lips before I get up and pull him to his feet with me. “I guess we’ll just have to shower together, then.”

For a moment, it almost looks like he’s going to say no, but that’s just my mind playing tricks on me because Kai follows me into the bathroom without a word. We undress, and I turn on the shower. Kai steps under the spray, and my heart gives a jump as I watch him tilt his head back, eyes closed, letting the water rain down on him.

He’s beautiful. I don’t know how I haven’t realized it before.

Drops of water cling to Kai’s lashes as he sends me a curious smile. He reaches out his hand and pulls me toward him.

“If I have to get clean, then so do you.”

I grab the bottle of shower gel from the counter and squeeze some in my hand. My palm slides up Kai’s side, leaving a soapy trail behind. I gather up the excess shower gel and start rubbing my hands over Kai’s skin.

He leans his back against the wall as I work my palms over every inch of skin I can find. There’s no hurry. I just want Kai to feel good.

He sighs and opens his eyes, head angled away from the spray of the shower.

“You’ve got good hands,” he says, a dreamy smile on his face.

“These old things?”

He laughs and looks down at where my palms are still moving over his chest and stomach. I palm his cock and slide my hand up and down, but I don't take it any further, and Kai doesn't look like he's in a hurry to get off and get to bed. Instead, he straightens himself, grabs the shower gel, and puts some in his own palm, too.

“Your turn,” he says.

The feel of his calloused palms sliding over my skin is heaven. I slide my fingers in the hair at the back of his head. Kai's eyes meet mine. His lips are slightly parted. Droplets of water are hanging from his lashes. Seconds tick by. I can't look away as I press my palm against Kai's chest. My heart is going haywire inside my chest as the moment stretches and spirals around us.

I tug him forward until our lips meet. The kiss is tender. Neither of us is in a hurry to move anything along. It's just us. Just Kai and me. Just like it's supposed to be. Just how everything is perfect.

We finish washing each other and grab the white, fluffy towels from the shelf next to the shower and start drying ourselves as we move back toward the bed.

There's something in the air around us tonight. It's almost like tension, but it's not entirely bad. Something is shifting and changing and settling inside me, even though my life is seemingly chaotic in a way it's never been before.

But I have Kai. And I'm happy.

I haven't accomplished even half the things on my happy list, but it doesn't matter. Maybe I'll get to them, maybe I won't, and maybe it doesn't even matter.

“You’re smiling,” Kai says. He’s lying on his stomach between the sheets, head leaning on his arms, looking at me.

“I’ve got something to look forward to.” I walk to Kai’s side of the bed. He likes to sleep on the left. It’s one of those small things I didn’t know about him before, but I do now.

“What’s that?” Kai asks.

“A massage,” I say. “It’s been pointed out to me that I should get one.”

Kai grins. “Oh. Well, say hi to whoever is going to give it to you.”

I pinch his shoulder and climb on top of him, straddling his back. He sucks in a breath as I press a quick kiss in the middle of his shoulder blades. My palms slide over his skin.

“I thought we’d take turns,” I say as I start massaging his shoulders, and he immediately melts into the bed and lets out a deep groan as I rub over his back. My cock stiffens at the sounds he’s making.

I knead his shoulders, moving lower and then back up again. I should see if there’s some massage oil somewhere around here, but I can’t seem to force myself to move.

“You’re naked,” I say after a while because my horny brain seems to think Kai doesn’t know.

“It’s hot in here,” Kai mumbles into the sheet.

I scooch lower and press a quick kiss on his shoulder.

“How the hell am I supposed to concentrate with my dick against your ass like that?” I murmur into his ear.

Kai pries one eye open and peers at me with a lazy grin. “For fuck’s sake, Grayson. For once in your life, could you

just be professional and not concentrate solely on your dick?”

“It’s hard,” I complain.

“I know,” Kai says and wiggles a bit. I groan at the feel of his ass against my balls. Kai just gives a throaty chuckle, the sound going straight to my dick.

I lower myself above Kai, trapping my cock between our bodies, and start slowly rubbing myself against him.

“I’ve never had a massage like that,” he pants.

“You’ve been missing out, then.”

“So it would seem.”

I close my eyes and lean my forehead against the back of Kai’s neck. I breathe him in, focusing on the way his body fits against mine. The muscles of his back flex as he moves. His hands are fisting the sheets as he rubs his ass against my cock.

“I want you,” I murmur, lips against Kai’s neck. “It’s like I’m aching for you. All the time. Why is that?”

He huffs out a laugh, shoulders shaking, body vibrating underneath me. “I thought we already agreed it’s because I’m hot, brilliant, and have a sparkling personality.”

“I feel like that doesn’t cover everything.”

Kai turns his head toward me. There’s a look in his eyes I can’t decipher, and it makes me frown because that doesn’t usually happen. I can read Kai like a book most of the time.

Before I can ask, he turns so quickly that I land on my back, and in an instant, he’s on top of me.

He stares down at me, still with that strange expression on his face, but then he smiles and lets out a short laugh.

“I’m also good in bed,” he says and wraps his fist around my cock. The pressure makes my eyes roll back in my head. He starts stroking me. Hot skin on hot skin.

Kai’s eyes stay down to where he’s jacking me off. He looks completely mesmerized, which increases the intensity of the moment at least a tenfold.

His grip on me is steady and sure. It should be weird to lie in front of him like this. Too intimate. Too exposed. But with Kai, I never feel that way. It’s like he’s a part of me, which makes it impossible to be too much of anything.

“I’m gonna come if you keep that up,” I warn him.

He stops his hand immediately, and I let out a sound of protest.

“I didn’t say that to make you stop,” I complain.

Kai closes his eyes for a second and laughs. He bites his lower lip as he looks me in the eye again. His mouth opens and closes before he licks over his lips and rushes out, “Do you want to fuck me?”

My breath gets caught in my throat.

“Can I?” The words come out on an exhale, barely intelligible.

Kai sends me an amused grin. “I don’t know. Can you?”

“Yes?”

He leans forward, hovering over me. A soft kiss lands on my lips. “Do you want to?”

“Yes!”

“I’ve gotta say I’m flattered by the enthusiasm.” Kai gets off the bed and walks to the corner of the room to our

suitcases. I push myself to my elbows and watch as he digs around in his bag for a second before he comes back with a bottle of lube.

“I don’t have any condoms,” he says and worries his lip between his teeth again.

“I have one in the side pocket of my suitcase.”

He’s back on top of me in no time at all after that.

“Do you need me to walk you through it?” Kai asks, seemingly all business now as he pops open the lube and starts coating his fingers, and that’s really not how I imagined this would go. The no-nonsense attitude makes him seem detached from the moment as he slips his hand behind himself.

I roll us over, and Kai lets out a surprised yelp when he lands on the bed below me.

“What are you—”

I cut him off with a kiss, pushing my tongue into his mouth and practically mauling him before I pull away, leaving us both panting.

The bottle of lube opens with a snick, and Kai’s gaze stays fixed on me as I pour a generous amount on my fingers.

“I didn’t think you’d want to... do that,” Kai says.

“You’re delusional if you think I’m going to miss a moment of this.”

My words may be full of bravado, and I may have done some research over the last few weeks, but I can’t deny that I’m still nervous. Not because I don’t want to touch Kai. Not even close. I’m dying to get my hands on him. I just want to make this good for him. I want to make him scream in pleasure. I want to be the best for Kai.

As if sensing my hesitancy, Kai slowly licks over his lips and lets his legs fall open. I slide my palm over his cock, and a soft sigh escapes his lips as I move my hand up and down a few times before I go lower, cupping his balls and rolling them between my fingers.

“You’re good at this,” Kai says through a rush of breath. The skin of his chest is flushed as I keep playing with him.

“Well, you know, I have a pair of my own, so it’s not a completely foreign territory.”

He laughs, but then I slide my fingers lower until they’re pressed against his hole, and then neither of us is laughing anymore.

Our gazes connect as I slowly push one finger inside him.

Kai’s eyes have darkened with arousal as I work my finger inside him. His hips push off the bed, forcing me deeper. It’s so goddamn sexy.

My hands are practically shaking from need by the time I push two fingers inside him.

“Fuck yes,” Kai hisses, and I have to close my eyes to fight off the desire to rub myself off on him.

He’s so hot and tight, and when he squeezes my fingers with his inner muscles, I swear I can feel every move in my dick.

I’m not sure if coming hands-free while fingering somebody’s ass would qualify as pathetic or awesome, but if my body doesn’t calm down, I’m about to find out.

“More,” Kai practically snarls at me, which doesn’t really help with the overeager dick situation I’ve got going on here. I

squeeze the base of my erection, tunneling my fingers in and out of Kai's body.

"Wait," he pants, and I pull my hand away.

He turns himself over, and I'm fucking going to come any second now at the sight of him in front of me on his hands and knees.

"I'm ready," he pants. "I need you. Do it. I'm ready."

"Oh fuck." The words escape me in a rush.

Kai looks at me over his shoulder and frowns.

"Okay?" he asks.

I blink in surprise. Okay seems too mundane a word.

In reply, I move behind him.

Kai is... I don't know how to describe him. His muscles are bulging. Wide shoulders and lean hips and the curve of his ass—it's a mouthwatering sight. I've never been this turned on. I grab the condom and roll it over my cock before I lean over Kai's back, grabbing the lube again. The liquid is cool on my overeager erection, and Kai tenses as I slick generous amounts of it over his hole.

I want to know how it feels to be inside him. I need to know it more than I need air right now.

"I'm about to... you... okay?" The gibberish coming out of my mouth hardly makes any sense, but Kai lowers his front on the mattress and nods.

"Need you," he says in reply.

I nod, even though he doesn't see it.

Slow, I remind myself. I need to go slow. I place my right hand on his back and caress over the skin before I line up my

cock with Kai's hole.

I slide the tip up and down, which makes Kai curse and clutch the sheet in his fist. He lowers his forehead on the mattress, and I start pushing inside him. There's some resistance, and I'm not sure if I'm doing this right, but before I can get inside my head too much, I feel Kai's hand on my ass as he starts pushing me forward.

My cock slips past the ring of muscle, and I want to fucking howl because nothing has ever felt like this before. It takes every ounce of self-control that I have not to sink inside Kai at once.

I take a couple of deep breaths, lecturing myself to calm down, and all the while, Kai's body is squeezing me.

I slowly circle my hips back and forth, my shaft disappearing inside Kai's body more and more with every move until I'm all the way inside him.

How come I only ever feel this good with Kai? I manage to think before Kai squeezes around me.

"Move," he orders in a strained voice.

I slide my palm up the plains of his back as I pull out and slowly push back in again. I slowly work up the tempo, sliding my cock in and out until we're both panting and groaning.

My fingertips sink into his hips as I snap my hips against his ass. Skin slaps against skin, and my breath rushes out in hot bursts of air.

More. More. More.

I can't get enough. My body curls over Kai's back, and I lean my palm against the mattress next to his head. He moves

his head and sucks my thumb into his mouth, biting down on the soft skin of the pad. The feeling goes straight to my cock.

Kai's hand is moving as he jacks himself off below me. We're both sweaty, and my balls are so full that they're aching for release.

"Kiss me," Kai demands in a choking voice, and I lean over, catching his mouth in a clumsy yet somehow scorching hot kiss.

I can feel Kai's whole body shudder below me as he pulls his head away and bellows out, "Fuck. Gray."

My body moves like I'm not in control of it anymore. I'm on my knees behind Kai. Hips snapping. Fingers in a bruising grip on Kai's sides.

An orgasm slams over me in a massive wave of pleasure. Nothing compares. Nothing has ever compared as I shout out my release, emptying everything I have inside Kai before we both topple on the sheets.

Kai has his eyes closed, cheek pressed into the sheet, but he pries one lid open as I slide my palm on his cheek.

"Thank you."

He snorts. "That's a new one."

"What? People don't usually express their gratitude after sex? Rude."

"Not usually, no," Kai says, and while I started the teasing, there's now stabbing jealousy when I think about Kai's past lovers.

I swallow and force it down. Everybody has a past. It would be an asshole move to get jealous over it. I'm with Kai now, and that's all that matters.

“Maybe I should be the one thanking you,” Kai says. “You went through all this trouble, and you still didn’t get a massage out of it. No tick in the happy list.”

I hum in response, too boneless to come up with a clever response.

“Although,” Kai adds thoughtfully, “you did get to *give* a massage with a happy ending.”

A loud laugh escapes me, and Kai grins.

“Now that’s what I call an upgrade,” I reply, still laughing.

I can’t keep my hands away from Kai, so I turn to my side and slide my palm over his back over and over again. He presses closer to me and hums in contentment.

I’ve never seen him like this. There’s a softness and vulnerability about him that I’m seeing for the very first time. I’m discovering this hidden part of Kai. It’s like uncovering a treasure chest in your own backyard.

My chest is filled with warmth as I keep caressing his back, enjoying the feel of Kai underneath my palm.

All the voices inside me that demand I should be better, smarter, more interesting, more adventurous, just more everything, are silent. The moment stretches around us, overwhelming me with light and happiness.

Kai shuts his eyes and burrows closer with a contented sigh.

“You smell like me,” he mumbles as he presses his nose into my neck, half-asleep already.

I don’t know what it is about those words, but they fill me with something so enormous that it feels like I’m bursting at

the seams. Feelings and realizations vibrate through me, shaking me up like an earthquake.

My hands tremble as I wrap myself around Kai, holding him as close as I can.

And as everything slowly settles in my mind, and the realization of what this warm, perfect feeling inside me means, I smile.

Ear to ear.

In the darkness of the room.

Like a lunatic.

KAI

We're all liars. If we don't lie to other people, we lie to ourselves. Lying has a bad rap. We're taught that everything connected to twisting the truth is inherently bad and negative, so we lie about lying. We shouldn't, though. Lies keep us going.

I should know.

I keep lying to myself that this thing between me and Gray does not have the potential to turn me into a chaotic mess inside.

I keep lying that our friendship remains unchanged even though I spend my nights in Gray's bed, doing things no friend should even dream of doing.

I keep lying that I can handle it.

I keep lying that I haven't tumbled headfirst into love again.

It's easier this way. It allows me to avoid the what-ifs and buts. It allows me to postpone dealing with the fallout that will inevitably make its appearance one of these days. It allows me to keep going.

My new mantra of *It's just sex, Kai* plays on a loop in my mind the whole day as if repeating it makes it true.

Just sex.

Just some fun.

Just a fucking tick in a fucking list.

The sound of the bell I put above the front door jingling makes me jump and drop the piece of wood I've been holding.

"Hello?"

"In the back," I call, hoping I sound normal.

Max peeks his head in the doorway and smiles when he spots me.

"This place just keeps getting better and better," he says as he steps inside the room.

"This place keeps getting dustier and dustier, is what you meant to say," I correct him.

He laughs and steps toward me to shake my hand.

"I'm glad you're here," I say.

"How else am I gonna get that bookshelf we talked about," he says with a smile. He slowly walks around the workshop, taking it all in.

"This is already turning into a pretty impressive setup," he says.

"Thanks. I'm happy with how it turned out."

He grins at me from the other side of the room.

"You should be."

Max really is just a genuinely nice guy. I kind of hate myself for not feeling anything for him. Life would be so much easier if I did.

I lean back against my workbench and cross one foot over the other and drag my hand through my hair, looking at him.

He slides his palm over a board on my workbench, studying the butterflies I've carved into it.

"What's this?" he asks.

"It's going to be a crib."

"It's beautiful," Max says. He wanders around some more before coming back to where I am.

"You're very quiet," he says as he settles in next to me.

"I guess I'm just surprised to see you here. I thought you'd be well on your way to IKEA after the way I left things between us last time. Your call was a real surprise."

"You mean when you ditched me in the bar and never contacted me again?" He grins.

"I'm sorry," I say.

He shrugs. "Eh, I knew you weren't that into me, so it's fine."

"You're a great guy," I start.

"But not as great as that roommate of yours," Max finishes.

I clamp my mouth shut. I'm already lying to myself, so it's probably best not to expand that circle.

"We're just..." I don't know how to finish that sentence. We're just fucking? It's no big deal? It's just some fun? God, I'm getting tired of this.

I rub my palms over my face and groan.

"It's complicated," I say.

“Isn’t it always?” There’s wistfulness in Max’s tone. “Anyway. It’s fine. Don’t get me wrong, I would have loved nothing more than to spend the night with you, but I have a feeling you come with way too much baggage for my taste.”

I chuckle. “Fair enough.”

“So I guess I’ll be happy with the bookshelf you promised me. And a hefty discount, of course.” He winks, and I laugh.

“You got it. Tell me what you have in mind.”

Max walks me through his ideas, and we spend some time clarifying exactly what he wants while I throw together some quick sketches.

He nods when I show him what I came up with.

“I like it. Classical with a twist.”

“That’s the first thing that popped into my head about you when we met,” I say with a laugh.

He cocks his head to the side before he straightens himself and chuckles.

“Ah fuck it, ditch the boyfriend, and I’ll totally do you. With compliments like that, I can ignore the fact that I’d be the second choice.”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” I say. “We’re just... having some fun.”

“You don’t look like somebody who’s been having a lot of fun lately,” Max notes.

“That’s because I’m an idiot,” I mutter.

“You wanna talk about it?” Max asks as he comes to stand next to me once again.

I shake my head. “There’s not much to say. Just... do yourself a favor and never sleep with your best friend.”

“Ah. A rookie mistake,” Max says with a nod. “No offense, but that was definitely a dumb thing to do.”

“Thank you. You’ve been most helpful in stating the obvious.”

Max laughs and nudges me with his shoulder. “It can’t be that bad.”

“I’m in love with him,” I blurt out. I drag my fingers through my hair and let my head drop back. I stare at the ceiling. “How about that for dumb?”

Max is silent for a while.

I huff out a breath and shake my head. “I don’t know why I’m telling you this. You don’t want to listen to the problems of a semi-stranger you went out with twice.”

“I don’t have anywhere I need to be. And sometimes it’s easier to tell things to semi-strangers. Think of me as a sounding board,” he suggests.

“He doesn’t feel the same,” I say before I can think better of it.

“How do you know?”

“He told me.”

Max sends me a side-eyed look. “Really? The guy I saw at the restaurant and then at the bar sure as hell didn’t look like somebody who’s not into you. He was more like somebody who was thinking of strangling me for daring to go out with you.”

I shake my head. I hate that my heart gives a hopeful lurch.

“He told me it was just sex. You can’t get any clearer than that.”

“Maybe things have changed?”

“Or maybe they haven’t, and I’m just the idiot who didn’t follow the rules.”

“So end it,” Max says.

I almost scoff. As if it was that simple.

Max gives me a wistful smile.

“I’ve been there,” he says after a little while.

I turn my head toward him.

“A friend. Unanswered crush. You know the drill.” He waves his palm in the air.

“What happened?”

“There comes a point where you have to choose if you’re going to pine for him forever or get over it and move on. I chose the second option. Best thing I ever did.” He shrugs, but he also avoids looking at me, his voice way too airy and light to sound even remotely believable.

Inside me, another hope shatters like somebody has thrown a rock at a pane of glass.

Shit.

GRAY

Over the next few days, Kai grows distant. I'm not sure exactly what I expected when we got back from Toronto, but it certainly wasn't me trying to chase Kai down and failing at every turn.

I'm unemployed. I have all the time in the world to sit him down and... do something. The details of what that something is still evade me.

Not that it matters right now because Kai also evades me. It's as if he's suddenly become an avid proponent of personal space, and by the looks of it, said space has to be far away from me.

I've hardly seen him all week. He sneaks out of the house at the crack of dawn, supposedly not to wake me, which is mighty considerate of him, and also completely unnecessary since it's not like I have anywhere to be the whole day.

What hasn't changed is the sex. We still have it. Every night, he climbs into my bed and we fuck each other's brains out, but it's as if he's eliminated everything else that makes us... us. There's a new distance between us. We're pretty much having casual sex, and it has taught me something else in this journey of self-discovery I'm on: I fucking hate casual sex.

I'm not that guy. I've never been that guy. That's the reason I don't do one-night stands. I need the connection, and with Kai, I need more.

With Kai, I need everything.

So, we need to talk. Desperately. But of course it's not that simple because Kai seems to want to do everything other than talking.

I've tried stopping by Kai's workshop, but whenever I show up, he's on his way out.

He tells me he has a lot going on. He needs to get his business going. He has orders to finish. He's busy with work.

By Friday, I'm ready to scream in frustration. How has everything gone off the rails so quickly? And just when I was starting to figure things out. Unbelievable.

But I have hope today. Mon and Ivo are putting on a dinner to celebrate Ivo's birthday. We're supposed to be there at seven, end even though at this point I wouldn't put it past Kai to call me and tell me to go on my own since something came up for him, if everything goes well, I'll find the moment to talk even if I have to lock us in a room somewhere together.

Miracle of all miracles, Kai walks in the door a little after three o'clock. He gives me an exhausted-looking salute and says, "Hey."

"Hey." I stand up and stare at him, heart going thump-thump-thump in my chest.

He's here.

He's here.

He's here!

“Hey,” I say once more, my voice dipping lower for some inexplicable reason. I sound like a dollar-store James Earl Jones.

“I’m just gonna grab a quick shower, and then I’m ready to head out,” Kai says as he walks past me.

I nod, unable to produce any sounds, as he disappears into the bathroom. It’s hard to force my mind out of the gutter as I listen to the sound of falling water and the shower door opening and closing. Ten infinite minutes pass, and then I can hear Kai’s bare feet padding on the floorboards as he heads toward his bedroom.

“Ready,” he announces in a little while as he walks into the living room, shrugging on his leather jacket.

My mouth goes dry as I look at him. I never had crushes in middle school, but I imagine this is what it feels like. My eyes stay glued on Kai. The way his jeans mold around his thighs. The way his white T-shirt is slightly damp because Kai never bothers to fully dry himself. The way his hair is messy because, once again, he has lost his hairbrush and has reverted to combing through it with his fingers.

I know him through and through, and that’s what makes him so unbelievably sexy to me.

“Gray?”

Kai’s voice startles me from my thoughts.

“Yup?”

“We going or what?” he asks.

“Sure.”

Two hours stuck in a car with Kai should give me plenty of time to talk to him and figure out... us. Maybe I’ll even sneak

in a wrong turn and prolong the journey. Monica will have my balls, but I'm thinking it might be worth the risk.

Only the moment I've finally maneuvered us out of Boston through rush-hour traffic, Kai is asleep in his seat. I turn the music up a notch, but he doesn't even stir.

I sigh. I guess the talk is going to have to wait a bit.

"Happy birthday, dear Ivo. Happy birthday to you," we all sing loudly and mostly off-key.

"Make a wish," Mon says as she pushes the birthday lasagna closer to Ivo. It's an inside joke nobody except the two of them gets, but Ivo never has a birthday cake. Instead, year after year, without fail, Mon makes a birthday lasagna and sticks five candles in it.

Ivo blows out the candles, and we cheer, clap, and whistle before we start passing the lasagna around the table.

We load our plates, and Kai sends Ivo a shit-eating grin before he starts chanting, "Speech. Speech. Speech."

Ivo flips him off, but he stands up and looks at the three of us gathered around the dining room table.

"It's nice you two stopped by," he says, aiming a look at me and Kai. "Now eat."

Kai pretends to wipe a tear from the corner of his eye. "So moving. Some people really have the gift of gab. I mean, everything about that speech was just profound and quotable."

"Sometimes when I can't sleep, I like to imagine what it'd be like if Mon was an only child," Ivo says. "I always fall

asleep feeling happy and have the nicest dreams.”

“Please. If I’d never been born, you’d always feel like there was something missing in your life,” Kai scoffs. “But you could never quite figure out what it is. I bet those sweet dreams you’re lying your ass off about are all actually like remake-with-a-twist versions of *It’s a Wonderful Life*, where the angel shows you how miserable you’d be without me. Do you often wake up covered in cold sweat, screaming, ‘Nooooo!’?”

“Of course. The moment I wake up and realize my dream wasn’t the reality,” Ivo says smugly as Kai laughs.

Monica shakes her head and smiles.

“How’s the workshop doing?” she asks Kai, redirecting the conversation.

“I’m getting steadily busier,” Kai says. “I have a couple of orders lined up, and I’m thinking about putting out some ads to get the word out.”

“I’ve been singing your praises to everybody I know,” Mon says. “I’m so proud of you.”

Kai flushes and looks down at his hands, and without thinking, I reach for him and link our fingers.

“He’s amazing,” I say.

Kai’s gaze flies to mine for the first time since we left home, and I squeeze his hand. He frowns and looks down at his lap, his eyes widening as if he’s just realized our fingers are linked. The next moment, his hand is gone, and he avoids looking at me at all cost during the rest of the dinner.

“Coffee and pie on the porch?” Mon asks. “It’s a nice evening.”

“We’ll do the dishes,” I offer.

“See, polite people would be all, *no need. You’re our guests*, but if you were hoping to score polite points without having to actually do anything, you’re in for a surprise. You can absolutely do the dishes while I sit back and relax outside with the birthday boy. Be careful with the glasses. They belonged to Nan, and I will dismember you if you break any.”

“Suckers,” Ivo says with a snicker as he follows Mon outside.

Kai and I clean the table and the kitchen in silence. I’ve been trying to create a moment for us to talk for the whole week, but now that it’s here, I don’t know where to start.

“So how about that dinner, huh?” I finally say. I’ve had better conversation starters while stuck in an elevator with the creepy security guard, who refused to break eye contact for the whole two hours we were stuck in that thing. Gus and I really bonded that day.

Kai flicks his gaze at me for a quick second, giving me a strange look.

“Yeah,” he says.

“And the lasagna. Very tasty,” I add.

“Delicious,” Kai agrees.

“We should steal the leftovers,” I say.

“A heist?” he suggests with a small smile.

“Yeah. In fact, why stop with the lasagna. Let’s empty the fridge and save ourselves a trip to the grocery store.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Another bout of silence follows.

“Is something wrong?” I finally blurt.

“No,” Kai says quickly. “Why?”

I lean my ass against the counter and cross my arms over my chest.

“You seem a bit off.”

He avoids my gaze again. “I’ve just been busy.”

Kai puts the last glass on the counter and puts the towel away.

“The owner of my building stopped by the other day,” he says, and once again, he avoids looking at me. “He wanted to see the renovations we did in the workshop.”

“You didn’t mention anything about him planning to do that. Did it go all right?”

Kai nods.

“Yeah. He was really happy with what we’ve done to the place, actually. So much so that he...” Kai bites his lip and looks down at his feet. “He asked if I’d be interested in renting the apartment above the workshop. Same deal, he’d charge me almost nothing for rent for the next year if I fixed up the place.”

I just stare at him.

“You want to move out?”

“Well, no, I mean, it’s an idea. Just... in case.”

“In case of what?” I ask, sounding almost frantic. My plan is to keep Kai with me forever, and everything he’s suggesting is the exact opposite of what I want.

“Well, at one point, when we’re both fifty, I imagine it’ll become a bit pathetic for you and me to still be living together.

Otherwise, when Mon and Ivo will have children I'll be the weird uncle who can't seem to get his act together." He lets out a strained laugh. "Anyway, it's just something to think about for now. Even if I do take the offer, the apartment is practically uninhabitable right now. There's a hole in the roof, and pigeons were flying in and out of it, so you're not getting rid of me that easily."

He glances at me as if expecting me to laugh, but I can't. Somewhere, somehow, things have gone off the rails really badly. I'm in love with somebody who, by the looks of it, is trying to find a way to get as far away from me as possible.

"I—"

The porch door slides open and Monica steps in. I clamp my mouth shut.

She looks at the glasses on the counter and lets out an exaggerated breath of relief.

"Phew. You didn't break any. Guess I can put my carving knife away again."

"You have an unhealthy attachment to inanimate objects," Kai says as he straightens himself. "You should really work on changing that."

He takes one last quick glance at me and escapes to the porch.

Monica hums as she opens the fridge and pulls out a red pie dish.

"Can you grab the plates?" she asks, and I force myself to move to the cabinet where Mon keeps her fancy china. I'm in some sort of a dream space, where my body executes all the necessary moves, but my thoughts are a million miles away.

The idea of Kai moving away sends a stab of pain through my whole body.

I can't let him do that. Then again, I can't exactly keep him with me if he doesn't want to either.

But what changed? That's the key question, isn't it? What made him even think about moving out?

I never want him to leave. Ever. I never want him to move. Or, okay, I do want him to move. I want him to move closer. I want him to move into my room. I want his clothes in my closet and him in my bed, and I want my room to be our room.

But Kai doesn't want that.

Or does he?

I haven't asked him. It hits me like a brick in the face. It's actually really simple. I have to ask him to stay.

"You're awfully quiet tonight," Mon says from somewhere behind me.

I turn toward her.

"I've been sleeping with Kai," I blurt out.

She places the pie back down and cocks her head to the side, saying nothing.

"I'm having sex with him," I clarify unnecessarily. She still doesn't say anything, so my mouth just keeps spewing out words. "Lots of sex. We're going at it, like, nightly. So... any thoughts on the matter?"

Mon makes a face.

"Oh plenty. The main one being that I'm way too involved in my little brother's life."

“I’m in love with him,” I add, sounding a bit dazed at the fact that I’m saying those words out loud right now, but it’s not like I want to make Mon think I’m bragging about doing his brother. “Just... immeasurably, completely in love with him.”

“That’s good,” Mon says with a nod. “Although I’d imagine any love declarations should be aimed at Kai and not me. Just an idea to consider.”

“He wants to move out,” I say, and now there’s a hysterical note in my voice at the thought of Kai possibly not being interested in the concept of turning my room into our room.

“You sure about that?” Mon asks.

My head whips toward her, and she gives me a knowing smile.

“He... doesn’t want to move out?” I offer hesitantly.

Monica gives me an encouraging nod.

“Because he maybe, possibly, perhaps feels something for me too?” I hedge, too afraid to concentrate on sounding confident.

Another nod, this time accompanied by raised brows.

“And he’s just hesitant to tell me because...”

Monica sighs and rolls her eyes. “Because falling in love with your best friend is scary sometimes,” she says like she’s explaining something obvious. “Because the potential to lose everything is much greater. And maybe it’s hard to believe all the cards have aligned and something you wish for so badly could come true. And maybe, just maybe, it’s difficult to believe the situation you’ve always known to be true might have changed. That the person you thought you knew through and through has changed.” Her smile kind of looks like she’s

trying to sympathize with me for being so dense. “I’m just speculating here, of course,” she adds with a shrug.

My heart is beating wildly, and my brain is working overtime.

“Actions speak louder than words,” I say to myself. “And I haven’t changed. Not really. I’m still the same. I’m just not blind to the obvious anymore.”

Mon is looking at me with fondness.

“I need a list,” I say with a nod. “Or, on second thought. I already have a list. It’s just missing a couple of very important points.”

Monica pats me on the hand. “I’ve always liked lists.”

I smile.

“Me too. Lists... have proved very beneficial in the happiness department.”

KAI

I have to face it. I'm shit at plans. Or at least I'm failing with my current one. Truth be told, it's not much of a plan to begin with. Let's see.

Step one. Stop sleeping with Gray.

Step two. Stop being in love with him.

So far, I'm failing on both counts.

But today is the beginning of a new era. I obviously don't have enough willpower to resist Gray, so I'm going to let him do the heavy lifting and tell him we should stop having sex, and then we'll just... stop.

It's the only way to salvage our friendship.

So for a change, instead of staying in my workshop until it's so late that Gray is already in bed, I go home at a normal hour.

The apartment is quiet as I enter.

"Gray?" I call out, but I get no answer.

I frown as I walk through the living room. Everything is still quiet. I peek into my bedroom that, let's face it, is more like a glorified wardrobe since I haven't used it for sleeping in a while now. A shot of pain goes through my insides at the

thought that I better get used to thinking of this place as my actual bedroom again. I shake it off.

This is my bedroom, I tell myself firmly.

Still no Gray, though. I hesitantly move to Gray's door. I take a deep breath. Prepare myself. If he's in there, I have to be ready to resist the need to kiss him and sleep with him and do all those things that we don't do now that we're strictly platonic friends again.

I push the door open. I'm both relieved and disappointed he's not here either. I'm ready to close the door when I notice a sheet of paper on the bed.

Curiosity gets the better of me, so of course I go and pick it up. What's one more bad idea?

I read the title, and I'm momentarily transported back to simpler times when I hadn't messed up my life yet.

The Happy List.

The feeling of déjà vu is strong. Jesus. Is this one of those things where life gives you a do-over? Should I drop the list and escape this room immediately?

Well, if this is my second chance, I fail immediately because I'm already reading the list.

My gaze flies over the title once more. I'm greeted by the same neat cursive as the first time. But as I go lower, I realize something.

At a first glance, it looks like a copy of Gray's previous happy list, but it becomes clear pretty quickly that it's not exactly true. Gray seems to have updated this one a bit.

There are several items that have ticks after them.

Have more fun

Take a risk

Take a road trip

Tick. Tick. Tick.

Some have additional comments written after them.

Do something crazy – ongoing project

Make a complete fool of yourself – I don't see why not

Find a hobby – hockey! Ha. Done.

Get a massage – only when it has a happy ending

My heart is beating like crazy when my eyes move lower. I swear to God if the one-night stand one has a tick after it, I will lose it.

Instead, it's crossed out without any ticks or comments. I stare at it. Does that mean it's done? Not done? Replaced with something else? Is Gray out right now looking to score? What the hell does it mean? I feel sick.

Do something sexually adventurous and have a fucking fantastic orgasm both have ticks, which clears up absolutely nothing.

Frustrated, I turn the sheet over. Don't know what I'm expecting. An essay to clear things up, maybe? Instead, I get a surprise. The list continues on the other side.

I start reading and nearly swallow my tongue after the first few words.

Convince Kai to stay

That's... that's a new thing. I would know if that had been in the last list. My eyes move lower, taking in Gray's words. I

have to read the next few items several times to make sure I'm not seeing things.

Make my room our room

Go on a real date with Kai

Introduce Kai as my boyfriend to everybody we know

Ask Kai to be my boyfriend (note to self, reverse the order of those two things, otherwise might come off as creepy)

I laugh as I read the remark, tears swelling in the corners of my eyes. The more I read, the less I can breathe.

Make Kai happy

Wake up in Kai's arms every day for the rest of my life

Fall in love with Kai

I read through those last five words over and over again. My hands are shaking so badly that I can barely see the words anymore, and my heart is beating like a jackhammer because that last line? It has a big, fat, wonderful tick after it.

I stare at the list for the longest time. My thoughts are all in a messy jumble. The only thing that is clear as day in my mind is that I need Gray. I need to find out if what this new happy list says is true.

I start to fold the paper, but then I reconsider and carefully place it on the bed instead. I wouldn't want to wrinkle the paper because we're definitely framing that sucker.

"Hey."

I whirl around at the sound of Gray's voice from the doorway. He's leaning against the doorframe, looking sexy and a bit nervous and gorgeous and fantastic and... in love. My heart skips a beat as I look at him.

“I was starting to think you were trying to find a way to climb out the window,” he says.

“I thought that was your specialty,” I say in a weak voice.

Gray chuckles and flicks his gaze toward the bed.

“I see you found my list.”

“I did.” I swallow hard. “Is there a reason why you left it lying around like that?”

He straightens himself and takes a step closer.

“I was thinking that you were so enthusiastic about my last list that maybe you’d want to help me with this one, too?”

My heart starts beating even faster, as I hungrily take in the sight of Gray in his casual sweatpants and T-shirt.

“I don’t know if I’ll be of much use to you. You’ve already ticked a lot of the items here,” I say.

“I left the most important ones for last.”

“Oh. In that case, we should definitely take a closer look at this list of yours,” I say, as I go back toward the bed and grab the paper.

“I see you’ve crossed out the one-night stand thing,” I say. “Not interested in that anymore, I take it?”

He takes another step toward me, and the smoldering look he gives me makes small shivers of anticipation run over my whole body.

“I figured out I’m more of a committed-relationship type of a person.”

“I’m sure there are plenty of people who’d like to be in a relationship with you. You’re quite a catch.”

“Ah. But see, there’s a problem. I have a pretty specific type.”

“You sure about that? Maybe you’re just picky,” I suggest, voice shaky, hands shaky, everything shaky. It’s a miracle I’m still able to stand.

“That, too,” Gray concurs. “But the way I see it, if I’m going to spend the rest of my life with this person, it’s good to be a little picky.”

“Hmm,” I say thoughtfully. “You might have a point there. How about you tell me about the criteria you have for the perfect person, and then we’ll see if I know anybody who’d fit.”

“Fingers crossed,” Gray says with a serious nod. “Okay. Let’s see. I’m looking for a redhead with blue eyes.”

I tap my fingertip against my chin. “I hear that’s the rarest hair and eye color combination in the world. We’re off to a challenging start. Would you be willing to make some concessions?”

“No. I can’t help it. I find red hair and blue eyes incredibly sexy,” Gray says. “But buckle up, it’s going to get even more specific, I’m afraid. He has to be exactly five foot eleven.”

“Is there a reason you’re after that specific height?”

“It’s perfect for kissing. Also, I admit the research is still ongoing, but the first results in the sixty-nine department are very promising.”

Man, it got hot here all of a sudden.

“Cool,” I croak. “Cool, cool, cool. What... what else?”

“Let’s see.” Gray takes another step closer. He’s only about three feet away from me now. “I’d also want him to be good

with his hands.” He reaches out his own hand and catches my fingers in his, sliding his thumb over my palm. “I swear, callouses are fucking fantastic.” That statement is accompanied with a look filled with so much heat that I could swear I feel the room temperature spike.

I’m desperately trying to get some control back, but that battle is already lost.

“I want somebody incredibly smart and beautiful and so sexy that I get hard whenever I so much as think about him,” Gray continues.

“Wow,” I joke weakly. “Low standards.”

Another step closer makes Gray’s toes bump against mine.

“I want somebody who makes dumb jokes—”

“Hey!” I protest as he laughs.

“I want somebody who is my best friend.” He slides his palm against my cheek, cradling it, and I have to close my eyes for a moment to get my bearings.

“Somebody who doesn’t mind that I’ve been stupidly blind for years and haven’t seen what’s right in front of me,” he continues.

“You’re here now,” I whisper.

Gray sucks in a breath, and then I’m in his arms. He holds me so tightly that I can hardly breathe, but it doesn’t matter because everything is bright bursts of happiness around me, and I feel so light and ecstatic that Gray is absolutely right to wrap himself around me like this because otherwise I might float away.

He inhales deeply, nose in my hair, hands moving up and down my back as if he’s making sure I’m really there.

“I love you,” he murmurs in my ear. “I’m so in love with you that I can’t see straight.”

My voice is muffled against his neck. “That sounds about right.”

Gray laughs as he looks at me before he presses a quick kiss on my lips.

“See? Dumb jokes.”

“That was an excellent joke. I would even say it’s topical.”

Gray smiles at me with all the love in the world radiating from him and shakes his head wordlessly before he kisses me again. I will never get enough of this.

“Now, is there something you want to tell me?” he prods.

I give him my best dopey smile.

“You’re really pretty?”

“How about something that’ll qualify as totally new information?”

“Oh.” I snap my fingers. “If I would make a sweater out of your hair, it’d smell really nice.”

Gray stares at me for a few seconds.

“Going all out with the creepy vibes, I see.”

I nuzzle the side of his head.

“It’s true, though.”

“Great. Now how about you stop teasing me and tell me you love me.”

“I thought you wanted to hear totally new information. You’re sending me mixed messages.”

He throws his head back and groans.

“Well, Gray,” he mutters. “This is the rest of your life in a nutshell. I hope you’re happy.”

I pull his mouth down to mine and kiss him before I lean my forehead against his.

“I love you. So much.”

Gray smiles and closes his eyes for a second, savoring the moment.

“See? Now was that so hard?” he asks.

I kiss him again.

He tastes like happiness and love, and the thought that from now on, I can do this whenever I want makes me almost tear up again. It’s been a roller coaster of a day. So much so that everything that has happened in the last thirty minutes seems almost like something straight out of a fantasy. Or a movie. Or a dream.

Shit. I need to check something...

I sneak my hand between us and pinch my side so hard that my eyes start to water.

“Umm... what are you doing?” Gray asks against my lips.

“Just making sure it’s not a dream.”

He snorts out a laugh, and I can’t help but laugh, and all the while, our lips stay connected, both of us inhaling each other’s happiness.

I don’t think we’ve ever had a moment that is more perfectly *us*.

GRAY

I wake up the next morning because my nose itches. I wipe over my face with my palm a couple of times while still half-asleep, but the itchy feeling keeps returning.

“What the—” I mumble as I pry one eye open, only to find Kai’s smiling face an inch above me. He’s holding a strand of his hair and tickling my nose with it.

“Nice,” I rasp as he throws himself on his back and laughs.

“You’re cute when you sleep,” he says.

“Too cute to let me continue?” I ask through a yawn.

“I figured you’d want to get up. We’re wasting precious daylight hours.”

“It’s June. The sun is up for, like, fifteen hours a day.”

“I was also really bored, but I didn’t want to go too far away from you,” Kai confesses with an unapologetic shrug.

“I’m rethinking this whole moving in and being in love stuff already.”

“Sorry. There’s a strict no-returns policy in place.” He rolls himself on top of me and smiles widely. “Although I do feel bad about waking you up. Maybe I can make it up to you.”

Kai pushes his hips against mine, circling them, grinding himself against my morning wood. I wrap my legs around his hips, trapping him.

“On second thought, I think I’m going to keep you,” I say before I hook my fingers on the back of his neck and pull him down for a kiss that intensifies by the second, until Kai suddenly pulls away from me, leaving me completely dazed.

“Where are you going?” I blink and try to clear some of the haze of desire as Kai sits up and throws his legs over the side of the bed.

“You didn’t hear the knock? Wow. I’m really good at foreplay.” He grabs a pair of sweats and pulls them on. “Somebody’s at the door,” he explains at my confused expression.

“So?” I call after him as he gets out of the room. “We can pretend we’re not home.”

He peeks his head back inside the room. “I already tried that, but whoever that is has been knocking forever by now.”

As if to prove Kai’s words, I hear a couple of loud raps from the direction of the front door.

I throw myself back on the bed. “Tell them to fuck off and never come back,” I call after him. “Unless they’re, like, Girl Scouts selling Christmas cookies, and in that case be polite when you tell them to get lost.”

The sound of Kai’s bare feet moving through the apartment makes me smile.

I hear a faint click when Kai opens the door, and then the murmur of voices and the sound of the door closing.

“Did you get rid of them?” I call. “Because I’m getting lonely here.”

In a few seconds, Kai is back in the doorway, looking startled for some reason.

I throw the comforter off and waggle my brows at him.

“You might want to postpone that a bit,” he says and motions toward the living room with his head. “Your gran and your brother are here.”

I fling myself to a sitting position.

“They’re here right now?”

“In the living room.” Kai looks away. “They might have heard you just now about the getting lonely part.” His voice is so quiet I can barely hear him, and he keeps throwing glances toward the living room.

“I told them we were playing Alias, but I’m not sure if they believed me, so you should probably do some damage control.”

I stare at him without blinking for a few moments.

“Alias?” I repeat.

“It’s the first thing that came to mind.” Kai crosses his arms over his chest and glares at me.

Laughter bubbles up inside me. This whole situation is too ridiculous for words, so the laughter gets louder by the second until Kai rushes into the room and flings himself on me, pressing his palm over my mouth.

“Cut it out,” he hisses and throws a nervous look toward the doorway. “They’ll hear you.”

I lick over his palm. Kai looks toward the ceiling and mutters something unintelligible before he lowers his head to look at me again.

“They don’t know about us, remember?” he says in a frantic whisper. “So you need to go out there and act normal, and maybe try and smooth over the whole Alias lie if you can.”

I shake my head before I kiss his palm, but Kai doesn’t seem to notice it.

“You’re right,” he says. “Just ignore the whole Alias thing. Pretend everything is normal, and I’m sure they’ll buy it. Deny, deny, deny, ‘til they believe.”

I turn my head until he releases my mouth, but instead of getting up, I pull Kai down for a kiss, and when our mouths eventually part, he looks... well, exactly as if somebody has kissed the fuck out of him. Just the way I like him.

“I’ll handle it,” I promise as I get out of bed.

Kai just nods.

I walk into the living room after I’ve pulled on some clothes. Con is standing by the window, looking down on the street, and Gran is sitting on the couch.

“Hi,” I say as stop in the doorway. “What are you guys doing here?”

Gran motions me toward her. She keeps crooking her finger until I’m practically in her face, and then, in a lightning-quick move, she grabs ahold of my ear and twists.

“Hey!” I protest as I pull away from her.

Gran stands up and points toward Con.

“What’s this I hear about you two fighting?”

“You tattled?” I ask Con incredulously.

“I did no such thing!” he denies immediately. “Blame Jamie. He’s the one with loose lips.”

“Nobody’s blaming anybody,” Gran says. “That goes for you two, too. You’re brothers. Whatever quarrel you two have gotten into, fix it now.”

“There’s no quarrel,” I try to say.

“Fix it!” Gran snaps before she marches out of the room. A second after she’s gone, she peeks her head back inside the room. “Preferably before two o’clock because I have a lunch date that I’d like to keep, thank you very much.”

I hear her move toward the kitchen, and then it’s just me and Con.

We haven’t talked since I quit my job. I guess we’re both too stubborn for our own good, but somebody has to offer an olive branch, and since Con is the one who came here—even if it was under duress—I figure I’m the one who should get the speaking ball rolling.

“I’m glad you stopped by,” I say.

“I didn’t have much say in the matter.”

The statement would probably come off as cold and callous to other people, but it’s classic Con. That’s just how he operates.

He motions toward the hallway. “Gran said you wanted to use her telescope, so we brought it along.”

“Oh. Well, you didn’t have to go through the trouble, but thank you.”

“I volunteered,” Con says. He takes a deep breath and looks down at where he’s leaning his palms on the windowsill. He sounds like he’s trying to pull the words out with a pair of pliers. “I’m... I’m not used to *not* having you around, it seems.”

He sighs and finally meets my gaze. “I shouldn’t have overreacted like I did. If you’d want to come back, I... I could live with that.”

“Wow.” I’m not sure if I should be flattered or not.

Con kind of looks like an actor who just realized he messed up his lines in the pivotal act.

“What I meant was, I’d like it if you would come back.”

I’ve never seen Con so hesitant before. It doesn’t suit him. The familiar urge to do what’s right—follow the responsible plan—is strong. I want to say yes. I want to make him proud of me because old habits really do die hard. Following the Con-approved plan has been my agenda for so long that standing next to him now, it feels almost impossible to stray.

But the moment I think of going back to corporate law is also the moment I realize I can’t do it.

“Don’t you get bored?” I ask before I can stop myself.

Con frowns as he looks at me.

“Bored?” he asks, cocking his head to the side like the word sounds foreign to him.

“We both draw up contracts most of the day, and I was just thinking how you manage it. How do you motivate yourself to keep going when you hate your job?”

“Hate my job?” Con asks, eyebrows going so high that for a second I feel the urge to laugh at the comical look of surprise

on his face.

“Maybe hate isn’t the correct word. I was just... I mean, it’s boring as hell.”

Con is still looking at me like I’m speaking a foreign language.

“I love my job,” he says slowly. “Why do you think I’ve been doing it for years already? Corporate law is interesting. It blends business and law, allowing me to really stretch my mental capabilities. It’s like the ultimate brain teaser. I need to be a step ahead to protect my clients. I need to be better than the people sitting at the other side of the table who’ll potentially try and add clauses or use a language that might harm my client. Drafting contracts, negotiating deals, navigating mergers and acquisitions are a challenge. I enjoy it immensely.”

“Oh.” The way Con talks about corporate law, his eyes shining with excitement, makes my shoulders slump. This is definitely the last nail in the coffin. I don’t understand what’s wrong with me that I don’t enjoy it even a fraction as much as Con does.

“What do *you* like about being a lawyer?” Con asks.

“Nothing,” I blurt out before I can think better of it. Con stares at me for the longest time.

“Gray...” He shakes his head in dismay. “Why are you a lawyer, then?”

I shrug. “I... It’s a field that will ensure I have a secure future. It’s a stable and responsible career choice. A respectable one.”

By the look on Con’s face, I can see he recognizes the words he’s parroted to me dozens of times over the years.

“So,” he finally says and rubs his palm over his face. “That’s a bit of a fail on my part.”

A startled laugh escapes me. I don’t think Con has ever failed in anything his whole life, so this moment here must be an interesting experience for him.

“Let me just…” He considers me for a moment.

“Mom and Dad were fucking terrible at being parents,” he says. “When I was younger and you hadn’t even been born yet, it was just chaos. They were both too young and irresponsible to have kids, and if I had to guess, I think I was probably an accident? God knows why they decided to have me at all. They both had, I don’t even know, wild oats to sow? It was constant parties and taking off on a whim. There were a few times they both forgot me at home. I assume they both figured the other one would take care of me, and it wasn’t some sort of a ploy to reenact *Home Alone*.”

“I would miss school for weeks on end. I was too tired because of the constant, loud parties and fights and the cheating and… It was exhausting. I don’t know if it’s because of how I grew up, but I like stability and routine. Love it. I can’t seem to function properly without it. And when they died, and you came to live with me, I thought that was what you needed, too.”

“It was,” I interrupt. I’m not sure I should say the next part, but then again, I think we need me to be honest. “I was sad when they died, but there was a tiny part of me that was relieved because I didn’t have to live with them anymore. I didn’t have to listen to the partying and fights and all the craziness that came with Mom and Dad. I wanted an out, and you gave it to me.”

“Fair enough, but I shouldn’t have made you feel like you couldn’t make your own choices,” Con says.

“Don’t blame yourself. You did the best you could, considering you were twenty-two and suddenly had to take care of a twelve-year-old. You’re a good brother, Con. You could have pawned me off to some relatives, but you didn’t. Gran would have definitely taken me in if you’d asked. But you kept me, and I’ll always be grateful.”

“You’re my brother. Keeping you was never a question. Besides, Gran had enough on her plate with Granddad’s cancer diagnosis on top of losing her son and daughter-in-law.”

Silence settles between the two of us.

“I should—”

“You should—”

We both chuckle.

“You first,” Con says.

“I realize that you’ve effectively been my dad these last sixteen years or so, but I’d really like it if we could try this new thing and be brothers. I could use a big brother.”

“That’s the gist of what I was about to say,” Con replies. “I’m gonna try, and you can call me out when I fail, which will definitely happen, I’m afraid.”

I nod even before he’s finished.

“Deal.”

We both smile, but I can’t feel a hundred percent relieved yet because there’s another important aspect of my life Con has no idea about, so I guess it’s time to power through and get it all out in the open.

“Kai is not just my friend,” I rush out. “He’s my boyfriend. We’re in love.”

Con frowns and for a crazy moment, images of him disowning me flash through my mind, each subsequent one scarier than the last.

But Con just gives a shrug.

“Okay?” he says.

“Okay?” I repeat.

His eyes move from left to right, like he’s looking for cue cards with hints of what to say on them.

“Good for you,” he says and pats me on the back awkwardly.

“You don’t seem that shocked,” I say.

“I’m a bit shocked it didn’t happen sooner. Does that count?”

All I can do is look at him with my mouth agape.

“I’m not homophobic if that’s what makes you stare at me like that.”

“It’s more that you never seemed to like Kai that much.”

He sighs. “Okay, so another fail on my part, it seems. I don’t... dislike him. I’m just a bit wary of him. He’s one of those free spirits. Comes and goes as he pleases. And the way he was hopping between jobs, never settling on something or committing to anything. I guess I always expected him to be like our parents. I didn’t want him to disappoint you because ever since you two met, you’ve been practically joined at the hip. I didn’t want him to break your heart.”

“He won’t.”

“You don’t know that,” Con says, looking a bit like he pities me for being so naïve.

“I won’t.”

I glance behind me at Kai’s voice.

“I won’t,” Kai says again, walking toward us. “I’ve been searching for something all these years, and it turns out the home I was looking for is right here.”

Con doesn’t look a hundred percent convinced, but he takes a deep breath and nods.

“Fresh start?” he asks as he extends his hand toward Kai.

They shake hands.

Con studies the two of us for a second before he glances out the window again.

“Is that why things didn’t work out with Cecilia?” he asks. “Was that another one of those instances where I pushed something on you, and you went along with it just to please me?”

I shake my head. “No. This has nothing to do with it. Cee is the best, and I’ll always love her, but we just want different things in life. It happens.”

“Okay.” Con nods. “I’ve gotta say I’m a bit relieved you weren’t forcing yourself to be with her because of me.”

“I really wasn’t. Even I have my limits.”

Con nods. He’s starting to look uncomfortable by the overabundance of truths and feelings that we have been exposing here this morning.

“Well, I’m glad we managed to clear some air between us,” he says. “I guess I should get going. I have some work to

do and errands to run and—”

“Do you want to stay for breakfast?” I interrupt him. “Or brunch, I guess.”

For a second he looks like he’s about to refuse, but then he nods.

“I like food,” he says.

“Me too. We have so much in common.”

“Dorks,” Kai says through a pretend cough.

“Hey, Gran?” I call toward the kitchen. “You want some breakfast?”

She steps into the living room immediately, leaving no doubt that she’s been eavesdropping, but she doesn’t look the least bit sorry about it.

“Why not. I happen to enjoy food too. Must be a family trait.”

Kai moves closer to me, and I wrap my arm around him.

“Hey, Gran?” I ask. “Want to meet my boyfriend?”

Kai’s smile is blinding.

KAI

“Where are we going?” I ask for the thousandth time.

“Dear God, what part of the sentence *it’s a surprise* did you not understand?” Gray grumbles, but I can hear the affection in his voice.

“You know what a good surprise is?”

“If you say no surprise, I’m going to turn this car around right this second,” he threatens, so I clamp my mouth shut and zip my lips for good measure.

We drive for a few more miles before Gray turns the car to a narrow road, and we follow that for another twenty minutes or so before he parks the car next to a small cabin. Fairy lights have been strung all over the place. There’s a deck overlooking a lake, and tall trees are surrounding us. It looks like something right out of a fairy tale.

I turn toward Gray, excitement bubbling inside.

“Are we on a getaway?”

He nods.

“It’s just the two of us for the next three days.”

“Fucking awesome,” I say as I throw myself at Gray. He easily catches me, and I wrap my legs around his waist,

pressing an enthusiastic kiss on his mouth.

“Dork,” he says. “I thought it would be good to take a break for a couple of days. You’ve been working your ass off these last few weeks, so you deserve it.”

“Aww, you’re turning sweet on me. Who would have guessed?”

“It gets even better,” Gray says. “We’re completely alone here. There isn’t another cabin anywhere in the vicinity.”

I press my lips against the soft skin below Gray’s ear, and he squeezes me tighter as I start nipping at his neck.

“You know what that means, right?” he asks on an exhale.

“What?” I murmur against his neck.

“No one will hear you scream,” he says.

I pull my head back so fast that I get whiplash.

It’s a good thing there aren’t any people close by because my roar of laughter would have definitely marked us immediately as the noisy neighbors. Even right now, I scare a couple of birds into flight from a nearby bush.

“No one will hear me scream? How very serial killerish of you,” I manage to get out through howls of laughter as I unwrap myself from around him and jump down.

“No! I meant that in a sexy way,” Gray protests.

“Because you’re going to kill me seductively? Got it.”

“I meant screams of pleasure.”

“I’ve never been more attracted to you,” I say as I wipe the tears of laughter from my eyes.

Gray just shakes his head and goes to grab our bags.

“You know, we should really explore before we start carting things inside,” I call after him.

Gray peeks his head out from behind the car.

“Explore?”

“Explore,” I say as I grab the hem of my shirt and pull it over my head in one swift move. “It’s the logical thing to do. Otherwise, how will we know if, say, the bed is big enough?”

“That *is* important,” Gray says, prowling toward me with all the grace of a lion out on a hunt.

I waggle my brows at him before I turn around and take off toward the cabin. Gray is right at my heels, and we stumble inside together.

We’re both stripping out of our clothes as quickly as we can. Shirts and pants are littering the floor as we make our way toward the bedroom, wrapped around each other, kissing, touching, fumbling with the last of our clothes.

I notice almost nothing about the bedroom, except for the fact that the bed is a king, and that’s all I need to know before I throw myself on it.

Gray topples on me, lips searching mine out and from there we’re nothing but frantic kisses and pent-up desire.

His hands are in my hair, and his lips are traveling over my body. I arch up to meet Gray. The need between us builds to something explosive as I start thrusting against Gray. The desperation is making the air around us vibrate with frantic need.

“Make love to me,” Gray whispers into my ear, and all I can do is nod.

My hands shake as I pop the bottle of lube open. My heart is beating in a wild staccato as I start teasing Gray open. It's not the first time my fingers have found their way inside Gray, but today we're not stopping with my fingers or my tongue, for that matter, so I'm a tiny bit nervous. I want to make this good for him.

I move down his body and suck him into my mouth, teasing him until Gray is desperately squirming beneath me, head thrown back, muscles straining with the way he's trying to hold on to the last shred of clear head.

"Oh fuck, just do me already," he groans as I massage my fingers over his prostate once again and suck his cock to the back of my throat at the same time.

I kneel between his thighs, adding more lube and kissing him soundly before I position myself.

Gray clenches as I start prodding my cock at his entrance.

It's not instant perfection and magic and angel choirs singing. First times rarely are, and it doesn't matter.

What matters is Gray's smile as I kiss him. What matters is the way Gray's lips part as I slowly inch inside him. What matters is the way he wraps his limbs around me and holds me close. What matters is the way we're entwined together until there's no I and no him but just us.

We move as one, bodies connected, wrapping around each other like vines. The pressure inside me grows, building from somewhere at the base of my spine and spreading into every cell of my body from my shoulders to my fingertips and from my nose to my toes.

Gray presses his lips on mine, whimpering as pleasure takes over. A broken moan leaves my lips as my climax

washes over me, wave after powerful wave.

I search out Gray's lips, pressing our mouths together until we're not breathing in air anymore but each other.

I wake up a few hours later when it's already dark outside. The bed is empty, but my suitcase in the corner of the room shows that Gray has been busy.

I grab a pair of sweatpants and a Henley and go outside while pulling the Henley over my head. I walk straight into Gray.

"I was just coming to wake you," he says, steadying me.

"Seems I saved you the trouble."

He pulls me to himself and kisses me. I happily let myself be swept away in the whirlwind of feelings that always accompany Gray's kisses. He pulls away way too quickly for my liking.

"Come on. I have something to show you."

I follow him down the porch steps, and we start walking away from the cabin.

"Shit. Wait a sec. I forgot my shoes," I say as I look down at my bare toes.

Gray immediately turns his back toward me. "Hop on."

I laugh and do as he says. He starts walking again, and I wrap my arms around his neck, hugging him. I nip at his earlobe, which makes him suck in his breath.

It takes us only a few minutes before we make it to a small clearing. I jump down from Gray's back. The grass feels cool

underneath my feet, and the night around us is filled with the music of the cicadas.

Gray points to the middle of the clearing.

“I thought we could do another round of stargazing.”

I smile when I see the telescope he’s set up.

“You’ve been busy.”

“It’s my grandfather’s telescope. Now we just have to see if I remember how to use it.”

“We’ll figure it out,” I say.

It takes us a bit of time and a couple of internet searches to get everything set up, and with a bit of time, it turns out Gray actually remembers quite a lot after I read him bits and pieces from my phone about the use of telescopes.

We start with something easy and aim the viewfinder at the moon, and then we track down Jupiter and Mars, and we also accidentally find a few star clusters.

“Okay,” Gray eventually says. “Let’s try something more advanced.” He grabs his phone and scrolls through it for a few minutes before he goes back to the telescope and starts messing around with it again.

“What are you looking for?” I ask.

He throws me a wicked grin.

“It’s a surprise.”

“You’ve got a lot of those in store for this weekend.”

“I’ve got a lot of those in store for the rest of our lives.” I will never get tired of hearing those words. For the rest of our lives. He says it so easily. It’s a foregone conclusion. Gray and

I. In love. Until we're old and gray, and then we'll just love each other even harder.

"I think I've got it," he says right as it starts to feel like my heart is going to burst from feelings because it isn't humanly possible to fit so much love inside it.

"I'm gonna need a bit more explanation than that," I say.

He straightens himself and points to the telescope.

"Come and see."

I peer into the eyepiece.

"What am I looking at, exactly?"

"There's a sort of a triangle of three bright stars. Can you find the one that is straight below the left base angle?"

"Got it," I say, concentrating on the view.

"Okay," Gray says. "I did something. It's stupid and completely useless, but I went ahead and did it anyway because that's what I do now. So here's the thing. You're looking at the Gray Loves Kai star."

I whip my head away from the telescope and stare at Gray.

"What?" I say dumbly.

"I went ahead bought one of those name-a-star certificates." He points to the sky. "The one you just saw, that's ours. I named it the Gray Loves Kai star. It's a highly original name that'll live on in the minds of generations to come."

My smile is so wide that it hurts my cheeks.

"You sap," I accuse with a laugh. "You bought us a star?"

“Technically I wired money to a couple of scam artists, and they promised me I’d just named a star. I don’t believe you get to claim ownership to it, though.”

I wave him off.

“Might as well go all out and say that we’re the proud new owners. If we’re already getting scammed, it might as well be for something magnificent and awesome. Hey! We should totally buy the moon!”

“I’ll put it on the list of possible birthday presents.”

I take one more look through the telescope.

“It’s a pretty star,” I say.

“That’s why I picked it.”

“Did you?”

I can feel him as he stands behind me, almost touching me.

“Nah. They just gave me one. There’s a good chance there are twenty other people who are happily claiming our star as their own right now.”

I turn around and wrap my arms around him.

“Eh, we can share.”

He laughs and kisses me under the star-filled sky.

After a while, we lie down on the blanket Gray has spread on the ground. He takes my hand in his and holds it against his chest.

“Oh. A falling star,” he exclaims and points toward the sky.

I turn my head toward him.

“Did you make a wish?”

The smile on his face as he turns his head back toward me is pure happiness.

“I don’t need to. I already have everything I want.”

EPILOGUE

Seven years later...

“The eagle has landed. I repeat. The eagle has landed. Do you copy? Over.”

“Yup,” I say distractedly as I try to wrestle the duvet cover in place while holding the walkie talkie.

There’s a moment of silence on the other end of the line.

“Uncle Kai, we talked about this,” Katie says in a voice that clearly shows she’s not happy with me. “I repeat. The eagle has landed. Do you copy? Over.”

“Sorry. Affirmative,” I say quickly. “Copy,” I add just in case.

“Uncle Kai, you’re supposed to say over. Over,” Katie says.

“Sorry. Over,” I say dutifully.

There’s a small pause before my walkie talkie crackles again.

“The eagle is flying to the nest,” Katie reports. “He’s taking his bag.” I can hear Mon murmur something in the background and then Katie’s back. It’s hard not to laugh as she

sighs dramatically. “Uncle Kai, we’ve got a situation. 10-32. Over.”

“Wait. What’s 10-32?” I ask, trying to remember the earlier tutorial.

Katie lets out another long-suffering sigh, reminding me of my absolute incompetence when it comes to walkie talkie etiquette.

My niece is a handful even at six. She’s an awesome, curious, super smart little girl, and I love her to death, but I’ll be ecstatic once the walkie talkie craze is over. I blame Gray. He’s the one who suggested buying those devil machines, dubbing them the perfect Christmas present. Of course, there’s a good chance walkie talkies will be replaced with something worse, but I’m not going to worry about it right now.

“Over,” I add, finally clueing on to the reason of Katie’s obvious disapproval.

“10-32, of course, means *Mom needs to pee*,” Ivo’s voice says snidely like the teacher’s pet he is. Ever since he aced Katie’s walkie talkie codes test, he’s been extremely smug. So yeah, I barely scraped by, but in my defense, Ivo had days to prepare while I only had about ten minutes. I really should have opened the email Mon sent me and studied beforehand.

“Oh. 10-4?” I’m not sure what I’ve just said, but I go with it anyway. Nobody scoffs or laughs at me, so I guess my 10-4 did the job of conveying... something.

“Over,” I add quickly at the pointed silence from the other end.

“We’re off,” Mon calls from somewhere in the distance. “The baby is using my bladder as a squeeze toy again. Gray is at the door in about twenty seconds.”

“Mom, it’s eagle,” Katie protests as I chuckle.

“Thank you guys for helping me out,” I say. “I really appreciate it. Over.”

“Bye, uncle Kai,” Katie says.

“Have fun. Say hi to eagle,” Mon calls from the background.

“Over and out,” Katie says and the line goes silent.

I take one more glance at the room, assuring everything looks okay, before I hurry to the hallway.

The front door opens just as I reach it and instead of slowing down, I just barrel forward and jump into Gray’s arms. He barely has time to drop his suitcase on the floor to catch me in time.

I wrap myself around him like a vine and hug him as hard as I can.

“Fucking finally,” I say before I slam my mouth down on his.

“Missed me?” Gray asks lips still pressed against mine, and I can feel his smile.

“You’re never allowed to leave again,” I state and pull away to take in all that is Gray, from his slightly messy hair and a day’s worth of stubble, to his lips that, after five days apart, look more kissable than ever. “I missed your face.”

He laughs. “Right back at you.”

I refuse to let him go, so he smiles and wobbles a bit as he toes his shoes off, before he starts walking toward the living room. We fall on the couch together in a tangle of limbs and

only stop kissing once our lips are all red and swollen and even then I'm doing it reluctantly.

“How was your trip?” I ask. I keep sliding my palms all over his body. The five days he's been gone have felt like an eternity.

“Fun,” he says and kisses the side of my head, hugging me closer. “Con fell into the lake.”

I snort, picturing Con trashing in the water, scowling and muttering curses. Every year, in the beginning of summer, Con and Gray rent a cabin and spend a few days together. It's their brother time. So much of their relationship has been about Con filling the role of a father figure, so that first weekend all these years ago was a way for the two of them to talk everything through. It turned into a tradition, though, and they both enjoy the time they spend together.

“He swore he'd never come to the annual fishing trip ever again,” Gray says.

“Doesn't he say that exact thing every year?” I ask. “He seems to draw all sorts of mishaps his way on your trips with worrying regularity.”

“Yeah. Nature isn't Con's friend. Man, the time he stepped into that wasp's nest? I actually thought he was going to die there. I didn't even know legs could swell to that size.”

Gray chuckles. He presses his nose into my hair and inhales deeply.

“How was your week?” he asks. The cabin has almost zero cell signal, so we've only spoken sporadically over the last few days.

“The hotel guys called back. I won the contract for the bar area.”

Gray beams at me. “Told you you’d get it.”

“That you did,” I concede. “I think I need to hire a few more people because with all the extra work that comes with the bar contract now, the three of us just can’t handle it all.”

“You should do it,” Gray simply says because he’s the one person who always supports all of my decisions.

About four years ago an interior design magazine tagged my stuff on their Instagram account, which brought me a lot of new clients and resulted in a sort of a partnership with one of the best known interior designers in Boston. Before all that happened, I was a one man operation, but practically overnight, I was hiring people and looking for a bigger space for my workshop. It’s still hard to believe all of this has happened.

“I’ll deal with it on Monday. First we have the whole weekend to ourselves without any work at all.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Gray says with a smile and presses himself closer to me.

These days neither of us works on weekends. Not because we don’t love our jobs but because we’re better at what we do if we unplug for a few days.

Especially Gray, because wonder of all wonders, he’s still a lawyer. Just not a corporate one. He now works for a nonprofit that offers legal services for people who can’t otherwise afford a lawyer.

He loves it. Every case is different, which provides a challenge for Gray, and he gets to help people who really need it. And sure, some days he comes home tired and surly, but so do I. It’s life. It’s not always endless sunshine, but I’ve never minded occasional storm clouds. Plus, a sulky Gray provides

me with the opportunity to cheer him up again, and that's always fun.

"I have a surprise for you," I murmur against his chin.

"Is it a naked surprise?" Gray asks hopefully, squeezing my ass.

"I think we can make the necessary arrangements."

I get up from the couch and nearly trip over one of the moving boxes we have lying around everywhere. We only moved in a little over a week ago and even though I had this whole plan to surprise Gray with having the whole house set in some sort of an order by the time he was back from his trip, I got sidetracked.

"We should really get started on unpacking," Gray says.

"We should," I agree, but I ignore the boxes for now as I grab Gray's hand and pull him up. "Come on."

I start walking and tug my shirt over my head as I go, throwing it on the ground.

"I'm really liking this surprise so far," Gray says from behind me.

I throw a glance over my shoulder and find his heated gaze on my ass, and since I'm a nice person, I turn around and pull my pants down because I wouldn't want him to feel like I'm trying to hinder his view with my unfortunate habit of wearing pants.

"Yeah," Gray growls as he stalks toward me. "Definitely loving it."

I waggle my brows and turn around again, heading toward the bedroom door with Gray on my heels.

He presses himself against me when I stop and his palms glide over my naked skin. This whole being apart for days on end has almost been worth it solely for the reunion part of it.

I push the door open and we tumble inside. I can detect the precise moment Gray notices his surprise. One moment he's kissing my neck and the next his lips stop and I can feel him suck in his breath.

My heart rattles nervously in my chest.

“Do you like it?” I ask.

Gray steps toward the bed wordlessly. His fingertips slide over the dark blue duvet cover as he moves toward the headboard. He tracks over the stars and constellations I spent two days cutting into it.

His gaze meets mine.

“Kai,” he says, voice sounding almost reverent. “It’s amazing.”

“Yeah?” I move toward him. “I installed LEDs behind the headboard so in the dark, it kind of looks like the night sky. Or that was the idea, at least.”

He pulls me into his arms and the kiss that lands on my mouth is so intense that it almost takes my breath away.

“I love it,” he says. “And I love you. More and more every day.”

I wrap my arms around his neck and kiss him.

“That’s good because you’re kind of stuck with me.”

He laughs. “I can live with that.”

He kisses me again and again and when we fall on the mattress and butterflies flap against the inside of my chest, I

smile.

Yeah. I can definitely live with that, too.

The End

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Briar Prescott is a work in progress. She swears too much, doesn't eat enough leafy greens and binge watches too much television. It's okay, though. One of these days she'll get a hang of that adulting thing.

Probably.

Maybe.

She hopes.

You can contact Briar by email at prescottbriar@gmail.com. Seriously, she'd be so happy to hear from you.

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If you're a fan of newsletters, you're in luck. She has one. You can sign up [here](#).

And, you know, there's always [Facebook](#), where you can also find her reader's group [Briar's Experimenters](#). Join up to get access to short stories, excerpts, teasers and the latest news.

ALSO BY BRIAR PRESCOTT

Project Hero

What if you accidentally fell in love with the right guy?

Andy:

If my life was a movie, I would be the sidekick. Not an especially promising start when my plan is to finally let my best friend know I have a crush on him. No worries, though. I have a plan. I just need a complete makeover. Change everything about myself so that when Falcon returns from his summer vacation, he can finally see I'm the love of his life. I totally know what I'm doing here.

Well, not really.

If I knew what I was doing, I wouldn't look like every nerd cliché wrapped into one awkward package.

In short, I'm screwed.

But then Law Anderson enters the picture...

Law:

It's all very simple. I need somebody to tutor my hockey team, and Andy needs somebody to help him with his crush. Sounds like a match made in heaven.

Only the more time I spend with Andy, the more I like this quirky guy who makes me laugh, and pretty soon *I'm* the one who's tutoring Andy in way more than we initially agreed upon.

It's fine.

I have it all under control.

But as weeks pass and the chemistry between us turns explosive, I'm starting to think that I might be in way over my head with Andy.

If only I could make Andy realize that he doesn't need to change himself for love.

If only I could make Andy see that he just needs to be with somebody who has considered him perfect all along...

Rare

One summer changes their lives forever...

Alex Ellison is well-educated, rich and good-looking. Too bad the ingredients of success haven't mixed too well for him and instead of having the world at his feet, Alex has, once again, landed himself in a hot mess of trouble.

The community service his father arranges for him in a wildlife center on the other side of the country comes as a bit of a nasty surprise, though. Being shipped off to middle-of-nowhere, Oregon, is not Alex's idea of the perfect summer vacation.

What Alex never expects is to meet Noah Price.

He never expects to be noticed and understood.

He never expects to feel valued and special.

He never expects to fall in love.

Everything is not what it seems, though, and love that feels invincible turns out to be anything but.

But love finds a way, and when Alex and Noah unexpectedly cross paths years later, they will have to risk it all for the love they both deserve and so desperately need.

Rare is a standalone MM Second Chance romance about first loves, one perfect summer, one debilitating secret and finding your forever.