

RIKKI LEIGHTON

# All's Fair in Love & Dare

### All's Fair Book One

# Rikki Leighton

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### **SYNOPSIS**

If all's fair in love and dare, someone's heart will have to give, but how can we survive the fallout?

Being a virgin is my well kept secret.

Being straight is the lie I've hid behind for the last twenty-one years. The truth is, I don't know what I am. But when my best friend dares me to sleep with a guy, the floodgates of foreign desire open and threaten to bury me under their current.

Messages sent in secret to a stranger wake up my heart and libido in newfound ways, and while we trade scorchingly dirty texts, the person I pretend is on the other side of the screen has my conscience in a tailspin: my best friend's brother.

Blair Novak has been our protector for years, taking his father's harsh words and harsher hands in stride as long as it meant me and his brother were safe. He's always given us his everything and somehow, I never realized it.

I see it now. In the shake of his hands as he pulls me close with a white-knuckled grip. In the ink that he wears on his skin like armor, like patches to the wounds he's spent his whole life healing.

Blair has given up so much of himself for his brother. I want to be his balm, not the final shard that rips him apart. Our connection has bloomed from words on a screen to a galaxy of emotions I can never rein in, and I'm not sure I want to.

Even at the expense of my best friend's heart.

### **CONTENT WARNINGS**

#### **Mental Health Representation:**

\*Minor manic and depressive episodes of a side character with bipolar disorder

\*depictions of depression of a main character including the mention of current and past self harm

#### **Unconventional Relationship Dynamics:**

\*There are brief moments of on-page kissing between MCs and a side character. No cheating involved; both characters are aware, open, and accepting of the dynamic, and it is not sexual in nature

#### **General Warnings:**

- \*Homophobia/transphobia from a parent
- \*brief on-page physical abuse from a parent to an MC, mention of past physical abuse
- \*On-page panic attack (brief)
- \*abuse of drugs and alcohol by a side character; off-page accidental overdose

\*mentions of a taboo relationship involving side characters (siblings)

### **PLAYLIST**

**Skydiving** – LIGHTS

**New Fears** – LIGHTS

I Wouldn't Mind – He Is We

**Heart by Heart** – Demi Lovato

I Only Wanna Talk to You – The Maine

**How Do You Feel** – The Maine

dancing in the kitchen – LANY

**Kiss the Boy** – Keiynan Lonsdale

If I Loved a Boy – We Three

When the Darkness Comes – Colby Calliat

**She Doesn't Mind** – Cour, PACANI & J R

You Are In Love – Travis Atreo

Talk Me Down - Citizen Soldier

Snow On The Beach (feat. Lana Del Rey) – Taylor Swift

Boy in Luv – BTS

Back To Life – Christina Grimmie

**Quiet** – LIGHTS

Listen on Spotify

### To Gena & B

For not letting me yeet the book no matter how many times I restarted

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# Chapter 1

#### **A**TLAS

FRAT PARTIES ARE USUALLY the best places to scope out girls, but they're also the best places to pretend to scope out girls while my best friend gets too hammered to question the status of my virginity.

Which he doesn't know is still fully intact but thinks my latest *dry spell* is hilarious and in need of remedy.

Should I feel bad for getting him drunk so I don't have to agonize over the guilt of lying to his face? Probably.

Shiloh and I share everything. We've been inseparable since he crashed into the trailer park I called home sixteen years ago.

And by crash I mean little five year old Shiloh came tumbling into the muddy yard around our trailer, covered in snot and tears and attacking anything and everything in his way.

Which included me.

He still pummels me, only more with words than fists. Though, he isn't opposed to throwing hands when he needs to. It's all done out of love, though. Shiloh wouldn't know what to do with himself without me around.

It's packed as shit in here, and I don't even know which frat house we ended up at, but Shiloh is sitting spread across the middle of the couch, one arm thrown around my shoulder and the other around a pretty girl. He's whispering in her ear, and she's laughing, but even I can tell that his words are slurred beyond comprehension.

He's one hell of a lightweight, and getting him back to our dorm is going to be a bitch, but it saved me from sober Shiloh pushing me into bed with the first woman he could lock me in a room with.

While he's busy thinking there's any chance in hell I'm letting him get laid when he's this wasted, I've been nursing the same cup of beer for the last two hours trying to see what everyone else does when they come to these parties.

Girls and guys are rubbing up on each other all over the room, some dancing, some not even pretending to be subtle. There's chicks with their tits hanging out, booty shorts riding up so high there's no room for imagination, but just like every other time I've tried, I feel absolutely nothing.

Not even a fucking twitch in my pants.

It's not like I can't get hard; I pop random boners all the time and have no problem tugging one out, but naked women just don't do it for me. Sometimes I peek at guys in changing rooms at the gym, but it's the same: nice to look at but doesn't turn me on.

One of these days I'm going to take up someone's proposition to find a dark corner and just get it over with. Knowing my luck, I wouldn't be able to get it up, and I'd end up embarrassing myself.

I'll stay a virgin if it means there's no reason for anyone to look at me twice.

I had all the attention I could handle in high school as Mountain Valley High's tight end. If I never see another football again, it'll be too soon.

"C'mon." Shiloh suddenly hops up from the couch, struggling to keep his feet under him. "Woah." He grins at me when I reach out and anchor my hands on his waist to steady him.

"Maybe we should—"

Shiloh whips his head back and forth and tugs me from my seat, stumbling towards the stairs.

"Caroline says they've got a game of Drink or Dare going on."

The girl from before stands and giggles but she doesn't make a move to follow us.

"The last thing you need is more alcohol," I mumble, and Shiloh steps on my foot absolutely on purpose even if he gives me fake apologetic eyes. "Can't turn down some good dares, Atty."

Dares aren't just a fun pastime for Shiloh; they're like a whole personality trait. He's known for coming up with some of the wildest dares on campus, and he's never turned one down either.

Not unless they were downright vile or transphobic. Those usually ended with someone getting a black eye—and it isn't usually Shiloh.

Maybe it'll be a good chance to sober him up just a bit before I have to carry his ass home.

I make a pit stop in the kitchen to steal a bottle of water from the counter amongst all the half-empty plastic cups, then let Shiloh drag me up to whichever party boy's room is having all the fun.

The hallway is littered with people talking, kissing, and grinding on each other, and it takes some creative maneuvering to get around them and not lose Shiloh in the chaos.

When he pulls me into an open doorway, I'm assaulted by the smell of cigarette smoke and weed, but once my eyes adjust to the constant haze of smoke, I can make out what looks like six or seven people hanging about, passing a bottle of hard liquor between them.

Shit, no. Beer is enough by itself to knock Shiloh on his ass—one swig of that shit and he'll be down for the count all day tomorrow.

"Loh—" but he shrugs out of my hold and bounds into the room, wrapping himself around some dark haired girl with pink and blue streaks in her hair. She looks to be around our age and pats him on the head as he settles into her side. "You want him?"

She smiles up at me, a sort of distant look in her eyes that most party goers have about now, and she rests her head on his.

"Nah. My brother would kill me for taking in another stray."

Shiloh laughs into her shoulder and lifts his head enough to kiss her cheek. "I'm surprised he let you come."

"Gotta convince me not to drop out somehow."

Some frat boy with a backwards ball cap and no clothes aside from a pair of jeans barely hanging onto his ass leans over and holds out the bottle of—jesus, straight-ass vodka—to the girl.

"You're up, V."

She grabs the bottle and eyeballs the room, then nudges Shiloh with her shoulder. "Dare me."

That seems to spur him from the drunken nap he was falling into it, eyes looking scarily alert as they ping to mine.

"Shiloh." I sigh, knowing exactly where his mind is going.

He clears his throat and waves the other guy off, who just shrugs and joins a handful of stoners in the corner. Shiloh rubs his hands together and rocks on his heels. "Atty, this is my friend, V. Go ahead and ask her what it stands for."

I only roll my eyes a little, offering the girl a smile. "Hi, V. I'm Atlas. What's the initial stand for?"

"Vulture."

I raise my brow, and she tips the bottle up to pour a sip in her mouth, face scrunched up as she sets it on the windowsill behind her.

"Don't know what's on my birth certificate. Too many coffee stains and alcohol spills to read. My brother started calling me Vulture when I was three or four because I was really good at poaching leftovers and stuff from Mom and Dad without them finding out."

Valuable skill, especially if you're like me and come from a family of seven and are stuck somewhere in the middle of them all.

Shiloh smacks V on the shoulder, but she doesn't even flinch, just gives him an unimpressed eye roll. "You want my dare or not?"

"Dare away, sweet stuff," she says, hopping onto the little edge jutting from the window.

"I dare you," he says slowly, lips curving into a smirk, "to make out with Atty."

Yup. Easy to read. Even with a head full of cotton balls, Shiloh still manages to focus on getting me laid.

Christ.

Vulture laughs but arches her brow in challenge like somehow *I'm* the one with a dare to uphold. She reaches out and tugs on my t-shirt, pulling me so I stand between her legs. She's so small I have to half bend over to press my mouth to hers.

Kissing her feels like kissing anyone. It's soft, it's nice, and when she winds an arm around my neck I put my hand on her hip because that's how this dance goes. Neither of us makes the kiss any more than a few swipes of tongue before she ducks away, and I hope she doesn't see the relief on my face.

It's not bad; it's just weird. Kissing strangers has never really done it for me, but it often gets Shiloh off my back, so they're pretty much the only kisses I get.

I barely take a breath and get a step away before the bottle is shoved in my hands, and I immediately shake my head at Shiloh.

"I'm not sleeping with her. Don't even think about it. No offense, V. You seem nice enough."

"None taken." She shrugs. "Valco would freak anyway. My brother says no hooking up if I'm drunk or high."

"Good philosophy."

Shiloh rolls his eyes and points his thumb at Vulture. "Fine. V can pick your dare, party pooper."

He's really going to think I'm a party pooper when I drag him out of here in a few minutes. Fun Shiloh is turning crabby, which leads to Sick Shiloh and Unconscious Shiloh.

I eye the bottle in my hand and hope that whatever she decides isn't bad enough that I have to take a swig. I've got great tolerance, but this is definitely the kind of stuff that'll go to my head quick.

"I dare you..." Vulture copies Shiloh's cheeky pause and giggles. "I dare you to strip and make a run through the house in your underwear."

That is nowhere near the craziest thing I've done for a dare, and is definitely better than what Shiloh would have put me through.

I have zero problems yanking my shirt off and kicking my jeans to the side, shoving my keys, wallet, and phone at Shiloh for safe keeping. Drunk hands are often grabby hands, whether that be sex or snatching. V takes the bottle, and I see the way Shiloh eyes it.

"Don't drink each other under the table while I'm gone."

None of the bodies in the hall pay me any mind, but once I hit the kitchen I start getting hoots and hollers. A couple slaps on the back, and one girl sitting on the counter tries to tug me aside, but I give her a wink and a salute before ducking away.

Unsurprisingly, I'm not the only one half naked in the throng of dancing and grinding bodies in the living room, but that doesn't stop the multitude of hands that pass over me. I'm sure at least one person gropes my junk and another smacks my ass, but I still push through and weave around the crowd, nearly bowling over my RA when I break through.

"Woah. Corvin, hey."

I've never seen him at a party before. Hell, I don't think I've seen him out of his room, but I'm not his keeper, and I've only really known him since last year.

He says something, but it's so soft spoken that I don't hear it over the people and the music.

"Repeat that," I say, a little louder than necessary to get the point across.

He frowns and crosses his arms, but clears his throat and speaks so I can hear him above the noise. "Shiloh. Is he with you?"

"He's upstairs. Need him for something?"

"No, just keeping up with my charges."

Corvin is a little shorter than me, but honestly most people are. I passed six feet a couple inches ago, and Corvin is only creeping up on it. So, I have to duck my head to speak without shouting.

"Okay, Mama Hen. I'm taking care of him, promise."

He grimaces and leans back against the wall where he's watching the party around us. "You know how people around here are, and you know how he gets when he's drunk."

It's sobering to remember how Shiloh and I ended up in what's known around campus as the LGBTQ Dorm, and how

Corvin became our RA. Freshmen at the university all share one crappy, cramped dorm, and while we both dealt with our fair share of shit, Shiloh got the rawest end of the deal. That's not my story to tell, and I wasn't there for everything that went down, but Corvin was the one with him at the hospital when I got there, and he's been a permanent fixture in our lives since.

"I'm taking him home once I wrap this dare up. Thanks for checkin' in."

He tips his head back and motions for me to get to it, so I make my way back to the stairs and take them two at a time, knowing the kind of chaos Shiloh can get up to within ten minutes and a room full of drunk, gullible college kids.

When I don't immediately see him in the smoke-filled room, I don't panic, but then I hear retching down the hall—and here's the thing, when you've spent most of your life with someone, you learn the sound of their puking. Gross as hell, but it's kind of like how a parent can tell their kid's cry out of the dozen of other tantrum throwing toddlers in a room.

Light is spilling out of a room at the end of the hall, and I skid to a stop just as it opens a fraction more and Vulture sticks her head out. She bites down on her lip and gives me a weary look. I see why when I step inside and not only is Shiloh bent over the toilet spilling his guts, there's also blood dripping down his face and the beginnings of a black eye forming.

"Shit. What the hell happened? I was gone for five minutes!"

I kick the door closed, glancing from Shiloh to Vulture when she flinches.

"Sorry. I'm not mad at either of you. What happened?"

Vulture wraps her arms around herself and crouches down beside Shiloh, rubbing his back.

"One of the guys out there was being a douche. He dared Shiloh to let him touch his tits. So Shiloh kicked him in the balls. And the guy retaliated. It was—" she waves her arm around—"chaos. I brought him in here to stop the nosebleed, but he had swiped the liquor and he just swallowed the damn thing. All of it."

I pinch the bridge of my nose and try to stave off the forming headache. "His stomach immediately revolted. Shit, he knows how this stuff fucks with his medications. I've got him, V, why don't you get going?"

There's a loud bang outside, and she flinches again, rising to her feet. "That's a good idea. Sorry I couldn't watch him better."

I shake my head. "Not your job. Get going. It was nice to meet you."

She gives me a tight-lipped smile and kisses the top of Shiloh's head before slipping out of the bathroom.

I slide down to the cold, tile floor beside my best friend, whose glassy, unfocused eyes are directed at me, his cheek resting on the undoubtedly nasty toilet seat.

"I don't have tits, Atty."

I scrub a hand through my hair and gently squeeze his nape. "I know, bud. He was just an asshole."

Shiloh's eyes shut, and I choose to let him take this reprieve before the nausea takes him again. Who knows where my clothes and things ended up, and Shiloh isn't in any condition to tell me, let alone he probably doesn't remember. I could get up and find them myself, but like hell am I going to leave him here alone.

There's a knock on the door, and I instinctively wrap an arm around Shiloh's shoulders, but it's just Corvin who inches it open and sighs when he sees us.

"I thought you were taking him home."

"He got in a fight."

Shiloh stirs but settles when I card my fingers through his curly strands of brown hair. "I'm just giving him a few minutes to rest."

"Did he at least get a good shot at the bastard?"

"The 'uck do you 'are?" Shiloh grumbles, one eye open. "Go 'way." He clumsily gives Corvin the finger, but then groans and rises up to lean over the toilet again.

It's silent other than the sound of Shiloh vomiting, and when he's done wiping his face with the sleeve of his shirt, he slumps into my side and doesn't say another word.

I look over at Corvin, who has a heavy frown with his eyes trained on Shiloh.

"Are you ever going to tell me what went down between you two?"

Corvin may be the reason Shiloh can be out and feel mostly safe on campus, but ever since he woke up in that hospital bed, Shiloh's had nothing but malice for our RA.

That hasn't deterred Corvin in the slightest.

He disappears from the doorway and comes back a minute later with a bundle in his arms that he puts on the floor beside me.

Clothes. Wallet. Phone. Keys.

"You didn't have to do that."

He shrugs. "Might need 'em to get him back to the dorm. You want me to help?"

"Nah. Don't worry about it."

He's doing something on his phone, but he nods his acknowledgement, and when he finishes up he gives us a last once-over.

"You know where to find me." Then, he's gone and it's just Shiloh and I.

A couple of people try to use the can while I get dressed, and the lock on this thing is practically nonexistent, so once I have everything situated, I haul an unconscious Shiloh into my arms and kick the door open.

He's not heavy in the traditional sense, but he sure as hell is dead weight, and there's no way I can carry him like this all the way across campus, but for now I just hold tight until I get us outside. As soon as we hit the sidewalk, I prop him up against the fence and try to see if the cooling night air will help bring him around.

The yard is full of more party goers, but it's not as populated, and the street itself is empty enough that I feel safe plopping down beside Shiloh and pulling him against me. We walked because both of us pregamed a smidge before the party, and I'm starting to regret not having a car to slip him into.

"M sorry," he mumbles, twisting to bury his nose in my neck. It tickles, and I feel him smile into my shoulder when I jerk at the contact.

"Don't be sorry, Loh. Assfaces will be assfaces."

He wraps an arm around my torso and nods. "Always protecting me."

"Of course. I love you."

He makes a soft, croaking sound in the back of his throat and drapes one of his legs over mine, effectively acting like a Shiloh blanket. "Love you too, Atty."

And then he's out again, snoring in my ear and resting all of his weight on me. It's fine, though. Shiloh is right: I'll always protect him.

When he cried about his new home at five years old and missing his mom. When he told me at ten that he liked girls. At thirteen when he said he was a boy. When he got his first

dose of testosterone. At the doctor's office for his surgery consultation.

Supporting and protecting Shiloh has been my whole life. He's my family.

I'd never do anything to hurt him.

# Chapter 2

#### **A**TLAS

I'M NOT SURE HOW long I sit there with Shiloh wrapped around me, but at some point the noise from the house fades out, and I rest my head back on the fence for just a moment.

When Shiloh and I were kids, we used to camp outside my trailer in some of my siblings' sleeping bags. We lived out in the middle of nowhere, so there weren't many of those pesky light posts like they had closer to the city. There was one down the road that flickered all the time, but for the rest of the trailer park, when the sky got dark so did everything else.

I liked to stare out into the nothingness, appreciating the silence, the vastness above. All those little lights in the sky, billions of them with all the room in the world. They weren't stuffed between two older siblings and two younger ones.

Shiloh loved making shapes with the stars. He loved coming up with the wackiest things he could see. He always said one day he was going to map a path out of there—away from the father who stopped caring about him sometime between the gay-to-trans realization period.

Away from feeling like a burden to his brother, who got a job at fifteen to afford Shiloh's medications and a therapist. Who knew state insurance would still have such a shit copay on mental health?

"He says he's not going to college. Has to take care of us. Dad and me. He can't stay, Atty."

Since both of my older brothers had moved out and I had the room to myself, I convinced my parents to let Shiloh move in with us. That way Blair—Shiloh's brother—knew he was safe and taken care of. His dad didn't really care, was more than happy to lose two mouths to feed, and Shiloh practically packed Blair's bags himself.

Two years later, Shiloh and I went off to school ourselves. The only real university around willing to give out pity scholarships to two kids from the boonies.

"Atlas? Hey, bud, can you wake up for me?"

My head spins when I try to open my eyes, so I throw an arm over them while I wait for the black mass in my mind to stop swirling like a tilt-a-whirl.

"There you are. Let's get you two home."

When I'm sure I can peer out without puking, I crack my eyes open. At first, the world is only darkness, but the headlights of a car shining a few feet away break up the monotony, and I turn my head to find someone crouched on the ground beside me.

I tighten my arm around Shiloh, protective nature jumping into gear no matter how off kilter I feel, but a comforting, familiar touch on my shoulder settles me.

"It's just me."

'Me' is a man. Dark hair that fans around his neck and blends with the hoodie he wears. Deep brown eyes that are close enough I could count the little flecks of green swimming in them.

"Blair." I relax my hold on Shiloh, but we're so tangled that it doesn't matter. "What are you doing here?"

"A friend told me my brother passed out at a party. I figured you might could use a hand."

"You might could be right." I chuckle as I try to free myself from Shiloh's koala-like cuddle, and Blair helps until we can gently lay him on his side in the grass while the left side of my body wakes up.

"I'm sorry," I tell him, watching the rise and fall of my best friend's chest. "We got carried away."

Blair stands, tall and lean, staring down at us with nothing but kindness and patience.

"It's not a problem. I just took off from my shift a bit early."

Blair works a couple different jobs around campus. I've seen him tutoring in the library, waiting tables at a diner down the road, stocking shelves at one of the mini-marts; there aren't many places I haven't seen him at least once. Which means I see him around pretty regularly.

"Can you get him into the backseat or do we need to tag team it?"

Now that half of my body is no longer tingling from Shiloh's weight, I feel fine. However long I dozed for seems to have knocked off what little bit of a buzz I was starting to get. I stand and stretch, meeting Blair's eyes as he runs both his hands through his hair and noticing the red bags etched deep under them.

"You not getting much sleep?" I ask as I bend down to hoist Shiloh into my arms. He grumbles a little, head flopping onto my shoulder, but he doesn't wake up.

"Worked a double. No classes today."

By all intents and purposes, Blair should have graduated last year, but Shiloh said something about him only being a part time student so it's taking longer.

Blair opens the back door of his beat up old Buick with paint chipping everywhere, and I lay Shiloh across the seat, taking Blair's hoodie when it's offered to ball into a pillow of sorts before shutting the door and resting my head on the roof.

"Fuck." I roll the heel of my palms over my eyes and curse under my breath. "He's never going to make it to class in the morning." A warm hand lands on my shoulder, pressing into the tense muscle there and digging in. "Tomorrow's Saturday."

"I know." I lean into the touch, catching Blair's eye as I lay my cheek on the hood of his car. "Self-Defense class. He's got a few new students signed up because they can't make it during the week. I'll have to call his co-instructor and see if they can take over for him. Shit, he's going to kill me."

"It's not your fault he drank himself into what's going to be a monster of a hangover. He knows he's not supposed to mix that much alcohol with his meds."

I turn, shaking off his hand and staring up at the dark, expansive sky.

"I invited him to this party. I knew there'd be booze, and I knew he'd partake. I just thought I could keep an eye on him. And he was fine. But some dickhead had to go and break Shiloh's number one rule and he lost his shit, and—"

"Is he okay?"

I shake my head, then sigh at the worried glance Blair sends my way.

"Black eye and bloody nose. But no, the guy didn't touch him otherwise. Just made a gross-ass comment."

Blair motions to the passenger door, and I climb in as he rounds to the driver's side.

"I told you," he says as he buckles his seatbelt and switches the idling car from parked to drive. "There might be a strong queer community here, but we still live in the fucking backwoods of the south. It's the asshole home ground. You two should have headed out west."

I throw my head back on the seat. This isn't the first and sure as hell won't be the last time we have this conversation with Blair.

"With what money? Maybe we can give it a try once we've got our Bachelors under our belts. Get jobs over there that can support it."

"I would have found a way to cover it."

"Blair."

He already works himself to the bone. I can see it in the sag of his shoulders, in the droop of his eyes, and the way his hands shake with clear exhaustion on the wheel. If stress were ever going to take years off someone's life, it would be Blair's.

"How's your dad?" I ask, knowing that this argument is going nowhere along with the fact that Blair is the only one of the two Novak siblings who's still in contact with the miserable old man.

His fingers tighten on the steering wheel, and the sound of his sigh echoes through the car. "You don't have to pretend to care. I know you hate him as much as Shiloh does."

I can't say I hate the guy specifically. I hardly ever saw him in more than passing. Shiloh preferred to hide out at my house with my bajillion siblings. But I can say that I hate the way he's treated his kids. It was like Shiloh didn't exist, and Blair was either a nuisance or the man's personal ATM.

"I don't hate him. I don't really know him. Just..." I shrug. "Don't know why you don't, you know?"

"It's complicated."

"I passed English Lit. Explain it to me."

He scoffs, an incredulous laugh following, but he doesn't seem upset when I look over. In fact, I have no idea what that look is. He's watching me with a barely there smile as the car crawls to a stop. It makes warmth flood my cheeks, being stared at so intently. Then, he clears his throat and throws the car into park.

"Next time. When we don't have to get sleeping beauty back there up three flights of stairs."

He throws open the door, and whatever that moment was passes like sound carried away with the breeze. It takes us ten minutes to get Shiloh up and moving, and while he's conscious, he isn't exactly coherent, but this is college so no one in the common room bats an eye as we take him up.

I've just got the door to mine and Shiloh's room unlocked when Blair puts a hand on my shoulder. His fingers just barely brush the skin at the base of my neck, sprouting goosebumps in their wake.

"How about you hand me a set of his clothes? I'll wash him down in the shower. Might make it easier on him in the morning if he doesn't feel and smell like a distillery."

I nod and duck away to Shiloh's dresser. Blair's right. Shiloh will feel better after a shower anyway—it's got nothing to do

with the tingles still traveling down my spine from him touching me. Maybe there's more alcohol in my system than I thought.

With boxers and sweatpants in hand, Blair ushers a struggling-to-stand Shiloh back down the hall, throwing me a small smile before turning away.

I shut the door with more force than I mean to, shaking out my shoulders as flickers of something warm rush under my skin. I could probably use a shower myself, but instead I just toss my shirt aside and strip out of my jeans, tossing them both in the hamper. There's some baby wipes beside Shiloh's computer, so I forgo the thought of hopping in when they're done for taking a few and swiping them through my pits and junk.

My Saturday mornings usually start with a run and a workout anyway, so I can take care of it then.

As I'm winding down a few minutes later, clearing the junk off mine and Shiloh's beds, the door creaks open and a half-dressed Shiloh comes stumbling in. I open my arms, and he immediately collapses into them rubbing his nose into my neck with a loud groan.

"Bed, Atty. Bed."

"I've got you, Loh."

He's still pretty out of it, but at least his limbs are cooperating now. I get him tucked into his bed, and just before he passes out again, he grabs my hand and squeezes tight.

"Love you, Atty."

I smile and bend down to kiss his forehead, soft snores already falling from his lips. "Love you, too, Loh."

Someone clears their throat, and I jump back, but even asleep Shiloh's grip is unforgiving. In the doorway, Blair stands sheepishly with the towel around his waist and his hair dripping down his chest.

I haven't really seen Blair without clothes except in passing in years, and the miles of ink all over his skin is astounding. There's thorns wrapping around his collarbones, roses sprouting on his shoulders and fallen petals descending down his pecs. Along his ribs are tree branches that wrap around to his back, but I can't see the massive tree trunk they turn into.

Just below, spread across the space beneath his ribs and resting above his belly button is a dark red Dahlia.

"Shiloh decided I needed a shower too. You, um, maybe got something I can borrow?"

I look him over—head to toe—and I spot the hummingbird on the inside of his left wrist. Shiloh and I went with him to get that one right after he turned eighteen. He wouldn't let us sit with him, but Shiloh chatted up the tattoo parlor's receptionist for the entire several hour appointment.

"Um." I shake my head, trying to rattle out the random thoughts. "Shiloh's might be a bit tight. Mine okay?"

He nods, brushing wet strands out of his eyes. "Yeah, that's fine. Thanks, Atlas."

I toss him one of my sleep shirts and a pair of joggers, planning on making a joke of some kind. It dries up in my throat when he catches the clothes and the towel at his hips slips.

It's just a patch of curly black pubes, nothing I haven't seen in the locker room a million times. Blair has been like another older brother to me since the day they moved into our park; I've seen his cock any number of times throughout the years. But it's that miniscule peek with water cascading down to the edge of the towel that makes my breath hitch.

He steps inside, closes the door, and then the towel falls completely, and I'm stuck staring at a very naked Blair with a burgeoning hard on in my pants.

I tried to get a reaction out of this thing all night—from guys to girls to anywhere else on the spectrum—and not a damn thing. But Blair Novak stripping down to his birthday suit in the middle of my dorm room is what does it?

I'm not even thinking about what I'm seeing. I'm just watching like something's going to happen. What kind of something, I don't know. I'm waiting for him to get dressed; that's it. But he doesn't move, and when I see his dick twitch and fill slightly, I snap out of my haze and thrust my gaze towards the ceiling.

I'd be frozen too if my little brother's best friend stared at my cock for a solid thirty seconds like it was something they wanted to eat.

Fuck, that is not a thought that just went through my head.

Blair chuckles across the room, low and a little throaty but light, and I hear the rustling of clothes, not daring to look anywhere else aside from the popcorn pattern above me.

"Thank you." There's something in his voice that breaks my resolve, cuts through my embarrassment, and I drop my eyes to find his.

The fond smile and pink hue to his cheeks is enough to settle my nerves, and I drag a hand through my hair as I try to shake off the weird feeling and half chub in my pants.

"Thanks for showing up."

He cracks open the door and raps on the frame. "I'll always come for you two. Either of you. As long as you need me."

Blair gives me one more smile, offering one to his sleeping brother before waving goodbye and shutting the door behind him. It takes a whole five minutes for me to calm my dick down, and maybe I can chalk it up to the beers making me frisky.

Something scratches at the back of my mind, though, and when I crawl under the covers and turn out the light, there isn't a chance in hell that I'm sleeping.

My mind is torn between worrying about Shiloh, worrying about Blair, and I can't get the image of him standing there—the moment right before the towel dropped—out of my mind. When my dick decided it liked something that it saw.

My dick doesn't like anything. Not unless I wake it up first.

I pull the covers back and walk to the door as quietly as possible, sneaking through when there's just enough space and leaving it open a crack as I make my way down the hall. A couple rooms over—across from the bathrooms—I stop in an open doorway.

Corvin is sitting on his bed in the single room, a notebook on his lap and wire-framed glasses perched on his nose. He's messing with a band in his hair, holding back his tightly coiled black curls, and hasn't noticed me standing there yet.

"Hey."

His eyes immediately flick over to me. "It's late."

"Yeah." I clear my throat. "I just wanted to say thanks."

"What for?"

I rest my shoulder on his door frame, crossing my arms and biting down on a smile. "For calling Blair."

He shrugs, neither confirming nor denying, but he was the only one at that party that would have even noticed us, let alone called someone to help. Plus, for as much as Blair does around campus, I know his pool of acquaintances isn't exactly a long list.

"I appreciate you for it. For everything you've done for us."

He doesn't acknowledge me this time, just drops his gaze back to the notebook in his lap and digs his teeth into his lip. I wait for a beat, then clear my throat.

"Corvin."

He looks up again, and this time I can see RA mode creeping in.

"Do you still have one of those cards? The anonymous queer support thing?"

When Corvin initially put in the request to have Shiloh and I transferred to his dorm building after the attack, he'd given Shiloh a card. Someone to talk to who wasn't me, because for a few weeks he entirely shut down. Shiloh and I shared everything, but after that it was like there was a barrier. One wrapped in barbed wire.

Eventually, things went back to normal, and I know his Secret Support Person—as he called them—had a lot to do with that.

Corvin digs around in a table beside his bed, pulling out a color coded index card sorter—wow, I thought only people like my dad used those to organize bills and passwords and shit—and takes out a shiny, rainbow colored card from inside. He shakes it in the air, and I cross the room in quick, short strides to take it as he holds it out.

#### Alphabet Mafia Alliance

Buddies for Bi-Curious, Closeted, and all around Fruity Friends

The back of the card hosts a QR code for an app with a list of pseudonym support people, each accompanied by tags like, 'Bi, 'Ace', 'Trans', 'Questioning' along with a note beside each name that says, "Chat with me".

"And this is completely anonymous?" I ask, and Corvin nods, tucking his sorter away and settling against the wall.

"Only what you want to share. They've each picked an alias. You can use your real name, make something up, it doesn't matter."

I nod, smacking the card against my hand and backing out of the room.

"Thank you again."

Corvin rolls his eyes, but a smile tugs at his lips. "Go to bed. And put some clothes on."

I let out a chuckle and hold up my hand as a farewell, but I only make it halfway back to my room before I backtrack again.

"Atlas Huxley. If you don't get out of my doorway in the next thirty seconds, I'm going to take your state of undress as an invitation."

The insinuation does nothing for me, not even a lick of embarrassment, much less arousal. Not that he means it anyway. Corvin might be bisexual, but I'm so far off his radar I may as well be in Switzerland.

"You care about him, don't you?"

Shiloh might not see the looks, the long stares when his back is turned. But I saw the concern in Corvin's eyes tonight. I saw how strung out and ready to pick a fight he was at the thought of anyone hurting Shiloh.

This time, his smile is soft, genuine. He puts his paper and pen away, tucking his glasses into their case and yanking the band out of his hair. His eyes look tired, but there's a familiar fondness in his eyes that tugs at something in my chest.

"Not that he'd ever believe."

I leave him to whatever thoughts I've awoken that he wanted to keep away, and when I'm under my own covers, staring at the rise and fall of Shiloh's back as he sleeps sprawled across his mattress, blanket half kicked onto the floor, I can't help thinking about Blair again.

Because the look I saw in Corvin's eyes was awfully close to what I saw in Blair's. Right before he walked away tonight. And maybe I've seen it before, too. Caught in moments when he didn't know I was looking. Maybe I shrugged it off and told myself it was nothing.

But the twinge in my chest and the heat in my gut doesn't say it's nothing. It says I want to rush over to his apartment and make him explain it to me. Why people like he and Corvin hold things back from the people they care about?

And why my body responds to it in such a heated way.

Even in the dark I can still see the lettering on the card, moonlight from the window making the colors glow almost iridescent. I've always thought there was something wrong with my body. That my sex drive was broken. I've gotten blowjobs and handjobs from a couple of girlfriends, but they took a lot of work to keep in the moment and stay hard. I can't fake it like a girl can, but more than once I found myself wishing that I could.

I've never gotten hard in response to another person before.

Not until tonight.

Someone from this card has to understand. Has to be able to tell me what the hell is going on, what's been going on for the last twenty-one years.

I don't want to be a virgin anymore.

And I don't like the direction my thoughts take when I imagine losing it.

# Chapter 3

### BLAIR

ATLAS HUXLEY MIGHT JUST be the death of me.

I've spent a good handful of years hiding the fact that seventeen-year-old Atlas—who sprouted up like a weed one summer at football camp—sent me spiraling into an entire sexuality crisis.

It's mostly out of my system now thanks to my roommate, Noah, but every once in a while I feel a tug, one that begs for me to look just a little longer.

If my libido could focus on anyone other than Shiloh's best friend since toddlerhood, that'd be great.

"Please don't overcook the bacon. I like it crunchy, not tooth breaking."

I rub at the sleep still clinging to my eyelids, a yawn coming out unbidden, and glance over at where Noah sits at our tiny kitchen counter. He's eyeing the bacon in the pan like it's going to fly out and straight into his mouth, and I shake my head before flipping the sizzling pieces of meat.

"You're more than welcome to cook them up if you want."

Stepping back, I grab a plate of pancakes I just finished stacking and slide them in front of him, passing the bottle of syrup with a stern look. "Don't make a mess."

Noah rolls his eyes, a playful little smirk on his lips. "Okay, Blair-Bear."

He digs in, moaning and groaning obscenely as he does the exact opposite of what I asked, syrup dripping down his chin and all over his t-shirt.

I switch off the stove and plate the bacon, setting it just out of Noah's reach. He frowns at me and pouts his lip out. "Bacon."

"Clean yourself up," I say. "And you can bring the bacon to the couch for cuddles."

That seems to light him up, and he jumps from his chair to the kitchen sink. You'd think he was an overactive twelve year old, but Noah's only a year younger than me at twenty-two. He's just more excitable than most about food and attention. Kind of like a puppy.

"I get to eat the bacon and cuddle you, right? Bacon isn't very cuddly."

"Yes, Noah. Now, c'mon. Don't you have a shit ton of lectures today?"

Noah grumbles but plucks the plate of bacon and stuffs one in his mouth, looking like a petulant toddler. He has a case of perpetual bedhead with his honey-blond hair and rings under his pale blue eyes because he's had insomnia for years. Sometimes he'll doze while we're tangled on the couch or one of our beds, but it's never for long. He says he's seen doctors about it, but it's too much of a hassle to keep up.

Caffeine and sugar are what keep him going, which is why he stops to crush a piece of bacon on top of what's left of his pancakes and scarf down a few more bites before meeting me on the couch.

I just accept the sticky, syrupy mess as he wraps around me; I have to shower before I head out anyway.

"Blair-Bear cuddles are the best," he mutters, leaving a sticky trail along my skin as he noses up my jaw. "Can I have kisses, too?"

I chuckle at the way his limbs cling to me like a koala, insinuating that saying no will lead to a very pouty roommate, and I just can't have that.

"If you want them."

Noah lets out a yip and presses his lips to mine, sure and steady.

"You taste like mint," he says, licking at his mouth.

"And you taste like a mess, mister. Did you want to kiss or not?"

"Hmm, yes, please."

When he kisses me this time, I gently card my hand through his hair, enjoying the soft mewls he makes as he opens up and lets his tongue play lazily with mine. Neither of us gets hard, and there's no touching other than soft, affectionate caresses.

There's nothing sexual between us. Noah enjoys touching and kissing, but has had problems finding a connection with someone who won't ask him for more: physically or emotionally.

And I... I didn't know I needed this kind of touch until we stumbled upon the mutual desire not long after we started rooming together.

There's no pressure to go further, no need to have more. If the urge for sex pops up, that's what I have Grindr for. And if I want something a little more intimate...

I stop that train of thought in its broken tracks. There isn't room in my life for a romantic relationship. I have my hands full taking care of me, Shiloh, and Dad. Add in work and school, and there just isn't enough of me to share with someone else.

I think of Atlas last night, of how deeply he cares for Shiloh and how I'd never admit how envious of my brother I am. I have Noah, and I love him as much as I can love a friend, but what Shiloh and Atlas have is special.

The way he looked at me last night—confused and curious—I don't know what to make of it. I wanted to stay and take care of him, take care of them both, but I have a mentally and physically demanding day ahead and I needed the sleep.

They'll take care of each other. They always do.

"Are you working today?" Noah asks when we pull apart for air, my lips tingling from losing track of time.

"No. Going to see my dad."

Noah makes a face, scrunching his nose up like a disgruntled kitten. He's met the man one time, and after some of the stories I've reluctantly shared, he's not too keen on a repeat. Which is fair. My dad is an... an asshole would be putting it lightly.

But he's family.

"I guess I could invite your brother over. He might cuddle with me."

A snort escapes me with such force I nearly keel over in a coughing fit.

"My brother would have you pinned down before your little octopus hands could even touch him."

"Kinky—and rude, Blair-Bear—but your brother actually likes me."

"He tolerates you."

"Same thing."

I roll my eyes and tilt his chin up, pressing a soft kiss to his mouth. "No. I like you, Noah. It's why we have this." I gesture between the two of us. "Shiloh likes that you're easy to read at poker."

"Oooh, could we play strip poker next time?"

I don't bother to answer him, pushing his head down on my chest as he makes himself comfortable again.

I'd like more than this someday. Someone to sit and talk and touch, but who wants me in ways that are stronger than just hands on bodies.

But right now I barely have time to breathe, between classes and work and keeping Dad afloat at the trailer park. Noah says something's gotta give, but if I've learned anything in life, it's that something is usually me.

NOTHING IN THE TRAILER park has changed since I was here a month ago. It hasn't changed from six months ago. Not even four years ago. It's like the rickety house parked on stilts with a half rotted deck is encapsulated in time at the worst version of itself.

I don't need the key because Dad's truck is parked out front and the door is already half cracked open. The air smells of stale cigarettes and weed mixed with the pungent aroma of those dangling car air fresheners that are hanging above each entryway.

I think he even lays them on top of the vents like it's going to distract from the wet mold growing in the corners. I'd say the place smells like a dumpster, but that would be an insult to dumpsters.

"Dad?" I call out, picking up the half eaten to-go containers sitting on the coffee table.

When I round the doorway to the kitchen, that's where I find him: sitting at the table with a model boat and screwdriver in his hands. It isn't until I rap on the doorframe that he looks up, wire-rimmed glasses hanging low on his nose.

"Blair," he grunts and turns back to his work.

At least the dishes aren't piled high, but the ones that are sitting in the sink are still covered in food with flies buzzing around. On the plus side, the laundry machine is running, even if it's thumping extra hard today.

I might have to look at it.

"Are you just going to stand there judging, or are you going to sit down?"

I sigh and pull out the chair opposite Dad.

"I'm not judging. Just seeing what needs to be done so I can help."

"Don't need your help."

"Dad."

He puts down the boat with a scowl on his face.

"Ain't nothing needs to be done that can't be done tomorrow."

"I have work tomorrow. Let me help."

Dad rolls his eyes and points the screwdriver at me.

"You're always working. It's why you never answer my calls and why you're never here."

I wouldn't have to work so much if Dad could support himself. If he didn't spend every dime of his disability fund on weed and miscellaneous junk that's just going to end up piled on the floor anyway.

"I've got one more semester of college, and Shiloh's got another year. Then, some time will free up and we can do more things with the three of us."

Not that Shiloh has stepped foot in the home we grew up in since the day he left for college. I don't blame him for it, but it would be a lie to say I don't miss us feeling like a family.

Dad makes a disgruntled noise and pulls a cigarette out of his breast pocket, ignoring my pinched expression when he lights it up.

"I'll believe it when I see it. Your sister—"

I slap my hand on the table, and his mouth slams shut. He takes a slow drag—making a show of it—before setting it down in the ashtray.

"Your brother wants nothing to do with me, and you know it."

Maybe if you hadn't made him feel less than his whole life, or maybe if you had been present and acted like a father. Maybe then he'd want to be here. Maybe he'd take some of the burden off our shoulders.

Dad made his bed, and now we both have to lie in it.

"Shiloh is busy. His schedule is jam packed, and he has the self defense class—"

"That boy has too much anger in him. It's going to get him hurt or arrested one of these days."

Talking to Dad is like talking to a brick wall.

"He's got Atlas," I say, feeling a little of the pressure in my chest lift.

Shiloh is a firecracker, a stick of dynamite. He's unpredictable and hotheaded, but having Atlas around has always seemed to balance him. The calm to his storm. The flowing river to his raging rapids.

"At least someone around here has some sense in their head."

Dad has been fond of Atlas since we moved to the trailer park when I was seven and Shiloh was five. I think it's because at the time he was drowning in the grief of losing our mother, and having someone take the weight of Shiloh's attention off of him was a relief.

"Come on," I say. "Help me sort through the mess in the living room, then you can get back to your project while I start the dishes."

He doesn't complain, only sighs in defeat and pushes away from the table, wheelchair nearly backing into the wall with the force of it. He reaches around for his walker, unfolding it and pushing himself out of the chair.

Dad lost his leg not long after he became an empty nester. A year on his own—while I was drowning in classes and work, trying to support both Shiloh and my college efforts—and he'd

stopped taking care of himself to the extent that they had no choice but to amputate his leg.

There was an accident. A small one, but he'd gotten a nasty

gash on his leg. He let the hospital stitch him up, but he

refused to follow the care guidelines, and as a man with severe

diabetic neuropathy, the infection traveled up his leg until

there were no options left.

He doesn't let it stop him from doing the things he wants,

but he sure uses it as an excuse to put off what needs to be

done. That's why he has me, and he isn't afraid to lay the guilt

card on thick if I miss a visit.

I get maybe twenty minutes out of him before he wanders

off, and I'm halfway through scrubbing up the bathroom an

hour later when something buzzes in my pocket.

It's not my normal pattern for text or notifications, but it's

one I'm familiar with.

I fish around until I find the pocket of the flannel wrapped

around my waist and pull out my phone. On it is a notification

from an anonymous messaging app that I use as part of an

LGBTQ helpline.

It's been a few weeks since I've gotten a message from it

that lasted for more than five minutes, so it can't hurt to check

it out and see what they need.

Unknown: What can you tell me about being

ace?

I chew on my bottom lip as I look around and take in all the work I still have to do. But I'm already tired, and a five minute break won't hurt me.

**Me:** All kinds of things. What do you want to know?

**Unknown:** Can you jerk off if you're ace?

The person's response brings a smile to my face.

**Me:** *If not, then I've been doing it wrong.* 

**Unknown:** Is there something wrong with me? That I like dating but not other things?

**Me:** What other things?

**Unknown:** you know. Handjobs. Blowjobs. Dicks in vaginas.

**Me:** Well, since you asked, do you like masturbating?

**Unknown:** Yeah. Not often, but yeah.

**Me:** what do you think about when you do?

Unknown: that's a little personal.

**Me:** I don't even know your name. You don't have to answer. I'm just trying to help.

While my mystery texter takes his time coming up with an answer—or deciding whether he wants to—I start sorting through Dad's medicine cabinet.

There's expired bottles, meds that are only half-taken, ones that look to be never opened, and even though I feel the phone vibrate against my hip, I'm too engrossed in the disaster in front of me to stop and check it.

When I spot a bottle off to the side that wasn't there when I straightened up last month, I curse into the empty room.

"Hey, Dad?" I call out, following the sound of his muttering to his bedroom where he's sprawled out on the bed flicking through TV channels. "Dad?"

He hits the mute button and grunts his acknowledgement.

"What's with the antibiotics? And why are they still full? It says you filled them two weeks ago."

"It was nothing. A little bit of a cough. You know how my doctors are."

I sigh so hard I swear I feel my chest rattle. "They just want to keep you alive."

"Well, they're doing a bang up job."

The sarcasm reminds me so much of Shiloh, and if I ever told either of them I'd probably be disowned by both.

"Is it pneumonia, Dad?" I ask, a kernel of anxiety popping alive in my gut.

He waves me off with an exaggerated swish of his hand, which is Dad speak for "probably, but I'm too pig-headed to listen".

Knowing there's no getting through to him, I head back to the living room. Most of the trash is bagged away, but there's not much I can do about the cigarette stains and holes in the furniture. There are backwards photos hanging on the wall, and I don't have to turn them around to know which ones they are.

I'm the one who hung them up in the first place.

One was taken six months before we lost Mom. Shiloh is sitting on her shoulders, all chubby five year old as he wiggles his fingers at the camera. I'm wrapped around her leg, half hiding while she cards her hand through my hair.

I couldn't tell you anything about the day other than we were happy.

And then the accident took her life, and the three of us were never the same again.

I drop my head back and stare at the yellowing ceiling, gathering my thoughts and composure as the weight of the day settles over me.

Coming here is never any less exhausting, but without me who knows what might happen to Dad. No one deserves to die alone and abandoned, even if they're a crabby old man with a knife for a tongue.

The phone in my pocket buzzes and pulls me out of my thoughts, and I can't help but look around at the place I called home for most of my life. No matter how much mold and grime I scrub away, there's no erasing the years of heartache we all suffered here.

There's no bringing Mom back.

The Dad I spent the first seven years of my life with died with her.

I pull out the phone and flop down on the couch, needing a distraction before I fall back down that rabbit hole.

**Unknown:** I don't really think about anything. Relief maybe? How good being touched feels?

**Unknown:** Last night I thought about someone. I didn't mean to. I think I drank too much or something.

**Unknown:** I got hard for a guy. Does that make me gay? Because I've never just looked at someone or thought about them and gotten hard.

**Unknown:** There's something wrong with me, isn't there?

Not wanting him to take my silence as confirmation—because I've been down that road, and it's a shitty one—I quickly type out a response before digging into the meat of his problem.

Me: No. Not at all. Hold on.

**Me:** Listen. Sexual attraction can be really complicated, and there's nothing wrong with having a low sex drive. If touching yourself is enough, that's nothing to be ashamed of.

**Me:** And there's no reason to be alarmed thinking about a man. Is this new for you? That kind of attraction?

It's been years since I've had a cigarette, since I nixed the bad habit I started growing up in this shithole, but the longer I sit here, the greater the urge becomes. Maybe I should call it a day. Be done with it and go home.

Maybe get a few minutes in with my sketchpad before I have to head to the library to meet the underclassmen I'm tutoring.

I stand up and give the room one final look over, contemplating saying goodbye to Dad, but I can hear the

snoring from here, so I don't bother.

Instead, I head out the front door and nearly have a heart attack when I get to the first of Dad's not-quite-up-to-code makeshift steps and the wood gives out beneath my foot.

The banister is thankfully strong enough to support my weight as I grip it and straighten myself on the step below which—thankfully—appears sturdy.

Shit, he's lucky he hasn't gotten coded for this. If it starts falling apart he'll really be in shitty waters if the code enforcer comes popping around. I'll have to see if I can find out when the next drive by is.

Once I'm back in my car with no energy to actually drive it, I check my phone and see I've got not only a text from the helpline but also one from Shiloh.

**Shiloh:** *Dinner at the BBQ place tonight?* 

I smile at the simple message. Shiloh and I have a routine of meeting up at a local Korean barbeque restaurant whenever he needs to unwind. It's just the two of us, and usually it means my brother is having one of his rare moments where he's on the outs with his best friend.

I don't think it's ever been anything serious, just general frustration that's better directed at me than at Atlas, and I'm always happy to be that for him. Atlas was there for my brother when I couldn't be, so I can take this bullet for him. More like a BB-Gun pellet.

After shooting off a confirmation to Shiloh, I switch over to

the messaging app and check my mystery texter's response. If

he's going to stick around, I should ask what he wants me to

call him.

**Unknown:** This might take me a while to explain.

You sure you wanna hear it?

I look back at the house, nerves swimming alive in my gut,

and card a hand through my hair to tug at the strands just hard

enough it leaves a dull ache.

First, I pull up Shiloh's message.

**Me:** *Does seven sound good?* 

Then I flip back to the helpline.

Me: You've got me for the next few hours. By the

way, got something I can call you?

**Unknown:** You go by B, right? Then you can call

me A.

Me: Not sure if you're copycatting or going full

Pretty Little Liars on me.

**Unknown:** Considering I spent an entire summer

binging the series, we'll go with option two.

**Me:** Don't murder me in my sleep. Hi, A. Welcome

to Queer Mafia Alliance. If it makes this any

easier, I am a cis, ace/bisexual man, early

twenties, and I'm a business major.

**A:** That is the most boring major.

**Me:** *It's the most practical.* 

**A:** Ok fine. Cis man, possibly bisexual—haven't

confirmed. Sexually confused, also early twenties,

general studies major, and a virgin.

**Me:** *This really is going to be a long story.* 

**A:** You asked.

And I'd ask again, because everyone deserves to have

someone who's there for them, willing to listen and understand

no matter what. Everyone needs someone in their corner. I

want to give the people who text this hotline the support I

never had.

**Me:** Fire away, A.

# Chapter 4

### ATLAS

I'VE NEVER SAID ANY of this out loud before. Yes, I know. It isn't technically out loud, but it's close enough. My entire life I've just faked my way through sex smack talk and jokes and tits and ass that I really don't give a shit about.

It's weird to explain what's in my head.

That attraction for me is this multifaceted thing with so many different factors I don't know if I can articulate them all.

I've resorted to seeking answers and validation from strangers.

Fuck me.

Attraction doesn't exist on a sexual scale for me. There's no measure of how much I want to bang someone or how hot they are.

There's the physical attraction where I like looking at them and wouldn't mind touching or kissing, but the latter two desires aren't always there at first.

Romantic attraction is what I feel the hardest. It's what

drives me to want to be with someone, to do whatever I can to

make them happy.

Which unfortunately often leads to activities I'm not a fan

of.

But there's so much more to all of it. So many complexities.

It can't be this hard for everyone else.

You like someone. You want to bone them. Simple as that,

right?

**B:** So you've never looked at someone and

thought about fucking them.

Me: Never.

**B:** What about that guy the other night?

**Me:** No. Fucking him didn't even cross my mind.

**B:** You comfortable telling me what did?

I throw an arm over my face and groan. Talking about this is

embarrassing as shit. But if I'm ever going to figure this shit

out, now is as good a time as any.

**Me:** at first, nothing. I was thinking about how good he looked. He's always been nice to look at. It just never meant anything before.

**B:** *It means something now?* 

Me: I don't fucking know. You asked what I thought about, right? When the goddamn boner wouldn't go away and I dealt with it, I didn't think about anything. Nothing other than getting off like usual. But then it happened. Like a fucking gif in my head.

**B:** Someone's being cryptic.

"Oh fuck you," I mutter, even as a smile breaks out across the flush on my cheeks.

**Me:** Someone doesn't want to say that he imagined losing his virginity by taking it up the ass.

Dammit. I don't want to see what he says to that.

I shut off the phone entirely, stuffing it under my pillow just as my dorm room door bangs into the wall and Shiloh comes barging in all red-faced and sweaty. This morning was a rough one for him, though morning is a stretch because I couldn't get him up and moving until nearly two in the afternoon.

"Motherfucking drill sergeant," he mumbles just loud enough for me to hear and kicks the door closed.

He immediately tosses his shirt into the corner and kicks his workout pants off to the side.

"Self defense class a little rough today?"

He glares and towels off the sweat from his chest.

"Corvin is an asshole."

Did I forget to mention that his co-instructor is our RA? Corvin was Shiloh's teacher before the incident freshman year, and even though he hates the guy's guts he still took up the offer to run the classes together.

"C'mon, lay down." I stand up and pat Shiloh's bed, where there's no hesitation as he flops down face first.

Shiloh has a lean, swimmer's build from his moderate exercise routine that I oversee, while I've packed on a bit more muscle since I'm at the gym at least once a day. Exercise isn't fun as most muscle-heads will lead you to believe, but when you've got someone to protect the pain is worth it.

I throw my legs over his hips and settle my weight over him. He barely acknowledges me as I press my thumbs into the back of his neck aside from the little grunts that tell me I'm doing something right.

We've had this pattern for years going back to high school when he'd sneak in my bedroom window covered in cuts and bruises from whatever fight he'd gotten into that day. I'd bring out the first aid kit (which was really just a bottle of peroxide and some old washcloths), clean him up, and then work out the stress in his shoulders until he fell asleep.

"What happened?" I ask.

"Corvin couldn't take the class this morning—which you know—" he glares back at me again, "—so he moved it to this evening, and when I tried to show up and teach *my* class, he said I wasn't needed. He's not taking this shit from me, so I taught the damn thing with him."

When I brush my fingers over his lower back he hisses and flinches away from me. I throw my hands up so I don't accidentally touch him again and spot a bruise just under his ribs on the right side.

"This from today?"

Shiloh grips the pillow at the head of the bed and buries his face in it.

"Loh. I need to know if this is from class or if you got in a fight."

He huffs, shoulders slumping, and I already have my answer. "Loh."

"Oh, don't give me that!" He half pushes himself up, and I shift my weight to my knees to keep my balance. "Corvin and

I played out a scenario for the kids, and I got my ass handed to me. I didn't go out asking for it."

"Did you egg him on?"

"Of fucking course I did. He pisses me off."

I sigh and press down on his shoulders until he relents and falls back flat on the mattress.

"Why do this with him if he pisses you off so badly?"

He's quiet for a moment, and I wonder if he's dozed off, But then he sighs loudly into his arms and turns his head to stare at the wall.

"Because whether I like it or not, Corvin gave me something no one else has. A way to protect myself. I know I have you and Blair, but I can't expect the two of you to fight my battles forever. The ugly truth is that there's always going to be people who hate me for being trans, and I always run the risk of stumbling into the worst of the bunch. Does it suck that I have to be prepared for that? Yes. But I refuse to let them win. I want to give other queer kids that power, too."

In a ridiculous show of strength and nimbleness, Shiloh flips himself below me, and I can see the determination on his face.

"I don't like him, but I owe him."

There's no changing Shiloh's mind when he gets like this, so even if I told him this weird sense of obligation is all in his head, it wouldn't matter. I shift my weight between my knees, and a flicker of

challenge lights in his eyes.

"Not gonna hurt anything, big guy. I'm not wearing my

packer."

I roll my eyes, even as my lips twitch up at his teasing tone.

"Excuse me for not wanting to sit on another guy's junk. It's

called being polite."

His answering smirk is the only warning I get before my

back hits the floor and Shiloh's laughter fills the room. "Shove

your politeness up your ass. We've taken showers together,

Atty. I've pinned your ass to the floor enough times. You

aren't going to hurt me."

That's what my truth comes down to. I'd never do anything

to hurt Shiloh. He's my best friend.

Which is why whatever happened in my brain and dick last

night will never happen again.

. . . . . . . . . . . .

**Me:** *Are you ace?* 

**B**: *I am*.

**Me:** *Does that mean you don't have sex?* 

**B:** It means sex isn't an important part of a relationship for me.

**Me:** *Do you get horny?* 

**B:** Wow, A, cut to the chase. Yes, I do.

**Me:** What do you do about it?

**B:** Well, if I'm in the mood, I might jerk off. If it's a big one I'll scout Grindr for a quick hookup. Otherwise I don't do anything.

**Me:** *Are you only into guys then?* 

**B:** Mostly. I've slept with girls before but it's never been like it is with men.

**Me:** *Romantically, though?* 

**B:** I don't know. I've never been with someone that way. Always had too much going on. But I lean towards men all the way around, I think.



"YOUR MUSCLED ASS IS asking for an ass-kicking," Shiloh says, knotting his towel around his waist.

I shoulder him out of the way as we both exit the showers laughing. The bathroom mirrors are fogged, and there's only a few other guys in here this morning. Shiloh doesn't bat an eye at any of them, heading to one of the sinks to wet his toothbrush.

"I'm just saying you could stand to come with me to the gym once or twice a week."

"Yeah, well," his words are garbled from all the toothpaste, "unlike you, I have a life. Have fun making love to a dumbbell."

I set up at the sink beside him and shake my head. "Not everyone thinks of getting laid twenty-four seven."

"Then they're missing out." Shiloh shrugs and spits into the sink.

Someone chuckles over by the other row of sinks, and I bite back a smile to see that it's Corvin. He must have just gotten out of the shower, too, because he's only in a towel, working some kind of product into his hair.

Objectively, I'd say Corvin is an attractive man. He's got dark skin, and while he's not bulky by any means, he has an athletic build and large hands with long fingers. There's no attraction in the sense that I'd like to do anything with him or hang out as more than friends, but I can admit he's good looking.

He looks over and quirks a brow when he notices me watching him, an amused smile on his lips. I quickly drop my eyes only to find Shiloh with his arms crossed and a tight frown on his face.

I turn back to the sink and rinse my mouth out, pretending to ignore the animosity I can practically feel coming off my best friend.

"What?" I ask when I finish up and he still hasn't said anything. "You wanna go grab breakfast?"

"No," he says slowly. "You beating off to our RA? Something you wanna tell me, Atty?"

I normally choose not to get in the middle of his issues with Corvin, but I think he just tacked me there with a giant, red circle on my chest.

"Beating off—dude, what the fuck?"

Shiloh leans his hip on the sink and rolls his eyes. "You were literally just eye-fucking the dude. Too bad for you I hear he's a picky fucker."

"I wasn't—" I groan and drag a hand down my face. "I was thinking. I happened to be looking in his direction. Jesus, Loh. When did you turn into a damn attack dog?"

I expect him to stand down after that. That we'll shake it off and move on with our day, but instead he storms off back to the room, and I'm left standing there wondering what the hell just happened. By the time I've cleaned up my stuff, grabbed my clothes, and walk into our dorm room, Shiloh is dressed in his navy hoodie and gray sweatpants. He's sitting on his bed, cross legged, and shoots me a glare as soon as I step into the room.

I shut the door and hold my hands up. "I wasn't checking him out, Loh. I promise."

His jaw ticks, and he looks away. "I thought you were straight."

Okay, we're still doing this.

Push the lie or give out some honesty?

"Shiloh," I sigh his name, grabbing some boxers and a tank out of my dresser and quickly tossing them on. "Honestly, I'm not sure what I am."

I bump his knee with mine as I take up the space beside him on the bed, and I take it as a good sign when he doesn't push me away.

"Are you saying you might be into guys?" he asks, head tilted back and staring at the ceiling. He's working his jaw and throat like he's nervous, and I can't figure out why or how to put him at ease.

"I'm saying it's possible. Guys are... I mean, they're hot. I don't mind looking at 'em."

He scoffs, still refusing to look at me. "Try again after you've fucked one."

"Fuck's sake, Loh!" I flop onto my back and dig the heels of my hands into my eyes. "I don't have to fuck someone to know I'm into them."

"So, you are into guys."

"I said I don't know. Why are you making a big deal about this?"

"I'm not." He finally follows my lead and lays back, hands resting on his stomach. "You've just never been interested in them until now."

It's my turn to sigh. "Not that I've told you about."

"What? Why wouldn't you tell me?"

"It's complicated. I'm still figuring it out. You've had enough on your plate—"

"Oh, fuck you!" He sits up and shoves at my shoulder. "Don't blame you keeping secrets on me being trans. That just makes you a fucking asshole."

"That's not what I meant. Loh."

He hops off the bed, digging around underneath.

"Shiloh. Loh. C'mon."

He pops back up with a bottle of *something* in his hands. It's a dark liquor, but I can't read the label.

"Corvin will kill you for having that."

"Then it's a good thing I don't give a shit what Corvin has to say about it."

I expect him to open it, to drown whatever frustration he's feeling in the alcohol like he does any time he thinks I'm not paying attention. I am. I just don't know how to help him.

But he doesn't. He climbs back onto the bed, crossing his legs, and holds the bottle out to me. I prop up on my elbow, but I don't take it.

"I dare you," he says.

"What?"

He shakes the bottle, and when I still don't take it, he sets it down in his lap.

"I dare you to fuck a guy."

My mouth stops working, my throat runs dry, and I think my tongue might be twisted into an actual knot.

"I—wha—You can't be serious."

He shrugs and motions down to the bottle. "Then drink up, Atty. Big dare you're passing up. The whole bottle oughta do it." The anger on his face dips slightly and gives way to a mean looking smirk. "Better yet. Take the dare, or I'll drink it."

"Loh!" I shoot up and snatch the bottle before he can do anything with it. "Are you out of your goddamn mind? A couple shots of this stuff would fuck you up even without your medication. You down this and you're going to fucking kill yourself."

He rolls his eyes. "I haven't taken my meds today, so it's fine."

"Shiloh."

"I feel fine." He pushes off the bed and holds his hand out, but I don't give it over. "I have more, Atty. Or I can run to our old building and get some blow, I'm sure."

Shiloh can be wild, but he isn't usually an outright danger to himself. Not unless he's skipped more than a dose or two.

"You can't do that, Loh."

He shrugs, something heavy and dark filling his eyes. "Then take the goddamn dare."

There isn't a choice in the matter. If Shiloh is off his meds—and there's a good chance it's more than just today—then there's no telling if he'll do it or not. One thing's for certain—I'm not taking that chance.

"Alright, Loh. I'll take the dare. Just don't do anything you can't take back."

His smile is smug, and the tension seems to lift from his shoulders immediately.

"Great. There's a party next weekend."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

He rolls his eyes. "Obviously, I need to see this hookup. You could lie. It's fine, I won't watch. Just want to confirm. I guess you could always bring them back here? No fucking Corvin, though. He's off limits."

I blanch at the thought, but this whole thing is a little off putting.

"No way. I'm not having sex with you in the room."

"Then I'll stand outside. Confirmation, Atty."

I shake my head. The entire idea is ridiculous, but when Shiloh gets something in his head, it's impossible to get it out.

I stride over to Shiloh's desk, digging around in the drawer until I find his pill organizer—which is empty—and search around more until I find the bottles. Popping them both open and dumping one of each into my hand—anti-depressant and a mood stabilizer—I hold them out to him.

When he takes them with an exaggerated sigh, I nab a water bottle from our mini fridge and open it for him. Then, I watch and make sure he swallows, showing me his hands.

This happens sometimes. He forgoes the medication when he knows he plans on drinking his weight in alcohol, but it's a slippery slope. One missed dose leads to another and we get moments like this.

I tack it onto my mental list of things to keep up with until he's back on routine—along with this ridiculous dare—and cross to my own desk where my phone is sitting on the charger.

There's a message from B waiting for me, but that's not the conversation I open.

**Me:** He's had another slip. Lunch at The Creamery? On me?

Less than five minutes later, I have a reply.

**Blair:** Shit, yeah. I can be there at one. Thanks for taking care of him, Atlas.

Panic squeezes at my chest, but I push it down and breathe it out.

My problems can wait. Shiloh needs me.

And I need him to be okay.

## Chapter 5

## ATLAS

"ANY IDEA HOW LONG he was off them?"

I set the hot brownie plate and a mug of more-creamer-thancoffee in front of Blair in the lounge area of The Creamery.

"No. He seemed fine until this morning. I'm hoping just a few days."

We don't have any pending orders at the moment, so I wipe my hands on my apron and take a seat beside him on the hideously orange leather couch.

Blair rubs his eyes and picks up his coffee. He blows on it, takes a sip, and then stares down at it with a heavy sigh.

"What medications are they trying him on now?"

"Um, I think they're trying a new dose of Lithium and... I'm not sure which antidepressant." They've cycled him off and on different ones so much, it's hard to keep track.

"He needs to talk to his doctor," Blair says, setting his coffee back down and burying his face in his hands. "I should have enough for a session if he can get in sometime within the next two weeks. I'll book some extra cleanings to make up for it."

I shake my head. "We'll split it. It's partially my fault. Maybe it wouldn't have been so bad if he hadn't gone out drinking."

"Drinking definitely didn't help." He shoots me an apologetic look when I flinch, and his hand searches out mine where I'm drumming my fingers against my knee. "I don't expect you to be his keeper. We all make mistakes, Atlas."

"He's my best friend," I say, gripping onto his hand and squeezing.

"He's my brother. He's also his own person. Get him to make that appointment. We'll keep an eye on him the next two weeks until the mood stabilizer kicks in. If they can see him soon, maybe they can give him a fast-acting in the meantime."

The bell above the door dings as someone comes in, and I nod, throat running dry. I pull away and stand, missing the contact with how unsteady I feel.

"It's not your fault, Atlas."

I sigh and head back behind the counter. While I was worrying about sex, talking to strangers, and apparently being attracted to Blair, Shiloh needed me.

I promised to take care of him.

"Feels like it is."

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BLAIR DECIDES TO STICK around through the lunch shift

to study, and while I'm worried about Shiloh, being reminded

that he has Blair in his corner helps settle the knot of anxiety

in my stomach.

It also means that my mind wanders back to B, which also

splits my focus to the other night with Blair. It hasn't

happened again. I'm as attracted to Blair as I've always been,

but nothing about him makes me want to bone.

Was it a fluke?

When the rush settles down and I have a few minutes to

breathe, I dig my phone out of my apron and shoot off a text.

**Me:** I need to know if it was a one time thing.

I'm not expecting an immediate response, but when I pop

into the back room to set some of the dishes in the sink, one

comes in.

**B:** Elaborate.

Me: The boner. The intrusive sex thoughts. I

haven't felt it again.

**B:** *Do you want to?* 

**Me:** *I* want to know if *I* can.

Since it's quiet, I spend a few minutes cleaning some of the

mugs out to save the evening shift some of the hassle. Is it

fucked that I want to want to have sex? That even if my body

isn't entirely on board, it's an experience I'd like to have?

Does that break some kind of ace rule? If I'm ace.

Fuck, this shit is confusing.

Drying my hands on the apron and legs of my pants because

Aaron never remembers to restock the paper towels, I pull my

phone out just as it goes off.

**B:** The guy from before. Were you close to him?

**Me:** *Sort of. I've known him a long time.* 

**B:** If you're comfortable, I can give you some

ideas of testing that theory. It's nothing sexual.

Nothing that will freak anyone out. Just something

you can try with someone you're comfortable

around.

**Me:** *I'm open to suggestions.* 

**B:** Touch him. Consciously. Think about what your hands are doing. Look for his reactions. See if that sparks anything.

Me: Touch how?

**B:** Simple things. Touching their arm, their knee, putting your arm around them, whatever is natural for you. Try to focus on how it makes your body feel.

I scrub a hand through my hair and take a glance towards the front of the store through the little oval windows. Blair is still sitting on the sofa, a book in his hands and his laptop on the table in front of him.

I'm sure it wasn't anything personal. Bodies are weird. Getting a hard on when you've been largely sex-deprived probably isn't that strange of an occurrence. There's nothing wrong with getting turned on by a naked person.

I should chalk it up to a one-and-done experience and focus back on the things that matter.

But I meant it when I said I wanted to know if I could feel it again. Strangers obviously don't do it for me. The person I'd trust most in the world to work through this with me isn't in any condition to be doing so. On top of that, I'd have to admit all these things I've been keeping from him...

Blair, on the other hand, is... safe. For all of the times that I took care of Shiloh, I let him crawl in my bed and hide when his head was bad but his dad would never let him stay home, for each of those Blair was there to look out for us. All of the negative attention their dad wanted to direct at Shiloh, Blair took on himself.

Hell, when I got pneumonia one winter, it was Blair who drove me down to the hospital because neither of my parents were willing to admit something was wrong.

"Kids get sick," Mom had said, busy nursing the twins after one of their colic episodes. Blair didn't even argue with her, just snatched me out of bed and drove me out to the emergency room.

He's always gone out of his way to do whatever he can for Shiloh and me.

Maybe thinking about it isn't bad. Maybe he's the safest person for me to work this shit out with in my head. He never has to know. Neither does Shiloh.

If he's the only person I've ever responded to... I just need to know if it can happen again.

I could definitely use the distraction, especially from Shiloh's ridiculous dare.

It's another thirty minutes before I get to take my break, but when I do, I heat up two bowls of goulash from last night's dinner shift and take them out to where Blair is staring at his phone with a frown. "Everything alright?"

He looks up, first spotting the food then flicking his eyes up to meet mine, and the sweetest little smile graces his face.

"Thank you. Yeah, just talking to Shiloh. He says he's napping in the dorm."

I nod and take up the seat beside him—maybe a little closer than necessary—but he doesn't complain when my thigh presses against his.

"I gave him a workout this morning. And then the whole thing with his meds. He's probably pretty exhausted."

"I don't know what I'd do without you." Blair's words catch in his throat, and I grab one of his shaking hands in both of mine.

"Hey now." I squeeze his hand, and he looks up at me with a sniffle. "Shiloh is fine. Little slip. He probably won't even feel the effects of it for more than a day or two."

His laugh is nothing more than an exhaled breath and hint of a smile, but he knocks his shoulder into mine, keeping the contact.

"It's not just that." He sighs, looking down at our joined hands. "Dad is sick."

"Oh, shit."

"Yeah."

He rests his cheek on my shoulder, and I'm not sure I've ever seen Blair with his guard down like this.

"You're a great big brother, you know," I tell him, reaching over to brush the hair from his eyes. "He loves you a lot."

Blair hums, pressing into my hand where I trail my fingers over his cheekbone. Shiloh and I have always been very touchy and affectionate with each other, and it doesn't feel any different to be this way with Blair.

"He loves you more," he whispers, and when he tilts his head and runs his nose along my jaw, I feel more than hear his intake of breath before he jerks away.

Not a single part of us is left touching, but when I look at him, Blair's cheeks are pink, and he refuses to look at me. He clears his throat and reaches for his bowl, and I'm not sure if I did something wrong, so I follow suit.

Several minutes of silence pass before I put my empty bowl on the table and turn. Blair is more staring at his food than eating it, and I gently reach forward, folding the hair curtaining his face behind his ear.

My fingers linger, brushing slowly along his jaw until hooking under his chin and tilting his head in my direction. His eyes are red and glassy from unshed tears, and he's digging so hard into his bottom lip that I pull it free and stare at the little droplets of blood there.

"Your brother is lucky to have you. We both are. If you ever need to talk... I'm sure I can handle two Novaks."

The smile from before pops out, the one that barely turns the corners of his mouth but still makes his eyes crinkle. I'm not

sure I've ever noticed how pretty they are.

Or how sad.

"You know," he says, pulling away and resting back against the couch. "I bet you're a pretty great big brother, too."

It's supposed to be sweet, but instead it's like a thousand little needles in my chest. I haven't seen or even spoken to any of my siblings since last summer. I skipped going home for the holidays in favor of staying with Shiloh in the dorms.

"Eat and get home," I tell him and grip his knee reassuringly. "You've gotta have better things to do than hang around here."

He shrugs and closes his eyes, head tipped back towards the ceiling.

"Thank you, Atlas."

"For what?"

He smiles, and I'm slammed with the urge to touch him. To comfort him. To wrap him in my arms and promise that everything will be okay. It's strange. Not because it's Blair, but because I've never had that protective instinct for anyone other than Shiloh.

"For being you."



MY SHIFT ENDS AT five, by which time I've already kicked Blair to the curb threatening to send his brother after him, and something he'd said starts nagging at me. I finish the last of the dishes just as it hits time for me to leave, and I pull out my phone to scroll through my contacts. It rings five or six times, and right before I hang it up, it clicks through and my mom's voice comes down the line.

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"Hello?"
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"Mom, hey."

There's a lot of noise in the background, some screaming and yelling, nothing abnormal for the Huxley household.

"Who's this?"

Leave it to Mom not to check her caller ID.

"Atlas, Momma."

"Oh, Atlas, honey! How are you?" There's some clanging around, and I think I hear her yell something at Zoe and Asher about fighting over the hockey stick.

And yes, I said, *the* hockey stick. Huxley Family Hockey isn't played on the ice so much as we play hide-and-seek and whack-a-mole with one of Grandpa's old sticks from the league a million years ago. You have to earn and/or steal the right to the stick and when you do... well usually everyone runs and hides because Huxleys get a little victory happy. Someone usually gets a couple good hits in before Dad makes us put it away and hide it.

Not that I've played in years.

"I'm good," I say. "Sorry I didn't make it home for Christmas."

"You didn't?" she asks, and yeah, that stings a little.

Before I left for college, she used to bitch all the time about Ryder being gone even though he popped in every weekend. Rue left not long after he turned nineteen, never looked back, and don't think I ever even saw Momma bat an eye.

Maybe I'm the new Rue.

"Yeah. I'm sorry. I was just, um, really busy."

"Well that's okay sweetie! We'll make sure to save you a spot this year. Bring that boyfriend of yours with you!"

I frown. "Boyfriend?"

"Oh, you know. The kid who used to sleep in your room every night."

"Shiloh? Momma, he's not my—"

The line fills with the sound of something crashing. "Oh, shoot. Sweetie, I'll have to call you back. Love you. See you soon."

And then she's gone.

Boyfriend? Jesus, how long has my mother thought Shiloh and I were dating? Does Dad think so, too? What in the hell kind of assumption is that?

I don't even have time to put the phone back in my pocket before it goes off again, and while a part of me hopes it might be Mom and we could actually talk, it brings a smile to my face to see that it's Shiloh.

"Hey, Loh. How ya feelin"?"

He groans down the line, and I can absolutely imagine him giving me the finger.

"My head hurts. You took my alcohol."

I click my tongue. "Yup, I did. Poured it straight down the drain. You know you can't have that stuff, right? And you know I'm not just being an asshole?"

"You are an asshole. But you're also right, and I hate you for it."

"No you don't." My smile grows wider. He sounds tired, but he doesn't sound pissed or anything anymore.

"No, I don't." He sighs, and I swear I can hear the smile in his own voice. "Could you bring me some brownies back? The caramel ones? And a coffee? Black?"

I fold my apron up on the rack and step back into the main part of the shop, snatching a tray of brownies set off to the side and accepting the steaming plastic cup the barista hands to me while squishing the phone between my ear and shoulder.

"Cute you think I wasn't already planning to."

"I love you, Atlas Huxley. I swear to god."

"You'll love me more if you let me get off the phone so I can get home."

We hang up, and the weight that's been resting on my shoulders all day lessens. Shiloh's okay. He'll always be okay because he has me and Blair.

Blair who looked like he could really use a friend, and I'm not sure who he has in his corner other than us.

He's always been there for us. Maybe it's time someone was there for him, too.

## Chapter 6

## BLAIR

NOAH IS WAITING FOR me on the couch when I get back to the apartment that evening, because I texted him and told him that I needed him. I know he was in the middle of a study session because he's still wearing his glasses and has his laptop out on the coffee table when I come in.

I have to carve out some time this month to fix Dad's porch before he falls through it or gets the cops called on him, and I need to get Shiloh into the clinic to see his therapist. Both of those are going to leave me strapped for cash, and even if I can make it up somehow, that's not going to leave me anytime for sleep or art; neither of which are that important, I suppose.

But it does mean I'll have to cancel my appointment at the tattoo shop.

Which I was really looking forward to, but family comes first.

Noah pushes everything aside and opens his arms as soon as he sees me, and while he's usually the one wrapped around me, I'm the one who's snuggling into him now. He's smaller than me, but that doesn't stop him from holding me close and running his hands through my hair as I bury my face in his shoulder.

When I get overwhelmed, I crave contact.

It's why touching Atlas today brought me comfort, why I leaned on him when normally I fight to keep anyone from seeing me when I fall apart.

I shouldn't have, though. He's got his hands full with Shiloh—with being who my baby brother needs every day—and it feels like I'd be taking up space where I'm not needed.

Atlas is a nice, caring guy, and as much as he might think he can, two Novak siblings is too much for any one person to handle.

Just ask my dad.

"Want me to order takeout?" Noah asks, rubbing his nose into my hair and grazing his fingers over my shoulders.

I relax further into his hold and shake my head. "Nah. I already ate."

"Do you want to make out?"

Usually the answer is yes. Kissing is nice. It quiets a lot of the noise in my head, but more than anything right now I just want to be held and talked to, and I want this pressure in my chest to go away. I shake my head, and Noah doesn't push it. I know he's itching to get back to his studies, and when I'm still wound up and can feel the need to cry welling up, I decide to leave him to it and head back to my room.

What me and Noah have is comfortable, casual, but there's a connection there that's missing. It isn't Noah's fault; it's just how it is. I don't have the time or energy to date around and find it.

I strip down to my boxers and flip on the AC, crawling under the comforter and pressing my face into the pillow. Noah would listen if I could talk all this out, but it doesn't feel like I have the words.

Horny is the last word I'd use to describe how I'm feeling, but I can't help the way I want to be touched: like it being me means something important. Even if it's just pretend.

Scrolling Grindr for all of five minutes fails to get me anything I'm excited about. I'm not necessarily picky about the guys I fuck, but every one around today seems to be macho, aggressive men, and I'm not in the mood for that.

I end up thumbing over to the private messaging app and reading through my conversation with A. It's been a while since I've had someone this earnest contact me about their sexuality. Talking to another ace person is great, too.

He never texted me back after our discussion earlier... but it can't hurt to check in, can it?

**Me:** Everything okay?

The silence that follows sucks. It's not like A and I are friends, and I'm the one who's supposed to be there to support him, not the other way around.

Knowing that doesn't make the little tendrils of darkness go away. They creep in a little at a time until my skin starts to ache and crawl.

Fuck, I need that ink appointment.

I could take Atlas up on his offer to split Shiloh's therapy costs. Which is only going to be higher if they decide to switch up his medication, because he's still a few weeks from being due for his refills.

The boards at the home repair shop to fix up Dad's porch aren't cheap either. It's at least a couple hundred, plus labor time, especially since I'll be doing it on my own.

The pressure behind my eyes builds, and my phone lights up moments before I give in to it. I almost don't check, but a few deep breaths in and I'm flicking the screen open.

**A:** It's been a shit day, honestly. Roommate just crashed, and I'm trying to distract myself with anything.

**Me:** I could help with that if you want. Depending on what you don't want to think about lol

**A:** As long as I don't have to talk about all the shit going on.

**Me:** Okay. Let's take you out of the realm of reality, then. How about a thought experiment?

**A:** *A what?* 

**Me:** Trust me? I want you to picture someone you're attracted to. Man, woman, non-binary, doesn't matter.

A: Okay.

**Me:** *Where would you want to be with them?* 

**A:** Is it cheesy if I say on a blanket under the stars? That's kind of always been my happy place.

Me: That's perfect. Blanket under the stars it is. Let's try this. You're attracted to them. You have feelings for them. What does that look like for you?

**A:** *Hmm. I'd like holding their hand.* 

Me: That's cute.

**A:** Fuck off. Attraction and feelings doesn't mean I want to grope them or anything.

**Me:** Fair. No desire for anything sexual?

**A:** None. Is that where this is headed? Seeing if I can think myself into having a hard on?

**Me:** Not entirely. If you're uncomfortable, we'll stop.

**A:** No, this is fine. What's next?

Reading A's replies leaves a smile on my face, the conversation distracting me as much as it's distracting him. It's nice having someone to talk to who has no investment in my life or responsibilities.

**Me:** Well, are you comfortable pretending I'm this person?

**A:** Sure, I don't see why not.

Me: Okay. Try this. You're holding my hand. We're watching the sky. It's cool and quiet. I lay

my head on your shoulder.

**A:** *I like the closeness.* 

Me: Do you like kissing?

A: I don't mind it.

**Me:** *Then I won't initiate.* 

**A:** What about you? Do you like it? Tell me what you'd want from someone you're into.

Me? I want someone to touch me without it having to be *more*. I want lazy kisses in bed and exploring hands. Someone who's willing to tell me their dreams, their problems. What makes them smile, what makes them cry. I want someone who can be as painfully open with me as I want to be with them.

Because right now, it's all locked up so tight I'm afraid the pressure building up will crack my ribs before I find a safe place to let it out.

But that's a lot to lay on a person who has no intention of us meaning anything to each other. **Me:** I love kissing. Could probably do it for hours. It sounds silly, but I like people messing with my hair. Light touches feel good.

**A:** Where?

Me: Anywhere. Everywhere.

**A:** Could I hold you? You could lay your head on my chest. I could card my fingers through your hair. Drag them up your spine.

Butterflies sprout in my stomach, a shiver running through me as I picture the touch, the embrace. That's what I need.

**A:** Are you quiet because you're uncomfortable or...?

**Me:** No. No, it's nice. Is it bad form to say I'm a little lonely?

**A:** Nah. You're helping me with some seriously personal shit. I can keep you company for a bit. Tell me what I can do.

Me: Can I touch you, too?

**A:** Hands off my junk. But otherwise, feel free.

I'm not as creative with my words as I am with my hands. My fingers can make lines that tell a hundred stories, millions of little heartaches in every pencil stroke. Words are where my creativity runs short. But A is giving me something that I might not have the chance to have for a long time.

Me: I'd want to take your shirt off. To listen to your heartbeat and feel your body beneath me. You could take my shirt off, too, if you wanted. Explore me.

**A:** What if I did? Turned every inch of skin into a playground for my fingertips. Where would you stop my hands?

**Me:** We'll stick with your rule. No touching the other's dick. Now if you were after my ass...?

**A:** *Depends. Do you like that idea?* 

Me: If you put your hands on me like that, I'd press you into the blanket and find your neck with my lips. I'd push into your grip and make a wreck of your throat. I'd want to kiss you, but you don't

like that so I'd just hold you more. Rest my head on your chest until my heart slows and my desire simmers down.

**A:** *Oh.* 

Anxiety swells in my chest. Too much. Way too much. But the flirty way he started makes me want to push. I'm supposed to be easing him into sexual thoughts, seeing if anything provokes him or makes him initiate. I'm not supposed to jump into it.

**Me:** I'm sorry. My head is in a weird place today. Didn't mean to take it that far.

There's a few more minutes of silence, and I know I've fucked this up. Absolutely just dropped the ball. I'm an idiot. An idiot who can't read a room and who wants too much that he's trying to get it from a stranger.

And not in the socially acceptable way.

I should have just picked someone on Grindr and gotten it over with.

I'm about to rush out another apology and turn the entire phone off when a new message pops up. **A:** You didn't do anything wrong. I was... collecting myself.

**Me:** *Shit. Did I upset you?* 

**A:** Not that kind of collecting.

**Me:** Oh. Oh, you mean I turned you on?

**A:** Kind of? Didn't make me hard but more like... a brain boner? I felt hot and excited and like imagining it made me wish I could feel it. But it wasn't sexual.

**A:** We can keep going. I like this. It's surprisingly relaxing.

**Me:** Giving you a brain boner is relaxing?

**A:** Shut the hell up and kiss me if you want to.

Me: I thought you didn't like kissing?

A: I don't dislike it. I've just never cared for it. You want it. It makes you feel good. You told me you were lonely. Tell me how you'd pretend kiss He wants this, then? Wants me to be honest? If A was someone I cared about, someone I wanted to lie with and be with, what would I need from him right now? What would I need him to let me do?

I gulp and rest my forehead on the pillow, taking a deep breath and pouring my heart and desires onto the screen.

Me: I'd suck kisses up your jaw. Blow air into your ear and seek out your mouth. I'd press our lips together and guide your hands to my waist. I like kisses that are slow and sensual. I'd want you to let me cup your face while you dig your fingers into my scalp. While you held me by the waist, by my neck, and kept me steady. I'd want to get lost amongst the stars, and I'd need you to anchor me.

Tears drip down my cheeks, and even though I refuse to pay them any mind, they keep rolling. All of the pressure, stress, and pain of the last few days leaks out with them. I know it'll be back; the feelings never dissipate for long, but for this brief moment it's like finally breaking the surface of a raging rapid you've been unable to escape.

**A:** You're a romantic.

**Me:** I'd like to fall in love one day. Be someone's

choice. Is it too much?

**A:** Not at all. In fact, I'm changing the terms of

our thought experiment. Tonight, I'm going to be

in love with you. I'm going to give you everything

you need. And in return... you can take my fake

virginity.

Wait. He wants... more than this? He wants to...? Shit, I've

never done a virtual hookup. Not one that wasn't insanely

awkward and over in like five minutes never to speak to each

other again.

**Me:** You want to sext with me?

**A:** Not if you don't want to. Sex is hard for me to

think about on my own. I've seen porn but it all

seems so awkward. Maybe thinking of it through

you will enlighten me?

Do I want to? I mean, yes. Yes, I'm in the state of mind that

sex is high up on that list, and if it'll help with A's curiosity...

Maybe it's okay?

**Me:** Are you still imagining me as your crush?

**A:** He's not exactly a crush, but... yes. Is that okay?

Me: Perfectly fine.

**A:** So we can do this?

**Me:** Yeah, we can do this.

This will be okay, I think, blinking back a fresh set of tears. A mutually beneficial agreement.

A: I don't know much about sex, but I know how to comfort someone. I know how to hold them close and lick their open, wanting mouth. I could lay you on the ground and kiss you until you're pliant, until you trust me to take care of you. Give your neck the same treatment you gave mine. Trail my fingers over your ribs and kiss down your chest.

Me: You'd make me hard. But I wouldn't expect anything. I'd ask for more. More of anything you're willing to give me. Touching me. Kissing me.

A: How about this? I'd put my lips to your ear, still feeling your body with my fingertips, and I'd whisper to you. You're so handsome, good, and worthy. You're strong and patient, and you deserve to be cherished. You deserve to find love and be loved in return. You deserve everything you never let yourself have.

More tears threaten to spill, and I push my face into the pillow. No one has ever said anything like that to me before. My body doesn't know whether it wants to run away and hide in embarrassment or stay and let the full body flush take over.

I wasn't lying about being hard. Thinking about being touched like that... It makes my body hot. Makes it respond as if someone were physically here with me.

**A:** I'm not hard, but if the pressure helps, I'd push our hips together, rock against you and let you have my mouth as much as you want.

I drop my forehead to my pillow, thrusting my hand inside my pants and gripping my cock. It's only a few short pumps, just relieving the pressure, and then I pick my phone back up and read the messages again. I roll my hips into the mattress and almost can't hold back the choked up moan that threatens to slip out. I'm horny and sad and so fucking enamored by A. I don't know what the hell we're doing, but I know I don't want it to stop. Just this once has to be okay.

**Me:** *I want to touch you.* 

**A**: Then touch me, B.

**Me:** *I'm not sure I should.* 

**A:** *Why not?* 

**Me:** Because this is turning me on. And when I say I want to touch you, I mean I want to touch your cock and get off on you.

**A:** Isn't that the point? Shit, I'm kind of flattered that this does something for you.

**Me:** More than something, A. I want to touch myself. I want to come, and I want to think of you while I do it.

Me: Fuck, I told you I was lonely. I'm sorry.

I should turn the phone off. I should take my hand off my leaking erection and douse myself in a cold shower. But he hasn't told me to stop. He keeps encouraging me to do more, and what little self control I have is slipping.

If he gives me permission, self-control is out the window.

**A:** You can touch me. Make me feel something, please.

Me: I shouldn't do this.

**A**: You want to. Fist your cock for me. Get off while you tell me how you'd take me apart. C'mon, B.

Fuck. I can't say no. I want this too much.

**Me:** If I touched you, would you get hard for me, or would you stay soft? I can work with both.

**A:** Let's say I get hard for you. What would you do?

Me: I'd switch us around so you're lying beneath me. I'd slide down your body, free you and wrap my hand around your base. Pump it slowly, root to tip, over and over until I get you wet. **A:** And when you've got my dick all messy?

Me: Well. You haven't seen messy yet. I have to lick it up first. Trace my tongue all around your shaft until your arousal coats my tongue. And then I've got to wrap my lips around the head and suck what's left. Before slowly taking more of you down my throat.

**A:** You're so good, B. So fucking good. I'll push back your hair, wrap it in my fist and just... watch you.

**Me:** Is it hot? Thinking about a man sucking your dick?

**A:** My brain boner is going wild. Definitely attracted to men physically. Maybe a little sexually? Jury is still out.

**Me:** *Want to stop?* 

**A:** God, no. I want to know how you'll take my cock.

**Me:** You've got a dirty mouth for a virgin. Lift your hips. Push into my throat a little.

**A:** You like being choked?

Me: I won't choke. My gag reflex has had a lot of

training. I want to run a finger through your

crack. Collect the spit pooling at your base and

balls and spread it around your hole.

My own balls are heavy in my hand as I roll them, pushing

onto my knees to get a better grip. It's getting harder for me to

type out responses, propped up on one arm with my other

working my junk.

**A:** That feels weird.

**Me:** *Are you touching yourself?* 

A: Just a little. I've never felt around down there

before.

Me: It can be weird to start, and if you're being

fingered it can hurt a little. But there's tricks to

making it better. Helps if the person doing it is

experienced.

**A:** *Is that what you want? To finger me?* 

**Me:** If I say that finger-fucking you and sucking your dick is what's getting my rocks off, would you judge me?

**A:** Hell no. You fucking your fist yet?

Me: Jesus. Dirty mouth.

**A:** It's fun. Sorry I'm not a more active participant.

**Me:** *I can't believe you wanted to do this at all.* 

**A:** Am I making you uncomfortable?

Me: No. Just making it hard to type.

**A:** Then send me voice chats. I'll pop some earbuds in so I don't disturb the roommate. Sorry, I can't return the favor, though.

My hand stills where it's been languidly stroking along my shaft, and I read the message over again as I force my heart rate to settle. I've never actually talked to any of the helpline people, but it's not like I've ever sexted with them either.

I lean my head on my arm and tap the microphone icon, speaking quietly to avoid bothering Noah and knowing that I'm out of breath.

"I want to push inside of you. I want to sink my finger in, and I want to bury you so far down my throat I can barely breathe—Ah—" I wrap my fingers around my cock as it aches and twitches between my legs. "If you bear down, it'll be easier. And I'll be slow. Stroking your walls and bobbing on your dick because I want you to feel good."

I tap the send button without listening to it back, not wanting to hear my own ragged voice. It's been weeks since I've been hit with need this strong, with the desire to shuttle my hand over my cock like the orgasm will run if I don't catch it in time.

Maybe I'm pent up. Maybe all of the stress is getting to me. Maybe I have a stronger need for what A is offering me than I ever thought possible.

"A, I'm going to come," I warn, not even checking for a message. "I'm going to hold you in my mouth, and I'm going to trace every fucking ridge of your dick with my tongue as I suck it slowly and rhythmically with every shockwave from my orgasm. Oh shit, oh shit."

I don't even manage to end the recording as the orgasm rushes through me. It tightens in my gut and spurts from my cock in heavy pulses, drawing moans and curses and even a sob from my throat with how overpowering it is. Several seconds of catching my breath and milking the last drops of cum from my spent dick until I'm shaking with oversensitivity are what he gets at the end, before I hit send and flip onto my back.

The come down period is slow, and I feel the phone's vibration on the bed beside me for several minutes before I have the energy to open my eyes and check it.

**A:** I think that is the hottest thing I've ever heard, and I'm no stranger to listening to people get off. That's not a kink or anything, I just live in a dorm with lots of horny queer kids.

**Me:** I think right now I count as a horny queer kid. Goddamn that felt good.

**A:** Glad you enjoyed yourself. I'll be honest B, I've never had a girl suck me with as much enthusiasm as you just pretended to.

If we're being honest, I don't think I've actually sucked off a guy as enthusiastically as I thought about doing for A. I'd say I need to get laid, but I don't think that's it. I need more than to get laid.

I need this. What we just did. But for real.

Tears burn in the corner of my eyes, and I throw my arm over them just as my mouth starts to quiver.

Fuck.

Fuck.

All those things A said are getting to me. The way he wanted to care for me. I know it's pretend, but I want something like that for real.

The phone buzzes a couple of times, but I can't look at it yet. Because I'll have to pretend that wasn't the best orgasm I've ever had, and because there's no one actually here to help me deal with the onslaught of emotions I don't know how to handle alone.

When I finally flip through, it's impossible to keep the smile off my face.

**A:** *B?* You okay? Still with me?

**A:** That was a lot, wasn't it?

**A:** *Take some time and breathe, okay?* 

**A:** I've never experienced anything like that before. Like I wanted to be there with you and see your face. Like I wanted to watch you go over the edge. It didn't feel like what I've had. Like getting off was the only thing that mattered.

**A:** I'm okay with it. Gave me some things to think about.

A: And I meant it. You deserve to have the love you want. To have someone treat you like you matter. Because you do. Not many people would do something like this for a stranger, not unless it was strictly transactional horny teenager shit.

**A:** I'm going to let you rest. Thanks for this. I won't be weird. I promise.

The sweetness pouring out of the messages lifts the heavy cloud that was forming over me. I was overdue for a good orgasm, but I also desperately needed that outpouring of support. Things haven't been great lately.

Hell, things haven't even been good for a long time.

Half the time I'm barely hanging on, keeping my grip on the thread only so I don't drag the people I love down with me.

Going to the tattoo shop helps.

Mine and Noah's relationship helps.

What A and I just did helped.

But that's not something I can count on to keep me afloat.

It was a one time agreement between two people who were lonely and knew what each other needed.

It's not like it'll ever happen again.

# Chapter 7

### ATLAS

WHAT WAS SUPPOSED TO be a one-off becomes a regular occurrence.

Not necessarily the sex bit—though B did talk me through a handjob I was too embarrassed to admit I got off during—but settling into this sort of... pretend dating of sorts.

It started with me sending him random, positive affirmations the day after. I just wanted him to feel better. Which turned into us jokingly flirting, which led into another scene in his thought experiment, and well...

It's kind of become our norm.

We both know it isn't real, but we've stopped acknowledging it.

It's nice, though, to have this break from all the stress.

It's been a little over a week since the night we started our game of pretend, and things have settled back into normalcy. Shiloh is his regular, annoying self, albeit a little more tired and cranky on occasion. He hasn't forgotten the dare, though, because he makes sure to bring it up in conversation at least once a day.

I'm hoping I can wait him out until the mess with his meds and therapist are sorted.

In the meantime, I don't know if it's an all men thing, but there is a definite sexual attraction to both B and Blair. I haven't had an instant reaction to either, but when B and I have acted out sexual things, my body needs very little coaxing to keep going.

I don't even know who it has more to do with. It's Blair I picture when we fool around, but I'm fully aware I'm with B.

But I hardly know anything about B other than the fact that he's a hopeless romantic with a serious self deprecation issue.

I want to ease that for him.

Hell if I know why.

Our last conversation was an hour ago, and while I know I should give it a rest, I can't help sneaking a peek in when I finish my reps for the morning.

**B:** Your idea of fun is getting sweaty first thing in the morning?

**Me:** Would be more fun if you were getting sweaty with me.

**B:** Damn, A. Someone's got game. If you want me to take my shirt off, all you have to do is ask.

**Me:** I wouldn't mind having some eye-candy for motivation.

**B:** I can show off the hickey my roommate gave me, if you'd like.

The picture had been a close up of the mark on his neck, followed by the message, 'I was thinking about you, but don't tell him that;)'.

B has opened up a little over the last week. I still hardly know anything about him, but he confided that he has a non-sexual, casual relationship with his roommate, and that's about all the action he gets.

I can't even imagine being involved with the person I live with. Casually or seriously. My friendship with Shiloh is way too important for that.

But it's not my place to tell B something like that, and if he's happy with the arrangement, then that's what matters.

The gym isn't all that busy this morning. Most of the hardcore muscle heads did their rounds with the sun rising, and there will be a rush around lunch, but right now is the perfect time for getting my workout in.

It also means there aren't many people around to see me ruck up my shirt, pinch the fabric between my teeth, and take a shot of my sweat-coated abdomen to send to B.

That should be okay, shouldn't it?

My face isn't in the picture, just my chest and abdomen, but if he's going to flirt and send me pictures of his hickeys, it's only fair that he gets something in the same vein in return.

I'm halfway through chugging my bottle of water when he replies.

B: Hot.

**B:** I'm in public, and I really want to write something dirty to you. But I'll be nice and wait until we're both behind closed doors.

Things like that should turn me on, but all it really does is make me smile. It makes a warmth spread in my gut and brings a flush to my cheeks.

Needing to wrap up because I'm supposed to meet Shiloh for lunch and want time for a shower first, I don't answer right away. I down the rest of my water bottle and wipe down the sweat collecting on my forehead with the workout towel around my neck.

There's a few stragglers in the locker room when I go back to grab my bag and clean clothes, and I sneak a few quick peeks at some of them in all their shirtless, sweaty glory, but my body has no reaction.

No sexual attraction, no desire to find out if I could grow a sexual attraction. Nada.

Right as I'm about to head to the shower—my dirty clothes already tossed into the bag and a towel wrapped around my waist—someone comes in who lights my body on fire.

Here's the thing about pretending to be in a relationship with my best friend's brother: it feels real.

Thinking about Blair while I'm getting off with B or flirting with B... my brain makes a connection between those activities and the man standing a few feet away from me.

He hasn't noticed me yet, having immediately opened a locker and stuffing his bag inside, yanking his shirt up over his head and tossing it in. His back is to me, showing off the masterpiece etched into his skin.

Those branches that outline his ribs wrap around to a big, hollow tree trunk taking up the lower half of his back. The trunk has words—symbols—carved into its base, but they aren't like anything I've ever seen before. Above that, across both shoulder blades and trickling down his spine right above the tree trunk is an entire constellation of stars.

More than that, it looks like a night sky, with a bright—almost iridescent—crescent moon and swirls of colors that remind me of galaxy paintings. Green, pink, purple, blue. Amongst all the black and silver ink, they seem to shine.

Maybe he feels eyes on him, or maybe it's just timing, but he turns before I can look away and there's that sweet smile he always gives me. Soft and kind, but his eyes are tired even as he steps up and leans his shoulder on the locker next to mine.

"Hey. How're you doing?"

I laugh away the nerves fluttering around in my stomach and turn to him, patting my abs like a food baby. "Working off that french toast from the cafeteria."

His eyes drop from mine to follow my hand, and something uncertain passes over his face. He bites down on his lip and scrunches up his nose in that cute way he does when he's in thought—how have I never realized the attraction here before?

He shakes his head, slowly trailing his eyes back up to my face... and I wonder if Blair is interested in men, too? He's never mentioned one way or the other, and I don't think I've ever met a girlfriend or boyfriend of his.

"Are you okay?" I ask as he scrubs a hand over his face.

"Just a... weird thought. It's alright."

"Gotcha. Hey, me and Shiloh are gonna grab a bite here in a bit. You wanna join?"

He smiles but dips his head. "Nah. Got tutoring to do. Just thought I'd stop in and... exercise?"

"You don't sound sure."

"There's a pool here, right? Does that count?"

We both laugh, and I motion towards a set of double doors on the other side of the room.

"That way. Though, that's not exactly swim gear."

Blair looks down at the pair of joggers he's wearing, and—shit, *those are the clothes I lent him*.

"No, it's not."

My brain can't get past seeing him in my clothes. Reminding me of how I couldn't stop staring at him that night. Bringing up images of how this would go if this was with B, if we were having one of his 'thought experiments'.

I'd pull him to me, grip his hair, and sink my lips down on his. I'd press us together, push him against the lockers if I needed, and while his mouth was preoccupied with mine, I'd find every line on his body and trace it. I want all of his inked skin under my fingertips.

My dick twitches behind the towel, and I barely manage to hold back a gasp. Right now? Looking at Blair while he blinks up at me like he's considering touching me as much as I want to touch him? Which is ridiculous.

I've never mastered the art of discreetly hiding a hard on, so I just have to hope Blair doesn't look down and notice it filling out.

"You look good," he says, and I don't know why this feels so awkward. I've known Blair most of my life, and we've always been friendly, but it's never felt awkward before. Even when I stared at his junk, he just laughed it off.

It must be me. I'm thinking of all the things B and I have talked about, and I *want*. It's like nothing I've ever felt before.

"Thanks," I manage to croak out as his eyes dip to my chest and his mouth parts slightly.

No. You're just seeing the reactions you want. You've spent way too long suspending reality that now you're mixing it all up.

That doesn't stop the words that come out of my mouth.

"Are you gay?"

His eyes shoot back up, lips quirking up and the awkward air evaporating in a flash. Too bad it's not taking my sudden arousal with it.

Is it possible for a person to look sweet and smug at the same time?

"That's direct," he says, and I think he catches wind of my problem when I shift my hips and nearly groan out loud at the friction. But he doesn't say anything about it. Just looks down and back up. "I'm bi."

I want to kiss that little smile on his face. My heart is pounding in my ears like I've run a marathon. It doesn't mean anything because Blair and I aren't anything. Even if I pretend we are.

That's fucked up, isn't it?

"Atlas." Blair steps closer, and I wish I could sink my hands in his hair and taste my name on his lips. He's got this look that's part curiosity, part something akin to amusement. "Are you?"

Am I?

I know B intrigues me, and Blair has woken up something inside me I didn't know was there. I can't say that, though. It sounds creepy and insane.

Having a full on sexuality crisis over a stranger and my best friend's brother.

"You look good, too," is what I go with as Blair raises his fingertips to my cheek.

His smile moves close to my ear, breath ghosting over my skin that erupts in goosebumps.

"You're flushed. You should go home."

That first touch is like lightning under my skin, like tendrils of a scorching heat that shoots down to my groin.

I'm so hard my dick hurts. All I can do is nod, afraid if I try to speak I'll say something embarrassing like 'touch me' and hell knows I'd probably go off the moment he did.

"Tell Shiloh to be ready in the morning so I can pick him up for his appointment."

He smiles at me again and disappears around the row of lockers. I wait until I hear the main door swing shut and then collapse onto the bench.

One minute.

Two.

Five.

I'm still hard. And my brain is fuzzy. The locker room seems to have cleared out in the time we were talking, and I'm glad there's no one here to witness my floundering.

I could text B. He could help me take the edge off.

But is that a good idea? If I think about Blair any more, I might start popping boners every time I see him. Which is inconvenient as hell since he's practically like a brother to me and is a regular part of my life.

Maybe B can just give me some advice? If something comes from that... then it's mutual, right?

**Me:** I need your help, please.

A few minutes later, my phone buzzes against my thigh, and it makes my dick jump.

**B:** Anything.

I chew my lip, wondering if this is crossing a line. He'll tell me no if I am. We've never been afraid to tell the other we're uncomfortable. I just wish I could think straight and not only about how badly I need to come.

**Me:** I'm hard, horny, and trapped in the gym locker room.

**B:** You don't need my permission to get off, you

know. Tug one out.

Me: Smartass. I'm not asking for permission. I

wanted to try something with you.

**B:** *Oh? Like what?* 

**Me:** Could I call you?

He's silent for a bit, and I have to squeeze my throbbing

erection and massage my heavy balls as they ache for release.

Fuck, he's right. I should just hop in one of the showers and

milk the horniness right out of myself.

I don't want to, though.

I want B to touch me.

I want *Blair* to touch me.

Fuck, what have I done?

**B:** Give me five minutes to get somewhere without

prying ears.

**Me:** *I don't think it's going anywhere.* 

**B:** And I'm the smartass?

While I wait, I go ahead and head over to the shower cubicles. None of them seem to be occupied, so I pick one furthest away from either of the doors and pull the curtain closed. I figure I'll wait to turn the water on until B's ready, but I drop the towel the instant I'm alone and grip my shaft in a tight fist.

God, it feels so good. There's so much fucking precum I could start my own lube factory, and thank fuck there's no one to overhear the whimper that falls from my lips as I give a slow pump and drag my thumb over the smooth, slick head.

I've never been this needy to be touched.

Never been this desperate for an orgasm.

This could be over in less than a minute, but I want it to be B's voice talking me through this.

My phone buzzes on the little shelf just above the showerhead, and I let go of my dick to check it.

#### B: Call me.

I don't hesitate to hit the button, and it barely rings once before he answers.

"Hello?" His voice is hushed and a little raspy, and the sound goes straight to my dick. "A?"

"I'm here," I gasp, holding the phone with one hand and reaching for the shower knob with the other.

The sound of water on tile fills the quiet space, and my own shakey exhales expel from my chest.

"B," I whine, unable to keep the need out of my voice. "I'm a horrible fucking person. He barely touched me, and I feel like I'm coming apart."

I wish I could put the phone on speaker, so I could close my eyes and pretend he's here for whatever it is he's going to say, but I can't risk anyone overhearing what I hope is going to happen.

"He affects you that much?" B's voice is hesitant, whispered and slightly echoed like he's hiding somewhere. He could be; I have no idea what I interrupted by asking for this.

"I think it's us," I say, breathing heavily through my nose. "Our thought experiments. Thinking about him when I'm with you. My body is confused. But I wanted to kiss him so goddamn bad. I wanted to kiss *you*."

My free hand strays back down to my cock, turning an angry red and making me cry out as soon as my hand circles around it.

"B."

"I've got you, A. Are you thinking about him?"

I close my fist over the tip and shut my eyes, head thumping back on the shower wall.

"Yes. I'm thinking about him. I'm thinking about us. B, I need to come so bad. Wish you were here to touch me."

I hear his sharp intake of breath in my ear followed by a muffled pleasured noise.

"We shouldn't do this," he whispers.

I gulp and still my hand, trying to push past all the adrenaline surging through my system.

"I won't force you. Fuck, I'm sorry if I've crossed a line. There's just no one else I want. No one else I can think about. I've never felt like this. I've never wanted like this, and I don't know—"

"I said we shouldn't, not that I didn't want to. I do, A. I want to hear you come. Hear you say my name while you do it."

My strokes are slow at first, just taking the edge off, but then I see Blair in the darkness behind my closed eyes. I see his tattoos; I see the dimple that pops when he smiles; I see the way his eyes took me in like he felt a fraction of the pull to me that I feel to him.

I hardly notice that I'm working my cock with a punishing pace until B's voice breaks through my thoughts.

"Slow down, big guy. Take it easy for me."

My body obeys instantaneously.

"Touch your cock for me, baby," he says, voice low and soft.

I circle the base of my cock with my forefinger and thumb, holding and waiting for instructions. It's so much easier when I don't have to think about it. When B tells me what's happening and takes charge.

"So good. I want you to stroke up slowly. Can you do that?"

I nod even though I know he can't see me and drag my fingers along my shaft. Precum drips down over my knuckles, and instead of pleasure all I can focus on is the sound of B's breathing down the line.

"Fist yourself loosely and ride your hand. You can go slow or fast, but don't increase the pressure, okay?"

I open my eyes just enough to look down at my hand, watching the way the head pops in and out between my fingers as I give experimental thrusts.

"Talk to me, A. I need to know you're okay," B says, his voice raising just slightly.

"I am. Just focusing."

He hums, a faint rustling sound interrupted by a satisfied exhale.

"Good. Focus on how good your hand feels. How good your body feels."

My body feels like it's a live wire, like it's a bomb waiting to detonate at any given touch. B's breathing changes, turns shallow, and my hips start pumping faster as I imagine what he could be doing.

"Are you touching yourself?"

He huffs out a laugh, which falls into a groan. There's a quiet thunk and squelching sound that has my dick throbbing. "How can I not? Thinking about you—right this second, I want to push you against the wall and rub our cocks together. I want to hold us both in my hand and grind our heads into my palm. Press our slits together and make your dick leak into mine."

Why is that so fucking hot? I've never thought about what two guys can do with their dicks, but I can almost imagine the pleasure as I press on my own slit and watch the precum drip down.

"B, I'm so fucking wet."

He breathes in sharply and lets it out as a growled and garbled moan.

"From the shower or from—"

"My cock. What else would you do to me? Please, B, I need to picture you."

A hesitant, humored laugh falls from his lips, and then his voice is even raspier in my ear.

"Want me to paint you a picture, big guy? About how I want to fuck my cock on yours until I coat it in cum, and then I want to drop to my knees and take you down my throat. I want to taste both of our arousals, both of our releases on my tongue."

"Oh god." I pump my cock in long, even strokes, shaft thickening in my grip until my entire body pulls taut. "B, I'm so close."

"Me too, baby, me too."

I let my eyes fall closed again, thighs quaking as the impending orgasm builds in my balls. It's not even anything sexual that does me in. It's picturing B—*Blair*—on his knees, dragging him up while he's dirty and out of breath, and kissing him until he's gasping for air.

That's the image that sends me over.

I have to bite down on my lip hard to keep from screaming, cum shooting from my dick like a geyser only to be washed down the drain. The phone nearly slips from my fingers as I milk the orgasm, choppy pants seesawing out of my chest. My vision whites out, and my eyes close as an unnatural heaviness settles over me.

I feel the cool tile beneath me as I sink down, but it doesn't feel like a conscious effort.

"Are you okay?" The voice coming through the phone sounds like it's underwater, and I grunt what's supposed to be an affirmation.

My head is fuzzy and what's louder than my thoughts is the thundering of my heart as it smacks into my ribcage over and over.

"Fuck. Answer me, please."

I try, but my mouth is full of cotton balls, and the pressure in my chest intensifies until I'm gasping and panting. Does this still count as breathing?

I can't open my eyes. It takes a tremendous amount of strength and feels like wading through sludge, but I manage to pull my knees up and press my head to the cool, damp skin.

The shower is still running.

Moving feels impossible.

What just happened?

I don't think I'm holding the phone anymore. I can't hear anything.

Sleep, my mind tells me. Stop fighting and sleep.

There's a reason I shouldn't.

But I can't remember what it is.

I'm half drifted off when something warm touches my shoulder. My neck. My cheek. There's water dripping down my face as someone brushes the wet hair back, but I still can't open my eyes.

"Atlas." It's hazy, but I recognize the voice.

An arm comes around my shoulder and tugs—and my rigid posture collapses like a stack of dominos. I let him pull me into his side and press my nose to his neck. He smells like sex and sweat.

Should I find that comforting?

His hand smooths down my back, my sides, settling on my hip and holding me close.

"I've got you," he says, and the adrenaline leaving my body has me sagging against him. I want to say thank you. I want to say I'm sorry, but my tongue is too thick and the call of sleep is stronger than I can fight.

It's okay to rest, though. It's okay to let go.

Because B will rein me in and bring me back.

# Chapter 8

### BLAIR

I WASN'T REALLY TRYING to scope out A, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't motivated to make a trip to the gym in hopes of catching a glimpse of who he could be.

Call it the romantic in me, wanting to know if this connection we've forged is real or purely imaginary.

The last person I ever imagined being on the other end of these conversations was Atlas Huxley.

The moment I saw him in the locker room, something clicked into place. Every little thread and comment that sounded vaguely familiar—they all pointed to him.

If I had to put a bet on Atlas being interested in anyone, it would be Shiloh. But the way he looked at me, the way his voice sounded on the call, those were all for *me*.

Me as in B.

Me as in Blair.

It sounds like a cosmic mistake, because being wanted by a stranger is a stretch, but being wanted by Atlas? That's an impossibility.

"He's fine," Nurse Landry says as she steps away from the curtain separating Atlas' bed and the rest of the room. "He's sleeping. Looks like a mild panic attack, but he should be fine once he's had some rest. They can really wear you out."

Don't I know it.

"Should I take him back to his dorm, or..."

"He can stay here," she says, offering me a gentle smile. "You're welcome to stay with him if you want."

I nod and slip past her, taking up the lone chair beside Atlas' bed. He was able to help me get him dressed before I brought him to the nurse, but he was unresponsive and groggy the whole time. She gave him some kind of pill when we got here, and that seems to have knocked him out, or maybe settled him enough that he was able to rest.

Right now all I want to do is work through the chaos in my head initiated by what Atlas and I have been doing for the last week.

I've had lots of meaningless sex, where I know I want something deeper but they don't. Atlas can't fall onto that list.

A was supposed to be a hookup I knew I'd secretly get attached to but would never actually have. That's how it works for me.

Knowing it was Atlas on the phone—listening to him get off and touching myself in return—it changes things. Complicates them.

That's a problem for later, though. Right now, Atlas needs someone to be here for him.

And that someone shouldn't be me.

"What's up?" Shiloh's voice breaks through the phone's static and shrill ringing. "I remember the appointment, don't worry."

"Hey, bud. It's not that." I look over at Atlas with his light snoring and the way he's squishing his face with his palm. "Atlas is in the infirmary. Wasn't sure if you had class, but I wanted to let you know he's alright and might need you when he wakes up."

"Shit," Shiloh curses. "Did he hit his head? He doesn't need a hospital, does he?"

"Nah. Just, uh, he wasn't feeling well at the gym earlier. I happened to stop by. I think he's just exhausted."

"Yeah, okay. I can be over there in like ten minutes. Keep him company for me until then?"

"Will do," I say, ending the call and stuffing the phone back in my pocket.

I brush my fingers through the still damp hair at Atlas' forehead and try to consolidate the idea that sweet, dirty, curious A is right in front of me. That if he were anyone else, I

could lean down and capture his lips with mine, taste the kisses he pretends to give solely because he knows I like them.

I fell into like with him from the get go.

What sort of heartache have I gotten myself into?



WHEN I'M STRESSED, I clean. It probably stems from some trauma of living in a shithole most of my life, but questioning it doesn't do me any good.

I straightened my room an hour ago, tidied up the living room thirty minutes ago, and now I'm scrubbing out pots and pans and bleaching the sink to keep potential gnats away.

The elastic holding the hair out of my face is about worn out, and I keep wiping suds on my forehead and cheeks when I push it back.

The mess in my head doesn't alleviate for long, and remembering the way Atlas' voice went from pleasured to pained haunts the back of my mind like one of those No Sleep posts you find on Reddit when you're up in the middle of the night.

I move onto the silverware, with seven spoons and seven forks and seven butter knives because if we didn't have the same number of each of them, Noah would lose his marbles.

We have some miscellaneous cooking knives from a set Atlas gave me for my birthday one year, and even though they don't get much use because my cooking skills are basic at best, I still pull some of them out on occasion—usually when he and Shiloh visit—because it brings the biggest smile to his face.

I pause where I've picked up and started scrubbing the big cutting knife. Have I always thought of Atlas as more than just Shiloh's best friend? Seeing him smile has always made me happy. Anything I'd do for Shiloh, I'd do for Atlas just as earnestly.

Atlas is family in all the ways that matter.

But he's also like sunshine in a bottle. Pure and blinding.

I've never seen beyond the light on the surface until I started talking to A. Now I've caught a glimpse between the cracks, and I don't want to take away that safe place he's built with 'B'.

But is it wrong of me to pretend now that I know the truth?

"Blair-Bear, you're bleeding!"

Noah's panicked squeak has me dropping the knife and sponge into the soapy water, and the stinging in my arm registers as I blink through the haze.

There's a thin line of blood trickling down my wrist and into the water, and I press a finger to the little half inch mark where I must have grazed it while I was off in my head.

"I'm alright." I turn the sink on and hold my arm under the water while I dig around in one of the drawers for where we keep the washcloths. Once most of the blood is rinsed away, I

switch the water off and hold the cloth to my arm until the bleeding stops.

Noah keeps watching me and worrying his lip from where he's perched at our tiny counter, and I step over to place a gentle kiss on his forehead.

"I'm alright," I reassure him. "Just a little nick. Got a bit lost in thought."

He doesn't look convinced, a pout taking over his mouth the longer he gazes up at me. "I'd offer to kiss it better, but I really don't like bodily fluids."

I raise my brow, and the pout lets up long enough for a tiny giggle to slip out of him. "Other than spit. I'm good with spit."

He tilts his face up, and I place a quick kiss on his lips just as there's a knock on the door.

"You expecting company?" I ask.

He shakes his head, stealing another kiss. "No. You?"

I shrug and take a couple of steps over to the door, coming face to face with a tray of something hot and chocolatey as soon as I pull it open.

"That's one way to greet someone," I say as Atlas lowers the tray and Shiloh rolls his eyes, cocking his hip on my door frame.

"I told him to rest. I really did," Shiloh says, putting both hands up in mock surrender. "He insisted on baking. Oh, and I have board games." He taps a bag on the floor with his foot.

"Am I missing something?"

Atlas hasn't looked up once since I opened the door, a tight expression on his face.

"Family game night." Shiloh waves his hand dismissively and shoulders his way inside with the bag.

Alright. I guess that's decided then.

When I reach out to grab the tray of what I think are cookies from Atlas' hands, his eyes catch on the cloth still on my wrist, and he quickly switches the sweets to one hand and gently grasps my wrist in the other.

He lifts the towel, and without the pressure blood wells back up and drips from the wound. I haven't taken a good look at it yet, so I'm not sure if it's because of the fact my body is slow at clotting or if that knife cut deeper than it looked.

"Dishes," I say, trying to crack a smile, but the way Atlas' already bleak expression dims obliterates my efforts and my shoulders fall. "I was just about to go to the bathroom and get it cleaned up."

He nods, a little bit of the wariness lifting. He drops his grip from my wrist to my fingers, twining them between his and stalking into the apartment like it's his own, pulling me behind him.

Atlas is no stranger to my apartment; he and Shiloh have dropped by unannounced plenty of times, wanting to hang out for the evening. He drops the tray of sweets off in the kitchen and shuffles us both into the bathroom, shutting the door behind us and having me sit on the toilet seat while he digs under the sink.

After he pulls out what he needs, he leans against the counter and holds out his hand. "Can I see?"

I toss the washcloth into the laundry basket by the bathtub and stare down at the little cut causing all this trouble before doing as he asked.

It's quiet as he rubs a cotton swab of peroxide over the sensitive skin, so when a sad noise leaves his throat—something that might come from a wounded animal—my head snaps up as tension fills my spine.

Atlas drags his thumb in a gentle stroke across my wrist, and I know exactly what he's feeling. It's a collection of scars, too many to count, bleeding into each other. Some older, some newer.

He stares down—rubbing and rubbing so softly like he could erase it with a simple touch—then his eyes flash to mine, sadness and something fierce, something like protectiveness shining in them, and suddenly I can't take it.

I pull my hand from his as easy as I can, tucking my arm into my side and smiling like he hasn't unearthed one of my most well kept secrets.

"Blair." His voice is rough, tone like a kicked puppy.

"I'm alright." Because I am. It's not as bad as it was when Dad would yell at me and work would beat me into the ground, and I had to listen to my baby brother cry himself to sleep at night, all while I had to be the strong one.

Things are hard, but they've been harder, and I do what I can to deal.

Sometimes that means hurting myself so my pain doesn't hurt someone else.

"You needed something else to do with your head, right?" I ask, standing to reach around him and grab a bandaid, sticking it over the cut so it can be over and done with.

He doesn't seem like he wants to let it go, but he nods and looks away. "I wanted to go for a run, but Shiloh vetoed and suggested having a Family Night."

"And like a wet cardboard box, you cave for my baby brother every time."

Atlas groans, biting down on his smile. "I did just give him a minor heart attack." He presses his hand to mine again, offering but not taking. "Thank you for earlier. I'm sorry if I scared you."

I hold up my wrist, breaking contact. "Makes us even."

His brows pinch, but then laughter rumbles out of his chest and he pushes me towards the door. "Fuck your humor, man. I'm going to kick your ass at Twister. And Trouble. And whatever-the-hell-else Shiloh scrambled together for us."

This is what I've always loved about Atlas. His ability to take the serious moments as needed and shift into joking around just as seamlessly.

I can't take B away from him.

It doesn't matter what I'm starting to feel; it's another secret I'll have to bury down in the wasteland of emotions that will either dry up or bleed their way out.

# Chapter 9

### **A**TLAS

IT'S NO SURPRISE THAT Shiloh wants to play Drink or Dare, but we veto that in favor of agreeing to play truth or dare on the condition that he has to win one of the other games first.

Let it be known that Shiloh Novak is nothing if not competitive.

Blair and I both silently agreed to give Shiloh as much hell as humanly possible to keep him from winning, which has been surprisingly fun.

I've had too much time to be in my head today. The nurse said I had a panic attack, and I've been keeping that tidbit to myself. I don't know if she told Blair, or if he already knew because he's the one who showed up, but I haven't wanted to risk saying anything.

Who the hell has a panic attack after an orgasm?

Apparently I do, and I've been too embarrassed to even contemplate talking to B again.

So, I threw myself into baking, and I did my stretches in the room, and I was prepared to burn this shit out of my system until I was too damn tired to think anymore, and I could quit agonizing over how fucking strange B must think I am.

Except here I am, losing a game of Exploding Kittens.

Me and Blair are both out, leaving Noah the only one standing in the way of Shiloh getting what he wants. Which means I'm keeping my distance and preparing for the fact that Shiloh is most definitely going to talk us into alcohol of some kind.

Meaning I dug out some frozen vegetables from Blair's freezer and am making a quick stir-fry to soften the blow.

"We're both going to cave, aren't we?" Blair asks from where he's leaning on the counter beside me. "I think we have a few beers in there and maybe one of those canned sangria things Noah likes."

I sigh, my smile automatic. "Hell yes we will. He should be fine with one beer."

"I just hate seeing him unhappy, you know? At the very least, if he's gonna drink it's with us in a safe environment."

There's nothing awkward about the silence that falls between us, just the sizzling of the vegetables in the pan, Shiloh and Noah's laughter from the couch. As I switch off the eye, there's a victory "Woot!", and Blair and I both chuckle. I reach into the fridge and grab a can of beer and set it on the counter, catching the shake of Blair's head out of the corner of my eye.

"How did we both wind up wrapped around his finger?"

I shrug and pull a couple of bowls out of the cabinet above the sink. "Shiloh is enigmatic. I don't think he realizes how charmed most people are with him."

"Unless they were an absolute asshole, I've never met someone who didn't immediately fall in love with him." He glances over at me with a look in his eyes that I can't read.

He takes the bowl I offer him, and when his fingers brush mine, a wave of heat rolls over me. My mind pops in the image it conjured earlier; the one of me pulling Blair off his knees to slot our mouths together.

My cheeks burn as I duck away, overwhelmed with the urge to reach for him. I finger the phone in my pocket and contemplate sending B a quick message to let him know I'm not ghosting him, but that's exactly what I'm doing, isn't it?

"Atlas?" Blair's voice in my ear and his hand on my shoulder draws me out of my thoughts.

"I'm fine," I say and grab the two bowls to bring over to Shiloh and Noah, tucking the beer under my arm. "When's the last time you had to do one of Shiloh's dares?"

Blair has his bowl and the last one, setting them on the opposite end of the coffee table from the ones I hand to the

others.

"Not long enough that I've forgotten I have to give him boundaries like," he pauses and leans around where I've sat on the couch to lock eyes with Shiloh, "Nobody leaves the apartment, nobody gets blackout drunk, and nothing that can be considered sexual harassment. Genitals stay clothed."

Shiloh rolls his eyes. "Yes, because I want my genitals on display in front of my *brother*."

"The feeling is mutual."

I dangle the beer can near Shiloh but move it out of his reach before he can grab it.

"Community beer. One sip per skip. No downing the whole thing."

Shiloh kicks my shin but doesn't try for the can again. I set it down on the table as he picks up his food and starts eating.

Thirty seconds later, he's downed his food faster than humanly possible, and I try not to choke on my own at his blatant enthusiasm.

The first few rounds of the game are simple, and we irritate the fuck out of Shiloh by playing around him as long as we can to keep him from giving a dare.

He gets us back, though, and barely twenty minutes into the game we've all taken several drinks from the can.

"Alright." Shiloh takes a swig of the beer even though he hasn't skipped a single dare. "Blair. Truth or Dare?"

Blair has a slight rosy hue to his cheeks, having skipped the most turns out of all of us. He readjusts his hair in the elastic, but it only makes the flush more pronounced.

"Truth."

The mischievous glint in Shiloh's eyes isn't promising.

"Big brother," he starts. "When's the last time you got laid?"

Blair goes stock-still, wide eyes flying straight to mine. His lips part, and he looks away just as quickly, pulling his lip between his teeth.

"What do you consider getting laid?" He asks, picking up the beer can and holding it in his hands.

"Getting off with more than just your hand and porn."

The Blair I know would smile, sip the beer, and put it back on the table with a pointed look to his brother. Smug and secretive because it drives Shiloh insane.

He doesn't, though. He stares down at the can, working his lip between his teeth and tongue like this is an answer with a heavy weight attached.

Shit. Is Blair seeing someone? Would explain the bruise at the base of his throat that looks suspiciously like a hickey.

'I can show off the hickey my roommate gave me, if you'd like.'

My gaze bounces from Blair to Noah. I've never seen them be anything but casually affectionate with each other, but the connection in my brain between B and Blair is getting fuzzy. It wouldn't be possible for Blair to be B, right?

Sure, they've both got hickies recently. So do tons of people. And yeah, when I heard his voice I immediately thought of Blair, but I always do when I'm with B. That's part of the experiment. It's just in my head. It's wishful thinking.

"Goddammit," he grumbles, tipping the beer can to his mouth and swallowing gulp after gulp until he crushes the empty can and tosses it on the table. "I'm bi. Last hookup where I touched another person was fuck-if-I-know long ago. Truth or Dare, Shiloh?"

Shiloh blinks and his jaw drops. "What?"

Blair stands and heads over to the fridge, bringing the last few beers and putting them on the table. "Truth or Dare?"

"No, I got that part. Back it up a second. You're bi?"

"Yup."

"I've never seen you with a boyfriend."

"You've also never seen me with a girlfriend."

Shiloh crosses his arms and huffs. "Well, I'd assume you're ace before I'd assume you're bi."

Blair shrugs and takes his seat, leaning against the arm of the couch away from the rest of us.

"You'd be right either way."

This time, both Shiloh and I gape at him. My heart thuds in my chest, pounding out the pattern of Blair's name on repeat. I can explain away a lot of things, but is it possible for this all to be a coincidence?

Shiloh purses his lips and slouches back in his seat against the opposite arm.

"Didn't know we kept secrets from each other."

Blair lays his head on the back of the couch, staring at the ceiling. "Wasn't a secret. I just never thought to bring it up. It's not like I've been dating. I've just been—"

"Sleeping around?"

"Busy."

With Blair and Shiloh spouting off on either side of me, I flinch when Blair raises his voice. He hardly ever shouts or appears outwardly annoyed, so it's always a shock whenever he does.

We all sit in the tense silence as the brothers have a stare off over my shoulder. It isn't until Shiloh leans forward to crack open one of the beers and guzzle a good half of the can down that the bubble pops.

"If it makes you happy, big brother."

I'm not sure whose sigh is louder, Blair's or mine, as I drop my head into my hands.

Jesus, does chaos follow Shiloh wherever he goes?

"Blair-Bear?" A quiet voice speaks up from the other side of the coffee table. The three of us have been sitting on the couch, but Noah decided he'd rather sit on the floor across from us.

"Does that mean we can snuggle now?"

Blair's face softens from the up in arms look he's had the last few minutes, and with a small bob of his head Noah springs up from the floor, clamoring over the table, and depositing himself straight into Blair's lap.

They laugh, arms wrapping around each other, and Blair kisses the top of his head.

"I'm guessing that's not new either?" Shiloh asks, eyeing his can like he's ready to empty it out.

"Nope," Blair pops the 'P' a little too deliberately. "Before you ask, we aren't dating. Noah is asexual and aromantic; He has no interest in getting in my pants or being life partners or anything."

"However," Noah pipes in, laying his head on Blair's chest and watching us through his big, blue, doe-like eyes. "Kissing is very much on the table. Can I do that now?"

"No—" Blair says at the same time Shiloh says, "Yes!"

Blair frowns and Noah beams.

"Noah," Blair says, using the stern voice I've only ever heard him use on Shiloh. "I don't want to kiss right now."

If B is Blair... B loves kissing.

Even though his words are firm, he runs a gentle hand up and down the length of Noah's back, like he's soothing a child.

"Noah could kiss Atlas."

All heads in the room turn to me just as my head shoots up.

I'm not buying the innocent look on Shiloh's face for a second. He leans over and puts a hand on my knee.

"You might be bi, too, right? Why not test that out?"

I can't tell him that I already know the answer, that it's at least fifty percent (and maybe even a hundred if I can convince myself) because of his brother that I confirmed it.

Especially not with Blair right there. What if he connects the dots, too? Oh god, what if he realizes when he found me today was right after we had freaking phone sex?

Oh, double god. What if he *already does* know?

Shiloh doesn't wait for me to answer, just grins and leans around me.

"Noah, truth or dare?"

Noah tips his head back, looks at Blair and then looks at Shiloh.

"Dare."

My best friend's grin widens. "I dare you to kiss Atty."

Noah clambers out of Blair's lap and onto mine, putting his hands on my shoulders and pressing me back against the couch.

"This okay?" he asks, tilting his head and giving me a genuinely sweet smile.

I guess it can't hurt, I think as I settle my hands on his waist and nod.

He drops his head so fast his nose bumps into mine, but that doesn't deter him from repositioning and fitting our mouths together. I chuckle, and he playfully nips at my lip before pressing little soothing kisses all over.

In all honesty, it only makes me laugh harder, even though I try to return the kiss. Eventually, he gives up and bites my chin, puffing his cheeks out when he pulls away.

"You're a horrible kisser."

I can't help the way my whole body shakes with laughter. I give his waist a gentle squeeze and place a kiss on his cheek, then gently coax him to stand.

"I think you're a little too enthusiastic for me."

Noah pouts, and where I expect him to crawl back to Blair, he puts his hands on his hips and pouts.

"I don't like this game. I want to go out."

"Out where?" I ask.

Noah trains his eyes on Blair, who sits up straight and gives us all a lopsided smile. "'Out' means he wants to go to Knockout. It's a queer club over in Oakvale."

"Didn't know you went to queer clubs, *Blair-Bear*," Shiloh says with a widening grin. "I could do with some loud music and naughty dancing."

Blair's own smile falters as he rubs a hand over his eyes. "I'm already getting a buzz headache. Can you all give me an hour?"

Shiloh fist pumps the air, and Noah's stance relaxes with a pleased smile.

As the others start moving around, Blair turns to me, a hand on my knee that sends a shiver up my spine.

"How about you? You feeling up to going out?"

I nod, the idea of shutting off and getting lost in sounds and moving bodies becomes more and more appealing as B starts coming back to mind. It's natural for me to place my hand over Blair's and squeeze our fingers together.

"Tylenol and water. I have a feeling we're going to wear you out."

Blair chuckles and presses his shoulder to mine.

"I wouldn't have it any other way."

### Chapter 10

#### BLAIR

I DON'T FEEL SO fuzzy by the time Shiloh comes barreling back into the apartment forty-five minutes later.

I've been staring at myself in the bathroom mirror for at least fifteen of those, and part of it is that I haven't put eyeliner on in so long it feels like I've forgotten how, and the other part is that this is part of my life—part of who I am—that I've kept from my brother and just about everyone.

But Noah threatened to withhold cuddles if I tried to leave in a hoodie, and the cuddle-slut in me couldn't have that.

So here I am in one of my Icon For Hire band tanks, neon orange leggings that make me impossible to miss under all the pulsing lights, and my hair partially pulled back to keep it out of my face while I'm trying not to poke myself in the eye with the liner stick.

Someone pounds on the door—interrupted by a hushed voice—and a second later the door clicks open slowly.

"Hey." It's Atlas, which brings a smile to my face as I pack up the tiny bag of makeup I hardly ever bring out. "Cool if I come in?"

"I'm decent, don't worry."

He steps inside and shuts the door, sighing and resting his weight against it. "Loh is going to give me a run for my money tonight."

Atlas isn't a partygoer, not unless it's a fraternity or sorority party, so I'm not surprised that his attire is a pair of form fitting jeans and a tee that stretches snuggly over the bulge of his muscles.

He's every little gay boy's wet dream, and I'm no exception.

Which reminds me of a conversation I had with 'A' while I was getting ready.

**A:** I'm sorry about before. It wasn't your fault. I promise. I'm just a mess.

Me: You don't have to apologize. But maybe we should ease up on the sex stuff? I don't want you to push yourself.

**A:** Pushing myself with you is how I've discovered that my sexual attraction boils down to two people—you being one.

**Me:** Would the other be this crush that you have?

**A:** Bingo. Tonight I'm going to find out if the attraction is mutual.

I'd wished him luck, but I knew tonight would be a turning point for us. A and B. Atlas and Blair. Both relationships are going to change, and I'm not sure yet if it's for better or worse.

His golden brown hair is mused like he's been running his fingers through it, and when his honey colored eyes meet mine it's like all of the oxygen in the room is sucked out between us.

"Woah," he says, eyes raking over my body in a way that has heat coiling in my core. "You look good."

Our eyes meet again, and it's like my body has a mind of its own as I step closer to him, only stopping when we're inches apart and I can reach up and twist one of his curls around my finger.

"So do you."

Atlas brings his hand up to my wrist, slowly pulling it away, but keeping his fingers on my skin even after.

"We should get going before Shiloh pre-games the rest of your beer."

I smile because Atlas does, and his happiness is contagious. I thread my fingers through his and pull him away from the door, only letting go when I slip out and he mumbles "gotta piss."

Shiloh is leaning against the wall—obviously waiting on his best friend—and he gives me a cocked brow but also an approving nod.

"Nice outfit."

It's times like these that I remember how vastly different our genes turned out. We might have the same parents, but whereas I take heavily after our Korean mom, Shiloh's looks lean more toward Dad's side, who is all southern American.

We both have dark hair and dark eyes—Shiloh's more on the light brown side—and Shiloh has a mess of curls that would put a curling iron's work to shame. He's shorter and slightly less filled out than I am, but honestly not by much.

He has a graceful physique but could snap you in two in a heartbeat.

"Noah just finished off the brownies and is bouncing around like a kangaroo."

I chuckle, leaning on the wall beside Shiloh.

"He's ready to find a make out orgy to join."

Shiloh blinks slowly. "Make out orgy?"

"Yup. Noah doesn't do sex, so when he wants to 'hook up' it usually involves finding a group willing to swap spit with him for half the night."

"Okay," Shiloh says. "So he's a lip whore?"

I choke back a laugh. "Something like that."

The toilet flushes in the bathroom, and I throw my brother a quick smile. "You gonna be good tonight?"

He knows I don't mean if he's going to behave. I mean is he going to be able to handle the noise and the alcohol with his moods still being a little out of whack.

Still, he nods. "If it's too much, I'll let Atty know I need to go home."

"That's all I ask." I raise my knuckles for a fist bump, and Shiloh just snorts.

"You're only two years older than me. Quit acting like an old man."

Shiloh is quick to snag Atlas' attention as soon as the bathroom door opens, dragging him down the hall with bubbling excitement.

I shouldn't encourage this thing between Atlas and I.

It could be dangerous to his relationship with Shiloh.

To my relationship with Shiloh.

But tonight he plans to test our attraction, and I'm not sure I'll be able to hold mine back when he does.



KNOCKOUT IS LOUD, BUT it's friendly. Noah pulls me through the doors and makes an immediate dash toward the

bar where an older man is sipping a whiskey and watching him approach.

I don't know the guy, but Noah has met with him a couple of times and seems to trust him, so other than keeping an eye on him, I don't interrupt his date.

I spot Shiloh and Atlas by a pool table, laughing and ribbing each other as they take turns with the cue. We took separate cars, and Noah and I spent a couple of minutes kissing in mine before we came in, so they've had a little time to settle in.

My feet are rooted to the spot near the entrance. Logic tells me to go over and join them, spend time with my brother and friend, but instinct tells me to turn away and go to the dancefloor. To get lost in the beat and hands that follow.

"Blocking the way, hot stuff."

Speaking of hands, a set lands on my hips and gently moves me to the side. One glides up my ribcage and the other cards through my hair as hot breath puffs against my neck.

"Pretty boys shouldn't be hanging around unless they want to get snatched up."

Usually I'm up for moves like this. I don't mind the flirting and being manhandled around as long as hands stay above the belt. My skin tingles where the stranger touches, but it isn't the same as usual. It feels ever so slightly wrong.

I try to step away, but he pulls me back, gripping his hand in my hair and pressing his body flush against mine.

"You're dressed up for a fun time. Don't play hard to get."

I'm not the one who's hard, I think as his erection digs into my back.

He doesn't do anything other than sway us to the beat and grind his hips into my ass, so I close my eyes and decide to wait until he loses interest.

Could I break his nose and get him to let go? Probably.

But this doesn't feel *bad*, and men usually move on pretty quickly when I'm not responding to them. They either want enthusiastic participation or someone who's going to fight back.

I don't do either. I just wait.

Two songs pass before I feel lips on my neck, and this time I elbow the fucker in the ribs and wrench away.

"That's two points, asshole. Don't make me give you a third."

He grumbles but doesn't reach for me again, heading for the mess of bodies a few feet away without another look in my direction.

Fingertips wrap around my own, and I'm instantly on high alert, but I know the laugh that follows. I know the hand that rests on my shoulder and squeezes.

"I was beginning to wonder if I needed to come over and rescue you."

"Nah," I say, turning and flashing Atlas a smile. "I can handle douchebags like that. No one touches me unless I let them."

"Hot," he says, and then his jaw drops and his eyes widen as pink fills his cheeks.

It doesn't feel different. Talking to A. Talking to Atlas. He's the same person either way.

I lace our fingers together and tug him toward the dancefloor, my heart pounding with the beat and the image of his flushed cheeks in my mind.

"Dance with me?"

He nods wordlessly, and as a new song starts up I drag his hands to my waist and let the music guide the way my body rolls and rocks against his. He's stiff at first, as if he isn't sure how to touch and move with another person, so I turn in his arms and work mine from his waist, up his toned chest, and wrap them around his neck.

I lean in close to his ear, but it's *his* breath that puffs against my skin.

"Loosen up, Atlas."

His fingers dig into my hips, but he slowly starts moving, following where I lead him.

"There you go," I whisper and turn back around, winding my arms around his neck again and leaning into his chest.

He finally starts to relax as the song plays on, as I turn my head to brush his cheek with my own and smile at him. He returns it, hands going from my waist to my hips and back up. Every little touch feels like relief, and when his fingers slip under my shirt and tease the skin there, my whole body lights up. I push into his touch, and it becomes more sure, traveling up and dancing around my ribs, hesitant over my chest. I drop my hands to his, guiding their movements until his touch is seared into my skin.

Soon it's impossible to tell who is leading who, both of us laughing and dancing to the beat seamlessly.

I should be resisting the urge to have his hands on me, but after the dickhole that couldn't take a hint, Atlas' touch is nice. It's comforting.

It's a reminder that he's always been more than Shiloh's best friend: he's been one of mine, too.

Is that sad?

It doesn't feel that way with his hard body pushed up on mine.

The song fades out and we silently agree to take a breather. Atlas grips my hand and pulls me over to the bar where we both take a seat, a little sweaty and out of breath.

Since neither of us are looking to get hammered, I order a vodka soda and Atlas just gets a beer.

"Not a huge alcohol drinker," he says with a shrug and brings the bottle to his lips.

"Never would have guessed," I tease, taking a sip of my own drink.

We can't seem to look away from each other, and I'm not sure if it's this connection or if it's the energy of the place worming its way into us.

"Where's Shiloh?" I lean in close so he can hear me.

Atlas rests his elbow on the counter and somehow gets even closer.

"Chatting with some friends by the game tables. Why'd you ask me to dance with you?"

I blink and lean back to see the caution in his gaze.

"Because I like it. Because I trust you to respect my boundaries."

"You didn't set any boundaries."

Not as Blair I haven't. But we've both set and crossed boundaries made together, and I know that those are the same ones he'll use with me.

I can put the pieces together. The things A has told me. Atlas' looks. How he got so hot and bothered from me barely touching him that he had to call so I could get him off.

"You're gentle when you touch me. Most people aren't."

Atlas stares, lips parted, and cups my cheek in his hand. His palm is warm and wide, thumb stroking the tired skin under my eye where the long nights have gotten to me.

"Didn't feel gentle a few minutes ago," he whispers, and I find that I've leaned into him again.

I close my eyes and focus on the soft feel of his fingers as they sift through the strands of hair at my nape. His hand slides down my neck, resting on my pulse point.

"You're beautiful, you know that?" His thumb hooks under my chin, and the silent order has my eyes fluttering open. "This side of you is... gorgeous."

"The slutty side?"

Atlas gives me a hard look. "Not slutty." He tilts his head, and his expression melts into a soft smile. "Sensual. Open."

*Touch-starved,* I want to supply, but I haven't had enough alcohol to loosen my tongue, so I'm able to bite it back.

"I like the colors," he says, dropping his hand to twine our fingers together and hold them on his thigh.

A lot like the make up, it's something I only do when I go out like this with Noah. Black, gray, white, and purple, each color painted on a different nail. That's not always the combination I go with, but tonight it was for Atlas. A show that I see him.

"I'll scrub it off in the morning," I say, finishing off my drink and feeling the warmth spread in my gut.

"Nah, I like it." His smile turns shy. "Ace, right?"

I nod, and he tips back the bottom of his own drink.

"Wanna dance again?"

"Depends." I push off the stool, Atlas' hand still warm in mine. "You gonna be gentle with me?"

I DRINK MORE THAN I plan to. Something about the music and Atlas, about the protective way he holds me as we sway, how his hands grip me tight when someone tries to step in or whisk one of us away.

We dance, we drink, we dance some more. At some point Atlas leaves me at the bar to check in with Shiloh, and my nerves get the best of me. I'm not a hard liquor kind of person, but I have had a few too many shots in too short of a time span. Now my head is spinning, and I'm not sure how long Atlas has been gone—but the worry sets in that he won't come back.

He wouldn't be the first to ditch me here because he had a fun time but not *that* fun. Sometimes guys get fed up when I won't let them grab my junk or slip away to the bathroom for a quickie. I don't usually come to Knockout for the hookups. I come because I need to be touched and this is the easiest way to fill my meter.

"Blair-Bear?"

I blink back the mist of tears in my eyes at the sound of Noah's voice, then force out a smile when his smaller arms wrap around my shoulders. His mussed up hair tickles my cheek, and then those bright eyes are peering up at me, making my smile more genuine.

"Hey, Baby Bear. You heading out?"

"Mhm." He nuzzles his nose against my ear, making little hums and grunts but no actual words.

I slip an arm around his waist and give it a firm squeeze. Over his shoulder, the man whose name I still haven't learned, other than that Noah calls him 'Papa' is standing with Noah's sweater draped over his shoulder.

I hold Noah closer and catch eyes with the older man. "Got a hotel and room number?"

The man smiles, small and indulgent like always, and hands me a card with the name of a nearby hotel on the front and both a room and phone number on the back. Just like usual.

I kiss the top of Noah's head just as he lets go. "You be safe."

He smacks a quick, wet kiss to my lips before grinning wide and bouncing back to the other man's side. When they walk away, it takes me a moment to notice Atlas standing beside me at the bar, leaning on the counter with the sweetest smile I want to kiss.

I almost do, which is how I know I'm definitely on my way to getting drunk.

"You're a great friend," he says, taking my hand and pulling me to my feet. I'm a little unsteady, so he rests his free hand on my waist and lets me lean on his shoulder. "And I think it's time to get you home."

I spread my hand out between his shoulder blades, only half paying attention to the conversation—the other half is busy appreciating the way his muscles flex under my fingers.

He tips my chin up. "Home, B."

Something about that sounds off, but I can't put my finger on it with how much my head is swimming. "Noah took off, and I can't drive like this."

"I'll take you back. Shiloh took my Jeep back to the dorms. One of his buddies got a little too wasted, so he gave them a ride. You cool with that? If I drive your car?"

I nod because Atlas can have or use anything of mine he wants.

That includes some naughty things my alcohol riddled brain decides to conjure up.

Atlas puts both arms around me, and for a moment it's like we're slow dancing. It doesn't make sense with the pounding beat and strobing lights all around us, but when I rest my cheek on his shoulder and he lays his head on top of mine...

It feels like being embraced by a lover.

Not a one night stand or a fuck buddy.

But a partner.

I turn my head into his neck and squeeze my eyes shut, and if he feels the tears that leak out, he doesn't comment. He just holds me tighter.

"I've got you, B."

And isn't that all I've ever wanted?

# Chapter 11

#### **A**TLAS

BLAIR IS IN THE passenger seat with his eyes closed, head back against the headrest as air blows through the open window. He asked me to drive around the back roads a few minutes ago, and I'm not sure if it's because he's starting to feel sick or if he doesn't want to go home.

His car makes lots of noises, and for as old as it is, I'm surprised the thing hasn't broken down. Blair bought the car when he was sixteen for a couple hundred bucks from a shady guy down at the end of the park, and somehow it's survived the last seven years.

I stopped drinking after my second beer, but Blair looked like he was having fun. He's kind of like a faerie when he dances: smooth and graceful. Even when those sensual hip rolls start or his hands begin finding places on my body I didn't know were erogenous, it's like watching magic happen right in front of my eyes.

Blair in his tight clothes and makeup and nail polish, looking like one hell of a sexy badass. I'm used to sweet, thoughtful, quiet Blair; so seeing him be this bold and open cracks something inside me that I didn't know was this close to bursting.

I glance briefly over to Blair, and he cracks one eye open with a tiny smile.

"Watching me?"

I avert my eyes back to the road. "Making sure you're still breathing."

"Not that drunk."

"Can't be too careful."

He hums in response, but I don't know if he closes his eyes again or not, taking a turn that should get us back on the road to his apartment complex. I think he might be falling asleep when I hear a deep sigh, and then he reaches for my hand and closes his fingers over mine.

I give it to him, letting him settle them into his lap.

"Could you do me a favor?" he asks, voice so soft it's a wonder the wind doesn't carry it away.

"Of course."

He takes a big breath in, squeezing my fingers tight as he lets it out.

A beat of silence.

And then...

"If I ask you to touch me tonight, tell me 'no'."

My hand on the steering wheel goes white-knuckled as I try not to let the shock of the statement make me crash the damn car.

"What?"

He makes a wounded sound, followed by a self-deprecating laugh, and when he tries to give up my hand, I don't let go.

"I'm drunk. Drunk enough that I'm horny. Horny enough that I'd let someone touch me; that'd I'd ask them. But I don't actually want that. And I know I'll feel awful about it in the morning."

He turns his head to look at me, a painful seriousness etched into his face. "When you touch me, it's nice. I want you to do it over and over again. But I don't ever want to regret you, Atlas."

I don't know what to say to that, my heart leaping into my throat. We sit with neither of us saying a word as I pull into the lot and find Blair's parking spot. Without the car moving, one of us should make a move to get out. But here we both sit, clinging to each other's hand like a reminder that this moment is unfinished.

Even with the engine shut off and the lights timed out, we both remain still.

I swallow roughly and turn to face him as best I can in the cramped seat. "I won't ever do anything you don't want," I say

slowly. And then I slip my hand from his and raise it to his cheek.

His eyes are slightly unfocused, even as he smiles and leans into my touch. I want to know what this is. I want him to confirm that he feels it, too. That Blair is B and he wants to explore this burning connection as badly as I do.

I don't know what brought this attraction on that night, why now after years of being in Blair's orbit I'm seeing him differently—but it's coming at me hard and fast.

I'm not sure I want it to stop.



BLAIR SPRAWLS OUT ACROSS the couch while I find some instant ramen and an egg to cook together for him. We didn't exactly leave the place in the best of shape before heading out to the bar, so while the water boils I try to straighten things up.

By the time the food is done and plated I've bagged up the garbage, loaded the laundry into the washer that definitely shakes too violently, and have started gathering the ingredients for something that I hope will make Blair smile.

He sits up with a grumble when I set the bowl on the coffee table, but he throws me a whispered thanks and slight grimace. I realize why when he reaches down to adjust the hard on his leggings cling to like a second skin.

I look away when I realize he isn't just adjusting—he's stroking himself.

"Sorry," he mutters around his food, then clears his throat. "Hurts."

All I can think about is how it felt earlier to touch myself. To have B and Blair in my head and the pure relief that came from that release. It brings up the thought that in all of our experiments, B never asked me to touch him, and I never offered.

How would it feel? To hold another cock in my hand?

If I tried and didn't like it, would he be okay with that?

*Shit.* It's not like I'm going to be giving Blair a handjob anyway. He already told me there would be no touching—no matter what else he says.

"Why don't I—um—start you a shower? You could..." I pantomime the jerk-off motion, and Blair's laugh sends the butterflies in my stomach into an uproar.

"I'm good. It's the alcohol. Sober me up some and the constant boner will go away. Sorry it's sort of in your face; I can grab a blanket to put over my lap."

I shake my head, sitting on the couch beside him, maybe a hair too close to show that I'm not scared off by an erection.

"Nothing you gotta hide. Eat up, then I've got a project for you."

He raises his brow and slurps a noodle into his mouth. "You really sticking around?"

I shrug, putting my hand on his knee and squeezing. "What are friends for?"

He groans and pushes my hand aside—not meanly, but firmly—and grips his cock again.

With his face turned to the ceiling, he says, "Please don't touch me right now."

Right. Tipsy Blair is also Frisky Blair.

My instincts roar that it's the exact opposite of what I should be doing, but I respect his request and give him space, moving back to the kitchen to get my supplies ready.

"What are you doing?" Blair asks a few minutes later as he places his empty bowl in the sink.

I hand him a bottle of water and an Advil, and he's already looking a little more steady.

"Your task," I answer once he's gulped down half of the bottle. "We're gonna make something."

He leans over to see what I've set up: parchment paper laid across the counter, a mixing bowl and electric hand-beater. There's also a pan heating up on the stove.

"This looks deceptively simple," he says, and I don't call him out when he rests his cheek on my shoulder, his chest pressing into my side. "It is." I open the cabinet over the stove to pull the sugar down and dig around until I find the remnants of some food coloring from the cupcakes we made for Shiloh's birthday last December. "Ever wanted to make your own cotton candy?"

Blair's brows tick upward, and I bite down on my lip to keep the laughter at bay.

"Have you done this before?"

"Nope." Extra pop on the 'p'. "But I've watched tons of videos."

His laugh reverberates through his chest and my back, and if I brush the back of my hand on his and he doesn't pull away... maybe my heart kicks up a little.

"This is going to be a disaster," he says with a dazzling smile and only the slightest bit of apprehension.

I can't help it; my fingers drift to his temple where I push away a few strands of runaway hair. It's a mess as it is, half in the ponytail, half flying around his face. It makes me feel soft. Cozy.

Like I'm home.

"Let's be disasters together."



WE HAVE A FOOD coloring fight almost right off the bat. First, we can't agree on a color, so we both lunge for them and fight to get the caps off. Then, Blair shoots red and I shoot

green all over the counter—Christmas is coming early in the Novak household, it seems.

We finally settle on making the candy blue, and set the stove to start caramelizing the sugar. While I stir, Blair looks over the rest of the items on the counter.

"You really like baking, don't you?" I don't have to see it to hear the smile in his voice.

"Baking. Cooking. I enjoy them both."

When I was little, Rue used to make me pancakes in the morning, and after school I'd often find him in the kitchen. I don't think Mom realized how often she forgot to pack lunches, and Rue always picked up the slack. Watching him became a favorite pastime of mine.

After he left, I naturally took over. I cooked for the twins and even Ryder on occasion if he was home long enough between bouts of hanging with some local MC club.

We stand in silence, me stirring and Blair watching from the other side of the counter. The distance is barely arms length, but I don't question his need for space. There's nothing awkward about it. It's relaxing, comforting—comfortable.

Once the sugar is fully caramelized, I pass Blair the bowl and mixer. "Ready to spin it?"

He smiles at me like I've just given him something precious, and I swear for a split second I see a flash of heat in his eyes, but then he looks away and it's gone.

I grab a spoon from the drawer and dip it into the honey-like mixture. When Blair turns the mixer on, there's a childish joy that runs between us.

I spoon some of the sugar and hold it over the mixer.

"Ready?"

He nods and I tip the spoon, watching as the thick liquid drips down and slowly spins into little spider-like webs. Some of it does anyway.

The more we pour, the more I'm noticing the sugar flinging back at us, so much so that we both start laughing and turning our faces away to avoid the half-liquid, half-string-like mess flinging around.

In the end, we do get a cute, thin mass of cotton candy-like fluff that looks nothing like what you get at a carnival, but we're able to twirl some on these little kabob sticks and eat them like that. It's too bad we're both smeared with liquid sugar and food coloring.

"Ooh, it's in your hair." Blair leans over and smears his fingers through a few sticky lines of candy coating the hair falling near my eyes.

I have to push my lips together to hold back my shit eating grin because Blair has stripes of the sugar across his nose and cheeks; it's in his own hair so he has no room to complain, and it's splattered all across his tank and arms.

"I think you might need that shower," I say, looking down at my own mess, which Blair obviously notices. "I'll scrub down at the sink. You care if I lose the shirt?"

Blair's lips part and his tongue shoots out to swipe across them. His hands twitch at his side before he folds them over his chest, and a warm hue travels up his neck and cheeks.

"Feel free."

I grab the collar of my tee and lift it over my head, holding out my hand for the washcloth Blair passes me. "Do you need help?"

His lips twitch at the corners. "I think I can manage, but thank you."

With his footsteps padding away, I wet the washcloth and put a dollop of soap on it, scrubbing at all the places I can feel the sticky candy clinging to my skin. My hair gets a full dunk and a dog shake once I've scrubbed the shit out, and I'm searching out the hall closet for a towel when I hear a clattering sound in the bathroom.

"Blair?" I knock on the door, pushing it open just a crack. "Need anything?"

"Um, I might." His voice comes out soft and trembled, but like he's trying to laugh it off. "Got a bit lightheaded."

I step into the bathroom and close the door to keep the warmth in, spotting Blair with the shower curtain half pulled back and sitting cross-legged in the tub. The showerhead is beating down on him while he blinks through the water dripping down his face.

"Jesus," I mutter, rushing over and pulling the curtain the rest of the way back to shut off the water. He looks up at me sheepishly, and I can't help leaning down to brush the wet strands away from his face.

"I don't think I can stand up," he says, voice shaking. His hands are folded over his lap, and his knees are raised like he needs to hide his body from me, so I avert my gaze and toggle the showerhead off before putting the water back on.

"Why don't you sit back in the bath and relax for a bit? I'll bet you'll be ready to crash in no time."

He doesn't argue, just stares down at the water as it slowly fills the tub, and I decide to give him some space by going to his room and situating his bed.

They say your room is a reflection of who you are, but as put together as Blair always appears, his room looks nothing like it. The black and red comforter is pulled back and rumpled with a t-shirt and boxers thrown on top. I relocate them to the hamper by his closet where a few textbooks sit piled in the corner.

The nail polish he used earlier is sitting on his bedside table with the tops only half twisted back on, and there's a box of red hair dye beside them that's unopened and has a thin layer of dust sitting on top.

I close everything up and open the drawer to put them inside, only to find what must be a hoarder's collection of chapstick. Seriously, there's at least thirty of these fuckers all in different flavors.

Just as I finish putting his things away, I notice a couple of scattered sticky notes on the table. A few on the headboard. There's even some on his dresser. They're none of my business, but curiosity wins out as I look them over one by one.

Shiloh Therapist Appointment: \$250

Shiloh New Medication: TBD (set aside \$1000)

Rent: \$1500, overdue (extension given to 26th)

Dad's Porch: \$500

Jesus, and that's not even all of them! There's a gas bill, water bill, and electric bill that all say 'Dad' on them. Plus some other miscellaneous ones that sound a lot like things Blair shouldn't be thinking about much less dealing with. I knew their Dad was an asshole, but I didn't realize he was putting his son in the middle of gang turf bullshit.

My chest aches and my hands itch to rip up every last note and erase them from Blair's mind, but it's not my place. I have to clench my fist and bite down on my lip so hard a sharp metal tang spills across my tongue.

How the hell does he deal with all of this on his own?

Does Shiloh know he does all this?

I can't imagine he does, or he'd be pissed.

Blair brought a towel into the bathroom with him, so I don't have to stop at the hall closet when I go to check on him. He's sitting slouched in the water with his knees pulled to his chest,

arms wrapped around them and chin resting on them as he stares blankly ahead.

I rap on the doorframe, and he turns his head just slightly.

"Feeling better?"

He smiles the barest amount and closes his eyes. "Less fuzzy."

"I cleared off your bed." I walk over to the tub and crouch down on my knees. He makes an affirming noise in the back of his throat, but doesn't otherwise speak. I know I shouldn't, but I raise my hand to his cheek and stroke it softly. "I'm worried about you."

"M'fine," he says on a sigh that makes his entire frame shake.

"You hurt yourself," I whisper, the first time I'm letting it fully sink in.

It's not like I'm a stranger to the act; Shiloh struggled with it for years off and on, and I always felt powerless.

This doesn't feel any better.

Blair opens his eyes and turns one of his palms up, offering it to me. I take it in my free hand, seeing the nick from this morning and the array of faded scars on the surrounding skin. Looking closely, the marks go further up his arm too, disappearing beneath the dark lines of ink.

"I have a system," he says, and we both look up in that moment, catching each other's eyes. "I save up. And when the urge gets strong... I book a tattoo appointment. Socially acceptable self mutilation. It's been a while since I've been able to afford it."

"B." I grip his wrist and his eyes crinkle in confusion before smoothing out.

"It's complicated, Atlas."

"Uncomplicate it for me."

He sighs and runs his fingers over the scars.

"Do you ever feel like you're shouting at a brick wall? Or stuck behind a two-way mirror in a soundproof room and no one hears a thing you say? That's what it felt like every day living in that house. I'm out. Shiloh's out. But I'm still *there*. When I close my eyes. When I stop to think. For years, the only times I was touched was when Dad was feeling violent."

"He hit you?"

His smile is sad, and he drops his arm into the water and out of my hold.

"He'd come into my room at night drunk and throw me around. It was worse on the nights Shiloh was with you. Because I told Dad I wouldn't fight him as long as he never touched Shiloh, as long as Shiloh never knew I let him hit me. There was at least one thing in life I could protect my baby brother from."

"Blair." I don't know what I could say to express the absolute horror forming ice in my veins, but I can sift my

fingers through his hair, pressing them into his scalp and watch his eyes flutter.

"I couldn't save Momma. But I could save Shiloh."

I didn't meet the brothers until after, but I'd heard about the car crash that killed their mother. A drunken driver, Shiloh told me in middle school after he coaxed the answer out of Blair.

I drop my hand to his back, following the colorful swirls near the base of his neck. He tips his head to the side and puffs out a soft breath, eyes shut.

"Who's going to save you?"

His lips curl up in a disbelieving smile, but it falls when I push my thumb against his spine and drag it down until I reach the water just below his ribs.

He shudders, breaths turning shallow.

I'm not supposed to be touching him, but I can't help myself. If he's going to give this much of himself so that there's hardly a piece of him left, then I'm going to be the one to safeguard it. The one who won't let him lose any more of himself.

"What do they mean?" I ask, tracing the stars and tree roots that sit above the water.

"Which one?"

I spread my fingers out across his back. "All of them?"

The smile is back, and when he looks at me, it fills my chest with warmth.

"The galaxy is my favorite," I add.

"I know. Shiloh used to tell me about all the stories you two would come up with about the people living in the stars."

Blair skims a hand over the surface of the water, dipping his thumb in to make a ripple.

"What does it mean?" I press my finger to the moon at the top of his shoulder.

"That I'm bigger than this," he says, eyes going hazy as he gazes off. "I'm more than what's been done to me. I take my pain and turn it into something bigger and brighter. Whenever the pain and heartache gets to be too much... I etch it into my skin and it makes me stronger."

There's a sharp tug in my chest, tears springing to my eyes, but I blink them away.

How could neither Shiloh or I have noticed? The amount of pain Blair's been through? He's basically been raising Shiloh his entire life and apparently dealing with an abusively drunk father on top of it all.

I want to distract him away from it, take the pain away at least for a little while.

"What are the... things? Written on the tree trunk?"

He finally looks at me again and raises onto his knees. I look away because the movement drags his cock out of the water, and I just barely catch his smile as he twists so his back is facing me. He runs his fingers over some of the lettering, which is impressive given there's no way he can actually see them.

"They're Hangul. Korean characters. They're...um, Mom and Shiloh's names. I've got Noah back there, too. The people who mean the most to me."

I hesitate with my fingers hovering over his skin. Of all the places I've touched him tonight, this feels the most intimate. As soon as my fingertips brush the characters, he lets out a content exhale. I trace each one, and then the bark of the tree trunk, the branches that outline each rib, and when I start to pull away he threads his fingers over mine and wraps them around himself.

He rests our hands over the Dahlia on his stomach, and I can count each individual inhale and exhale through the touch.

"Blair." I press my chest to his back, leaning over him at a slightly awkward angle because of the tub.

"I've never told anyone," he says, stroking his fingers over the backs of my hands. "No one but you, A."

If I was looking for confirmation, I just got it. B is Blair, and here he is pouring his heart out to me because the liquor opened him up, and that shit has to go somewhere.

"Not even Noah?" I ask, partially because I don't understand their relationship, and partially because I want to hear him say it again.

He turns his head, our faces inches apart as I hook my chin on his shoulder. "No one but you, *Atlas*."

That's when it happens. When I see the loneliness, the longing in his eyes, and I know I promised him I wouldn't, but

I can't be the only one coiled so tight for the need to connect in a more substantial way.

I press forward until my lips barely graze his, and then I just breathe. Watch the way his eyes widen and then fall to half mast. His lips close over mine, and it doesn't feel electric. It doesn't feel like every little thing is finally falling into place.

It feels like peace. Like surrender. My mind goes blank other than the rough feel of Blair's chapped lips on mine, how they soften as my mouth moves against his.

It's short and sweet, and for the first time in my life when I pull away I wish I could press back in for more.

His eyes flicker open a moment after mine, and I can swear I see the moment his walls fall. Walls I'd never known were there in the first place.

He threads a hand back in my hair, Adam's apple bobbing as he swallows and releases a heavy breath.

And then he kisses me again, pulling me to him in a non-negotiable grip. It's still sweet. It's still slow. But now his tongue is stroking my mouth, seeking permission, and I give it to him without hesitation. He explores my mouth, and I think about how he still tastes faintly of alcohol, so before he can push for more, I break away and lower my lips to his shoulder.

His breathing is labored and ragged, and as I wait for us both to calm down, I spot the purple splotch just below his collarbone. The one he said Noah left. The one he pretended he thought about me while getting.

It's an awkward stretch, but I lean over him enough to close my lips over the spot, and without another thought I suck the bruised skin between my lips. He gasps, the hand in my hair tugging harshly but not in a move to pull me away. Pressing me closer. Asking for more where words fail him.

This might be one of those things we both regret in the morning.

But I can't bring myself to care.

I pull away and run my nose along the shell of his ear. His hand falls to my neck and holds me in place.

"B," I breathe, and this... *this* is the moment something falls into place.

I don't know what, but it feels big.

It feels like it could be everything.

## Chapter 12

## BLAIR

I WAKE UP WITH my mouth tasting like piss and my dick throbbing between my thighs. It's not a wait it out kind of boner either; it's one that will plague me all damn day if I don't take care of it.

I don't think it's safe to do heavy construction with a hard on.

But when I shift onto my back to grip myself over the fabric of my boxers, something in the bed moves beside me, and last night comes back in a series of flashes that makes my head ache.

Atlas Huxley is in my bed.

He's still asleep, arms wrapped around a pillow and his hair sticking up in all directions. There's a line of drool dripping from the corner of his mouth, and without thinking I lift my hand and wipe it away with my thumb.

He stirs slightly, and I yank my hand away, not proud of the fact that I shove it down my pants and grip my shaft with slick fingers.

I can feel the memory of every touch, of Atlas' hands on my body, his lips on my neck and covering my mouth. He tasted like candy, and what I wouldn't have given to devour him.

But Atlas kept his word, and other than getting in bed and kissing my mouth raw, he didn't lay another hand on me.

My dick aches for the friction as I pump it slowly, milking precum from the tip until I coat myself with it. My boxers are sticky with it, but it'll be much less mortifying if Atlas wakes up and catches me jerking off but can't actually see my dick.

It's restricting, though, and I can't get the momentum I need to push me over the edge. So, in a last ditch effort to get it over and done with, I shove my boxers under my balls and hammer my hips into my fist.

I'm not thinking of cocks or tits or asses. All I've got on my mind is the way Atlas kissed me. The gentleness with which he gave himself to me.

No one does that.

"Blair?" The groggy voice to my right has me stilling my hand and gripping the base of my cock to keep the impending orgasm at bay, but there's no stopping the disappointed moan that escapes my throat in response.

The room is silent, but any hope that he doesn't know what I was doing is shattered when I turn my head and see him

watching me with wide eyes. His gaze is on my face, but for a second they flicker toward my waist. He gulps and forces his eyes back to mine.

I drop my hand from my throbbing cock and curse under my breath. I should have just gone to the damn bathroom instead of jerking it like a creeper beside my brother's best friend.

"You don't have to stop," he whispers, and my heart kicks up like a jackrabbit in my chest. "I'll turn away."

He makes a move to roll to his other side—to give me his back and a smidge of privacy—but in a moment of pure insanity, I shake my head and call his name.

"Atlas, wait."

He stops, flopping onto his back, and I have to lick my lips to ease the tingles as they crave contact with his mouth and flushed cheeks.

I swallow roughly, working my jaw to loosen the words begging for a way out.

"You've heard me come before," I say, and he nods with a look in his eyes that coaxes me forward. "You could watch. If you wanted."

It's stupid, but I want to ask him to kiss me. That's all. While I work my cock, I just want Atlas to kiss me like he did last night. But that's not something you ask the guy you're supposed to be denying your attraction to.

But asking him to watch you jerk off is perfectly acceptable?

I open my mouth to take it back, but then Atlas settles on his side, those big brown eyes watching me, and I don't want to.

My movements are still hidden by the comforter, so I start up a slow rhythm. Atlas' eyes widen, transfixed on the rise and fall of the blanket.

Last night, every touch was like a brand: hot and searing even through my clothes. Now it's his gaze making my skin scorch and my composure unravel.

Yesterday, I came to the sound of his voice. Today, I'm going to come from the way his eyes follow every little movement.

Fuck.

It's weird. And for as turned on as I am, the little bit of unease trapped in my shoulders is making my dick flag.

Atlas had a fucking *panic attack* when we crossed this line before. What if he doesn't actually want this? What if I do something to set him off again?

I swallow hard and drop my hand, throwing an arm over my face.

There's a pressure in my chest. One that's full of trapped emotions and a frayed ball of desire that's going to plague me all day, but I'd rather suffer through perpetual blue balls than risk hurting Atlas.

It's the same logic that helped me bite my tongue when all I wanted last night was to have his hands all over my body.

The covers rustle, and when they pool around my waist, I lift my arm to see Atlas has sat up. He's in an equal state of undress, and those eyes are boring down at the tats covering my chest.

He splays his hand over my pecs, tracing petals and vines with his fingertips. My breath is trapped in my chest, muscles locked tight at each electric press of skin on skin.

"Can I look at you?" He whispers as his hand travels lower, as it follows every line of ink until he reaches the edge of the blanket.

My words are still being held hostage by his touch, pushed further down by the smile on his full, pink lips as he brushes the mask of hair away from my face.

"I'm going to kiss you," he says, but he pauses a beat as if to give me a chance to say no or show any indication that I don't want it to happen.

I do.

My lips part, and he takes that as his invitation. It's the lightest press of his lips to mine, of his hot morning breath rushing over my face. I smile, and he presses a little harder until I yield, reminding me exactly what it was like to kiss him last night.

He's skimming my chest, pressing into the indents beneath my ribs, and for someone who had me take the lead in our chats, Atlas' movements feel confident.

Fuck, what would Shiloh think?

I turn my head and break the kiss just as I remember my little brother. The one who I have to take to an appointment in who knows how long and whose best friend I'm currently lying in bed naked with.

"Can't," I say, seeing my own disappointment reflected in Atlas' eyes. "We can't."

He bites down on his lip, gnaws it between his teeth and points his eyes at the ceiling.

"What part can't we do?" he asks, fingers resuming their exploration of my exposed body. "Kissing? Letting me watch you jerk off?"

I choke on a laugh at the statement and because the drag of his touch over my sides tickles.

"Definitely that last one."

His eyes find mine, and I can't tell what he's searching for but he must be swimming through rapids to find it by the trouble swirling in them.

He wets his lips and rolls to his back, leaving my skin cold.

"Are you disappointed?"

I whip my head around so fast I'll be feeling the ache in my neck for days.

"What are you talking about?"

"Me being A. Last night it felt like... like you felt the connection too. The pull. But this morning..."

"Atlas." I flip to my side and plant my hand on his bicep. "It's early. I'm hungover. Yesterday was a lot. I don't want to jump into anything you'll regret."

He sighs and drags his hand over mine, pushing his fingers into the divots between my own.

"You said you never wanted to regret me. Well, Blair Novak, I couldn't possibly regret you."

I sigh into the arm folded behind my head. Would it be the end of the world to let Atlas experiment? With his feelings? With a man? With me?

"What do you want, A?"

When he turns to face me this time, he cradles our joined hands to his chest and dips his head so his eyes have a straight path to mine.

"I want to continue our thought experiment. I want to give you the emotional support you need and you could... help me understand what's going on with my body?"

It's a dangerous line, one that would make crossing it a mess of uncertainties.

"You want to pretend to be my boyfriend?" I ask, and his sweet smile turns playful.

"Whenever you need me." His eyes drift down to where the blanket has fallen to only barely cover my shaft and balls. "However you need me." "Atlas." I tug on our hands, and he looks back up at me. "Sex wouldn't be something I expect out of a boyfriend."

"But it's a bonus?"

"If we're both feeling it."

Atlas pulls his hand from mine and places it over my hip, dipping his fingers a tease beneath the edge of the covers.

"Are you?"

The answer to that would be a resounding yes, that my entire body is abuzz with the anticipation of Atlas closing his fist around my cock and milking me dry.

But I won't hurt him.

And if he wants to do this, then we need to take it easy.

"I need to pick up Shiloh," I say, withdrawing and sticking my hand under the covers to lift my boxers back into place. "Raincheck?"

If anyone can pout with their eyes, it's Atlas, so I can't resist leaning over and planting a soft kiss to his lips.

"I think we need to have a talk first. A real one. I'll text you, and we can find a good time, okay?"

He nods, and right before I turn away again, he catches my cheek in his hand and pulls our mouths back together in a kiss so sweet it rivals the cotton candy we made.

"I thought you didn't like kissing?" I ask, pushing down the part of me that wants to ask him to do it again.

His thumb caresses my cheek in slow circles.

"You might be the exception, Bumble B."



I GIVE ATLAS A lift back to his dorm while I wait on Shiloh to come down, and I can't say it isn't nice how he leans over the center console to grab my face in his big, warm hand and give me a kiss goodbye.

By the time Shiloh throws himself into the passenger seat ten minutes later, I've worked the entire situation into a headache that throbs in my temples.

"You look like shit," he says, crossing his arms and slouching in his seat.

"Well, thanks to someone's bright idea, my hangover has a hangover."

Shiloh shrugs and reaches to slide his seat back as far it will go and crosses his sneakers over the dashboard.

"Don't blame me. Your little lip-lock buddy is the one who wanted to go out. Besides, you had Atlas, so you had like the best watchdog. Seriously, when I get wasted he's with me twenty-four seven until he's sure I'm not going to drown in my own puke."

I try to keep my expression neutral as I pull us back onto the road. "He's such a caretaker."

"I know." Shiloh throws his head back, picking at a colored band on his wrist. "Did you two...you know... get up to anything?"

My nails bite into the worn material of the steering wheel as my heart picks up the pace in my chest. "Like what?"

Shiloh deadpans, his eyes slowly sliding to mine and staring me down when I peek over.

"Sex, big brother. Did you and my best friend have sex?"

*Jesus christ.* I pinch the bridge of my nose and begin to wonder if Atlas told him anything.

Shiloh's hand touches the collar of my shirt, tugging it down, and he snickers before pulling away.

"That's one hell of a hickey you've got."

Right. I completely forgot about Atlas doing it last night, but now that I'm thinking about it, my mind whirs with the memory of his skin pressed to mine, his arms locked tight around me, his mouth doing things to my neck I could practically feel in my oversensitive, horny dick.

"Gotcha." He grins wide, flopping back in his seat. "I told him to get laid. Didn't realize you'd be the practice dummy."

"What?"

"We've got a dare. Big lug thinks sex with a guy would be just as good as sex with a girl so I told him 'bet'. You two must have been hammered as hell to fool around like that."

My first thought is that even if Atlas and I had hooked up, he'd never done the same with a girl to compare.

The second thought is that it sounds like Shiloh doesn't know that.

Which throws me for a loop because Shiloh and Atlas share *everything*.

The last thing to cross my mind is that finicky little word: dare.

Did Atlas' initial reasoning for messaging B have to do with this dare? I can't imagine him lying to me. Can't imagine those kisses and touches came from a place of deception.

Even then, he's been honest in that he wants to experiment, wants me to help him understand his body and mind.

Am I the stepping stone to him finding a guy he really wants to fuck?

I could put an end to it now before anything happens.

Anything except for kisses that make me feel safe and warm and has my body screaming with arousal.

Atlas never turns down a dare with Shiloh. It's a key part of their friendship. If I turn him away... does that mean he'll just find someone else to have all his firsts with?

Shit, I want his firsts.

I don't realize I've gone silent until Shiloh's sigh fills the silence of the car, and even then I don't know what to tell him. So, I swallow hard and do my best to put him at ease.

"We didn't fool around. This is from Noah."

"Oh? You broke away from grinding on Atlas long enough to get your neck sucked by your kissing buddy?"

I know he's ribbing me, but there's something else in his voice. Something that almost sounds bitter.

"We were just dancing."

"Atlas doesn't dance with me like that."

Now I'm the one who sighs.

"Have you ever asked him?"

"What?"

We stop at a red light, and I turn my attention to my brother, who looks flushed and perplexed with his brows drawn tight and his lips formed into a hard line.

"Have you ever asked him to dance with you like that? You don't get to be jealous of what he does with other people if you aren't willing to ask him for it yourself."

That seems to shock him into silence, but his lack of vocal response doesn't stop him from kicking the dash and dropping his legs dramatically.

"Oh, fuck you, Blair. I'm not fucking jealous. Maybe my brother and best friend getting frisky in front of a shit ton of people rubbed me the wrong way. You think about that?"

Yes, Shiloh, it's all I've thought about since I realized I was attracted to him.

"It was just fun. Didn't mean anything, bud. I promise, nothing happened."

Just don't ask me to promise that nothing will.

"Listen," I say when I pull into the clinic therapist's lot and throw the car in park. "Atlas is your best friend. I'd never take him away from you."

He's still pouting, but his posture loosens at the words. "I'm going to lose him anyway."

"What do you mean?"

Shiloh pulls the seat back to its default position and drops his head into his hands. "I'm not straight enough to miss the fact that Atlas is hot as hell, okay? Guy, girl, one day he's going to fall in love, and I'm going to be left behind just like always."

"Atlas loves you," I tell him, staring him down until he lifts his head and drops his shoulders. "Atlas loves you more than anyone else in the world. Nothing and no one will ever change that."

His smile is lopsided, and he puts his hand on the door handle, only to pause and hover there.

"Then I feel bad for whoever falls for Atty. No one wants to be second in the heart of the person they're in love with."

He holds out his other hand, and I realize he wants the money for the appointment, so I dig it out of the glove box and slap it in his hand. He gives me a two-fingered salute then slams the car door shut and runs inside.

I always wondered if anything happened between them over the years—to say they were attached at the hip and codependent would be putting it lightly. It's something Atlas and I will have to talk about if this thing—this experiment—is something he seriously wants to do.

For now, I just lean back in my seat and wait forty-five minutes for Shiloh to get through his session.



**A**: *I like what we did.* 

**Me:** *I told you we'd talk about that later.* 

**A:** No, you said we'd talk about what we're going to do later. I'm talking about what's already happened.

Me: What's already happened that you liked?

**A:** The phone sex. It was hot. Telling me what you'd do to me.

**Me:** *You like when I'm bossy?* 

**A:** Less so that you're bossy and more that I don't have to overthink what's next.

Me: I'll keep that in mind.

**A:** Can we keep texting?

**Me**: *Like right now?* 

**A:** No. Well, yes. In general. I don't want this part to change. I like talking to you, B. I like the escape.

**Me**: Whatever happens between Blair and Atlas... we can keep being A and B, too.

**A:** Thank you.

## Chapter 13

## ATLAS

BLAIR AND I DIDN'T talk about the thing between us for a couple of days. With Shiloh adjusting to his new medication and being less of his energetic self, I spent a lot of time keeping him company. Plus, I hadn't noticed how distant things felt since I started talking to B, and since Blair was busy and we hadn't had time to have our talk yet, I figured some bonding/reconnecting time was in order for me and my best friend.

It has nothing to do with the guilt of wanting to tangle in the sheets with his brother.

The basement of our dorm building is a big concrete room with one wall taken up entirely by a movie projector and a white sheet held on only by the miracle of fifty million thumbtacks.

Never say college kids aren't resourceful.

That's never where Shiloh drags me to, though. Not unless it's the middle of the night and he decides to give the girls who like to make out on the couch hell by putting porn on the display.

Chances are if we're coming downstairs we're doing one of two things: taking our laundry to the machines down the hall or taking up Shiloh's favorite corner that has one solitary locker and a boxing bag set up.

He just showed up with it a few months ago, and when I asked where the hell he got it from, he said it had to do with his self defense class. Honestly, I think he just likes pretending it's Corvin and punching the shit out of it.

"You good for this?" I ask as he opens the locker and pulls out his hand wraps.

"It's either this or alcohol, and I promised Blair I'd stay sober until the adjustment period is over."

For as much as he bitches about people telling him what to do, Shiloh always takes what Blair says to heart. He might not admit it out loud, but Shiloh has a lot of respect for his brother.

When he motions for me to get in position behind the bag and his gloves are still snug on the hook in the locker, I raise my brow.

"No gloves today?"

He shrugs. "What's some bruised knuckles when your head is a fucking cocktail kaleidoscope?"

I hold the bag still as he gets in position, forms his fists, and makes the first swing. He starts easy, but by the time sweat starts forming on his brow, my hands ache from the vinyl material rubbing my palms raw.

"What'd he do?" I ask when Shiloh stops for a gulp of his sports drink.

"Who?"

I roll my eyes. "Who else makes you want to break shit?"

Shiloh twists on the top and clicks his tongue. "For once, not Dipshit RA."

Just before he prepares to go again, I throw my hands off the bag and he sighs out dramatically with his whole body.

"What?"

"You gonna tell me who set you off?"

"No one set me off."

"My nearly bloody hands would disagree."

"They aren't—Holy shit, Atty!"

The frustration marring his features melts away, and he yanks at my hands to examine the blisters forming.

"I've told you to wrap your hands, too, dingus."

"And *I've* told you not to hit the bag so hard it tries to blow me into the wall."

He huffs and presses down on one of the sore spots, not enough to hurt but enough to sting. "Imma blow something in a minute," he grumbles.

It's not even bad. A couple of little blisters on the bottom of my hands, because that's where I bear the brunt of the weight.

"What are you so pissed about, anyway?"

Shiloh looks down, molars grinding together as he picks at the wrap on his hands. "Blair is at Dad's today."

I'm so used to Shiloh being strong and brash and diving head first into everything that I almost forget about the little boy who used to scream until he cried—until that barrier was forced open and he could let all those bottled up feelings pour out.

Excitement and anger he's good at, but vulnerability only happens when it's late, dark, and no one can see him cry.

Right now there's a crack, a glint of sadness in his eyes that reminds me of being thirteen and Shiloh crawling through the broken window in my room to soak his tears into my chest until he passed out.

When did I stop being the person he let in?

"Did, um," I clear my throat, and Shiloh looks up. "Did they have a good relationship?"

He frowns and crosses his arms. "I'd say not. Dad has always been an asshole to everyone. I don't know why he doesn't leave the old man to rot."

"Blair likes to take care of people," I find myself saying.

Shiloh rolls his eyes but doesn't rebut. He walks over to the locker and pulls out his sweat towel, then takes his water bottle and dumps a quarter of it over the towel. Then, he holds it out to me, and I press the material between my palms.

"I can take care of people, too," he mutters, and I duck my head to kiss his temple, which gets me a firm swat on the side and a warm laugh. "Fuck you, Atty."

"Sorry, Loh," I say with a grin. "You don't swing that way."

I wink and expect him to rib me again, but instead he goes stock still, eyes widening and lips parting like he's going to protest. No words come out, and eventually he snaps his jaw shut.

He's silent for a few minutes, staring at the ground and idly unwrapping his hands. When he speaks it's more of a grunt as he gingerly grabs my wrist and leads us to the community kitchen. He walks away but comes back a few seconds later with actual bandage wrap, and without a word takes my hands and—after making me wash them in the sink—wraps them up until it looks like I've got an actual injury.

"This is overkill."

"Shut the fuck up."

Still, I laugh at the pout on his lips that I don't think he even notices is there.

"I love you, Loh. You know that, right?"

He looks up and smiles. "Shut the fuck up," he repeats. "Answer a question for me. Since you're into guys now."

I fight not to roll my eyes because as big of a dick as Shiloh can be at times, I know he doesn't mean it in a nasty way.

"Shoot."

He hops up onto the kitchen counter, kicking his legs against the cupboards. "What is it about them that you like?"

"About guys?"

"Yeah. You know, is it muscles? Do you have a thing for dick?"

I scrub a hand over my face and groan. "Loh."

"No." His expressions swim with confusion and indecision. "I don't mean it like that. I mean..." He huffs a stray curl out of his eyes. "Your type?"

"I don't think I have one," I say, planting my hands on the counter on either side of him. "Most guys are nice to look at, I guess."

He cocks his head, then leans it back to meet my eyes. "What about Blair?"

A tight knot forms in my chest. "Blair?"

"You two spent the night together the other night."

I smile and ruffle his hair. "Yeah. Because he was hammered and you took my car."

Shiloh wraps his arms around my middle, burying his face in my neck and nearly knocking me into the counter.

"Nothing happened between you two?"

Shit. I can beat around the bush, but I don't know if I can outright lie to him. Plus he's been emotional as hell while his medicine balances out, and the last thing I want to do is hurt his feelings.

"Atty?" His voice is a wrecked whisper, and while I don't know what's brought all this on, I know that right this second comforting my best friend is more important than keeping things from him.

I've done enough of that for one lifetime.

"We kissed. That was it."

His arms tighten like a vice around me, and I wrap one of mine around his waist and card the other through his hair in an effort to soothe him.

"Do you like him?"

That's a harder one to answer. I'm not a hundred percent sure where I stand there, and that's crossing into territory that I'm not quite ready to get into with him.

"It was just a kiss."

He finally peers up at me, those dark eyes of his bleeding out questions his mouth will never ask. Questions I can't read but can tell are there all the same. He pushes back and hooks an arm around my neck.

"Did you kiss him or did he kiss you?"

"I kissed him." The last thing I need is him anymore mad at his brother than he already is over the whole 'dad' thing. "Why?"

There's only so much truth I can readily give out. I swallow hard

"I was tipsy. He was lonely."

Shiloh is quiet as he stares up at me, fingers picking at the hair on my nape. "Did you like it? Are you going to do it again?"

"Shiloh."

"You did. Do you want it to happen again?"

"I don't know what I want."

At the core of it all, it's the truest statement I can make. I don't know what I want. I know that Blair makes me feel seen, makes me feel wanted. He lets me explore a part of myself I was too afraid to dig into for most of my life.

Shiloh nods his head and smiles up at me, sweet but full of mischief.

"Loh."

His other arm comes around my neck, and he pulls me down until our foreheads meet in a gentle bump. "Atty."

He rubs his nose against mine, and I can't help the laugh that puffs out of me. "You're teasing me."

"Totally not." He sticks his tongue out and drags it over my cheek.

"You are so fucking gross."

"You kissed my brother. That makes you more gross."

I'm glad we can joke about it. I was afraid he'd be mad. It's hard to tell some days.

"Wanna make it even?" he asks, grinning wide from ear to ear.

"Make what even?"

"The kissing count."

"You wanna kiss one of my brothers? Good luck finding Rue, and Ryder will challenge you back twice as hard."

He wrinkles his nose and shakes his head. "Not what I had in mind."

His hands steady on my neck, and he tips his head back. I think it registers what he plans half a second before he does it, but my entire body goes too still with shock to stop it.

Shiloh pulls me down and rests our mouths together. It's just pressure, just warm skin on skin, but then he opens his mouth and I gasp, and he must take that as me welcoming the sweep of his tongue over mine.

I'm not kissing him back. I'm not even sure I'm breathing.

Which he notices, because he pulls away enough to breathe his words over my face.

"Kiss me, Atty. Make it fair."

I don't understand what's happening. I don't understand why our lips are moving together or why his legs wrap around my waist. But I give him what he wants, because this is Loh. I'll give him everything he needs, even if I don't understand it.

I hold him tighter because I fear he's going to break. I don't know why, but alarm bells blare in my head to not hurt him right now.

Eventually, he breaks away and presses a firm hand to my chest. He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, that grin still plastered to his face like he's won some sort of prize.

He kicks at my hip, and I step back, letting him hop off the counter.

"Wanna grab lunch?"

I'm pretty sure I should say yes because that's my normal response to Shiloh, but my brain hasn't booted back up yet.

"What was that?"

He shrugs and scoots around me to grab a bottle of water from the fridge.

"Just a kiss," he says, uncapping the bottle and tipping it towards his mouth. When he's finished, he smacks his lips together and sets the bottle on the counter. "Now you've kissed two Novaks."

He winks and bounces out of the room without waiting on me to follow.

What the hell just happened?

My mouth tingles, and confusion ripples through my thoughts. That didn't feel like *just a kiss*. It felt like Shiloh was

searching for something. For a moment, I thought he might never let go.

It feels like I'm missing something. Like there's a picture right in front of me with a chunk taken out of the middle.

Shiloh just started new meds. He's been low for a few days; maybe the imbalance is making his mania act up.

A few more days and he should be closer to normal.

With that, I decide not to worry about it. Shiloh always does wild, unpredictable things.

Kissing me is just the next rung on that ladder for him.



**B:** I have been ripping up porch for at least an hour. I didn't think the whole damn thing was rotten. Shit. I don't have enough replacement planks for this. If I leave now, Dad's going to try to find a way down the porch just to spite me and break something else.

BLAIR AND I HAVEN'T been talking as much as he keeps sending me paragraph after paragraph of complaint since I checked in with him over lunch.

It's kind of cute the way he goes off, not seeming to care that half of his words are misspelled or ineligible. At one point I even got a butt-dial and listened to his jeans rub on the microphone for a solid minute before I realized he wasn't going to notice and didn't want to embarrass him when he did.

I hate that he's doing all of this. Not just because his Dad is an obvious piece of shit who emotionally abused one kid and physically abused the other, but because I know it's running him ragged. It's biting into his bank account, and I know for a fact he worked and did tutoring this morning, so he has to be exhausted already.

It's nearing six in the afternoon, and the sun is still heavy and hot in the sky. That's what you get for Tennessee weather with May right on the horizon. I can't imagine tearing at the porch is doing anything other than giving him heatstroke on top of everything else, but he'd never listen to me if I told him he should give it a rest.

Another day, maybe earlier in the morning would be better.

After getting a text that shows a long ass cut across Blair's palm from a nail sticking from one of the planks, I decide that if he isn't going to listen to reason, then it's time to call in some drastic measures.

Shiloh took the Jeep to pick up some kids a couple blocks over who needed a ride to his class, and there's no way in hell to make it to the trailer park on foot unless I want to end up roadkill on the side of the interstate.

If I plan to show up unannounced—because let's be honest, Blair would pull every excuse in the book to convince me not to come—I feel like I should do it with more than just a charming smile and an apology.

Plus, I've been feeling this odd sense of guilt ever since the

kiss with Shiloh. It didn't mean anything. And it's not like

Blair and I are actually dating, but a good pretend boyfriend

wouldn't kiss said boyfriend's brother.

He also wouldn't leave his stubborn boyfriend to tear down

and rebuild a porch all by himself.

Yeah, that's a good excuse. He can't refute that.

But if I don't have the Jeep, how the hell am I...

I scroll through my contacts until I come across the number I

need and open our chats. They're fairly spread out, sometimes

just a greeting back and forth and a couple of pleasantries.

Sometimes we get going about something or another, but it's

been about a month since the last time we talked.

Should I go with a normal greeting or jump straight to the

point?

Eh, it's fine. He's my brother. He loves me.

**Me:** Can I borrow your truck?

A few minutes later, when I'm considering alternatives like

getting a Lyft down and walking back and forth from the

supply shop, my phone dings.

**Ryder:** *Hello to you too, little bro. What for?* 

**Me**: Loh has my Jeep and I gotta haul some lumber.

**Ryder:** 'haul some lumber'? Is this some new college chick trafficking scheme?

**Me:** What? Ew gross, no. Like, actual lumber jackass. You know, wood that you build things with?

**Ryder:** *And if I need my truck?* 

**Me:** You have the work van! Please. I'll pay for gas.

Ryder: Of course you will, twerp.

It's nearly an hour and a half later when I'm rolling down the dirt and gravel path down one of the semicircle sections that houses the Novak trailer. And it is... an absolute shit show to say the least.

All five of the steps have been torn down, half of the boards and railing at the top are gone, and Blair is currently whacking at one of the sides with a sledgehammer.

Jesus.

Blair was not built for this kind of labor, that's for sure, because this is a mess and a half.

"Blair!" I hop out of the truck and jog over as quickly as I can before he smashes a finger. He's already got a half-assed bandage on one hand—and hey we kind of match!—and he sure as hell doesn't need to add another injury on top of it.

I must startle him because he jumps and the hammer slips through his fingers, landing with a nice, solid thud on the ground. It's not a far drop, like three or four feet because of the stilts under the trailer, but he still looks down at it with a point that reminds me of his brother.

"Can you hand me that?" he asks.

I bend down to pick it up but completely ignore his outstretched hand in favor of inspecting the railing he's trying to take apart.

"You got any rhyme or reason to this?"

He shrugs, and when he wipes the sweat from his forehead he smears blood across it. Before I can chastise him or ask him where the hell he's bleeding now, he rips at one of the loose boards and tosses it over my shoulder.

"I can do it like that, but the hammer is more fun."

"I bet it is," I grumble, stepping closer and grabbing both of his hands before he can do it again.

He doesn't argue, but I think it has less to do with him giving in and more to do with him being too exhausted to fight. His chest is heaving. He's got dirt and sweat and blood in the most random places. When I switch my hold so both of his hands are in one of mine, I tilt his head to the side and examine what looks like a small gash.

"The hell did this come from?"

"Fell through a shitty board trying to take the steps down. It's fine."

It doesn't look fine, but something tells me that's an argument for another time.

"I brought you some new wood."

His head snaps up in my grasp, but the surprise melts into something else when I squeeze my fingers under his chin and behind his ear.

"I figured you could use some help," I say, which is an understatement given the state that he's in.

His hair is in disarray, pulled back but still flying all over the place. The ratty tank that he's wearing looks like it used to be white but is now every color under the sun and ripped in so many places that it might as well be tossed down the bottom of a well. It sure as hell isn't doing him any good. There's dirt all over his arms and face, and I'd even go as far to say those pants aren't going to last too much longer.

"I'm not going to be able to put them up today."

I shrug, but still can't convince myself to let him go. "Then, I'll leave it here and come back to help when you can."

"You don't have to do that."

"Nah, but I want to."

He's watching me. His eyes haven't left mine this entire time. Like the moment our eyes locked, he froze.

"You came," he says softly, the tension in his body dropping like it was a thousand pound weight reduced to rubble. "Thank you."

I shrug and drop my hand from his chin to his knee, and that seems to snap him out of his trance a little.

"I like to think I'm a good pretend boyfriend."

He smiles, full and sweet and genuine, and I instantly want to grab his face and kiss him. Kiss him senseless. Kiss him stupid. Kiss him until he lets me pick him up and put him in the truck and drive away.

I don't. Instead, he scoots out of the way and motions to what's left of the little deck.

"Wanna help me take the rest of this down?"

"Do I get to save you when you inevitably fall because you weigh more than the boards do?"

He doesn't answer, just tucks some hair behind his ear and bites down on his smile.

"You might get to kiss me if you can finish first." He points to the other end with another railing, and the spark of challenge in his eyes has my whole body warming.

I know it wasn't meant as an innuendo, but tell that to my libido, which has decided anything and everything that comes out of Blair's mouth turns me on.

"Challenge accepted."

## Chapter 14

## **A**TLAS

IT'S ANOTHER WEEK BEFORE Blair has the time to get back to his dad's and I'm able to borrow my brother's truck again. This time it's because someone complained that all of the broken wood pieces needed to be hauled off or someone was gonna call the city—which I think is ridiculous because who the hell gives a fuck about how orderly the damn trailer park looks?

Who the hell knows. But I spent the last week occupying as much of Blair's spare time as I can. If only because he's running himself into the ground trying to do everything for everyone, and he needs a damn break. Even if he doesn't think so.

This time we drive the truck over together, and we spend the twenty minute drive chatting idly in a way that's almost as natural and comfortable as it is with Shiloh. Only there's definitely an air of tension between us, nothing negative, but almost anticipatory.

Ryder's truck is a manual, so my hand is pretty much always on the gear shifter. A couple of times, Blair's hand brushes mine, or he touches my arm and lets his touch linger, trailing his fingers down and gripping my elbow while we both laugh about something.

I'm not even sure I'm paying attention. Every time he touches me, it's like little bolts of lightning under my skin. It's hard to focus. Even makes my dick twitch.

I don't get hard, but the potential is there, and it's a feeling I want to explore. Something I want to experience with him.

When his hand closes over mine and stays there? I feel that one in my chest. Feel the warmth spread outward, and suddenly I don't ever want to arrive. I want to stay in this truck, coasting along the road with him forever. With no one else around. Nothing to get in the way and complicate things.

If there were ever a scenario that could describe the word 'perfect' I think this would be it.

All too soon we pull up in front of the trailer, and reality has a way of crashing in instead of gently flowing back, because there is Mr. Novak, with his arms crossed and his front door open and looking angrier than a wet hornet.

"How has your dad been getting in and out of the house?"

Blair rolls his eyes, but he's biting down on his lip something fierce. "Back door ramp. The one I built for him when he lost the leg but was too damn stubborn to get it installed himself."

He throws open the passenger door and storms out, shouting at his dad in a very placating way that contradicts the look of absolute bewilderment on his face. I take a minute to reorient myself, because the mix of hormones and whatever the hell is about to go down doesn't seem like they're going to mesh well.

With a deep breath, I follow him out, and when I'm close enough that I can hear more than just raised voices, I put my hand on Blair's back because he looks like he's ready to pass out.

"I should be able to walk out of my own damn house."

"And you will, Dad," Blair says, leaning back into my touch as he rubs his temple. "Atlas and I are here to put it back together. I'm sorry it took so long; but I've had classes and work, and it's been a busy week."

"Too busy to care about your old man."

"Dad—"

"Mr. Novak," I cut in, because at this rate one of them is going to have an aneurysm and honestly I'm not sure who it's more likely to be. "I promise, we'll have it back together for you in a few days. Until then, if you need anything, why don't you call me and I can run out for you?"

Blair's head whips around, mouth parted in surprise. "Atlas."

"That's very nice, son, but I'm not an invalid."

"Sure you aren't," Blair mutters, and I fight back a smile.

"No, sir, you aren't. Just offering a hand. I helped take it down in the first place."

He finally seems to cave, muttering under his breath as he hobbles back inside and slams the door with a force that should probably rip the old thing off its hinges.

Blair turns to me once he's gone and rests his weight on my side, his cheek on my shoulder, and I don't even have to think about putting my arms around him in response. I just do it.

"Sorry about him."

"Nah." I kiss the top of his head and rub my hand soothingly along his arm. He's wearing an old t-shirt today, but just like how mine will be on the ground in a few minutes, I'm sure his will join it not long after. "We try not to bang you up too bad today?"

He smiles up at me and kisses the underside of my chin. "Bang you up instead?"

I roll my eyes and give him a firm squeeze before letting go and reaching for the hem of my shirt. "Maybe try not to bang up anyone, yeah?"

With my shirt tossed near the rubble—because it's going to end up as trash anyway—I give my body a few good stretches to get ready for the hellish workout it's about to get. I've skipped more time at the gym in the last week than I think I have over the last few years, but it's been worth it.

When I turn back around, Blair's eyes are on me, and I know I'm not mistaking what I see there. We talked about it after we

finished pulling the porch apart last week, about how he doesn't want to push any kind of sexual relationship on the two of us. He'll help me as best he can to work through the mess of feelings in my head, and I'll be here to give him the support no one else ever has.

If something grows from that, we'll tackle it when we get there.

We both know it's sitting there, simmering under the surface, just waiting for us to acknowledge it.

"Ready to get to work, B?"

He catches me eyeing his shirt, and with a roll of his eyes he tugs it over his head and wads it up, taking it to the truck and tossing it inside. The little smirk he gives me makes me want to tackle him down. Just put my hands on him and wipe it away.

"Ready to put you to work, A." He winks, stepping up and pressing his lips to my ear. "Let's see what those muscles can do."



I KNOW I LOOK like someone who thrives in the outdoors, with the sun beating down and gravel digging into my back. Add in dirt in places dirt shouldn't be. I'm the guy most suburban moms would probably pay to mow their lawn hoping I take my shirt off.

But I would one hundred percent rather be in the air conditioned building of The Creamery mixing up coffees and baking brownies any day of the week than spend five more minutes out here getting fucking sawdust in my eyes and splinters in my hand.

Still, every time I feel like throwing my ass on the ground and bitching about how tired I am, I look over and see Blair working just as hard, dirt and dust smeared on his hairline because he can't keep it out of the way.

Should we be the ones building this damn porch? No. But can either of us afford to pay someone to do it? Also no.

So, I suck it up and keep going.

After what feels like forever but is likely no more than two hours, something cold and wet touches my neck, and I nearly swing the hammer at Blair on instinct before I hear his breathy laugh.

"Hard work giving you the spooks?"

I toss the hammer down and take the offered water bottle, pointing it at him. "No, a cute little Chapstick hoarder is giving me the spooks."

He throws his head back and laughs, readjusting the elastic that will last him all of five minutes before he's blowing hair out of his face again. "You saw that?"

"Got any on you?"

He smiles, tilts his head. "I might."

"Might have to call that a work hazard."

"Oh?" Arms crossed, he leans on one of the porch support legs. "Why's that?"

Anyone who doesn't see how attractive Blair is has to be out of their minds. He's a mess of sweat and dirt, and his chest is practically glistening with it. Each breath heaves out of him as his eyes take me in, as he licks his lips and arches his brow in what has to be the most seductive pose I could imagine on a man.

My own smile is lopsided as I step toward him, sliding my hand to his hip and drawing his attention with a finger under his chin. Pinpricks burst alive under my skin when our eyes meet.

"Maybe your *boyfriend*—" I drop my voice on the word, "— will be too distracted wondering what it tastes like."

"Hm. Is that so?"

Strong hands grip my biceps, Blair pressing forward so his chest bumps mine, eyes shining with a mischievous desire. "Wanna taste me, A?"

His hand finds the back of my neck and tugs me down, our lips millimeters from touching as he tips his head back. I slide my hand to grip his hair, dragging a gasp out of him, and then I let my other hand fall to barely graze the ass of his jeans.

Is this how people flirt? Are they supposed to want to explore the other person's body with every little touch?

"Is that permission?"

I feel his smile, feel the way he pushes back so his ass fills my hand, and he doesn't say a word before closing the distance.

We've kissed a few times. All of them have been sweet, with sensual strokes of tongues and lips pressing pillow soft together, but this immediately feels like more.

Blair's mouth is open to mine, breathing me in as I run my tongue over his lips, only flicking inside once I've gotten a good taste of them.

Honey. Blair tastes like honey.

I press him back, plunging in deep and working my fingers over the back of his jeans to feel the vibration of his moan between us. His nails dig into my shoulder, sink into my neck like a demand to stay, to keep my body on his.

Kissing Blair is like running out of oxygen with no desire to catch your breath. Staying right here where his hands, his mouth, his body all have access to mine is the only real thing there is.

My fingers slip around the elastic in his hair and pull it loose, sinking into the long strands as they fall to his shoulders.

"You're so hot," I mutter against his mouth as he chuckles, dragging his nails down my back in such a rough sweep that I gasp. It's hot as fuck out here, but that kind of touch has my nipples pebbling and a bolt of arousal shooting to my groin. "Fuck, do that again."

He does. Skates them back up and down again until I'm panting so hard I have to drop my head to his shoulder. He moves the touch to my abdomen, alternating between rubbing the pads of his fingers over my abs and scraping his nails along my sides.

It's one playful tug on my nipple that has me crashing our bodies together: chest to chest, groin to groin, and there's no mistaking the hard on pressing into my thigh.

I've never wanted to hump someone before, but as my hips start slowly rolling into his, I'm not sure I'm entirely in control. We're wrapped in each other, so tangled it's hard to tell where one of us ends and the other begins. I don't even know what I'm heading towards because my dick is still soft, but it's filling slowly with the friction.

Blair's breath is hot on my neck as he holds me close, his own body rising to meet mine. It doesn't feel sexual. I know two dicks rubbing up on each other should be, but that isn't what this feels like. Not for me.

It's a closeness I've never had with a partner when we get physical. There's always this layer of separation between the 'us' that's together and the 'us' fooling around. This doesn't feel like fooling around. It feels like fitting together in the most intimate way.

I turn my lips to his skin, dragging my tongue through the sweat on his collarbone and feeling him shiver.

"Atlas." His mouth brushes my ear, his body starting to tremble as his hips pick up speed.

It hits me at that moment that he's going to come. He's falling apart in my hold, the noises he's trying to hide, but they leak into the space between us. My cock is somewhere between semi-hard and uninterested, so I don't feel the same pleasure that's making him cry my name under his breath, but it's exactly those sounds that make me want to keep going.

I don't care about an orgasm, but I care about giving Blair this high we're chasing.

I pull back just enough that I can angle his face and slot our lips together. He pants into my mouth, only half heartedly kissing me back.

"Do you want to come?" I ask, and his lips drag over mine as he nods. "What can I do to get you there?"

He groans and pushes his ass into my hand again, but quickly resumes rocking into me. His body flexes like a bow, and I slip my hand under the top of his jeans, running a finger along his crack and gripping his bare cheek in my palm. The rougher I grip him, the more moans slip out until he has to take my tongue in a battle to keep the noises down. When I brush over his rim with the pad of one finger, he jolts in my grasp.

"Fuck." Blair throws his head back, hips slamming forward one last time before he stills.

I've never seen a man come up close. Sure, I've caught dudes jerking off, but I've never been right there in the action when the climax hits.

Blair is fucking beautiful: the way his back arches, his neck strains and the muscles bulge; his fingers dig into me hard enough to bruise.

I'm fully hard after I feel his cock thicken where it's pressing on mine followed by the pulse of cum that leaves a damp spot on his jeans. But I have no desire to get there myself.

I hold onto him as his body relaxes, as his breathing goes from labored to shallow, and his hands fall from around me.

"Oh my god," he whispers, looking up at me with a disbelieving smile. "Guess I was a little pent up."

"Was that okay?"

Blair blinks, frowns, and tilts his head, smiling slightly again. "I would have told you if it wasn't."

I must look like a mess: biting my lip raw and still holding him tight like the world's going to come crashing down if I let go, because his smile drops entirely.

"Atlas." Blair's hands warm my cheek, and he guides my forehead to his. "Was that okay with you?"

I nod, but my head is swirling, and he smiles tightly. He drops a hand to my chest and gently pushes me back. My arms fall from around him, and he makes us put a foot of distance from each other.

"Atlas."

He thinks I'm going to panic again. I'm not. This just... happens sometimes. Usually it's after I orgasm and not

someone else, but it's like all of my nerves go into shock. Like they don't know what to do with themselves.

I bite down on my tongue to see if the pain clears my head—which it mostly does—but before another word can pass between us, the front door of the trailer slams open and we both jump away from it.

"If you think I can't hear that whole damn shamble of a porch shaking, you must think I'm an idiot. Take that bullshit behind a closed door."

It definitely sounds like Mr. Novak has been drinking, which isn't surprising, but my face still flames with embarrassment, while Blair just leans an arm on one of the sturdy porch boards and cocks his head.

"We *were* behind a door, Dad. Besides, we're probably about to call it for today. Got all of the supports up. Tomorrow I'll reinforce them and get the floor done. Stairs if there's time, if not it'll have to be this weekend."

What he doesn't say is that even then it's just the bare minimum, and I saw him looking up more materials to build a ramp—even though he knows his dad will protest. The good news is we can add that in later and hopefully not piss the old man off by holding up the process.

"There's still plenty of sunlight left, son."

Blair's shoulders sag, and as he scratches at the back of his neck, I know that he'll cave. He'll stay out here well into the

night to finish this for that miserable man, and all it takes is the tiniest push back.

Fuck that.

"No can do, sir," I say, wrapping an arm around Blair's shoulder, massaging the tense muscle. "Blair has already worked an entire shift today, then came straight over here. I promised to make him call it quits before he pushes himself too hard."

Mr. Novak barely reacts other than a scoff, and he rolls his wheelchair dangerously close to the edge of the doorway, grazing over our work with calculating eyes.

"Back in my day, an honest day's work started with the sun and ended at dusk unless you were on night crew."

"No offense, sir, but Blair isn't in a laborer's position. He's a student with a job, doing his father a favor."

That gets me a narrow eyed look, and I'm suddenly glad he can't wheel right out because I do not want to have to defend myself from a man with one leg. That feels like a lose-lose situation.

"I raised and provided for this fag for eighteen years. I've paid my dues, and it's time he pays his."

I've put up with my share of queerphobic assholes, but that doesn't stop the coil of anger in my gut that makes me clench my fists and tighten my hold on Blair when he tries to duck away.

"Don't call him that, sir."

Mr. Novak looks down at us, and I notice the shake in Blair's shoulders, the way he's drawn in on himself, pressed into my side and resigned himself to being a spectator.

Strong, fearless Blair looks like he'd dig his own grave and bury himself in it if his dad demanded.

"Guess when boys are as close as those two, it was bound to happen." The man sighs and leans back in his chair, steely eyes glaring down like we're some kind of scum. "A little surprised they're sharing, though."

That's when Blair jerks, and I let him go as he wraps his arm around himself and forces himself to stand straighter.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

His dad picks up a bottle squished between him and the ass of his wheelchair, pops the top off using the doorframe, and takes a long, slow drink.

"I'm saying you and your brother have your hands in the same cookie jar."

The way he speaks to Blair but stares straight at me leaves absolutely no room for confusion on what—or who—the cookie jar is in this analogy.

How many people think Shiloh and I have been fucking?

"I always thought it was a good call in his case. Atlas has a good head on his shoulders. Means your brother hasn't forgotten his more... feminine urges."

I'm a fairly calm guy. Work things out with words rather than fists. But that right there is my line.

"If Shiloh and I were together," I say, arms crossed and stance wide, fighting back the urge to deck the crippled old man. "It wouldn't have anything to do with that. If Shiloh is into men at all, it has nothing to do with no goddamn X chromosomes."

"Don't lie to me. You've been fucking my daughter—" Mr. Novak stops when Blair slams a hand to one of the support legs. "—my son since you were both old enough to know what sex is. I walked in enough times on the two of you tangled in his bed to think otherwise. And I've got windows, boys. I'm not fuckin' senile."

It's definitely not out of the realm of possibility, but my tongue is too heavy with all the curses I'm holding back to say anything.

"We're leaving," I say, holding out a hand to Blair and praying that he takes it. This man is nothing but petty and toxic, and there's no reason for us to stay here arguing with his wrong assumptions and backward thoughts.

Blair hesitates, but only long enough to throw a look over his shoulder, and his hesitation melts away instantly when our eyes meet. He nods and laces his fingers with mine, and I give them a reassuring squeeze.

"We'll be back tomorrow," I say, though I have thoughts about standing the bastard up because neither Blair nor I need any of his bullshit.

A harsh sound comes out of his throat, but we pay it no mind as we head back to the truck, not even bothering to clean up any of our mess. Maybe tomorrow will be the day the city decides to pay his decrepit ass a visit.

Glass shatters behind us and Blair rips from my hold with a loud hiss and a dozen muttered curses. It takes a minute for my brain to catch up, to register Mr. Novak's barked laugh and the pain twisted on Blair's face. I grab his arm and spot the prickles of blood and little shards sticking out of the skin on his back.

"Maybe that'll keep you off your back for awhile."

The implication makes my throat burn. He'd throw a goddamn fucking beer bottle at his own kid because he *might* take it up the ass? What the ever loving fuck?

Rational thought flies entirely out the window as I storm back to the trailer. Blair shouts after me, but there's too much blood pumping in my ears to hear him. The trailer sits on a couple of cinderblocks, but it's no more than a few feet off the ground, and with Mr. Novak in his chair, I can come pretty close to getting in his face.

"You have two of the most fucking incredible sons," I spit the words more than say them. "You don't deserve either one. Make one more goddamn joke, jab, or phobic-ass comment about them and so help me whatever god you believe in, I'll make sure this chair finds a tall ass cliff and rolls itself right off with you in it. Test me, sir." I don't wait or give him a chance to reply, just turn and head back to the truck, stopping only to take another look at Blair's back.

"Want me to take you to the hospital?"

He shakes his head, wincing when I brush away some of the shallow shards. "Can't afford it."

Even though I don't like it, I agree. I've got some half-assed coverage from my scholarship, but even that only really applies to local clinics and not an entire ER trip.

As we settle into the truck, Blair holding on to the oh-shit bar and leaning forward to keep pressure off his back, I put a comforting hand on his knee. There isn't much I can do right now other than drive us back to his apartment and help clean him up, but at least until we get there I can offer him support.

That's what I'm here for, right?

"Ya know," I say as I back out of the gravel drive. "I didn't know your dad drank the kind of stuff that shatters like that."

Blair chokes on his own laugh, pain and discomfort laced through, but he places his hand on top of mine and leans his forehead on the dash. He doesn't speak, and I think there's more going on in there than just distracting himself, but when he's ready to talk about it, he will.

And I'll be here.

His dad might have it twisted, but both Novak brothers *are* extremely important to me. And they both deserve better.

So much fucking better.

## Chapter 15

## BLAIR

MOST OF THE GLASS is superficial, and it only takes Atlas a few minutes to pick out the pieces that decided to dig in, but all the tiny little cuts feel like razor blades as he drags a soapy washcloth over them.

"Your dad is a piece of work, isn't he?"

I smile despite the pain I'm in. "He wasn't always that way."

Atlas' warm lips press to the back of my neck, and when I crane my head to see him, he's wringing the pink-tinged washcloth over the bathroom sink. When he's finished, he turns back and his hand finds my skin in a gentle, soothing touch.

"I'm sorry," he says, dragging his touch down my spine and making me shiver.

"Nothing to be sorry for."

There's a quiet thud followed by arms snaking around my waist and Atlas' forehead resting on my shoulder. "I provoked

him."

I grip his hands where they splay over my stomach. "I provoke him by existing."

"Which is bullshit."

We hold each other in silence. Noah is in study mode and isn't likely to leave his room for most of the night. In fact, his headphones mean that he won't even notice anyone is here until he has to take a bathroom break. It's like Atlas and I have the place to ourselves, and right now I could really use that solitude.

This isn't even the first time Dad has gone after me with a beer bottle, and it isn't the worst he's cut me, either. What started as hitting and shoving around turned into more over the years, more creative ways to hurt a person than just nasty words and fists.

Atlas is never stationary when he's touching me, and it keeps me from going too deep into my thoughts. His hands travel my chest, my sides; his fingers tap out a nonsensical pattern. His lips tease the skin of my shoulder, kisses trailing over ink and cuts, but that doesn't stop him. He brushes his nose across the stars on my back; I can feel his breath as he leaves open mouthed kisses on them, but it's when he scrapes his teeth over the moon near my nape that I gasp, and not in pain, but something else.

It should hurt, and maybe it does, but it's the way that he closes his mouth over the spot and sucks that takes the sting away.

"You like touching me," I whisper, relaxing into his snug grip as it tightens.

He hooks his chin on my shoulder. "I'm not always great with words. With reassuring people. Touch is how I do that."

"I bet Shiloh loves it."

His breath is hot against my face as he laughs. "Shiloh is very physically affectionate."

The words form a ball of anxiousness in my throat. Dad might have been out of line, but I'd be a liar to say I've never wondered the same. I just always figured they'd tell me when they were comfortable if anything was going on.

I clear my throat, because now has to be as good a time as any, right?

"So, Atlas," I say as he turns his nose into my neck and sighs. "Have you and Shiloh ever..."

He groans and nips at my neck, another round of laughter shaking his shoulders. "Not you too. Do you think I'd be having this sexuality crisis if I was sleeping with your brother?"

"Well," I start, not sure if what I'm going to say makes sense. "Sometimes gender doesn't make a difference with certain people. If there's a strong connection... a lot of feelings can grow from that."

He sighs into my shoulder, his arms around me loosening so he can seek out my hands and thread ours together. "I've never felt anything sexual for Shiloh," he says slowly, voice soft in the quiet of the room. "Nothing romantic. He's Loh. He's my best friend. I don't know what I'd do if he wasn't in my life."

"You can't be roommates forever, you know. One day you're going to find the people you want to spend your life with, and I know you'll always be close, but it won't be like this. Are you okay with that?"

I don't want to convince Atlas that he's in love with my brother, because this budding thing between us is a light in my darkness right now, but I also don't want to trick myself into thinking this is more than it is. Especially if Atlas has feelings for someone else.

"Yeah." He finally unburies his face from my neck and sits up. The missing pressure from my back is only slightly relieving; I like the way he holds me. "It's scary to think about. Things changing so much. But I want Loh to find that person for him. Someone who doesn't give a shit about his issues who can be understanding but also keep his head on straight, you know?"

I do. Shiloh is a handful; he always has been. Whether it's the bipolar disorder, or his short fuse or need for excitement; I've spent most of my life chasing Shiloh and rescuing him from trouble. Which is why I'm grateful for Atlas, who has managed to help Shiloh keep his spark but not let him go off the deep end.

"You don't think you could be that person?"

This time he pulls his hands from mine, and I immediately miss the connection.

"Atlas—"

"I do want to be that person. But not for Shiloh. For you."

I stare down at my hands, at the cuts and abrasions and the dirt on my bare legs.

"When was the last time you took a day to take care of yourself?" His voice is back in my ear, and I close my eyes as pleasure whispers down my spine.

"I have responsibilities."

"Not tonight," he says, hands sliding down my shoulders so slow they leave goosebumps in their wake. "Tonight I'm going to be your boyfriend. I'm going to take care of you, and you're going to do as I say and relax."

Easier said than done, but when his hands slip to my exposed thighs, my body gives in under the touch. My legs spread as his fingers work into the muscles, and my head lolls back against his shoulder.

I don't think I realize how much of me aches until it all lets go. Every touch is a sore spot, little hisses escaping through my clenched teeth, but Atlas doesn't stop. He grips and kneads up and down my thighs until they shake, and then he flattens his palms over the skin and kisses my neck.

"How about a shower?"

I laugh out a strangled sound, forcing my eyes open to see his big, hazel eyes staring down at me.

"You expect me to stand after that?"

"Yes." He pecks my lips and pushes me forward, moving to stand in front of me and pull me to my feet. When he has to grip my arms to keep me steady, he chuckles. "Need me to join you?"

I know he's joking, but I'm not ready to give up this constant connection, the way his touch quiets all the worry in my mind.

"Oh," he mutters under his breath at the pink staining my cheeks. "Okay."

Atlas steps back and hooks his thumbs into the top of his pants and tugs them down. Along with his boxers.

Right. Showers are naked.

There isn't any arousal left in me after the mess and adrenaline surge, but in Atlas' words, seeing his thick, soft cock and large balls sway as he kicks the clothes aside gives me one hell of a brain boner. As he switches on the water for the shower and lets it warm up, I take my own boxers off and try not to think of this as awkward.

I literally got off on him earlier, how much more embarrassing can standing under a hot spray naked together be?

Steam fills the small bathroom, fogging the air between us, and when Atlas turns around, something crackles. Maybe I *am* a romantic, because looking into Atlas' eyes as they soften like

being here with me is something that *matters* to him... it breaks me open.

I like this man.

It goes beyond attraction. Beyond all the years we've known one another. Beyond texts on a screen.

I like him. When he looks at me like that, it feels like maybe he likes me, too.

I reach for him, cupping the sides of his neck and pulling him down to me. He's pliant as I kiss his willing mouth, relishing in the feel of how his lips move on mine, how they let me guide and never push for more. There's patience in the kiss, a kind of respect I can never hope to get from one of my hookups.

It reminds me of the feeling I get when Noah and I connect, but bigger. Consuming like a forest fire instead of kindling like a holiday flame.

"What was that for?" Atlas' lips are marred with bite marks and little purple bruises that have to sting like a motherfucker.

I kiss him again, only once, and memorize the feel of every crack. "For making me feel safe."

His wraps his hands around to the small of my back and tugs me forward, our bodies coming flush together. Tingles shoot through me as I copy him, lowering my hands to cup his full ass and press his cock more firmly into my hip.

If it bothers him, he doesn't let it show. He smiles down at me and kisses my cheek. "You'll always be safe with me." My cock twitches. Something about the familiarity, the way I feel protected and warm in his arms making blood flow and flush my whole body. He chuckles and urges me to step back, a curious look on his face that turns to surprise when he glances down.

His eyes flick back up to mine only to fall again. "You've got a piercing." His voice is husky but full of amazement, and he has the cutest smile on his face.

"I do." I absently stroke my soft cock, rolling both ends of the barbell between my fingers.

He opens his mouth to speak but slams it shut again, heat flooding his cheeks. If he wasn't staring so blatantly, maybe I wouldn't know exactly what he's thinking, but Atlas is like an open book in front of me.

I take his hand and place it over my junk, and he immediately seeks out the piercing, pressing on the head of my dick as his fingers examine the jewelry passing through it. He cups my whole length in his hand, stroking it with a gentle touch and squeezing the tip.

"Does it feel good?" he asks, and when my brow shoots up in a 'duh' gesture, he chuckles and firms up his grip, pressing the piercing into his palm. "I mean, does it make sex better?"

"For the people I fuck, sure." I only rock once into his hand, the drag of his skin on mine like a shot of pure ecstasy. "Feels good when there's suction around it." Atlas pinches the barbell between his fingers, lighting up my nerves as he twists and pushes it around. Then, his hand shifts, and while his thumb drags slowly from one end of the piercing, to my slit, to the other end, he weighs my balls in his palm and drags a slow, deep moan from the back of my throat.

It's impossible not to get hard under his ministrations, but I try to keep my body still, wanting to let him explore like I promised without pressure.

When he brushes a bead of precum across my tip, I can't stop another filthy sound from slipping out. He starts stroking up and down my shaft, slow and torturous, until I'm leaking all over myself and into his hand.

There's no hurry, no intent, just curiosity and awe, and those parted lips shiny with his own spit that I want to take with my mouth until they're swollen and kiss-bruised.

I'm not usually so easily turned on, especially after already having an orgasm today, so my body reacting so readily to Atlas' touch is a phenomenon.

"You're so wet," he says in a hushed tone like he can't quite believe it.

I want to tell him that it's him. That it's his body, his hands, his words, his *voice* that puts me in a constant state of arousal, that makes me want to come so badly I can hardly breathe. But his touch is still explorative, nothing close to getting me there no matter how incredible it feels.

I surrender to it. To each gentle caress, to my skin tingling with every stroke. I hardly realize I've gone unsteady from the pleasure until Atlas catches the back of my neck in his other hand and presses my face to his chest.

"You're fucking gorgeous, Blair. How every man on campus isn't lining up to fuck or be fucked by you is beyond me."

His hand stills, my erection pulsing in his hand in protest, and he presses his thumb to the bundle of nerves on the underside of my dick then drags it along the flared head in a featherlight touch that leaves me squirming.

That's when I pull away, because he's getting close to my hair trigger, the thing that will have me coming in seconds, and I've never let another man find it before.

His brow pinches in worry, but I smile and grip my dick, willing it to calm down.

"We should shower."

He takes my diversion for what it is with a smile and a nod, and I'm even more grateful when the awkwardness doesn't settle in. Atlas pulls back the curtain, motions for me to step inside, then crowds my back because the bathtub is tiny. Hot water sprays down my front, and when I tip my head back, I meet Atlas' shoulder.

"Sorry it's so cramped."

A dollop of what I imagine has to be shampoo lands on my head, followed by Atlas' large fingers scrubbing and scraping along my scalp to rub it in. It makes my chest twinge and my eyes burn. No one has washed my hair for me since before Mom died.

"Don't apologize. I don't mind the closeness."

I close my eyes and settle against his chest, letting his hands guide my head in whatever direction he needs. They fall to my neck, digging into the muscle and rubbing circles over my collarbone. We're silent as he spreads soap over my body, having me turn around so he can carefully do so to my back while tipping my head to take small kisses from my mouth.

The shower is warm, but I find myself shivering under every pass of Atlas' hands, every comforting squeeze. He turns me again so my back is to his chest as he travels further south. It's a gentle pass over my cock and balls, a kiss to my shoulder, and then his hands dip between my thighs, and I widen my stance to give him access. A finger presses on my taint from behind, slipping into my crack and working the suds over my rim. I don't think another person has ever touched me this intimately before, this caringly.

As much as I'm enjoying the attention, exhaustion is starting to wash over me, and I'm not sure how much longer I can stand here. I gently ease his hands away and grab one of the wash cloths in the corner, lathering it in soap and dragging it across Atlas' chest.

"We should talk," I say.

His brows draw together, but he nods. "What about?"

"I'm wary about doing anything sexual," I start, and his brows fly up in surprise. "Earlier. We could have stopped. I would have been okay with that. You looked upset when we finished, and... that's not really something a guy wants to make his 'boyfriend' feel."

Our chests brush as I reach around to scrub down his back, and the feeling of his hand sinking into my hair and scraping lightly over my scalp has me tilting back for a kiss that he readily supplies.

"I wanted to get you there," he mumbles against my mouth. "You looked so sexy and needy; I wanted to be the reason you came."

A fresh wave of shudders roll through my body. "I think you're going to be the reason I come for a while." I don't mean for the words to slip out, but they make him smile, so I don't regret it.

"I'm sorry I wasn't as excited. I enjoyed it; I really did."

"Atlas." I step back, showerhead beating down on me as I lean my head back to rinse the soap out, then I fix him with a stern look. "Don't ever apologize for that. Sex and intimacy are only things you should do when you want, and I don't want you feeling pressured to do that with me."

His face looks pained as he scratches at his temple, lip trapped between his teeth. "I don't. Feel pressured, I mean. I wanted it. Hell, I want it again right now. I just want to touch you and make you come and see you breathless and flustered. I just don't... feel the need to have it reciprocated."

Even though my body is prepared to beg to have his hands on me again, I push the desire back. I maneuver Atlas into switching positions with me to rinse the suds from him, then have him put his back to me so I can scrub the shampoo into his hair.

"You want to touch me, but don't want me to touch you?"

He shakes his head. "No, I want you to touch me. I just don't necessarily feel the need to orgasm. Is that weird?"

"Hm. What about the phone call?"

"Phone call?"

I turn him again and dunk him under the water, feeling the rumble of his laugh through his chest as he shakes the extra out of his face.

"The phone sex, big guy. I remember your voice. You chased that orgasm like it was your damn salvation."

His lips tip up and his eyes drop, the shiest I think I've ever seen a man who is currently baring his birthday suit in front of his pretend boyfriend.

"I'm not sure I understand it myself. I've noticed it when I jerk off, too. Sometimes I'll touch myself for a few minutes, and then just stop. Others it's like I need it so bad I might pass out. The um... the former is more satisfying, usually."

"What you're saying is," I start off slowly, waiting for his eyes to lift to mine, "you like the build-up. You like the sensuality of it."

He nods, running a hand through his wet hair and pushing it away from his face. "I tend to drop after I have an orgasm." He winces, bites his lip. "I don't know a good word for it. It feels good while it's happening, but then it stops and I feel... awful, gross. My mood dips, and I have to fight to drag myself out of it. The panic attack though, that's a new one."

"Has that happened every time?"

He scratches the back of his neck, averting his eyes. "Mostly. Not all the time when I solo it, but a lot. Every time I get off with someone else? Definitely."

I can feel the awkward tension radiating off of him, the shame at something he has no reason to be ashamed about. But in a world where sex is practically everything, I understand better than most that not wanting what everyone else wants can make you feel like a failure.

I wind my arms around his neck, pulling him out of the direct line of spray, and he loops his around my waist.

"I let a lot of men touch me," I say into the breath of space between us. "I don't let a lot of them fuck me or get me off. I only hook up when the need is high, which isn't often. But Atlas?"

His lips graze mine, but I pull away before he can apply any pressure.

"I haven't stopped wanting you since that first thought experiment. I have wanted every touch you've offered and then some. I don't know what this is or why it's happening now, but I know I'm not ready for it to stop."

# Chapter 16

### **A**TLAS

BLAIR IS WEARING MY sweatpants. Correction: Blair is wearing my sweatpants with nothing underneath. I watched him slip them on when we came to his room after our shower, and I couldn't stop looking at the shape of his dick through the material until he grinned and flipped onto his stomach.

Which helps, but now I'm staring at his ass—which I've learned I really like touching and squeezing, because I keep absently doing it while talking and only stop when Blair moans into his arms and pushes his hips into the bed.

Since I obviously needed something to do with my hands, I made him lay there while I worked at the kinks in his shoulders, sure to be easy around all the superficial cuts. How the hell can he act like this is normal? Like being patched up is just a part of his every day?

It makes me angry. It makes me sad. It makes me want to cradle him in my arms and give the whole universe a big ole middle finger because Blair doesn't deserve all the shit he goes through—and the world doesn't deserve Blair Novak at all.

Now I'm lying beside him, following the lines of his tattoos with my fingertips. I like mapping trails from one spot to the next, finding new details on every pass, and the sweet, content sounds that fall from Blair's lips are enough to keep me going over them again and again.

The pillowcase rustles as he turns his head to look at me, a soft smile on his face that I lean forward to kiss.

"You don't have to stay," he says, but the look in his eyes says he yearns for the opposite. "I'm okay."

"Tough shit." I cup his face in my hand and bring his mouth to mine again. He lets out a relieved breath as soon as our lips touch. "Maybe I could stay the night? You could... maybe practice touching me?"

"What about Shiloh? What will you tell him?"

One thing that we've both pushed aside these last few weeks, even though I know we both think about it every time we're together, is worry over what Shiloh would think. Neither of us wants to hurt him, but we also don't have the will-power to give this up.

"I'll come up with something."

He smiles at me like he's so goddamn happy that I'm here, and for a moment I wish I could always be. Lying here in bed with Blair, trading kisses and innocent touches until they become not so innocent?

I've never wanted that before.

"You could say you're staying the night with your brother."

Blair's voice jostles me out of my thoughts, and I frown at the suggestion. He chuckles and scoots up to prop himself up on his elbow. "You don't get to see your family enough. It's always me or Shiloh monopolizing all of your time."

"I like you monopolizing me," I say, wrapping an arm around his waist and pressing my lips to his neck. "Both of you." I wrinkle my nose and laugh into his skin, loving the way I can feel his own laughter in his chest. "That sounded wrong."

Blair's lips brush my ear, the arm not holding him up hooking around my neck. "I love you, Atlas."

We both freeze. Not because Blair telling me he loves me is strange—because while he's always been less verbally affectionate with Shiloh and me, the three of us trading 'love you's' around isn't unusual—but it's the first time it's slipped out since whatever this thing we have going on has started.

He huffs a quiet laugh into my ear, but he doesn't apologize or take it back or over-explain himself. He knows I understand. He knows I won't take it the wrong way.

And that's what makes things with Blair so easy. We know each other, even if there's little pieces still around to surprise us.

I nose along his neck to his jaw. "I love you, too."

We lay there, holding each other, touching softly, kissing slowly, just enjoying one another's presence until my phone rings across the room where my discarded clothes are.

I groan as Blair pushes me to my back, laughing when I cling to him while he tries to stand so he has to tickle my sides to get me to let go. We're both out of breath from the laughter as he digs out my phone and tosses it to me.

"Speak of the devil," I say, rolling my eyes. "Ryder. Probably wants his truck back."

"Hm, then I guess you better get it back to him."

"Maybe I can negotiate to get it back in the morning?"

Blair climbs back into bed and settles with his head resting on his arms folded over my chest just as the ringing stops.

"You can come back," he says softly. "I'll wait up."

I sigh, threading my fingers through his hair and watching as his eyes close and he tips his head closer to my hand. He kind of reminds me of a cat.

"Shiloh will have to drive out and pick me up in the Jeep."

He opens his eyes, and I slide my hand down to cup his cheek.

"I could just follow you out."

"Don't you work in the morning?"

Blair huffs and buries his face in my stomach, making me squirm when his nose prods at my belly button.

"Fine. Call him back and tell him you'll have it for him bright and early. I'll wake you up. But maybe you should hang out with him tomorrow. He's been a big help with the truck."

I toss my head back on a groan. "Why don't you hang out with him, then?"

"Atlas." His voice is admonishing, and it makes my mouth run dry. It's not often that Blair uses his big brother voice on me—that's usually reserved for Shiloh—but hearing that tone directed at me gives me one hell of a brain boner.

He pushes up and throws a leg over to straddle my waist, which is one hundred percent not helping the hormonal thoughts suddenly rushing in my head.

"I know your family can be trash," he says, pressing his hands to my chest and leaning over me. "But Ryder isn't one of them. You need more people in your life than just Shiloh and me. Call him."

Dark strands of hair curtain his face, but those brown eyes that stare at me intent and serious shine through the shadows. It's as natural as breathing for my hands to grip his thighs and skim my fingers up to his waist. His eyelids flutter, but he doesn't budge.

"I'd rather start our exploring," I mumble, and Blair presses a cheeky smile to my lips.

"Hm." His mouth moves on mine, barely letting me return the kiss before he goes back to hovering. "How about a deal? Call your brother, and I'll blow you. If that's something you want."

I think I stop breathing, desire opening in my chest like I've never felt before. Heat floods my body, and the sneaky way Blair shifts his weight on my lap tells me he knows I like the idea.

"Tell me something that turns you on."

I blink at the request and give him a once over, quirking my brow. He chuckles and swats my chest. It makes fresh heat build on my skin and butterflies go off in my stomach.

"Your dick," I say under my breath, wondering if he's going to admonish me again, but he only fiddles with the band on the sweats he's wearing.

"Hm, does my piercing turn you on, big guy?"

He flattens himself on top of me, his chest to mine and his thickening erection pressed to my stomach. His lips fall on my neck, tongue tracing a vein along my throat and stopping to suck at my Adam's apple.

"You calling me 'big guy' turns me on." I cup my hands over his ass and give it a squeeze that earns me a thrust of his hips and the erotic feel of each ridge of his cock through the sweats grinding on my abs. "Why does that turn me on?"

Blair keeps the movement going, rocking his ass back on my dick and letting his drenched cock make a mess of my stomach. Why is he so wet? My dick has never leaked as much

as his, but now I'm thinking about how he dripped into my hand, how ready and willing he was for my touch.

I squeeze his ass and fit the tip of my soft dick between his cheeks, and I'm rewarded with Blair's mouth coming down on mine hungrily.

"Do you want it?" He takes my bottom lip between his teeth and tugs.

"Want what?" I ask, half delirious from all the sensations.

He licks into my mouth and breathes a soft laugh that fills my chest with warmth and tightness. "Blowjob, A."

I'm nodding because there's no way I can make words. Not with how his body is plastered to mine, how his hands and mouth explore me and his ass makes me *want*. I've never wanted like this before.

"Do you want it now or after?" His lips trail kisses up the column of my neck, stopping at the juncture of my jaw and throat and flicking his tongue at my earlobe. Shudders travel through my shoulders and into my chest, my breaths coming out in shaky pants.

"What if I don't...?" I can't make myself say it. That I had to focus so hard in the past to keep myself aroused that it practically took away all the joy I'm supposed to feel from another person's hand or mouth on me.

Blair searches my face, smoothes a thumb over my brow and smiles kindly. "No expectations here." He kisses the corner of my lips. "Just my mouth. On your cock. As long as it feels good, and I'll stop when you say stop."

I want it. The thought has the synapses in my brain firing like it's the fourth of July, and I'm at the center of the explosion. But there's the real fear that maybe I won't enjoy it. That even if my head is in the game, my body still won't be interested, and then this whole experiment will be over.

I don't want it to be over.

"Atlas." His hands are on my face, bringing me back to the present and out of the chaotic worry in my head. "We don't have to."

"You're hard."

He shakes his head, kisses my cheek just below my eye. "Doesn't matter. Not about me."

Blair's selflessness in the bedroom is an oddity. Every woman who has gone down on me or who offered in the heat of the moment and I refused expected the same treatment in return. Which sounds fair, but when you aren't even remotely interested in either of the acts, you start to feel a little resentful.

I give him another slow nod, trailing my fingertips up his back and feeling fresh precum drip from his dick to my stomach. The sweats are doing fuck all for him anymore. "I'm not sure I can... um... in return."

"No expectations," he repeats. "You've done enough for me today. Now choose, A. Before or after you make your call?"

I grab my phone from where it's lying beside me on the mattress, and my face flames at the thought that crosses my mind. Blair tips his head, brow pinched like he's trying to read me, and maybe my eyes betray me, or maybe I want to welcome him into every recess of my soul. Either way, his lips part and his eyes widen, but the biggest, wickedest smile takes over his face.

"Oh. Naughty boy you are. Is that something you want to try?"

I'm not surprised he reads me so well, but that doesn't mean embarrassment at the idea we're both proposing isn't lighting my nerves on fire.

"Ryder might not appreciate it."

Blair presses his lips to my sternum, making me tremble, but when he goes to pull away I slip my fingers into his hair and urge him back down. His tongue swipes down my chest while he readjusts his body so he has access to my boxers.

"I'm going to do it," he says, reaching into the opening and brushing his fingers over my cock. "Call if you want."

He strokes me with a slow, loose grip, and it feels nice, but nothing that's going to excite me. When his hand dips to my balls, rolling them and squeezing them gently, I lay my head back and stare at the ceiling.

I want to feel good, but my body isn't listening. Before my throat can close up and tears can come to my eyes, I flick open my screen and find my brother's number. I hit the call button before I can overthink, and at the same moment Blair pats my hip and I lift up so he can slip my boxers off.

Blair moans a soft sound, pushing his face between my open thighs and pressing his nose to my hip crease.

Fuck, okay, I feel that.

"Atlas." My brother's voice startles me, but it's nothing compared to how my body reacts to Blair's tongue running along the underside of my balls.

Oh. That feels good.

I close my eyes and press my lips together to hide the sound climbing up my throat when Blair sucks one of my balls into his mouth.

"Atlas. Hello?"

Shit, right, phone.

"Hey," I croak. "Missed your call."

"I noticed," Ryder replies dryly. "No dings or dents today?"

"Nope."

Blair has moved to my other ball, sucking and nipping along my sac.

"It's getting late. Are you coming by tonight?"

"Um, actually, I was wondering if I could bring it by in the morning? You know. I was thinking that we don't—ah—we don't hang out nearly enough. Maybe we could... grab breakfast or something?"

Blair licks at the head of my dick, firming up slightly under his tongue. It's slow and meticulous how he flattens his tongue and drags it up my shaft.

"You wrecked it, didn't you? Trying to soften me up with sausage and pancakes."

"No," I say, but it comes out cracked when Blair fits me into his mouth. He sucks in slow pulls as his tongue keeps up the work on my shaft and twirls around the head. Fuck. "No, I just, um, talked to Momma recently and I'm feeling a little homesick. Don't actually wanna go home. You want to or not?"

I don't know what I was worried about, because my body is one hundred percent on board with Blair's mouth. My dick is slow to fill, but when I glance down I can see the way I'm beginning to stretch his lips, how he pulls back an inch to make room for my length.

God, that is so hot. Blair is so fucking hot.

Is this what I've needed all these years? Blair Novak on my cock? He works it like it's his, and it responds in kind.

"Yeah, fine," Ryder says on a sigh, but I manage to hear the amusement in his voice through the ringing in my ears. "Eight sharp, got it? There's a twenty four/seven diner you're gonna pay for."

I'm pretty sure I mutter 'uh huh' before I hang up the phone and let a strangled moan out of my throat, but I can't be sure. It bounces off the bed and onto the floor, but fuck if I care.

Blair strokes me to a hardness I didn't know I could reach, cheeks hollowed out as he slides his lips along my cock. There's prickles of tears in the corners of his eyes, and my hips threaten to chase the suction as he slowly pulls it up my length, but I hold them down with a heavy hand because my self control slipped away the moment the phone hit the floor.

His mouth makes a lewd pop as it releases my dick, and his eyes flick up to mine just as he wraps his hand around my erection. My nerves are on fire with each slow pump, but it's his fingers smoothing over the head and opening my slit with light pressure so the tip of his tongue can fit inside that has the mounting pleasure taking over.

He closes his lips over the tip as his tongue continues lapping at and slipping into my slit. My abdomen clinches as shockwaves shoot through my groin at a particularly good flick, and I have to make a decision fast.

"Blair?" I gasp out his name, and he looks up at the question, releasing my cock to free up his mouth.

I'm terrified of ruining this moment because my arousal is at a solid eight, and I want to come until I'm bone dry and too exhausted to think. But what if the touch aversion kicks in? What if I waste my night with Blair being too grossed out by myself to touch him?

He reads my hesitation and kisses the tip of my dick then rests his cheek on my thigh. "Want me to stop?"

With my libido swinging between both options, I throw an arm over my eyes and breathe deep. The urgency settles down,

and the feel of Blair threading his fingers through mine settles the worst of my fears.

"Yeah, let's stop. We can try some more later?"

I lift my arm, and Blair is smiling at me so pure and affectionate I can't help but guide him up to me and pull his mouth down to mine. His breath is musky, and his tongue has a salty taste clinging to it but I enjoy every stroke as he fucks my mouth with it; almost like a claim.

"So proud of you," he says into my open mouth, and I press in tighter with my fist in his hair.

We kiss until we're both out of breath and my dick is resting soft between my legs. Every so often, Blair might reach down and give it a squeeze or sensual stroke, but instead of arousing it just feels *good*. The kind of good that has me stroking him in return—but not sexually.

I drag my hands down his back, scrape my nails up his arm, and use his neck as a canvas for my lips and teeth. We talk a little, and then we touch some more, and then we talk and touch at the same time.

It's like as long as our hands are on each other, there's something right with the world. Everything makes more sense when Blair's head is on my chest, when his leg is thrown over my hip and his toes are digging into my calf.

My mind has to betray the endorphins swimming around by reminding me of Shiloh's dare. The one he hasn't let up on yet. Where I'm supposed to sleep with a man, and the thought of anyone other than Blair putting their hands on me makes me sick.

But I don't want Blair to feel used, and I don't want to ruin this connection by having sex when I'm not ready and risk my body deciding the touch I love so much is bad.

That only leaves me one option.

I need to come clean to Shiloh.

About my virginity. About my sexuality. Maybe even about these feelings stirring alive for Blair.

They both mean too much to me to lose over a stupid dare.

## Chapter 17

### BLAIR

NOAH IS QUIET THIS morning. Not that he isn't quiet most mornings when he's up at seven-thirty, but it's not a test day—at least according to his whiteboard schedule on the fridge—and on days like this he usually sleeps in.

I woke Atlas up at six this morning so he'd have time to stop by his dorm for a change of clothes before he had to drive out to meet his brother. We may have spent a little too long kissing in bed and he ended up leaving in a rush anyway, but it was worth it.

I'm not much of a coffee drinker myself, but I brew a pot specifically for Noah, and I have his cup filled to the brim with what I'm sure is at least seventy-five percent milk, but that's how he likes it, and by the frown on his face as he stares ahead, I'm sure he needs it.

"Hey, Baby Bear." I set the coffee in his little dinosaur mug on the table in front of the couch, along with a small stack of pancakes. He doesn't look at me, just tightens his arms around his legs pulled tight to his chest. When I go to rub his back in small, comforting circles, he flinches, and I drop my hand.

"Noah?" I sit down beside him, and his shoulders rise. "Are you okay?"

He shrugs, eyes flicking from me to the food back to the vacant spot he keeps watching. I've seen Noah act all kinds of weird; he's a unique little man, but completely despondent? That's like an anti-Noah.

"I made your milk-bean-juice."

A pout sprouts on his lips, and then he's burying his eyes in his knees. It's instinctual for me to reach over and ruffle his hair, but the moment I do, he shrinks in tighter.

"Noah. Hey, I need you to tell me what's wrong."

Baby blue eyes peer at me from the side, and then his hand pulls on mine and grips it tight.

"I don't know," he mumbles, propping his chin on his knees. "I woke up early, and I felt... off. Disoriented. My body feels gross, and I've already showered."

"Did something happen with your guy?" I ask, a shot of worry bursting through me.

Noah shakes his head but then stops, furrows his brow, and tilts his head. "I don't think so? I don't actually remember much of last night. Marco asked if he could take me out for a drive, and you were busy so I was kind of lonely..."

He purses his lips, face scrunched in concentration. "I must have fallen asleep at some point. I woke up..." His voice trails off, eyes going hazy. When he doesn't speak up again, I tug his hand.

"Noah." He blinks, looks at me, then frees his hand and wraps them both around himself again.

"Nothing happened. He helped me into the apartment, then left."

"Wait, he knows where we live? I thought you two always met up somewhere else."

He frowns again, and after a second of silence shakes his head. "I must have told him. I'm sorry."

I put my arm around him, and this time he leans into me, nuzzling his nose into my neck. "Don't be sorry. I just want you to be safe. You've been seeing him for a couple months, right? He knows that this isn't..." I don't know what kind of motion I'm making with my hand, but Noah laughs and nods.

"He knows. No sex. No love. He just likes to spend time with me. And I really like the things he can do with his tongue in my mouth. Oh, and he has really rough hands that feel surprisingly nice."

I laugh and squeeze him to me. "As long as he's on board. I don't want you to get hurt."

"Nah, I'm okay, Blair-Bear. Just out of sorts this morning."

I kiss the top of his head and pick up the mug. "Let's get some sustenance in you."

That earns me a peck on the lips and Noah's hands circling the warm cup. "Thank you for taking care of me."

"Always. Want anything else?"

Noah takes a sip of his drink, humming soft in delight and somehow tucking himself tighter to me without spilling any of it. "Watch Chrono Crusade with me?"

"Sure, but just one episode. I've got to get ready for work." I say, squeezing his shoulder. "I'll get my laptop."

He doesn't want to move, but when I inch the pancakes into his line of sight, he willingly sits up and switches out his cup for the plate and sets it in his lap. "Love you as much as I can!" he says with his signature Noah grin.

Glad that he's feeling better, I head to the bedroom to grab my laptop from the desk, and smile when I spot a small collection of sticky notes with Atlas' chicken scratch across them.

'Text me when you get to work'

'NO DAD TODAY'

'PS that drug dealer money better be going to your dad and not straight to them or so help me I will tie you to the bed so they can give HIM a beat down and not you'

'Not in a kinky way. Are you kinky?'

'Can't be your boyfriend today, but I'll make it up to you by taking you on the best thought experiment date ever.'

I one hundred percent shouldn't be crushing on Atlas, but I think somewhere deep down I've always had this special fondness for him. I've always wanted to protect him and look out for him, and Noah says I'm a natural caregiver.

Still, the notes fill me with a foreign kind of happiness, something that has me stacking them together and setting them inside my nightstand drawer beside my Chapstick collection. It's not a hoard—contrary to Atlas' belief—but it definitely takes up a good half of the drawer.

When I pick up my phone from its charger, there's a text from the anonymous app. It's not from A, but from another noname, no-number texter with a list of questions a mile long. Usually I respond right away, wanting to help people work through their problems as badly as they want to themselves. But Noah is waiting for me in the other room, and the only other person I want to talk to right now is otherwise preoccupied.

There's nothing wrong with taking some time for myself, I think, and leave the phone on the table as I swipe the laptop and retreat from the room.

It'll be there in an hour when I have to get ready for work. Just like Atlas' notes will still be in the drawer when I get home, and I can refrain from interrupting his day with his brother.

Even if I'm already craving his company again.



MY LEAST FAVORITE WAY to spend the day is cutting mold out of carpet, or digging it out of air vents. It would be nice if I had an actual mask instead of this old bandana that hasn't been cleaned since the last time I used it to wipe the oil off the dipstick when I checked the levels in my car.

It's my own fault, though. I thought I had a couple in the glove compartment, but that was just a stack of takeout napkins. I'll have to make a note to stop by the drug store when I'm done and pick up some more.

This house is giving me a run for my money; that's for sure. But they're paying me a grand to deep clean the place, so I'm trying not to complain too much. I spent at least an hour just picking up general trash and shit, but then I found the mold, and well... here we are.

The upside is all of the texts I've been getting from Atlas. Embarrassingly enough, it ticks my happy box that he's texting me right now and not B. Not that I mind those, but it feels more personal, less like we have something to hide.

Almost every message is a picture. The first was of a plate with chocolate pancakes, hash browns, eggs, and it was directly followed by a picture of Atlas holding a sausage suggestively in his mouth. I shouldn't have looked while I was driving because I nearly jerked the wheel with how hard I wheezed.

The next picture was a half sideways image of Ryder with his backwards baseball cap drinking a hot coffee out of a straw, edited to say '#TooGoodForGerms'. After that, there was one of Atlas in a hardware store holding a handful of nuts with laughing emojis all over the screen.

Every time I needed a break, was frustrated or tired, I'd find a new picture on my phone, and it would renew some of my energy.

It's been an hour or so, and the last one I got was of Atlas sitting on the tailgate of his brother's truck, grinning sneakily at the camera. He's wearing a yellow and black plaid button up—unbuttoned—with a white tee underneath, and the way his jean-clad leg is propped beside him with his arm resting on his knee; he looks like he's posing for a calendar spread.

It's none of his business if I save it as my background for a bit.

I never responded to that last one, but only because there's no way I could match it. I've got a smartphone, but it's still crummy, and I'm not that photogenic. Plus, with all the hazardous material around me, it would make for a pretty nasty shot anyway.

On that front, things only get worse. Making it to the bathroom, I see why they were in such a hurry to get someone in here. There's black mold and grime covering the tub. The toilet is overflowing with sops of toilet paper and mushed up turds. The walls and counters are so yellow bleach wouldn't stand a chance. The mirror is shattered with shards all over the damn place.

The walls, the floor, half of it looks like it's rotting out and needs to be replaced. It's a job much bigger than me alone, and

sure as hell is worth more than what they're paying me.

But this is the last room, and I'll be damned if I'm putting all the hard work I've already done to waste. I start by putting on a fresh pair of gloves and picking all the glass shards off the counter, but the floor is too clumped with grime for the broom to collect what's on the floor, so I end up getting down and taking care of that by hand, too.

What's left of the mirror also goes into the trash bag, and I'll make a note that they'll have to get a new one anyway. All of the clothes on the floor go into a separate trash bag because no matter how disgusting it is, I'm not risking withheld payment because they wanted to wash and wear old, mildewed clothing.

Bleach fumes are making me light-headed by the time my phone rings an hour later, and I almost don't answer in time with how long it takes me to climb out of the tub, rip off the gloves and bandana, and dig the phone out of my bag right outside the room.

I spot Atlas' name right away and grin as I accept the call. "I'm going to sign you up for a modeling gig."

Boisterous laughter carries down the line, lightening the load in my chest in an instant. "You can thank Ryder for that one. It's a hobby of his apparently."

"Hmm." I lean my hip on the counter and wrap one arm around myself. "You look good, A."

He's quiet, but I hear the nervous chuckle under his breath. "Can I get one in return?"

"Oh, absolutely not." When I don't get a response, I frown.

"Not because I don't want to, but this house is a train wreck.

I've laced this place with so much roach spray I'm going to need thirty showers tonight."

He makes a thoughtful noise in the back of his throat. "How long do you have left?"

I look around at the mess I've hardly made a dent in and scrub my palm down my face. "Hours? At best? I'm not exaggerating, Atlas. This is years of neglect. Kids use this damn bathroom."

"Call it."

"Call it?"

"Yup. Pack up. Tell them you did your best. Get your money, and be done with it."

I sigh and press into my temple. "I can't just stop. I'm being paid to make it acceptable for a home check."

"That's not sketchy at all."

"I need the money."

"No." Atlas' voice is hard, and it takes me back. "Your sperm donor needs the money, and you need to stop enabling him."

Feeling a headache forming behind my eyes, I peer into the shit-filled toilet and seriously consider packing up and going home, but the sharp tug in my chest at the thought stops it in its tracks.

"I'm not enabling him. We're family. This is what family does. I'd do the same thing for you and Shiloh."

"You know for a fact that man wouldn't go through any of this shit for you. He threw a fucking beer bottle at you! He was always a miserable ass, but I've never seen—"

"Because I bore it," I snap, the throbbing starting. "I took his shit so no one else had to. Now that he doesn't have me as his physical and emotional punching bag all of the time, he's got to take it out on whoever he can whenever he can. Yes, he's a fucking asshole, but he's my dad and I'm not abandoning him."

"Blair." His voice is slow, careful. "Sometimes we have to do shitty things for the people we love. You doing all of this... it's not helping him get his shit together. As long as he knows that you're going to pay his bills, clean his house, whatever the hell else you do—he's never going to do it for himself."

"That's rich coming from someone who lets Shiloh walk all over him. When's the last time you told him to cool it with the dares? Or told him, hey, maybe he shouldn't go out to these parties and drink himself into a goddamn coma? How many manic episodes have you missed because you didn't want to hurt his feelings and tell him to take his fucking meds?"

"What the fuck, Blair?" Hurt is wound deep in his voice, but floaters are filling my vision and I can't bring myself to care. "I'm not his keeper."

"Yes, you are!" I shout, immediately regretting it when my head pounds. I cover my eyes and slide to the floor, tucking

my knees up to press my face to them and block out the light. "You are," I say softer. "You might not mean to be, but you are, and he knows what he can get away with. I wish I could keep a closer eye on him, but I..."

I'm tired. My head hurts. I know I'm being an ass, but I don't know how to stop. Shutting my goddamn mouth is probably a good step.

"Are you okay?" Atlas' voice is low—quiet—and I appreciate the reprieve. "B?"

"No," I say, barely above a mumble. "I'm exhausted. There's mold and shit everywhere. The bleach is giving me a headache. I want to go home and sleep this shit off."

"Stop doing this to yourself," he pleads in earnest. "Want me to come get you?"

"You've got class soon, don't you?"

"I can skip. I'll grab a rideshare so we can take your car back. Shower you up. Get you in bed."

I laugh softly, humorlessly. "When can we spend time together without you patching me up?"

"Hey. I told you I was planning a date. You saw the note, right?"

I'd forgotten about it by now, but yes, he did.

"Not tonight. Tonight you need more being cared for, and that's okay. It's okay to accept help, Blair."

Then why does my throat burn with the thought of accepting it? Stepping away from this, from Dad, it feels like someone is squeezing a vice around my heart, and I hate every second of it.

The only thing that beats it out is the memory of Atlas' touch. One he never holds back and infinitely supplies.

"A," I whisper, tears filling my closed eyes and bile rising in my throat from the nausea. "Come get me, please."



"I'M SORRY," I SAY for what must be the hundredth time. Atlas' hand rubbing circles on my back is soothing, but I still have to press my face into the pillowcase while the ache in my head is persistently hanging around. I've taken medicine, drank my body weight in water, and I made Atlas wait in the room while I showered because I needed to feel at least a little capable.

Now, though, he's kneeling at the side of my bed with a textbook open on the edge while he smooths his hand over my skin.

"I know you are." His voice is soft but firm. My apologies don't seem to aggravate him, and after every one he squeezes my nape like a silent 'it's going to be alright'. "Sleep, Blair."

"I can do that on my own."

"I know." There's rustling and then a soft, gentle kiss pressed to my shoulder. "I want to be here when you wake As much as I know I'm going to regret it, I turn my head and crack my eyes open. Things are blurry from how tight I've kept them scrunched, but I can tell his mouth is curved in that sweet smile right away.

"Why?"

This isn't a game to Atlas. I'm not going to insult him by accusing him of using me for a dumb dare. He *wants* to explore this sensual side of himself, and he *wants* to explore it with me. Out of all the people he could find, I just don't understand why.

He leans over, fingers combing through my hair before settling on my cheek.

"Because I love you. Because you have carried so much more than you ever should have on your shoulders. Because you protected us, protected *me*, from everything you could. You took that pain, and you hid it. I want it now, B. Give it up and let me hold it for a while."

I squeeze my eyes closed again, enjoying the warmth of his hand for a few seconds before turning away. I don't know how to share this hell with him. I don't know who I am without the pain and the heartache and working myself to the bone.

I don't know who I am if someone isn't depending on me.

"Silly," Atlas says, stroking my hair and over my shoulder. "I'm depending on you."

Did I say that out loud?

"Yeah, you did. I think sleep is ready for you. But listen before you drift off." A's chest presses to my back, a heavy warmth that has the dark edges of sleep floating closer.

"This thing between us. I couldn't have it with anyone else. All of these new feelings: they're because of you. They've always been because of you."

His lips brushing my ear and hot breath fanning my cheek and neck is the last straw. I mumble something or maybe it's just a content rumble in my throat, but it earns me a kiss below my ear that I hardly feel as I quickly fall under the wave of sleep.

I hope the words that follow me into my dreams are more than just my imagination.

"I want you, Blair Novak. I think I always have."

## Chapter 18

### **A**TLAS

"YOU GONNA BE THE liquor police tonight?" Shiloh says as we walk down the dark, rural road on the sketchy side of town.

I should. I really should. That would make me a responsible friend, but the guilt that swirls in my gut keeps my mouth glued shut. Shiloh called last night while I was with Blair, and I had to lie and tell him that I was still at Ryder's. It's the second night in a row I've lied to him and given him some excuse why I was so late getting in.

He's been passive-aggressively making jabs about it all day, so I caved and agreed to go out with him tonight.

Shiloh stops in front of an old, abandoned building with most of its windows shattered, doors ripped off the hinges and covered in graffiti. There's an orange flicker just past the empty entryway, and I only panic for half a second before I see the waste barrel surrounding it.

"We here to sing Kumbaya in front of the fire?"

Shiloh's lips twitch into a smile, and he jerks his thumb towards the entrance before lacing his fingers behind his head. "Visiting some friends. Maybe you'll catch a familiar face."

The inside isn't in any better condition than the outside, and I think the realtor must have given up on the place ages ago for it to be let go this poorly. They've got one hell of a fire going, kindling halfway up the can and flame licking just above the top. There's two people sitting in a pair of hideously puke green lawn chairs, and when one looks up, I recognize those green eyes from the last party.

"Vulture."

She pulls down the mask covering her mouth and grins, sending me a two fingered salute. "Hiya, Atlas." Her hair is pulled up into these spiky little pigtails, and she's got a baseball bat tucked into her lap.

Beside her is a dark haired boy also in a mask with his hair pulled back in a low ponytail and dark, dagger eyes directed at both Shiloh and me.

Vulture stands, swinging the bat onto her shoulder. "Boys! This is my twin brother, Valco. Valco, my party buddy, Shiloh and his friend, Atlas."

The brother doesn't stand, just gives us both a nod and pulls his own mask down to bring a beer bottle to his lips. "Looks like great company, Vult." It feels like I should find that offensive, but Shiloh bursts out laughing and crosses over to them, kicking the guys legs down from where they're propped on the top of the barrel inches from the flame. Valco raises a brow, but doesn't speak up.

"What's with the Harley Quinn burglar look y'all got going on?" Shiloh asks, throwing an arm around Vulture's shoulder and smacking a wet kiss to her cheek. "Lookin' badass by the way."

"Thank you," she beams, bouncing on her toes. "Valco and I were doing a photoshoot for this competition. Local band is holding a contest for their next music video. They give us the song, and we shoot a thirty second demo. Valco came up with the idea, and I put all the visuals together. Photography and Videography might not be the best, but the heart is there."

"Hey," I cut in. "If you've still got time, I can see if my brother might be able to come around and help you with a reshoot. Found out he's taken up photography recently."

Shiloh's mouth pulls into a humored grin, and he takes a swig of the beer Valco passes to him. Vulture lets the bat clatter to the floor and claps her hands with a loud *smack*.

"Absolutely! You think he'd be up for it?"

I shrug. "No idea, honestly. But he needs out of that ratty apartment anyway."

When I'm offered one of the lukewarm beers, I take it, but since I'm the designated driver of the Jeep parked a block away at one of the local diners—where Shiloh knows we'll

need to grab a bite before heading back to the dorms—I barely drink any of it.

Shiloh and Vulture chase each other around the big, empty space, and the way they roll around on the floor laughing reminds me of wrestling in the grass and hiding out in our sleeping bags in the empty lot at the back of the trailer park to see how long it would take until one of our brothers noticed we were gone.

Valco doesn't join in, and as we sit there watching the two of them, I'm suddenly struck with a burning curiosity of when I went from the person roughing it alongside Shiloh to the person keeping an eye from the sidelines: keeping him safe.

When Shiloh bounds up to me a few minutes later, winding his arms around my neck and dropping into my lap, I know that whatever words are about to come out of his mouth, my response is going to be a thousand times yes, so maybe this canyon I feel opening up will sew itself closed.

"I dare you," he says on a breathless laugh, dropping his mouth to my ear. "I dare you to come rollerblading with me."

"With what skates, hot stuff?" I ask, and he scrunches his nose and pushes at my chest. "What? Don't get mad at me for being logical."

"Well, stop," he says with a pout. "Shove your logic up your ass and be fun with me. They're the twins'. Vulture is letting me borrow hers, and we could probably squeeze you into Valco's."

Yeah, the two of them aren't all that different in size, and I have a feeling I'm a couple shoe sizes too big for either of their skates.

"How about this?" I pat Shiloh's hips, and he leans back to glare at me. "Why don't you and Vulture race around the empty beer and soda cans, and I'll referee for you?"

"Buzzkill," he mutters but pushes off my lap. I've watched him down two beers, but he's taking it easy on his third, and all the exercise will hopefully keep him from going too far down the hangover rabbit hole.

I used to be just as fun as Shiloh is, but somewhere along the way since we started college, I've become a bystander. I still play his dares, and we give each other hell when it's just the two of us, but I can't seem to stop myself from going into protector mode any time we're out like this.

"So what's the deal with you two?" It's the first time so far tonight Valco has spoken to me, and I'm so wrapped up in my thoughts I almost don't hear him.

"Huh?"

He looks from me over to the doorway where Shiloh and Vulture are lacing up their skates and whispering conspiratorially. "You and your bud. You two a thing?"

The groan that leaves my throat is entirely involuntary, but I think if one more person asks me that, I'm going to seriously think the universe is like an author who has no idea who they

want their characters to end up with so they push them in every which direction to see where the dick sticks.

"No. Not a thing. There is no thing. Why does everyone think there's a thing?"

Valco shrugs. "He kinda hangs off you like a lost puppy. Always looking to you for your reactions. The way he touches you..."

"There's nothing strange about the way we touch."

"I didn't say there was. I'm just saying that it's a lot more intimate than you see in most heterosexual friendships."

I roll my eyes and kick at the barrel of smoldering logs. "I'm bi." It's the first time I've said it out loud like that, and it feels like a kernel of truth has popped alive in my chest.

"You into him, then?"

"No. I love him. He's my best friend, practically my brother."

Valco drops his chin into his open palm, scuffing his feet on the concrete floor. "He might be into you."

My mind flips to that kiss in the dorm's basement kitchen, then to Shiloh's bright smile and the way he brushed it off and never mentioned it again.

"Nah, that's not possible."

"Oh, it's possible." Valco reaches under the chair and picks up a black duffel bag, standing and hauling it over his shoulder. "They're being quiet. Let's go check on them." I shake my head to knock away Valco's question rattling away inside. Shiloh and I are affectionate; we're practically trauma bonded: two halves of the same fucked up whole. We might come across as too close, but years of touch-starvation will do that to a person.

For most of our lives, if we wanted company, all we had was each other. Shiloh with me to escape his dad's phobic comments, and me with Shiloh because my huge ass family is too busy to remember I'm alive.

Why does every relationship have to be romantic or sexual?

Yes, Shiloh is the most important person in my life.

Yes, I love him more than I've ever loved another person.

But if I've learned anything from the time I've been spending with Blair, it's that there's this whole other layer of emotions that I'm only just uncovering, and it's a kind of wanting that I've never felt with Shiloh.

Something deep and aching.

Something that feels like it could rip our friendship apart at the seams.



SHILOH'S LAUGHTER COMES TO an abrupt stop as he lays back on the slanted roof of the building. The bottle in his hands has been empty since we sat down, but still he holds it above his head and twists it in every direction before he lets it clatter to the tile beside him.

"I miss you, you know," he says as he stares up at the night sky. "It feels like I never see you anymore."

I haven't had a drink since before the roller derby street race escapade where Shiloh and Vulture nearly wiped out some industrial trash cans, so my mind is clear enough to know that his has to be a mess.

"We have breakfast *and* lunch together most days. We hit the gym every Sunday. I get to listen to you jerk off most nights."

Usually Shiloh would bark a laugh at remarks like that, but that one gets nothing.

"Do you hang out with me because you feel obligated?"

"What?" I turn to him, and nothing has ever hurt more than seeing the dejected look on my best friend's face. "Hell no. I hang out with you because you're my person. Because even if we're fighting, we're gonna have each other's backs. Even when you're a dick off your meds and I'm a hard-ass who hates watching you fall apart."

He digs the heels of his hands into his eyes and releases a shaky exhale. "But you will. Because I hate them. I hate how they make me feel."

"You have to give them time to even out."

"And they'll work for how long before they're out of whack again?" He sits up so suddenly it's jarring. His jaw ticks as he picks up the bottle beside him. "Or before I need to feel in control again and flush the fuckers down the toilet? The

process starts over. Numb. Normal. Chaotic. It doesn't feel like I exist with these fucking meds."

The next thing I know, he winds his arm back and the bottle shatters somewhere below. It doesn't sound like anyone gets hurt, but it brings me back to the other night at the trailer park, and I flinch. Shiloh pulls his knees to his chest and wraps his arms around them.

"It feels like it tampers me down until I'm a socially acceptable version of myself, and I've already spent my whole damn life fighting what society wants me to be. Why is it that I always, *always* have to compromise who I am for everyone else? Why can't I just be fucking Shiloh and have what I want? Just for once."

I scoot closer until our arms brush, until my hip is pressed to his, and then I put an arm around his shoulder and squeeze him tight. "What do you want, Loh?"

His breath puffs out and he laughs: brokenly, bitterly. "For you to not hate me."

"What the hell would I hate you for? Is this about me not being around? That has nothing to do with you, Loh, it's all me. I've got a lot of shit going on."

"Shit you aren't sharing with me." He peers up before dropping his head to my shoulder. "We've always gone to each other for everything. Ever since the... you know, *the dare*... you've pulled away. I'm sorry for all that shit I said and the ultimatum I gave you. I'm sorry that I'm such a dick and that

you're stuck with me. Either you're angry or... or you found someone."

My heartbeat picks up, and I pull Shiloh in tighter. "I'm not angry with you. Yeah, I was pissed at the time, but I was also worried. You scare me when you go manic, Loh. I'm afraid I'm going to lose my best friend. You do crazy shit like roller derby on a pothole-riddled road in the middle of the night, and god, one day you're going to get seriously hurt."

He blows a raspberry in my ear, and I shove him away with a laugh. "I'm serious. I can't stay mad at you. I love you too damn much. But I don't understand why you feel the need to put your life in danger for fun. It stresses me out and makes me want to lock you in a basement."

He shrugs, picking at a scab on his knee. "You pay attention to me when I'm crazy."

"You aren't crazy. Don't say shit like that." I bump my foot on his ankle, and he straightens it out so I can hook my leg over his. "You forget that I like domestic shit, too, dumbass? I like pulling a movie up and squishing into one of our beds with snacks. I like listening to you bitch about Corvin and get excited about the kids you're training. I fucking love when you come down to the kitchen when I'm stress baking and just sit there letting me vent it out."

I put my hand on his thigh and squeeze until he looks at me. "You're like my soulmate. We've been drawn together since that first night staring at the stars covered in mud." I press on

his chest, and he lays back, and I quickly settle beside him. "What do you see up there?"

Shiloh sighs, but lifts his hand and starts mapping out shapes in the stars. "Home. A place where my body doesn't matter. Where my brain chemistry doesn't matter. Where I'm just Shiloh. Not 'that trans, bipolar kid'. Just me."

Finding his hand trapped between us and wrapping it in mine, I turn on my side and press our joined hands to his heart. "Well, I like this 'trans, bipolar kid' so shut your mouth. Stop saying shitty things about someone I love."

He looks down at our hands, and the alcohol must be getting to him because his eyes start misting. He brings his other hand up to cover ours on his chest and turns his face towards mine.

"I love you, too. I don't mean to make everything so hard."

I bump his forehead with mine and wipe at his stray tears with my free hand. "Stop it. You're drunk and won't even remember pouring your heart out in the morning."

"I'm not the one who's usually an emotional drunk."

"I try not to get drunk since that party senior year where I shouted to the whole place that I hated eating out Trisha Bailey's vagina."

Shiloh laughs so hard he has to turn away. clenching our hands and pulling me with him when he sits up to double over. I can't blame him. It was a hilarious night. Trisha was a girl I kinda-sorta liked, but her 'like' and my 'like' were entirely different. She wanted to give me head in the bathroom then

demanded that if I wasn't going to fuck her, I should at least go down on her. I mostly drank to get the taste out of my mouth, but that led to me getting plastered and making a complete ass of myself before spending half the night crying on Shiloh's shoulder about how much I hated the whole experience.

After the laughter dies down, we both sit in the silence, listening to the crickets chirp and the faded conversations from down below. Loh lets my hand go so he can fiddle with his phone, not really turning it on but tapping it on his thigh and pressing the button to turn the screen on and off repeatedly.

Something is still on his mind, so I give him the space to work through it.

"You've found someone, haven't you?"

The words are soft, drowning in sadness. "What do you mean?"

"Someone you like to touch and be with. Someone you have a connection with." He looks over at me, and while the tears aren't back, his eyes are rimmed red. "You found a guy and fell in love?"

I didn't want this moment to have to be now; I wanted to have it when we could do something fun, when he was sober. But it looks like we might be having that talk now.

"I'm not in love, Loh, but um..." I trail off, scratching at the back of my neck where I've worried nervous scars from the

shit over the last few days. "Remember how I told you I might be bi? Thus the whole dare shenanigans?"

He nods and turns his head away, resting his chin on his knees.

"Well, that's kind of true. I don't think I really care what genitals someone has. I'm open to romantic attraction with anyone."

That has him cocking his head, brows furrowed.

"I don't..." Sighing, I drop my face in my hands. "I'm a virgin, and I'm not sure if that's ever going to change."

This time, his head snaps over and his jaw drops. "No fuckin' way. We were literally just talking about you hooking up with Trisha."

I scrub a hand through my hair and shrug. "I've fooled around. But I've never... *fuck, Loh...* I've never penetrated anybody and nobody has ever penetrated me."

My face is scorching, and I refuse to look at him. I refuse to see how ridiculous he thinks I am, because god knows I feel it. He shuffles so he's facing me, but I keep my eyes down.

"Atty." Soft, warm hands cup my cheeks, and he doesn't give me a choice as he forces our stares to meet. "Sex doesn't have to be dick in a hole. How do you think lesbians do it?"

I crack a smile, and he pulls out one of his own. "I've never fucked anyone, Loh," I say quietly. "I don't think I ever want to."

He nods, pushes his forehead to mine and rubs our noses together like we're ten again. "Nothing wrong with that." He pulls away enough to catch my eyes, but I can see the deep dip in his brow from concentration. "Did you think I'd say anything else?"

"I guess I worried."

"Atty." Shiloh pulls me into a tight hug, strong enough to crush my ribs. "I know I acted like an ass about the bi thing, and fuck I'm sorry. Whether or not you're into guys, girls, dicks, vaginas, or none of the above, I don't care. I care about you and your happiness, and I thought you were on board with the ribbing."

Saying it all out loud with clear certainty? It gives life to something in my chest. Something that flutters and soars and aches beyond belief, but in a good way.

"I want to like sex," I say into his shoulder, and he nods to show he's listening. "I want that connection."

He tightens his arms around me, burrowing into the juncture between my neck and shoulder. "Okay. Yeah, that's okay, too," he says, followed by a mutter, "fuck."

Shiloh untangles himself from me, guilt written all over his face. "Fuck the dare, Atlas. I've been pushing you about it, and I thought it was something we could laugh at later, but it's not and I'm such an asshole."

"It's okay. I'm used to it." I try to crack a joke, but Shiloh groans and pulls further away.

"You shouldn't have to be!" Shiloh throws his hands up and stands, rocking a little on his feet. "I just wanted—I thought that maybe—goddammit." He grabs his hair in his fists and lets out a bellow so broken and raw that I can almost feel the aftereffects in my own throat.

He stands there for a long time, peering over the edge of the roof and making my anxiety skyrocket. But eventually he takes a step back and falls onto his ass. "You don't like sex at all?"

I play around with the words in my head, wondering if I can get them out right or if I should leave things as they are.

"I... can enjoy parts of it. I want parts of it. But I need... I don't know. I need to trust the person. I need to feel connected to them and safe with them. I need to... need to care about them before I feel anything else."

He nods slowly, turns his head, and the briefest hint of a smile comes out. "Can we go home?"

"Yeah, of course."

When I go to stand, Shiloh catches the sleeve of my Henley. "Can we watch a movie? In your bed or mine?"

I settle back down and wrap my arms around him, a hug he immediately returns. "Child's Play?"

"Think we could play it loud enough to annoy Corvin?"

I shake my head. "Not unless you want him busting down our door at three am."

"Aww, but that sounds fun!"

Maybe I haven't been completely honest with him. Maybe I'm not ready to put words to this thing blooming between Blair and I. But even when shit is hard and we don't see eye to eye, when we fight about stupid shit—Shiloh and I will always be there for each other.

So when this whole thing gets out, when we drop this thought experiment façade and find that something deeper has taken over, I hope Shiloh will still be on my side.

## Chapter 19

## BLAIR

AFTER WORKING ON DAD'S porch from early morning until the sky turned the faintest hint of pink and orange, I'm ready to soak in the tub for hours unwinding my knotted muscles, but Atlas with that handsome grin and steady fingers that work into my shoulders tells me that he has plans for us tonight. I'm too weak for him to say no.

"Where are you taking me again?" I ask as I sit cross-legged on the bed with my eyes closed. Atlas has my face cupped in one of his big hands, brushing a burnt orange color of eyeshadow over my lids.

The makeup was actually his idea this time. He asked if I liked wearing it out, and as long as it's somewhere off campus and not towards home, with someone I'm comfortable with, then I'm usually more open with what I'll wear. It's hard to get people around here to pay you for hard work if they're used to seeing you in tight clothes and makeup.

Tonight, Atlas told me to dress up in whatever would make me happiest, and staring into my closet, I realized I didn't really know what that was. What I settled on was another pair of leggings like what I wore out to the club, only these were black and shimmery and somewhat sheer around my ass. I've never worn them out of my bedroom, but by the appreciative stare and lip bite I get from Atlas, I think I've made a good choice.

I paired it with a high necked crop top in a deep maroon color, one that clings to my chest and makes the pink Dahlia on my abdomen stand out. Once I was dressed, Atlas sat me down and pulled my hair back into a loose braid and insisted on letting him do my makeup and nails for me.

Which isn't a kind of pampering that's ever been offered to me, and I still feel guilty sitting down to do those things myself, much less letting someone else do them for me. But those big honey eyes get me every time.

"I haven't told you yet," he says, pressing something against my scalp that has me cracking one eye open.

"What are you doing?"

He's got his tongue sticking out between his teeth as he does it again. "Bobby pins. Because your hair is a pain."

I laugh and reach out to stop him after the fourth one, threading my fingers into his. "Are we ready now?"

Atlas grips my chin and tilts my face to reach his mouth, a gentle and steady pressure against my lips. "Should be." He looks down at our still-joined hands, rubbing his thumb over the pink and black colors we picked out. "You're incredibly handsome all of the time, but right now..." He kisses me again. "You are breathtakingly gorgeous."

It makes my stomach feel warm and tight when he says things like that, and if I wasn't so curious about what he has planned, I might drag him down to the bed and get lost in the cavern of his mouth.

But A is taking B on a date, and I want to savor every second of it.

THE SUN HAS SET by the time Atlas has us in the truck driving down a dark, desolate road away from the bright lights of the town. The street lamps ran out a few miles ago, and it gives off a certain level of peace: the warm May air coming through the windows, the trees passing by in a blur of greens and browns, and Atlas' hand wrapped securely over mine on the gear shifter.

"You get me all dolled up to murder me out in the boonies?" I ask when he takes a turn down a dirt path that cuts into the woods.

"No," he says through a laugh, following the path until we come to a clearing of sorts and parking the truck in the middle of the field. With the car shut off, he turns to me and pulls our hands to his lips. "I made you get *comfortable* and dress in a

way that makes you feel good so you could come out here and dance with me. No one else to see or judge."

He turns my wrist over, kisses over the crisscross of faded scars, and smiles brighter than the moonlight outside. "For tonight, you're just mine, and I'm just yours."

There goes that warmth again. Spreading outward and blooming on my skin like a brand. The sky is dotted with specks of white as we step into the humid air, nothing but sky, trees, and grass as far as I can see in any direction.

I cross my arms and lean back on the hood as Atlas climbs into the bed of the truck and rummages around under the tarp he'd covered it with. When he comes out, it's with one of those handheld Bluetooth party speakers, and he sets it down on the hood as he pulls out his phone and starts connecting them.

"Ya know," I start, "if you wanted me to grind on you, there are much simpler ways to go about it."

Atlas bites down on his smile and gives me a hot look over the screen of his phone. "While I'm not opposed, that's also not what I'm going for."

He puts his phone in the pocket of his jeans as an acoustic guitar plays through the speakers. His hand reaches for mine, and even if I don't know where this is going, I let him pull me along the dirt and grass until the beat of the song kicks in. Laughter bubbles out of my chest at the unmistakable tune of country music filtering through the clearing.

"Gonna teach me a line dance, cowboy?"

Atlas tightens his fingers around mine and yanks me into his chest, a wide grin plastered on his lips as they fall over mine. "Smart mouth," he grumbles, mindlessly rocking us both to the music. "It's a queer country song. Came on while I was working out the other day. I got a good chuckle out of it. Thought you might, too."

I don't get what he means until the chorus hits and my brows fly up. "Wow." Atlas drops his hand to the small of my back and I rest mine on his biceps, following the beat with the rock of our hips and the back and forth pressure of my groin on his hip as Atlas presses me to him.

"I'm not sure if it's figurative or if he's talking about sucking dick," Atlas says, and I throw my head back on a laugh. "It's fun, though. And it reminds me of you."

I shake my head and lay my cheek on his shoulder. "A horny country song reminds you of me?"

"You suck at guessing. Shut up." He pulls me back up for another kiss, parting my lips to give my tongue a sensual suck before nipping it and breaking away. He mouths along to some of the words, catching the back of my neck in his hand and holding me still as he repeats them over my lips.

"Hmm." I dart my tongue out to taste his mouth. "Catching feelings, are we, A?"

His hands on my hip and neck stop all movement of us swaying to the song, and he peers down into my eyes with a volcanic seriousness. "Not as A," he whispers. "A and B are a mutually beneficial agreement. They're about exploring and experimenting and becoming comfortable in our bodies. This isn't that."

He pushes me forward, the hand on my neck coming around to cup my throat and jaw as he angles our mouths together. "This is me wanting to know you, Blair. This is me caring about you and craving you in ways foreign and terrifying to me. But I'm okay with them. I want them. Because they want you."

My heart skips and pounds and clenches all at the same time, and I slide my hands up his back urgently until I grip into his caramel colored locks and hold him to me with all the strength I possess. From the moment I found out Atlas was A, I was gone for him. This man I'd secretly projected all of my hidden romantic desires on is the one person I should have been the most guarded against falling for.

But he's shown up. Over and over. He's been here for the trouble and pain and heartache that I hide so far down there are jagged pieces of my corroded soul broken apart inside me.

We kiss until my lungs ache. Until Atlas whimpers and pants into my mouth. Until several songs have played and our bodies start moving on their own. It's slow and slightly erotic, skin touching skin but not enough. I lean away only long enough to tear Atlas' tee from his shoulders and press back in to run my hands over his bare chest and drag my lips along his jaw.

"Is this our first date?" I ask, sucking a bruise on one of the tight cords in his neck.

Atlas gasps, drops his head back and brings both hands up to undo the braid holding my hair back. The strands fall around my shoulders, and he buries his hands in them with a gentle firmness that melts me from the inside.

"Do you want it to be?"

I nod because I don't know how else to express the desire swirling within me.

"I want you naked," I say, our bodies plastered together from the sweat of dancing and the natural muggy air this time of year.

Atlas stills, his grip loosening to a barely there pressure that I instantly pull away from to see the panic in his eyes.

"Fuck." The heat of the moment is still burning alive beneath my skin, but I can see the steam rolling off Atlas in waves from the ice bath my words caused. "Shit. I don't mean sex. I told you I'd never push that on you."

He smiles halfheartedly and rocks back on his heels, a tiny current of space opening between us. "It's not you," he says softly, then chuckles under his breath. "I mean it is, but not like that. I want you naked, too. I want to roll around in the dirt and learn every curve of your body, teach you mine."

His chest is heaving, and his eyes are burning into mine. I can feel the invisible string pulling taut between us, begging us to come together or break apart because there's only so many

times you can tug before it snaps. Does he feel it too? Does this feel like a pivotal moment for him like my head screams it is for me?

"You take the lead." I graze my fingertips over his sides, and he doesn't flinch, but I see the way his chest expands with a deep inhale. "This isn't sex. It's an exploration. My body can be your diagram to another man's pleasure."

Atlas' lips form half a smile, his hand closing over mine where they rest on his hips. He pushes my thumbs past the waistband of his jeans, then flicks open the button and rolls down the zipper. His expectant looks makes my breath catch, and I push the material down his thighs, nearly kneeling as I pool them around his ankles.

I wrap my hands around his hairy calves, slowly sliding up to the backs of his thighs which quiver beneath the touch. I graze the legs of his boxers, and he swallows hard, a rough jerk of his head that has me abandoning the path to stand and press my palms to his cheeks.

He breathes deeply, slowly, eyes closed. His hands slip under the material of my shirt, bunching it up as he rides it higher on my chest until I let him pull it off and toss it in the direction of his own shirt. Hazel eyes flutter open as fingertips brush the rose stem and falling petals on my chest.

"What about this one?"

My skin feels more alive under Atlas' touch than when the needle marked me. The light pressure burns more than the color inked onto my body. Pain I know what to do with. Pain I can grit and bear. But this almost reverent carefulness overloads my system, my already warm and tacky skin heating further.

"Everything perfect still falls apart," I whisper as his fingers make my voice quake. "Even the most beautiful things won't stay that way forever."

"That's pessimistic."

"It's true."

I'm pulled into Atlas' chest, his lips inches from mine. "You feel it, Blair. I know you do. You want this as bad as I do."

"It's easier if you're using me," I breathe. "When it breaks, maybe it won't hurt so much."

He doesn't kiss me. Doesn't so much as touch me. Just kicks off his shoes and pulls his legs free of his pants. He steps away, and I'm left feeling flayed, like something inside of me was forcibly opened and left to fester.

"Let's cool down," he says softly, and I fold my arms over my chest to hide how exposed I feel. "I mean literally." He jerks his thumb behind him. "Give me five minutes."

He disappears back towards the truck, and I close my eyes on a deep breath. I get carried away when Atlas and I are alone. I crave every ounce of his attention, and it never feels like it's enough. Noah has always told me that I can be a lot, but I never realized how much until I saw the conflicted look in Atlas' eyes.

A few minutes later, rough hands land on my shoulders, and it's such a gentle touch that the tension resting in them drains out almost instantly. The wait was long enough for my pulse to settle, for the anticipation roaring through my veins to clear out, and I'm left with this deep ache of affection for the man standing behind me.

"Ready for the second half of our date?" Lips touch my neck, the space behind my ear. Fingers brush the hair off my shoulder and deftly return it to its braid.

"You mean I didn't make you want to pack up and run?"

"Nah. It's not like you said anything we haven't both already thought. I'm not ready for that fully yet. But I want to get there. I want to take a step forward tonight. C'mon."

Atlas leads me around to the bed of the truck—minus the tarp—but before I can peek at what he's set up, he covers my eyes with his hands.

"Just a sec. Need us to be in equal states of undress."

I laugh and blindly reach for the waistband of my leggings and work them down slowly, bending to pull them off my legs from the way they cling. Atlas' breath hitches as he takes them from me, and instead of taking in the truck, I focus back on Atlas who groans and thumps his forehead on my shoulder.

"You told me to dress comfortably," I say, knowing *exactly* what's garnering this reaction.

"A jock, Blair?"

"It's not like you don't wear them all the time to work out."

A light smack on my bare ass makes my face warm, and Atlas gently nips at my neck before pushing me forward. "In the truck, troublemaker."

I shake my ass, and he smacks it again, both of us clambering into the bed of the truck half bent over laughing. As soon as I'm up on that tailgate, though, everything around and inside of me goes silent.

There's a couple of blankets stretched out, padding the bed with some pillows thrown up there. There's a black insulated bag right in the middle, but it's the little white fairy lights wrapped around the truck that I keep coming back to.

"Is this you trying to be romantic?"

Atlas rubs a hand over his nape. "Is it working?"

I lean over and drop a kiss on his cheek. "You're a wonderful man, Atlas Huxley."

We sit on either side of Atlas' bag as he pulls out two plastic containers and a set of silverware.

"I snatched some of the best food on campus: Alfredo from The Creamery. Mine has chicken and yours just has broccoli because you're weird."

The container is warm in my hands, but I'm watching Atlas' wide smile as he reaches into a tiny cooler in the corner and takes out two bottles of water. He presses one to my thigh, and I jolt, but his smile never wavers.

"I'm weird? Shiloh sent me a picture the other night of you lapping cream out of a bowl like a cat."

Atlas throws his hands up—splashing water from his partially opened bottle on his face—and laughs. "It was a dare! I had to act like a kitten for thirty minutes, and I was in the middle of baking snacks."

"Didn't know you were into kitten play, A."

He cocks his head, eyes curious and analyzing; his smile open and playful. "I can think of more erotic things to do with my tongue."

"Hmm, maybe if you eat your dinner, my tongue can do some erotic things to yours."

He drops his eyes. "I might like that."

We both eat in relative silence, sneaking glances and throwing occasional snark as we do, but halfway through Atlas slows, staring down at his bowl with a slight frown.

"What's wrong?"

"Just thinking that... you know, ever since I was young, I've had this silly dream of opening a family restaurant."

I set my mostly finished container inside the bag that's now sitting on the tailgate and scoot closer to Atlas. "With *your* family. Bold."

He chuckles, but there's a slight mist in his eyes. "My family, yeah. Specifically Rue. I loved his cooking. And he really tried to teach me. I'm... absolutely hopeless with real food. I can cook the basics, and I can bake a cake in my sleep, but Rue had an insane talent for it given the food stamps we had to work with."

"With a family that big, I don't know how you managed."

Atlas' smile is full of sadness, and he closes the container of his food to put it in the bag with mine, then grabs me by the shoulders and pulls me down to lay beside him on the pile of blankets. He lays there pulling each bobby pin out of my hair one by one, jaw working as he bites down on the inside of his cheek. When he's finished, he lifts up the end of one of the blankets and stashes them underneath, then cradles my cheek in his hand.

"We had Rue. He held us together. I guess he was our Blair. I don't think Mom and Dad ever knew how much he did for us, especially when they were busy with the twins."

"I don't think I remember much about Rue. He's your oldest brother, right?"

Atlas nods. "It went Rue, Ryder, me, and the twins. I was thirteen when he left. No note. No phone call. No goodbye."

"I'm sorry," I whisper, splaying my fingers over his ribs and feeling the skin pebble. "I couldn't imagine leaving you or Shiloh like that."

"You could," he says softly, parting my legs to fit one of his between them, angling his body closer so he can press our foreheads together. "You could do so much without your worry about us holding you back."

I scoff, and Atlas tips my face so our lips almost touch. "What would you do, Blair? If you didn't have to worry about your dad, his mountain of bills, the university shit?"

"But Shiloh—"

His lips press against mine, then trail along my jaw. "Shiloh is twenty-one. He can take care of himself. And he has me. Would I let anything happen to him?"

With his mouth pressed to my ear and his thigh putting a steady pressure on my crotch, the fire from before rekindles inside.

"What would you do? Who would you be if you weren't your family's caretaker?" His hand is spread across the length of my neck, thumb under my chin keeping me from backing away. Not that I would. I've spent weeks living for this touch. I'm not strong enough to walk away from it.

"I..." His mouth distracts me as it ghosts down my jaw back to my lips, but he doesn't kiss me again. "I want to design tattoos."

I'm rewarded with his mouth on mine, with a brief grind of his thigh that makes me gasp. "I'd open a shop. I'd specialize in covering up scars. Self harm. Accidents. Surgery scars."

I make an obscene moan that Atlas swallows, his hand falling to my hip to rock me against him.

"Should I find that hot?" he mutters with his mouth still ravaging mine. "Even when it's about you, it's about someone else."

I manage to break away long enough to gulp in a breath, and I duck my head to his chest, pressing my nose to his clavicle. "I like making a difference in someone's life. I want to know something I did meant something to someone."

That I mean something to someone.

But the words burn my throat like acid and never make it past my lips.

"You're so fucking attractive right now. Brain boner is going mad." He pants into my hair, his hand sliding down to cup my ass cheek. "Can I make you come? I want to make you see stars, the ones in the sky and the ones I'm going to stir alive all over your body, praising and worshipping every inch of you."

"Atlas." I'm already hard and leaking, rutting my stiff cock on his thigh like a horny teenager. His hand wraps around my braid and pulls my head back, lips claiming my throat with rough sucks and tender bites. Tomorrow is going to be a turtleneck day.

He pins me on my back, his leg keeping a firm pressure on my erection. His hands press mine above my head, but he doesn't hold them down, instead slides his touch delicately down my arms and over the tattoos on my chest and sides. They finally rest on my thighs, hiking one up around his waist.

"You're handsome and kind, and fucking beautiful with the moonlight casting over your flushed cheeks." His lips brush them. "The red down your chest." He trails light kisses along my sternum, and I arch into him.

He flicks his tongue over my nipple, closing his lips around it to give a gentle suck before switching to the other. The fingers digging into my thigh slide up to press on the underside of my balls, weighing them in his hand with a gentle squeeze that has me moaning and baring my neck for him to place more dirty kisses on.

"Confirmation, B," he whispers into the hollow of my throat as he swirls his tongue along a pulsing vein in my neck.

I want to nod, but I don't want any of the things his mouth is doing to me to stop, so I wet my lips and let out a hoarse, "uh huh" before thrusting my hands into his hair and holding him down so his lips keep wrecking my marred skin.

He gives my dick a long, slow stroke through my underwear, stopping to fiddle with the balls at the end of the barbell on either side of my tip. My hips respond in earnest, and he grips me tight.

"I want to feel you," he says, slipping the jockstrap down, and I do nothing but moan in agreement because I'm already lost to the pleasure of this man's hands and mouth.

He wraps his fingers around my bare cock and precum spurts from my slit, dripping down to coat his palm. I've never been this turned on before, never felt this insatiable need coursing through my veins like a ticking time bomb.

His strokes are soft, unsure at first, but with each gasp and groan that passes my lips, with my hips jackknifing and grinding up in his hand, he gains confidence. He explores my shaft, digs his thumb to the bundle of nerves on the underside that makes me whimper and claw at his shoulders. He collects the stream leaking from my dick and spreads it all over his

fingers, then brings his hand to his lips to lick a wet stripe along his palm before returning to my cock.

"You deserve beautiful things," he says as he starts a slow and steady rhythm that has my abs clenching in anticipation. "You deserve to have the life you want. You deserve to be happy. To be loved. To have someone cherish you and take care of you."

The hand not on my dick takes a loose, possessive hold of my throat, fingers resting on my pulse points but not applying pressure. I stare up into his eyes, watching those rich brown and green irises blow wide, his cheeks flushing, but there's a determination in his gaze that squeezes the pounding muscle in my chest.

His lips part, eyes dart down to where my cock is disappearing into his slick fist, dark and shiny and only a few strokes away from coming undone.

A tiny moan escapes his lips as he watches, and his grip becomes almost punishing as he pumps my cock, but it's how he takes the slightest moment to press the tip of his thumb into my slit that makes me lose all control.

I toss my head back, nails digging into Atlas' forearms to keep myself grounded, and I rock my hips into his precum soaked hand with abandon.

"You're going to come." It doesn't sound like a question, more like an amazed exclamation, and I'm nodding my head so hard he has to thread his fingers through the hair at my scalp to keep me still.

His hulking frame bends over me, those lips I love coming down on mine with nothing short of ownership. He's as sure with this kiss as he is with everything else in his life: his workouts, his friendship with Shiloh. He kisses me like doing so is a given, like it's natural and right and the moment his tongue slips in and he squeezes the head of my dick and moves the piercing in just the right way—that's it.

Pleasure pulses through me like an avalanche, and the rough ecstatic feel of Atlas' hand jerking me with a sure grip sends me tumbling over. I come so hard my entire body shakes and shudders. A cry leaves my throat and pours into Atlas' mouth where his lips and tongue soak it up until my muscles relax and I lay pliant on the pile of blankets.

It takes me several moments to catch my breath, several more for my focus to come back, and when it does I nearly stop breathing.

Atlas is still hovering over me, one hand stroking my cheek, with a smile of pure adoration aimed down at me.

"You're sexy when you come," he says and brushes the softest kiss over my lips. "Was that okay?"

It hits me like a cosmic explosion at that moment: I'm falling in love with Atlas Huxley. Deep, hard, and breathtakingly in love with this man I've known most of my life but have never really seen until his eyes lock on mine and bare his whole soul to me in an instant.

"More than," I say, because the hidden truth in the words is as close as I can get to admitting my revelation without throwing us into the deep end with no life preservers.

There's no stopping what's happening to my heart, and with every caring smile and gentle stroke of his thumb over my cheek, the less I wish it would.

## Chapter 20

## ATLAS

USUALLY SHILOH AND I head to the on-campus gym together on Sunday mornings because it means less people will be around—though Sundays in general are pretty slow, which is why we picked it.

But he said he had to run a class this morning as he was rushing out of the dorm and wanted to push our workout back until noon.

I've had a hell of a lot on my mind lately, so I figured I'd get here early enough to get my own workout in and push through all the horniness before Shiloh shows up.

Hooking up with Blair has made my head a haven for dirty thoughts. My cock gives a valiant twitch every time I think about the pleasure bleeding through his expression when he came. It was hot as hell. And I haven't been able to stop thinking about more ways I could take him apart and make him come.

Which is mighty inconvenient when you're working out in compression pants. But by now I've worked up a sweat and can blame the boner on adrenaline.

When I catch Shiloh slumping in through the gym doors looking rumpled and exhausted, my problems are put on pause as I jog over to him.

"Those kids sure did a number on you."

He glares at me and yawns, shoving his duffle bag into my chest. "Shower. And then no going easy on me today, you got it? I need you to run me into the ground." He unzips the bag and pulls a tank and shorts out, then closes it up and walks around me.

"When have we ever done more than light exercising?"

He's already halfway to the locker rooms and showers, but he turns around with his arms crossed to send me a glower. "Atlas."

I put my hands up in surrender because not only did he use my actual name when I'm always 'Atty' to him, but that's the tone he takes when someone crosses a line. When he has no intent of taking someone's bullshit.

I find a good, empty spot for Shiloh to do his stretches and set his bag in the corner near a row of mirrors. He gets freaky about leaving it in the locker room, so any time we workout together, we just carry it from spot to spot.

Knowing that he'll likely be a few because he *really* looked like he's gone through it this morning, I pop my earbuds in and

resume my most recent workout playlist. Since I've already been at it for a while, some cool down stretches are in order.

Shiloh has been all over the place lately, but he doesn't seem manic. Just his special brand of chaotic. He's taken to being an actual turd and waking me up before he leaves every morning to show me that he's taking his pills. Which usually means he's crude as hell and sticks his tongue in my face with the pills resting on it.

I can barely take Tylenol one at a time; I don't know how he swallows several without gagging.

Movement in the mirror makes me look up from my floor stretches, and I'm prepared to razz Shiloh over his rushed clean up when I see a different Novak watching me.

Blair is leaning on one of the large concrete beams with his arms crossed over his chest and a warm smile on his lips. He looks different today—good different. His hair is pulled away from his face in a high ponytail instead of the low one that barely holds. He's wearing a baggy, cut off crop top and a pair of gray joggers that have a snug but not skin tight fit.

The tattoos on his arms and abdomen are on full display, and every time I see them I just want to run my tongue along the ink. I've done it several times, but it never seems like enough.

"I thought you saved those looks for me?" I joke, dropping back on my elbows and staring at him through the mirror.

"I'm here to see you, aren't I?" He steps closer, taking a quick look around before sliding down to his knees pressing a

kiss to my lips. "Sexy."

I sneak a peek at the locker room entrance, and when all is clear I reach out to grip the back of Blair's neck and pull him down for something longer—albeit clumsier because my mouth is upside down.

"You taste like peaches today," I say as he pulls back, running a hand down my chest as he does.

"You taste like sweat," he says, licking a stripe down my neck.

My eyes dart to the doorway again, and I gently push him back. "How's your dad?" I ask, knowing that he spent his morning over there making sure everything worked and was at least mostly up to code.

"Miserable at best," he mumbles, sitting back on his ankles. Never realized he was that flexible. Huh. "Wouldn't talk to me so much as grunting and grumbling around."

"No more beer bottle accidents?"

He shakes his head, rubbing a hand along the back of his neck. "It was a boring, frustrating morning. Which is why I decided to stop in. Kind of wanted to see your face." His smile is almost shy, and I let my arms drop to lay back all the way, my head falling into his lap. "That alright?"

"Absolutely," I say, and even though I know we're pushing the edge of this secret when Shiloh could walk out any second, I can't bring myself to mind. We talked the morning after our date about needing to sit down and decide if this is something serious for us—if it's more than an exploration, and that it isn't something we should hide from Shiloh. Something seems to be holding Blair back, but I can't quite tell what it is.

He runs his fingers through my hair, not seeming to mind the sweat, and I'm surprised to see he hasn't taken the polish off from the other night. He's got this weird sense of self where he worries that his more 'feminine' side will be off putting to people, but that guard seems to be coming down little by little.

"What are you listening to?" he asks, not giving me a chance to answer before taking one of my wireless earbuds and putting it up to his own ear. He chuckles, giving me an amused grin. "K-Pop?"

Heat crawls up my face, and I press my lips together. "I went down a rabbit hole. They're very motivating. Great beats. I was trying to look up... um... your tattoos. I forget what you called them. And somehow I ended up on K-Pop TikTok, and..."

Blair full on belly laughs, loud and bright with another kiss on my lips, my cheek, my chin. "Hangul. What were you trying to look up?"

"Um..." I look away, but that's really hard to do with Blair leaning over me so I end up just squeezing my eyes closed. "I plead the fifth."

"You aren't on trial." There's humor in his voice. "Look at me, A."

I shake my head, and then I feel the soft brush of his lips on my eyelids. "You were looking up your name, weren't you?"

"Nope."

"Liar. You want me to tattoo your name on the tree."

"That sounds extremely narcissistic."

Blair strokes his fingers over the stubble on my jaw. I don't mind having a five o'clock shadow, but anything more bothers me, so I stay clean shaven more often than not.

"It doesn't," he says softly, the touch coaxing my eyes open. His smile is small but just as warm as when I caught him in the mirror. "You're important to me. As A. As Atlas. You're my family."

"You have Noah but not me," I blurt and immediately throw my hands over my eyes. "God that sounds whiny."

"Atlas." Blair grabs hold of my wrists and gently lowers my hands. "Do you want me to put your name on my body?"

I gulp, pulse pounding hard enough it echoes in my ears. "Only if you want it there."

He nods, grips my face and kisses me again. It's quick but sweet in the best way. "I'll work on figuring out what I want. Don't be jealous."

"I'm not jealous."

He quirks a brow, and I groan, rolling off his lap and sitting up. "Okay, I'm a little jealous. But it's not because we're...

you know..." I wave a hand between us. "You're important to me. I thought I was important to you, too."

I move to stand, because I feel like an asshole admitting this. Blair cares about me. He always has. I know this. I know that he's taken care of me the same way he has everyone else, but what if that's all it was? Another obligation because I'm Shiloh's friend? It sounds ridiculous, and I feel ridiculous saying it out loud.

Blair's hand reaches for mine as he follows me up, and our eyes meet in the mirror showing a look like fiery burning coals in his.

"Atlas." He paces to stand in front of me, drawing my eyes away from his reflection and directly into his intense stare. Both of his hands come to rest on the back of my head, holding me close as his body breaks the barrier of my bubble. "I love you." He pushes out each word like a stone being dropped into the ocean. "I love you just as fiercely and strongly as I do Shiloh. That won't change."

He swallows, and I follow the movement of his throat to his heaving chest. "But it's different now," he adds. "It means something different to me."

It's like Blair has his own source of gravity, a gravitational pull that has my hands anchoring to his waist and pressing closer until his back hits the mirror and his face tilts up towards mine.

"Blair Novak. Are you saying this is more than a thought experiment?"

His smile is almost sad, but there's a wistfulness to it, a longing. "I'm saying I don't think it ever was."

I take his mouth in a firm kiss, grabbing his face with both of my hands. There's no tongue, just lips claiming one another over and over until Blair turns away, panting.

He looks at me, and I can tell he's been agonizing over this. Over these feelings. It's in the way his mouth quivers, how his fingers tremble on my neck.

"You thought of me when this all started. And I've thought of you... in the back of my mind I've thought of you for years. How kind and caring you are. How I want that in someone who loves me." His voice cracks, and I crash my lips down on his again to take the pained sound away.

I kiss him until his lips are red and puffy, until the tension drains from his shoulders and his arms hang loosely around my neck. I kiss him until his head thunks against the mirror and his eyes watch me dazed and half-lidded.

"We really need to talk about this," I say, trailing my nose across his cheek to his ear. "About us."

He chuckles. "Isn't that what we just did?"

I pull away and drag his intense, beautiful stare to mine. "A serious, sit down conversation. What this means to us. What we want it to be. When I don't have to worry about your brother stepping out and catching us before we tell him."

Blair's eyes widen, and his lips part with a worried exhale. "Oh. Shiloh's here? Shit." He doesn't try to extract himself,

though. Instead his hands slide down my chest and grip my hoodie. "That should make me want to pull away, shouldn't it? That's what a good big brother would do."

I trap his jaw between my fingers, and he breathes a soft sigh. "You are an incredible big brother. I'm not Shiloh's property, Blair. I'm not his boyfriend."

"But you're like the center of his universe."

"Shut up," I whisper, letting my lips just rest on top of his. "We can talk about it later. I'm working the late shift. Come see me tonight?"

He lets go of my shirt and nods, opening his mouth as one last invitation for my tongue to stroke his before I push away. I'm only mildly surprised to see the erection straining his shorts that he has to readjust.

"I'll see you tonight." He smiles and gives my arm a gentle squeeze, then steps around me. It's a conscious effort not to follow him, not to drag him back and pin him against the wall so I can keep kissing all over his beautiful, breathless body.

I wait until his footsteps fade away, and then I drop my forehead to the mirror, cupping my own throbbing dick to get it to cool down. I've never been wanted the way Blair wants me, and that does something to me. Seeing him open up and let pieces of himself free that he's been holding back—it shouldn't turn me on this much.

"I don't think the mirror consented to you being grabby with it."

I nearly jump at Shiloh's voice and quickly tuck my dick into the waistband of my shorts.

"It's called taking a self reflection moment. Try it some time." I smack his shoulder just as Shiloh whacks his towel at my chest, and we're both grinning at each other like a couple of kids.

"Nah. I'd rather you whip me into shape, Atty." His voice almost sounds like it has an undertone of flirting, but I shake it off. That's just everyone's assumptions taking up space in my head where they don't belong.

If Shiloh were into me, he would have told me a long time ago. He has zero problems going after what he wants.

"Sure you aren't too tired? You looked like a wreck when you got here."

"I'm fine. Shower perked me right up." He crosses his arms with a big ass grin on his face. "Looks like you perked up yourself, bud." His eyes flick down to my crotch and back up, making my face burn.

"Adrenaline," I say, rolling my eyes. "Do you want this or not, because I can totally go to the dorm and get a nap before my shift."

Shiloh snorts. "An eight hour nap? Take it easy, big guy." He gives me a matching eye roll and winks. "Let's get sweaty."

There's that flirty tone again. But it has to be my imagination. I'm still just horny and awestruck over Blair's

impromptu visit. Just because everyone else thinks there's something going on doesn't mean there is.

By their logic, I should be in love with Shiloh, but he isn't the Novak brother whose bed I want to slip into when I'm worn out from my shift.

It isn't Shiloh who I want to lay under the stars with and map out a future I've long since stopped believing was possible.

Blair makes me want to believe again, because I believe in him and his dreams even when he doesn't.

And I believe I'll never want to kiss another man's mouth as reverently as I want his lips on mine again.

One more kiss will never be enough.

# Chapter 21

### BLAIR

I LIED. I GOT a call from a distressed neighbor that Dad had taken a sledgehammer to the porch and had cut a gash on his leg that needed medical attention. I ditched class, I ditched tutoring, and I drove him to the emergency room screaming and cussing me out the whole time.

He stayed long enough for them to sew it shut and ignored the prescription of antibiotics because it would just sit useless in his cabinet like the last bottle anyway.

The deck was in shambles. So bad that a code inspector would fine our asses so hard with one look at it. So, I spent another hour cleaning everything up, taking another round of my Dad's verbal abuse, and then going back to my apartment and scrubbing the grime, shame, and disappointment from my skin.

When Atlas sent me that gym selfie, the only thought was that he could silence the noise. Being with him turns down my inner critic, makes me feel comfortable—wanted.

If the other night proved anything, it's that Atlas sees me for me. Not a solution to problems, not as a big brother, not as a college kid barely keeping his own head above water—but me: Blair.

The temporary lightness from the visit vanishes the moment I walk through the door and hear Noah screaming.

By the time I make it to his room his breathing is loud and ragged, but the door is locked. It ends up being quicker for me to break the thing open with a bobby pin than for him to recover and open it himself.

Noah's room is meticulously clean and organized. That's why it's so shocking to see his bed in such disarray. The covers are kicked nearly onto the floor, the sheet is half off the mattress and half tangled in Noah's legs, and Noah is sweaty and trembling with wide eyes as he holds his favorite stuffed owl to his chest.

Those big, blue eyes meet mine, and he launches himself across the small space into my arms, damp face buried in my chest, and one arm gripping the back of my tank in a tight fist.

"Another bad dream?" Atlas and I fell asleep the other night wrapped in blankets and each other under the stars, and when I made it back to my apartment around three in the morning, Noah was curled up on the couch with tear tracks on his cheeks. He's spent the last several nights with me in his bed for fear of the dream coming back, but our sleep schedules don't always line up, and today was one of the days he usually sleeps well into the afternoon.

He's been jumpy and anxious, says he keeps getting flashes of a nightmare he can't quite remember.

"I woke up in the dream," he says, sniffling into my shoulder. "Someone was in my room. They were on top of me. I couldn't move. I couldn't wake up because I thought I was awake..."

"Noah." I curl my arms around him like a protective cage. "No one's here, baby bear. It's just me and you."

"I have to get ready for class," he mumbles through a hiccup and sob. "M gonna be late."

I kiss the top of his head and ease him back until his knees hit the mattress and he sits.

"What do you need to do to get ready?"

He tilts his head, eyes closed, and wrinkles his nose. "Shower. Clothes. Food."

"Okay. Those are all really easy."

His eyes open with a series of slow flutters.

"How about this? You go shower. I'll set you out some clothes and make lunch. That sound okay? All you have to do is wash up."

I can tell he's chewing on the inside of his cheek by the way it caves in, making the little dimple at the corner of his mouth pop. "Dino nuggies and ketchup?"

Noah's go-to snack when he needs a quick bite of energy and nutrition is a frozen box of nuggets shaped like dinosaurs that's supposed to have vegetables in them. A good way to trick kids into eating greens. I think I pulled that card on Shiloh a few times before the cute shapes stopped cutting it and I had to get more creative.

"Anything for you, baby bear. Shower?"

Noah nods, uncurling from himself to sit straight and push off the bed. He smiles and presses onto his tip toes to place a dry peck on my lips before slipping out of the room and down the hall

I wait until I hear the water turn on, and then start moving about to do what I always do best.

Take care of the people I love.

All the little frustrations and pieces of feelings that have been floating to the surface are buried under my protective instincts, because I have a best friend who needs me, a brother whose feelings I need to weigh against my own, and a man who wants a part of me I've never given to anyone.

Of all the days to fall apart, today isn't an option.



WITH NOAH GONE AND hours until my meet up with Atlas, my worry shifts into overdrive. Dad and his demolished porch and his outrage. Noah and his persistent nightmares. This thing with Atlas that keeps me on the edge of elated and terrified.

Everything feels clear and quiet when he kisses me. When he holds me. I'm supposed to be the one guiding his experimentation, but every time we're together, it feels like he's in the lead. Like I just want to lay my soul in his palm to fill me with warmth. Wrap his fingers around my core and be my security blanket. My safety.

I've never relaxed with someone the way I melt into Atlas when he's around. But then I step back into the world outside our galaxy of pretend, and I'm slapped in the face with the harsh reality of life.

Dad's bills and repairs are piling up; Shiloh is on the verge of a depressive episode because his new meds don't seem to be tampering his mania as much as they should; I haven't even mentioned it to Noah, but I had to drop a class last semester that I haven't been able to pick back up, and that puts me under part-time enrollment so the student loans I took out are coming to bite me in the ass.

Sometimes I wonder what I'm even at college for. At first it was just the need to escape: to get away without feeling guilty about abandoning my family. But now it's like another requirement, another task I have to check off on my daily tally. I'm skating by in the few classes I still have left, but my attendance is abysmal so it's mostly just cram sessions the night before a test.

That night under the stars, Atlas wove a thought experiment of his own. One where we had a cabin out in the middle of nowhere. During the day, he'd be at the little family restaurant he owns with his older brothers, and I'd be at a tattoo shop helping people rewrite the stories society believes defines them. At night we'd build a fort under the stars and just talk. Hold each other and forget the rest of the world exists.

It's not practical or possible by any means, but it creates a little spark of joy in my chest that's been missing for years—maybe since the day Mom died. Atlas said that it could be my kernel of peace: that place I go when life gets hard or overwhelming; when I need to get away but there's no way for me to leave. He says he has one like that, but that it's a secret.

And then he'd kissed me like I was his secret: like I was his peace.

My bed is covered in crumpled and torn pages. There's smudges of lead on my fingertips and smeared around my cheeks, nose, and chin because I can't stand eraser marks and wipe at my mistakes with the pad of my fingers instead.

I don't know what I'm making. There's no image in my head, just an emotion bubbling in my thoughts until it's a foaming mess that I can't ignore. Nothing comes out right, though, and I can feel the frustration—the desperation—reaching a peak in my chest.

I need this out. Whatever it is, it needs to be captured on the page and bottled into the ink until I find the place, time, and money to put it somewhere on my body.

My phone buzzes against the comforter, and the fog narrowing my focus lifts. Not entirely, but enough that I can fit myself back into the Big Brother Blair mold when Shiloh's name appears on the screen.

"What's up, squirt?" I press the phone between my ear and shoulder as I fiddle with the sketchbook in my lap.

"Not much," he says, tone dull. "Sore as shit from exercising with Atlas. You'd think he'd cut his best friend some slack, but fuck no. Fuck him."

His voice holds a whine at the end, and a smile tugs at my lips for the first time in hours. "You told him not to go easy on you."

There's a beat of silence, then a heavy sigh. "I did. But since when does he listen?"

"He respects you, Loh. Plus, Atlas would never push you further than he thought you could handle."

"I'm trying to be frustrated with him, you jerk."

I chuckle. "Sure. Be mad at the man that would quite literally take on the world for you."

"I know," he says softly. "I love Atty."

"Shocking."

"No." His tone shifts to something hard, but his voice is quiet. "I'm telling you I love him. You can't have him, Blair. He's confused and hurting, and he's going through so much right now. He needs *me*. Not you."

My sketchbook falls to the mattress, pencil rolling off the edge and clattering to the floor. A lump forms around the breath in my throat, making my chest go stock still.

"I don't have him," I say through the intrusion, hoping he takes the way my voice cracks as just static from the phone. "He isn't mine. I know you care about him."

I've always known he cares. I've seen the way he's all but monopolized Atlas throughout the years. How he has friends but only ever sees them in class or with Shiloh present. How Shiloh has been his priority for so long I don't think he realizes how isolated he is.

A part of me hoped that I'd always been wrong. Because then I wouldn't have to weigh Shiloh's heart against my own. I wouldn't have to truly worry about who Atlas would choose when it came down to the wire.

He says he doesn't feel that way about my brother, but if Shiloh told him he wanted him... would Atlas give in? Because Atlas would trade his heart without a second thought if it would make Shiloh happy.

"I know you've kissed," he says. "At least a couple of times. I didn't think you were the submissive type, but you fold right up for him. You both looked ready to fuck right there against the gym mirror. Would you have let him? I can't imagine Atlas bottoming for you."

Mortification wars with the dread sitting heavy in my chest. Shiloh saw us. He saw Atlas' hands on me, his mouth on mine. He saw my surrender.

"We wouldn't have... I wouldn't have..."

"He's a good kisser, isn't he?"

"Shiloh..."

"It's not like I'd disagree." There's a smugness in his voice that makes my chest ache. "We've traded a couple of kisses. He's sweet with them, isn't he? Makes you feel special. Wanted."

I can't give him an answer. Not with the way my throat closes up.

"It's a dare, big brother. Atlas is experimenting with you because I dared him to."

I know that's not the truth. I know Atlas would never toy with me over a dare. But he's never actually told me about it. Not as Atlas. Not as A. He isn't the type to back down or ignore a dare, and I don't know if he's told Shiloh about his suspicions of being ace. It's not my place to out him.

"I know," I say, because this isn't a corner I can back myself out of. "I'm not taking him from you. I know this isn't serious."

"Then tell him that."

If a single sentence could stop my heart, it would be that one. "What do you mean?"

"Tell him you aren't serious about him. That whatever is going on between you is done. You were right. My head was in my ass over what I wanted from Atty. I want him. In every way, shape, and form. And I think he'd realize he wants me too if we just talked about it."

And isn't that what I keep pressing Atlas about? That he's sure his feelings for Shiloh aren't romantic? I'm not the only one who's suspected. But it hurts like hell to think about pushing him towards that conclusion and it being true.

Atlas and I might have an incredible connection, but it will never be anything compared to what he and Shiloh share. It's a hard, bitter truth I've been doing my best to ignore.

What am I supposed to do? Tell my little brother that I'm pretty sure I'm in love with his best friend and that I want to keep exploring this connection even knowing how Shiloh feels about him?

My family is enough in shambles as it is. I can't lose him too.

"Okay." The word falls out of my mouth like snow down a frozen bank: soft but fragile.

"Have I told you lately you're the best big brother ever?" There's a wide grin in his voice, and even though I feel the fog rolling back in, feel my throat closing up and tears prickling in my eyes, I don't hold his excitement against him.

When we hang up, there's a weight in my chest I'm not sure any amount of drawing can cage away. I knew I needed to make a decision.

Atlas and I are interconnected to each other in a cosmic way: a binding way. He's as woven into my life as Shiloh, not by blood but by a friendship and brotherhood with too many layers to untangle. This new thread would throw kinks into the mix we could never work out. Ones that could affect not only our relationship with each other but also our individual relationships with Shiloh.

But even without the words, without the full acknowledgement of what we mean to each other—or at least what Atlas means to me—this new connection has been working its way inside our hearts.

Torching it could set fire to every thread that runs between us.

Including the ones entangled with my brother.

We take this chance or we don't, but either decision feels like plucking petals off heartstrings and waiting to see where the wind carries them.

I made my choice, and my heart may never recover from it.

# Chapter 22

#### BLAIR

I LEFT NOAH'S BED hours ago, but I've kept to the apartment in case he needs me. The moon is high and the stars look like puncture wounds in the sky. I have the curtain pulled back as I rest my cheek on the back of the couch, watching out at the vast nothingness above.

The nighttime rain came and went sometime between midnight and three in the morning, at which point I turned off my phone and stuffed it in my bedside table, not having the courage to send the message I should have sent hours ago, and not having the heart to hear Atlas' voice and keep to my resolve.

It's been a few hours since then, and I'm becoming more numb to the idea of ending things with Atlas. He'll always be a part of my life because he's in Shiloh's, but I've spent twenty-three years without someone else to hold me together, I don't need anyone to do it now.

It's remembering the electric feel of every casual touch of his hands on my body that has the regret and dread rising. So I head to the shower and try to scrub the memory away.

But then all I can think of is Atlas behind me, his hands a gentle pressure as he lathers me with soap and opens up about a part of himself that I know he's agonized over.

My skin tingles with loneliness, knowing that all it would take is one phone call and Atlas would come. He'd bring my body to life with his touch and shut off this horrid apocalypse in my head.

But if I'm going to give him up, I have to stop relying on him to make me better.

It's too bad the coping mechanisms I have are all self destructive.

Better me than someone else, at least.

I step out into the living room with a towel around my waist just as someone knocks on the door. The sky outside is lightening the slightest shade, so it has to be going on seven. Goosebumps crawl up my arms, that prickle of loneliness expanding with the innate hope of the one person who would be so persistent as to show up at the crack of dawn.

I should ignore it. Should sit on the couch and watch the sunrise, listen to the retreating footsteps and the splintering of my already stitched together heart. But every fractured piece of me calls out to his sunshine that fills in my cracks.

That's how I'm standing here in the doorway—skin still damp and slightly chilled from the hall air—staring into hazel eyes wide with concern.

"Hey," he says on a soft exhale. "I was worried. You never showed, and I couldn't get a hold of you. Are you okay?"

No. Nothing about me is okay.

Warm fingers interlace behind my neck, and I'm dragged forward into Atlas' embrace. His lips find mine with gentle pressure and a relieved sigh, and any fight I may have been able to muster evaporates. I anchor my hands to his biceps, guiding him into the apartment to kick the door closed and press him against it.

Everything quiets. Nothing exists except for Atlas: his hands, his mouth, and the ache in my heart at losing out on the beautiful love I know this man can give takes a backseat to the desire building stronger in my gut.

I scratch my nails down his arms and grip his waist, thrusting our bodies together in a wave of heat and passion that he readily reciprocates. He tangles a hand in my hair and drops the other to my hip, tracing the edge of the towel with his thumb.

"Blair..."

My hands dip under his shirt and explore the rough feel of his skin, the tight muscles running up his back to the corded ones in his neck. The hand in my hair tightens fractionally, and I drop my lips to his throat. He can speak all he wants, but I need my mouth otherwise occupied lest the storm raging inside find its way out.

"Shit. Did something happen?" He barely gets the words out before a moan breaks through, and I nip the skin of his collarbone with a satisfied grin. "Fuck, Blair. You'll make me hard."

"That's the point, isn't it?" I ask with a slow roll of my hips drawing another panted moan from him. "I turn you on."

"You do." He guides my lips back to his where we trade lazy kisses, his grip in my hair holding me still so he can lick my whimpering mouth. "But we need to talk."

I shake my head. "Not now. After."

"After what?"

I don't know. But I'm not ready for this to be over. I'm not ready to have to say goodbye to one of the most important people in my life. To shut off the budding feelings that bloomed so brightly in my chest only to be suffocated by life's growing obligations.

I need to feel what he made me feel that night, what he made me feel yesterday; I need to feel it one more time before I shut everything down.

"I can't give you what you need if you don't tell me."

How do I tell him that I need him to consume me? To cover me with every ounce of light in his soul to give me a moment's reprieve from my darkness. He wraps soft but stern fingers around my wandering wrists and shuffles them both into one of his hands, holding them loosely in the air above my head. Then, he walks me back until the backs of my knees hit the arm of the couch, and he pushes my ass down on it.

"You need me. I feel it." He lets go of my wrists and presses his palm to my throat. "I was scared, Blair. Scared you went home and got into another fight with your dad. Scared one of his illegal-ass debt collectors came after you. God, you can't go dark on me like that."

I can't avoid the dangerously conflicted look in his eyes, not with the way his simple touch holds my body in a trance. I'd unravel for him with a simple command, a tender suggestion, even a gentle nudge at my seams.

"Things are a little dark in here," I admit, tapping my temple, and when he raises his hand from my throat to caress my wrist, I start to tremble.

"Blair." Atlas' voice cracks, and I realize why when his thumb brushes over a sensitive spot, then down to another, and now he's tracing the makeshift lines on my wrist.

The bleeding stopped before I got out of the shower, but the skin is still pink and raw, even if the cuts weren't deep.

"You should have called me," he breathes, dropping his forehead to mine. "I would have been here."

"You're here now." I raise both of my hands to the back of his head, wrapping my legs around his waist and bringing him closer. The towel is doing fuck all anymore, but I don't care enough to unknot the damn thing. Not with Atlas in my arms and against my body.

"Tell me what you need."

The answer sings through my body. Pounds through my blood. Tears sting at the corner of my eyes because no matter how much pain I'm in, no matter how much relief I seek, hurting Atlas simply isn't an option.

"I can't. I don't want to push you."

He lowers his cheek to mine, brushes his nose under my ear and along my jaw. I arch into him, my cock thickening as images of all things Atlas could do to me flash through my mind. He feels it. I can tell by the puff of breath that skates down my neck, by the hand that sinks into my hair and urges my head back so his mouth can roam my skin.

"It's not pushing." His voice is light; his lips on my skin a ghost of a touch. "It's asking for what you want. Don't be afraid to ask me for something. If I can't give it to you, I'll tell you."

He sucks a deep purple bruise on the base of my throat, and the floodgates of desire come crashing over me.

"Inside," I pant, capturing his lips when he makes his way back to mine. "I need you inside me."

He doesn't pause or hesitate, just cups my face in one of his hands and holds our mouths together. The other roams my body, starting at my shoulder, tracing along the edges of my tattoos. His nail catching on my nipple draws a gasp from my throat, and he takes his time rubbing it in slow circles with the pad of his thumb.

Every press of his fingers has pleasure pooling in my gut, ecstasy sparking behind my eyes when he tugs at the towel and it effortlessly falls away. My dick twitches—semi-hard and only getting fuller—as cool air rushes over it, but pulses with need when Atlas' warm hand encompasses the shaft.

The hand on my face drops down to wrap around my wrist, and then Atlas shoves them down the band of his sweatpants with his thick, soft cock resting in my palm. He gives me a languid stroke that makes my toes curl, and I give him a gentle squeeze in return.

"Make me hard for you," he says, mouth coming down on mine, and I have no choice but to obey.

I want him so badly I can barely stand it.

We're an uncoordinated mess of hands, teeth, and tongues. My cock drips to coat Atlas' palm, and he drags it down my length and back to the head with a slow grind of his wrist. Somewhere along the way, I yanked his shirt off, and now I'm sucking on his throat and weighing his heavy dick in my hand.

While his length might be slightly less than average, he more than makes up for it in girth, and my hole clenches in anticipation of having it inside me.

Atlas cups my balls, one finger still slick with precum smoothing along my taint and back to my rim. Shudders erupt from my shoulders to my toes at the first touch, and every hesitant press has me dragging him closer, pushing my ass down on his finger as desire rocks through me.

"Do you have lube?" Atlas' mouth caresses my ear. "Condoms?"

My chest heaves as I try to settle my raging heart enough to form coherent thoughts, and Atlas' lips on my neck are the opposite of helpful.

"In my room," I moan, eyes falling closed and head tilting back because I'm so damn ready to give myself over to the pleasure, to the light that washes through my darkness, even if it's only for a while. His body pulls away from mine the barest amount, and I latch my free arm around his neck, stroking his cock with such increasing fervor that he trembles and buckles, his forehead falling to my shoulder. "I haven't had sex since my last check up. Which was... god it was a long time ago. Spit is fine. I need you, Atlas. Please."

"I don't want to hurt you." Hazel eyes peer down at me, and I stroke my fingers over his cheek.

"Maybe I need you to," I whisper, the truth bubbling in my throat like bile. "Just a little."

Atlas watches me intently, an unwavering stare as he takes me in from the sweat dripping down my brow to the flush staining my cheeks and chest, and then to my straining erection that begs for attention. He covers my hand with his own, linking our fingers together and dragging his lips over the marks on my wrist. "If it hurts too much, you tell me." The command flashes in his eyes, and my body surrenders to the tone. "I mean it." He pushes me down to the couch cushions, crowding over me and pinning me with his weight. His pants have been shucked aside, and his cock rests in the dip of my hip as he shifts his weight.

Atlas has never seemed as big as he does now, my body trapped beneath him as he tries to maneuver us in the cramped space. He pushes my legs up and spreads them, lifting off me as he does. He props them on his shoulders, and my stomach flutters as his lips touch my inner thigh and travel down.

His hint of stubble leaves goosebumps in his wake, and I'm torn between letting the coming pleasure consume me and watching every movement he makes. Atlas' large frame hunched to fit between my open thighs is a deeply arousing sight, made even more enchanting when he gives an open mouthed kiss to the head of my dick and sucks the waiting precum from the tip. He trails his tongue down the underside, making me thrust up in desperation for more contact, and then he folds my legs forward so he can dip his head to my exposed hole.

The first swipe of his tongue is electric. Tendrils of bliss race from my groin to every nerve in my body, and when a steady stream of spit leaks over my rim with the firm press of his tongue begging me to open up, I can't stop my hands from flying to his head and my hips from pushing down to meet the probing muscle.

His shoulders tense, but instead of pulling away, he simply moves my hands to hold just under my knees, and then those hot as sin eyes seek out mine as he moves his mouth back to my dick. He doesn't take me between his lips, but he mouths along the side of my length, licking and slurping at the wetness, making sure to get another powerful suck at the tip that makes my legs tremble.

It becomes a pattern. Atlas turning my cock into a dripping, leaking mess that he collects and uses as lube to soften my hole. The first time he wiggles his tongue inside, he moans louder than I do. The sound vibrates inside my body, only heightening my need for *more*.

The press of a finger breaching me startles a hiss between my clenched teeth. It burns dully—not quite painfully—and Atlas throws me a worried glance.

"I'm okay," I say, letting out the breath I've been holding in anticipation. "It's been a while."

He nods slowly and sits up straight, lowering my legs but keeping them spread, and smoothes a hand along my abdomen, stretching his fingers across the Dahlia.

"You want this with me?"

I clasp both of my hands over his and bear down on the finger still lodged in my ass. He presses in to the second knuckle, a whoosh of air leaving his chest as he sees it slip inside.

"Atlas Huxley." Honey eyes fix on me, and I slide his hand resting on my stomach up to my throat. He instinctually cradles his fingers around me, and I rest my hands above my head. "I love you. And if you're willing to give it to me, if this is okay with you, then what I want is for you to hold me down and bury yourself inside me. I want to feel this—feel you—until I can't breathe. Until I have no choice but to give everything up. To let you have me. Darkness and all."

I can't tell what he's thinking, can't tell what's going on behind that stormy expression. Was that too much? I never seem to have a filter with Atlas. It's like my heart decided the moment it found out Atlas was A that it would give itself entirely over to him in that instant.

That's why this all hurts so much.

It's why I need this to happen before it all falls apart.

Atlas presses his fingers into my throat, not hard but grounding, keeping me present and locked on him. He stretches me slowly, adoringly, drawing sounds past my lips I've never made from another person's touch. I grip the arm of the couch with both hands, straining not to fuck myself on his fingers.

This is Atlas' first time. He should be in control of how fast or slow we go. I need to know that if he needs to stop then I've given him every opportunity to shut things down. But god I hope he doesn't.

I'm trembling by the time he's stuffed three fingers as deep into me as they'll go, whimpering with each stroke and curl inside as he explores.

"You sure you're okay without a condom?" He bites his lip as he hovers over me, early morning light streaming through the window making his eyes appear molten. "I can run and grab one."

I force myself to take a deep breath in through my nose and close my eyes to push through the rush of hormones taking over me. "Do *you* want condoms? I'm okay without, but if it makes you more comfortable, we'll use them. I've never—" I nearly choke on the words, and Atlas presses on my throat just enough to make me gasp and throw my eyes open. "I've never gone bare with anyone. Topping or bottoming. I want to feel you—all of you—inside me. But if you don't want that, the condoms are in the table beside my bed. Just come back. Don't… don't leave."

"Blair..." Atlas' eyes go soft, his grip loosening, and then those warm, wet lips are on mine again. It's gentle and steady, and with a twist of his fingers all of my tension fades away, leaving me pliant against the cushions. "This isn't something I can imagine. It isn't something that crosses my mind and excites me. But you lying here, begging me to make you feel good, asking me to be the person you trust enough to let wholly inside your body? I'm okay with that. I'm okay with this. I want you to have what you need. I want to be the one to give it to you."

And then I'm empty, but only for a moment before the head of Atlas' dick notches at my rim. He leans over me to grab one of my wrists and coaxes my hand around his girth.

"Guide me. Show me what you like."

What I like is *him*. What I want is *him*.

The fat head of his dick stretches my hole, and the moment it pops inside I want to thrust myself down to swallow his entire length. Instead, I take it easy, and feed him slowly into me, paying attention to his labored breathing until he sinks down to the hilt.

Atlas bottoming out inside me is the fullest I've ever been. I can barely breathe, can barely feel anything other than the way I'm stretched around him. His eyes are blown wide as he stares down at me, both of us adjusting to this new sensation.

"Blair..." I can hear a dozen questions, a million statements all wrapped in the amazement in his voice. The incredibly overwhelming feel of having your cock buried in someone else? It's a mind-blowing moment.

My own cock twitches—wanting a turn—but that's not what I'm after tonight.

Sometimes I want to be the one taken apart and fucked back together.

Atlas' thrusts are awkward and clumsy, and though each press of his dick deep inside builds a heavy pressure in my gut, I can see the concentration lines on his forehead and the downward tilt of his lips.

"Atlas," I pant, lacing my fingers behind his neck. "If this isn't good for you, we can stop."

He shakes his head. "It feels amazing. You feel amazing. I'm just..." He breaks off in a dry chuckle. "I'm thinking so hard about making sure you're enjoying it and not in pain that it's kind of hard to stay in the moment."

"I can fix that," I tell him, yanking him down to kiss the frown off his mouth. "Switch with me."

A brief fear flashes in his eyes, and I snuff it out with a quiet laugh. "Not like that. Lay on the couch."

There's a single moment where no part of us is touching, but there's so much adrenaline zinging through me that I hardly notice. Because between one second and the next Atlas is on his back, proud, bold body on full display. He's stroking his flagging dick as he watches me, and I realize as much as I need this connection with Atlas, he needs me to give him some guidance. Feed his confidence.

I hook a leg over his hip, resting between his body and the back of the couch, and rest my weight on his thighs. His skin is rough and clammy under my fingers as I slide a hand up his chest.

"You told me to show you what I like," I say, leaning down to nip his jaw and moaning when his hand flies to my hair. "What I like is to be in control." He loosens his grip, but I push back into his hold. "I only give it up when I feel safe."

He tangles his fingers in my hair, and I brace myself above him, reaching back to grasp his dick and stroke it back to hardness. "I've never let anyone fuck me for pleasure before." I press his tip to my well-stretched hole, and it slips inside with little resistance. We both gasp, my nails digging into Atlas' pec and him tugging at my scalp. "A few times out of curiosity. But I'd much rather be the one doing the fucking." Without warning, I drop down until he sinks all the way inside.

"Then why are you...?" His free hand grips my hip in a white-knuckled grasp.

I grind my hips into his and grin as the breath is knocked out of him. "This? You? I want to be owned, Atlas. I want your dick to brand me as yours. And if you never want to have sex like this again? I'm fine with it. But I'm so fucking in love with you, and I want to be fucked by the man I love."

"Bumble B." The hand in my hair slides to my cheek, and there is such an outpouring of affection from his misting eyes that as I start riding him in slow, sure motions, the emotions bottled in my own chest rise to the surface.

I'm not delusional enough to think Atlas—who's still figuring out his sexuality and attraction—already feels the things for me that I do for him.

I think I fell before I knew who he was, and when the pieces fit together something deep and dormant inside of me came alive. I watched Atlas grow up. I saw his ferocious protectiveness for the people he cares about, and the unmistakable loneliness at being overlooked in the circus of his family. I gave as much of myself to Atlas, to his happiness and wellbeing, as I did Shiloh.

But unlike my love for Shiloh, those feelings towards Atlas expanded into an ache in my ribcage that his unwavering dedication and light was something I wish were directed at me. Feelings I shoved so far down that, as soon as they were given a single drop of hope, sprouted up like weeds I now have to rip out at the roots.

Atlas' cock drags along my walls just shy of painfully, and though that little tingle of hurt sends pleasure cascading through me, I slip off to spit in my hand and coat his length in it before slowly lowering back down onto him.

No one has ever looked at me with such pure amazement. Not while I've fucked them. Not while they've fucked me. Never. But that's exactly how Atlas is watching me now, his hands curving along my back, my sides, wherever they can touch. My own dick sits heavy between my legs, but if I touch myself I know this will be over much too fast.

His fingers play over my thighs, feeling the way they tense as I thrust and rock on his cock. My chest feels as tight as my balls, on the verge of overflowing, of spilling out and leaving me vulnerable and raw.

I don't know what I need until Atlas shifts his hips and bucks up to meet me, finding my prostate on a series of pumps that has me so full of pleasure, pain, and the man below me that tears stream down my cheeks and I have to grip his shoulders to counter the trembling in my thighs.

This doesn't feel like sex.

It feels like heaven. Like sanctuary.

#### Like goodbye.

"I love you," I say, because all of these bottled emotions need to go somewhere, need to seep out before they eat me alive. We kiss and rut and grind; I dig my nails into his shoulders, he presses his fingers into my hips hard enough to bruise. We're both sweaty and out of breath, and when a sob rises in my throat, I bury my tongue in his mouth to drown it out.

He yanks me down so hard I shudder, his grip keeping me firmly seated on his dick as it pulses inside me. A sharp gasp transfers from his mouth to mine, and my whole body is filled with such a blinding warmth that I know this moment—this single moment in time—will be one I come back to for the rest of my life. When I want to remember a time pure joy coursed through me, it will be of Atlas' moaned cry into my mouth as he fills me with his release.

I'm not even thinking of my own orgasm until Atlas pushes me up and grips my swollen dick in his fist. He's still hard where he's lodged inside, and I can't help clenching around his length as he works mine with wide, fascinated eyes. With Atlas watching me, with his hand gripping and squeezing my cock, I barely last a handful of seconds before I'm tumbling over and painting his stomach with streaks of cum.

I collapse on top of him as he slips out of my ass, and we're both covered in spunk but can't be bothered to move more than fitting our arms around each other. The silence is comfortable. Encompassing. For a few minutes, only the two of us exist. But that isn't the way the world works. And the reprieve can only last for so long.

Atlas' hand on my back travels over my skin in loops, and the slightest tremble starts in his fingertips.

"We aren't doing this, are we?" There's a crack in his voice, one that makes me think I should take this whole night back. That I shouldn't have slept with him. Shouldn't have been selfish. But when I look into his eyes and see the fear and deep affection reflecting in them, I don't see an ounce of regret.

It doesn't make me feel less shitty when I shake my head.

"I can't be another person who hurts him." There's a flash of insecurity in his gaze, and I slant my lips over his, reassuring. "This is better for everyone. I won't be responsible for ruining your friendship. Someone is going to get hurt, and I'd rather it be me than either of you."

"What about what I want?"

I prop up on my elbow and drag a hand through his hair. "I'm the one who took the thought experiment too far. I'm the one who fell in love. Let me bear it, A."

He pulls me into another kiss, but this one feels sad. It feels final.

"You're wrong," he whispers against my mouth. "And I'll prove it."

I don't let him pull away. I kiss him until neither of us can breathe, until we're gasping each other's exhaled breaths, until there's stirring down the hall and the moment is broken.

If I could keep him and nobody got hurt, I'd take that in a heartbeat. But I can't find it. Can't fathom it.

I could never put him in a position to choose between me and Shiloh, because that's what it'd come down to. So, I have to take one option off the table entirely.

Atlas isn't mine, and it was foolish of me to think he ever could be.

# Chapter 23

### **A**TLAS

I'M SUPPOSED TO GO to a party with Shiloh tonight, but all I can think about is the look in Blair's eyes the other morning. The relief that flooded them when he opened the door. The fear when I discovered the mutilation on his wrist and how helpless I felt against the demons in his head. The tears that rolled down his cheeks as he took me into his body. And then the resignation when he told me we had to end things.

My chest feels like it's been flayed open, like a piece of Blair had worked itself inside and was torn out with those few heartbreaking words.

Let me bear it, he had said. Blair always bears everyone else's pain. If he can take it on himself and ease other's burdens, he'll do it.

When will he let someone carry the brunt of *his* heartache?

I'm supposed to be helping Ryder fix the brakes on the truck, but most of my attention is caught up staring at my phone where I've left Blair a couple of 'friendly reminder' texts—cute little memes about drinking water and taking care of yourself—where he opens them but never responds. I want to know that he's okay. That he isn't still hurting himself. I made him promise before I left that morning to call me if he went back to that place in his head, but I don't know if his answering smile was agreement or just placating.

"Atlas." I snap out of my thoughts and nearly whack my head on the open car door Ryder is leaning against. "Foot. Break. C'mon, you can talk to your girlfriend later."

"Boyfriend," I correct on a groan, throwing the phone into the passenger seat.

It takes point three seconds for my brain to catch up with my mouth, and when my eyes fly to Ryder's expression, he doesn't look surprised or impressed but more mildly amused.

"My little brother has a boyfriend, huh?"

I lean my head back in the seat and scrub a hand over my eyes. "No, I guess not technically, but..."

Ryder's eyes soften, and he reaches over to squeeze my shoulder. "Not into you? Not out?" His brows furrow. "Are you out?"

"Is that like a queer rite of passage? Because if I have to put a label on it, I'll be in the closet forever."

Ryder grins, leaning back against the door. "Date whoever you want, buddy. I'm the last person to judge."

"Is that because you're an entire manwhore?"

He chuckles, but there's a hint of sadness in it. Weird because Ryder is one of the happiest people I know. "You could say that."

"What? You secretly pining over 'the one who got away' or something cheesy like that?"

His smile dips a fraction.

"Wait seriously? This is a story I need to hear!"

He groans but walks around the truck to the passenger side and climbs into the seat, promptly tossing his feet up on the dash and tipping his head back against the headrest.

"I'll tell you about my guy if you tell me about yours," he says, pointing a finger at me.

I raise my brow. "You got a guy too? Damn. We need a Huxley Family Coming Out party. Should we call Rue and see where he sits on the Kinsey Scale?"

Ryder winces, arms crossed defensively like even the mention of our older brother sets him on edge. What in the hell?

"That." I turn in my seat, narrowing my eyes at him. "Mom and Dad pull the same shit. What the hell happened that's made Rue the black sheep of the family?"

When Ryder sighs, he looks every bit his twenty-five years of age with his sandy brown hair mussed and dangling near the crinkles at the corners of his eyes. When I was younger, Rue and I used to joke that the universe switched their souls when they were born because Ryder was always more serious, more

bossy and responsible while Rue just wanted to sit in his pile of neighborhood stray dogs for the rest of his life.

"It's a bit of a long story, bud."

I cross my arms to match his posture. "Well I'm here and I'm listening."

He shakes his head in the most big brother way, but even his little indulgent smile is strained. "Mom and Dad blame Rue for something they think he did almost ten years ago."

"They *think* he did?"

Ryder runs a hand through his hair and sighs. "Rue was always real sweet. Hated sayin' 'no' to anyone."

"I remember my own brother, Ry."

He nods. "I'm just pointin' out that it wasn't his fault. That he might have been older but he's always been the pushover of the family. Mom and Dad blame him, but... but it was my fault. They won't talk to or about Rue because of me."

Ryder tips his head back, staring up at the truck's torn upholstery.

"You know how the park was. You know how our whole town was. Don't ask questions. Don't stand out. If you wanna be different, do it behind closed doors. So when I got curious about boys as a teenager... I kept that shit inside. I tried not to look at boys at school like I wanted to shove 'em against the lockers and kiss 'em—and there were quite a few I'd thought about it. But the curiosity got bigger. And puberty is a bitch."

Ryder smirks, but he isn't looking at me. He's staring out the windshield like he's not even present.

"I remember being fifteen and horny, layin' in bed one morning thinkin' 'I wanna kiss a boy'. But who the hell was I gonna kiss, you know? Try that at school and I'd get a fist to the face and a bloody nose. And it was the dorkiest thing. You were out with that friend of yours because you always were. Mom and Dad had taken the twins to the park. I rolled over—remember smoothing my face into the pillow so hard I could barely breathe—and I just sobbed."

He breaks off with a choked laugh and folds an arm over his eyes. "And then what did I do like any emotionally immature teenage boy? I laid there and jerked off because I figured *that* release would turn the waterworks off. Never said I was the smart brother."

I smack his arm, because that's something the three of us have always done. If we degrade or talk down about ourselves, we get a warning smack before going full WWE on each other's asses. It was usually Rue who was on the receiving end.

"Turns out the house wasn't as empty as I thought. And the next thing I knew, Rue was standing beside my bed with an armful of clothes, and I'm sitting there covered in snot and cum trying not to be mortified. But at that moment all I thought was, 'I need my big brother'. And ya know? Rue didn't hesitate to drop the whole ass stack of clothes on the floor and pull me into the warmest, messiest hug on the planet.

And that right there? That's when everything started to go wrong. Because everyone and everything in the world felt like a battle—everything but Rue.

He's the first person I ever told that I was gay. Not bi. Gay. I had no interest in women, but every day I wondered what things could be like with a man. He sat with me through every breakdown. Comforted me. My feelings were so far repressed they found whatever outlet they could and ran with it. Unfortunately? That outlet was Rue."

Ryder tips his head back to stare at the ceiling, picking at a thread on his jeans like he needs something to do with his hands.

"We spent a lot of time together over the course of a few months, and I... one day we were hiding out in the little bunker fort—you know that shed Dad always said he'd fix up for home projects but never did—I don't even remember what we were doing. A stupid game, I think. Never Have I Ever, maybe? Rue admitted to fooling around with a guy before. Admitted it hadn't gone well. And I thought, 'I bet it'd be better with me'. And god, Atlas, I kissed him. Our brother. I was fifteen and confused and... and Rue was sweet. Attentive. Attractive. And I kissed him."

I crinkle my nose at the thought of Ryder and Rue doing anything resembling swapping spit, but the pain on his face wipes away any thoughts that could come from it. Whatever happened, it hurt him. It still hurts him. I know that look. I've seen it in both of the Novak brothers.

"Here's the thing," he says after a moment of silence and a quivered breath. "He kissed me back. I told him I just wanted one safe experience. One time where I didn't have to be afraid of what I wanted. And he gave that to me. It was in that stupid shed, kissing Rue, that I realized my feelings for Rue were more than brotherly—and I know, trust me, when Mom and Dad found out, I heard the whole spiel about how wrong it was. But it didn't feel wrong then. It felt like the only right thing that had ever happened in my life."

"Wait... is this whole mess because you and Rue made out? I mean, gross, sure, but you were teenagers. Teenagers do stupid shit. And no offense, but why is Rue getting the shit end of the stick?"

He plays with the band on his stupid backwards baseball cap, huffing out a slow breath.

"Because that's not where things stopped. One kiss in the shed grew into more. Became me sneaking into Rue's bed after everyone had gone to sleep. We'd touch and explore, and I'm sure you don't want the details, but it turned into sex. I lost my virginity to Rue."

I've never seen Ryder be anything but put together. Right now, I can see his throat working to push the words out. His muscles tense like they're prepared for a fight.

"It wasn't just once," he says, refusing to look at me. "I didn't date in high school because Rue and I decided to be together. It wasn't just physical. It was... I love Rue. He's my big brother. But he also became so much more than that. And

I'm not going to explain or defend our decisions, understand? The point is, Rue and I were in a relationship."

"For how long?"

Ryder finally glances over, and his expression softens the slightest bit. "A little over two years. My eighteenth birthday was coming up. Rue had used the excuse that he wanted to help take care of you for why he hadn't left. We didn't have any plans, but I wanted to make some. I wanted this thing with Rue. And I didn't want to hide, but..."

He flicks his cap off and shakes out his hair. "Talking about it made Rue uncomfortable. We argued. And we had a rule about fooling around: never in the open. We had so many hiding places around the house and yard we got up to shit. But I was feeling like a brat. I was angry at him. And Rue just gives in so goddamn easily. I... shit I should probably PG-13 it for you. We had sex on the couch. Because I begged him. And he hated us fighting so he gave in. I *heard* someone in the house. I *knew* someone was up. But I was angry and horny and hurting. And so I pretended that I didn't. And then there was Mom. Turning on the light and looking horrified to find two of her sons getting it on with each other."

"Shit."

Ryder snorts. "Yup. We got a good ole southern talkin' to. I remember thinking that I would find a way to make it up to him. We'd be sneakier. I wouldn't push him on the moving out together issue. But Momma wasn't done with us. Oh no. She finished with the 'being queer and banging your brother is

wrong' speech, then looked right at Rue and told him he had to be out of her house by morning or she was calling the cops and pressing charges."

"What?" I cut in, slamming my hand on the steering wheel and making Ryder flinch. "Charges for what?"

Ryder lets out a humorless laugh and tosses his hat onto the dashboard, dropping his legs.

"Statutory rape. Rue was nineteen. I was seventeen. Didn't matter that we were both minors when it started. He was an adult. She told him not to contact us. Never to come back. No goodbyes. I was angry but I didn't want Rue to go to jail. And Dad looked like if Rue stayed any longer he might not have made it out at all. I told him to go. Told him we weren't worth ruining his life. We were young and stupid and horny and that was it. He left and... Momma wrote him off."

"Jesus." I lean back in my seat, watching Ryder out of the corner of my eye. We were never as close as Rue and I were, but over the last few weeks I've come to see that Ryder is standoffish with everyone, not just me. Even when he goes home to visit Mom and Dad, there's always a calm civility about them, but he's still closed off. "You're both adults now. Do you... Like are you still...?"

Ryder's smile is sad as he shakes his head. "I haven't seen Rue since then. Number got disconnected a long time ago and... honestly, I've been too afraid to find him."

<sup>&</sup>quot;Afraid?"

"Because he meant something to me, Atlas. *Means* something to me. And wrong or not, I let that go. Let him go. That regret has poisoned every aspect of my life. All of my personal relationships. My sex life—Hell, I only sleep with women because the thought of being touched by another man feels like I'm betraying an 'us' that doesn't even exist anymore."

"Why sleep with anyone at all?"

Ryder raises a brow but chews his lip in contemplation. "Loneliness, I guess? Gotta fill the void somehow. Better than alcohol, I reckon."

"So Rue? He's your someone?"

"You gonna tell me how awful I am?"

"Nah. I think... I think love finds us when it wants us. And sure, it's weird. Really weird because you're my brothers, but... it's not hurting anyone for you to love each other."

His shoulders droop as the tension in them uncoils, and he reaches over to ruffle my hair. "What about you, Ats? What's keeping you and this guy apart? Because I can tell by how glued to that phone you've been that you're really into him."

"It's complicated," I start to say, but slam my mouth shut at the half glare Ryder sends my way. "Us being together could really hurt someone we both care about."

"Why?" Ryder asks, and I snap my eyes to his. "Shouldn't this person want you to be happy?" When I fumble trying to

find the words, Ryder smirks with a sparkle of understanding in his eyes. "This has to do with Shiloh."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because somehow you're the only person on the entire planet who hasn't realized the man has been in love with you since you were kids."

"Why does everyone say that?" I ask, but I'm not feeling the resistance I usually do. There's this ache edging at the corners of it, this prickle of awareness that's slowly been finding its way in. "I don't..."

"Yeah, I know that, too. You can't help your feelings, little brother."

If that's true, if there's more to Shiloh's feelings than just what's made up our friendship all these years, then there's no way to stop him from getting hurt. Whether I'm with Blair or not, won't change the fact that as much as I love Shiloh, *I'm* not in love with him.

"I love you," Blair had said, and I'd felt it. Filling the room like a perfume, like an aphrodisiac, the passion in his words dragged me under like a tidal wave crashing in. It was in every ragged breath, every roll of his hips, every moment his mouth descended on mine. I was held captive by the strength of it. I'd chain myself to that feeling for the rest of my life.

Because in the quiet moments, when our eyes met and everything outside stopped existing, whispers licked at the back of my mind, ones that are working their way forward the more I think about this thing with Blair and I ending.

I would live in Blair's body if it meant the open flame burning when we connect would always stay lit. Keeping us both warm and safe.

"I love you," he had said, and it echoed in my chest like an undeniable oath. It reverberated through my bones, pounding in my heart and begging my throat to open up and let them escape.

I pull the phone out of my pocket and open the anonymous chat app. B's icon is yellow; the same it's been the last few days: away.

"Some advice?" Ryder's voice cuts through my thoughts. "Fear is only a deal breaker if you let it be. The only good reason not to be together is because you don't want to be. Otherwise, you'll both live with the regret of your decision."

"Ryder Huxley giving relationship advice?" I faux gasp, and he whacks my chest with the back of his hand. "The sky is falling."

"Shut the fuck up." He rolls his eyes. "And hey. Maybe don't be weird about the Rue thing? I'm sorry I fucked shit up so bad, but me and him have been over and done for years."

I turn more fully in the seat and fix him with a stern look. "You're my brother, and I love you. If Rue makes you happy," I lean forward, mimicking his slap on the chest. "Go find him. I want my brother back as much as you do." I lean back and

open the driver door, a grin spreading across my face. "Maybe not *quite* as much."

Ryder shakes his head and bites his lip, but there's no awkwardness here.

"Oh, and do me a favor," I say as I hop out of the truck. "Tell Mom and Dad that I'll come for a visit when they're ready to acknowledge Rue again."

We both laugh as I help him clean up the mess around the truck we both made, and it's when I'm ten minutes down the road in my Jeep that my phone buzzes from the passenger seat.

**Me:** *Try one last thought experiment with me?* 

**B:** How am I supposed to say no to you? Take me anywhere, A.

## Chapter 24

### ATLAS

**Me:** How's your head?

**B:** Rough, but better.

Me: Wanna reschedule?

**B:** No. I want to see you, A.

KNOCKOUT IS A BLUR of flashing lights and dancing bodies, and I'm right on the outskirts of it, standing at the bar nursing a club soda because I don't want to be drunk tonight. I don't even want to be buzzed. I want to remember every moment of what happens next.

Someone comes up behind me, their shoulder brushes mine, and I know it isn't one of the hundreds of strangers in the club by the zing that sparks and travels under my skin. They slip into the seat beside me, and I take a slow sip of my drink and watch them out of the corner of my eye.

His black hair is tied up in a messy ponytail with streaks of red that are barely visible under the low light. He's got some kind of shimmery eyeshadow on and a thick layer of eyeliner that I kind of want to lean over and smudge. His lips are quirked up into an amused smile, chin resting in his palm as he watches me.

"Very subtle, A."

I set my drink on the counter and try to swallow my nerves. This was my idea in the first place, so I can't chicken out now. But he's right there, and more than anything I want to lean over and drag him into a kiss, but that doesn't fit the narrative we're weaving.

"I am one hundred percent capable of checking out a hot guy, thank you very much."

"Hmm." His grin widens, and he reaches over to hook a finger in the rim of my glass, eyes finding mine as he slowly slides it closer and lifts it to his lips. His mouth touches the glass, and I watch his throat bob with each swallow until the drink is empty.

"Come dance with me," I say, because suddenly getting my hands on him is my top priority.

"Oh?" he raises a brow and pushes up from his seat, leaning back against the bar top. "Shouldn't you buy me a drink first?"

I stand and look down at my empty soda water, sprouting a grin. "I think I just did."

He bites at the corner of his smile, running a finger along the collar of my shirt as I press closer. "Cheeky. I like it."

"Dance with me, B," I whisper, planting a hand on his waist and another on the back of his neck. It's only been a few days since I've touched him, but it feels like an eternity when my skin finally meets his.

We hold each other like that, his finger slipping under my collar to trail along my collarbone, his other hand at the hem playing with the idea of crawling underneath. His nails are black tonight, and I'm not sure when that became something that always catches my eye. but the thought of those hands splayed across my body erupts shivers over my skin.

Between one moment and the next, B slips beneath my arms and tugs me towards the dancefloor, crowding us into the throng of bodies and coaxing my shirt over my head without a word.

"Someone's in a hurry," I shout over the music as he tucks the shirt into the back waistband of my jeans. And then he's pulling that cut-off band tee—the same one he wore the last time we were here—over his head and stuffing it with mine.

Those hands are instantly on my body, scratching over my sides as he pulls me against him. They slide to my back, climb up my shoulders and dig into the muscle while he rolls his hips into mine in time with the beat overhead.

"Bumble B," I groan into his ear when he presses his cheek to mine.

He lowers his grin to my neck, and what starts as two bodies grinding together becomes something else. His grip is unforgiving, his mouth parted and panting into my skin. Chest to chest, the urgency slows, and when I map out the stars on his shoulder, it's like we're the salvaged remains of a shipwreck drifting in a rapid ocean storm.

We don't talk about the thread stretched thin and fraying between us. We don't talk about the goodbye that still hangs heavy in our hearts and like a sword dangling above our heads.

We don't talk because that's part of the game. The experiment. Tonight we aren't Atlas and Blair, aren't two people who can't push through the barrier in their path to reach one another. We're A and B, two friends helping each other find and experience pieces of themselves that they've been denying.

"You going to come up here and kiss me?" I ask softly into his ear, and his answering chuckle brushes hot air over my warming skin.

"Thought I'd make you work for it." He trails his lips up my neck, mouthing at my jaw before pulling back and smiling so sincerely that any anxiety or resistance I may have had left melts away.

Gorgeous.

I curl my fingers into the loose strands of hair at the base of his neck and tug him forward. My lips brush his cheek first, pass over his eyelids and down the curve of his nose, his other cheek, and then hover above his mouth.

His lips twitch, eyes flicking up to mine, but he remains otherwise still. I drag my fingers down his side in a slow, sensual caress.

"Kiss me, Bumble B."

The world as a whole stops existing when his mouth closes over mine. Honey and peppermint. That's what he tastes like. Comfort and serenity wrapped in the tingling sensation of desire consuming all of the blood in my veins and replacing it with the taste of him.

I hardly realize he's led us away from the mess of people until the music dulls and my back thuds against the wall. B plants an arm on my chest and breaks away, an indulgent smile on his flushed cheeks.

"Anchor me," he says. "Remind me why I shouldn't want you this hard."

I shake my head, gripping his hips to keep him in place. "I'm yours, B. Tonight I'm your tether, but you're free to drift and wander. Take what you want, and I'll give you what you need."

He watches me with a look in his eyes that's like a mix of sadness and adoration. He presses both palms to my chest but leans in closer.

"You are my galaxy, Atlas Huxley. My moon, my stars, this enigmatic force that makes me weightless." His arms wind around my neck, bringing us flush together. "You are what I need. Your heart. Your soul." There's that sadness again. Stronger. "I don't know how to accept it and not feel like I'm taking something from him."

I rest my palms on his cheeks, tilting his face up and dropping my forehead to his. "Your heart matters too. You matter, Blair. To me. To your brother." I rub my nose on his. "My heart matters. And it wants you. *I* want you."

I don't know if my words get through to him or if he's just tired of the tug-of-war in his head, but I see the shields drop, see the hesitation shift away. And then he crashes our mouths together so hard I'm not sure whose blood blooms between us, and I don't really care.

"Bathroom," he gasps as he rips his mouth away, panting into the miniscule air between us. "Unless you want the whole club to see your dick."

My dick hadn't even been a thought in the equation until he brought it up, but at the mention it stirs behind my jeans. Blair is like a siren call to my libido. It's less about wanting sex and more about wanting him. Wanting to connect and be closer to him.

We shuffle into the bathroom, and Blair immediately shoves us into a stall at the end and slides the flimsy lock into place. He crowds me against the door, and my heart starts up a racket in my chest. His eyes are dark with a swirling desire, and they bring me back to that night in his apartment. Where he took me inside his body and begged me to make him whole.

It never felt like I was fucking him. It felt like he was making me a part of himself. And I've craved that connection ever since.

The shirts tucked into the back of my waistband are yanked out and tossed aside, nimble fingers flicking the button and lowering my zipper in quick, fluid movements. Dark eyes bounce up to mine and a soothing hand comes up to cup the back of my head.

"Do you want this?" *Do you want me?* is what he doesn't ask, but I see that sliver of insecurity behind his controlled demeanor.

Explaining that I'm indifferent to the idea of sex but the thought of bringing him pleasure and satisfaction sends my libido into overdrive feels like too much for this moment. Too much for my brain and tongue to put together in a comprehensive way.

So, I give him the only truth I have words for.

"Make me hard for you. Show me what you need."

His lips part and then they're on mine. There's the shuffle of his own pants being shoved to the floor, hands on my hips working my jeans and boxers down my thighs, and then he rips his mouth away and I'm greeted with a breathtaking sight:

Blair on his knees, looking up at me with blown out, lust-filled eyes.

He starts by flattening his tongue over the head of my cock and dragging it down to the base, wrapping his lips around my girth and sucking on the soft skin.

I groan softly as my head thunks back against the stall, Blair's lips and tongue working my shaft until it starts to plump up. He takes the heavy head into his mouth and moans around it, stroking me with a loose but steady fist. A hand comes up to cradle my balls, squeezing them softly and drawing a moan past my lips.

Blair toys with my cock like it's something holy, like taking me into his throat and swallowing around me is the key to some otherworldly experience. I'm hard as steel and soaked from tip to root by the time he stands and presses a kiss to my lips, thrusting his precum coated tongue into my mouth.

"I love how responsive you are to me," he breathes into my open mouth, moving to suck bruises on my jaw. "This is okay? You aren't...?" He drops his face into my shoulder. "You aren't doing this just because I want it, are you?"

I shake my head, then realizing he can't see me, massage my fingers into the back of his neck. "I want it because you want it if that makes any sense. Your arousal feeds mine. If I need to stop, I'll tell you."

His hips shift, and then his hot, throbbing length bounces against mine. My gasp earns me a grin, Blair pulling back just enough so we can both see our erections straining together. Then he wraps a fist around them and it's like I become a puddle of pleasure.

"I told you how much I wanted this. Remember?" That smile lights a spark in my soul, a memory in the gym showers of that phone call with B.

Blair steps back, wrapping one hand around each of our dicks and stroking mine until a pool of precum leaks from the tip, then he presses the deep red head of his cock up against mine and catches the precum in his pinched open slit.

The sight is so erotic that I choke on my own spit, and I have to cover my eyes on a heavy groan when he grinds his palm onto our tips, thrusting forward to drag the ball of his piercing along my shaft.

"Fuck," I bite out as he repeats the pattern: squeeze, grind, tease me with the barbell. Over and over until my legs shake, until he's covered my neck and chest in hickeys. Until his own breathing becomes a wrecked, jagged mess against my skin and his hips rutting into mine lose their rhythm.

I want to fuck my cock on yours until I coat it in cum.

"Blair." He's gripping the top of the stall door with one hand, holding himself up as the other shuttles over our cocks. "B." He presses his face into my neck, moaning and panting and threatening to send me over the edge with every ripple and shudder of his muscles under my fingertips. "Bumble B."

He chokes on a gasp, and then his body stills and hot cum spills from his dick onto mine. He doesn't just let it drip, he works that shit over my shaft ignoring the aftershocks wracking his frame. The stickiness spreads across our stomachs as he presses in close, chest heaving like he just ran a marathon. His nose travels up my neck to my ear, his panted breaths aiding the flush spreading across my body to warm me.

"Can I suck you off?" he asks, and even though my dick jumps in response, he waits for a verbal confirmation before making any moves.

"Please?" Because I remember how this scenario played out in my head, and kissing a well satisfied, boneless Blair until he's breathless is now at the top of my to-do list.

He drops down, his spent dick twitching between his spread thighs, and I almost wish I had been a more active participant in his orgasm, but there's nothing but satisfaction and desire reflecting in his eyes as he regards my dick like it's a treasure.

His mouth is on me again, specks of white dotting the corners of his mouth as he licks his own cum from my shaft. There's nothing slow or sweet about the way he works me, alternating between taking my cock deep and suckling on the head while his fist strokes me with fervor.

When he has to pull away to suck in a much needed breath, he rests his cheek on my thigh, staring up at me as he keeps pumping his fist.

"Atlas." He doesn't say anything else, but the pleading in his voice is enough. I know what he wants—and by the way my balls pull tight and my dick throbs—my body does too.

I nod and within seconds I'm buried in the back of his throat, his nose brushing my pubes, but it's the shaky moan vibrating my dick and the trembling fingers that yank my hips forward that does me in.

I have to close my eyes because the sight of Blair pulling back just enough to taste my release as it pulses against his tongue is almost too much for my nervous system to take.

We both sit in the silence, Blair panting against my stomach while I catch my breath. As soon as I can move without my knees threatening to buckle, I drag him up with a tug on his ponytail, and he's all too willing to follow my lead as I take his mouth in a scorching kiss, swirling my tongue through the taste of our collective orgasms.

It's like Blair and I exist in our own pocket of reality, like B and A coming together in this moment cemented a galaxy of love and light that houses us both and provides us sanctuary.

The illusion shatters when the bathroom door swings open, and the outside world comes crashing in. I feel the heaviness settle in Blair's bones, and I do my best to hold him up and hold him close before the panic or worry can take him over.

Footsteps tap on the tile floor, passing the sink, urinals, and other stalls until they come to a stop in front of ours. We're both entirely naked, our shirts tossed in the corner and pants around our ankles. Now is not the time to talk down a confused drunk.

"Atlas?" The voice is tight, followed by a slight knock on the stall door. "Blair? I thought I saw you two come in here." Realization dawns for Blair at the same time it does for me: *Shiloh*.

"Shit." Blair quickly shimmies his briefs and shorts back up his legs, tucking his dick away before helping me pull up my own. "Everything okay?" he croaks, face bright red and forehead growing clammy.

"Feel like I should be asking you two that."

Blair's panic seems to be hitting him full force, so I grab his face between both of my hands and pull him into a gentle kiss. He locks up the moment our mouths touch but gives in when I tilt his face a smidge to deepen it.

"I can hear you making out, you know?"

I don't let him yank away even when his head jerks. I ease him back, swiping my thumb over his lip once we separate.

"We're okay, Loh. Is it an emergency?"

There's a hesitant silence.

"Does there need to be?"

I sigh and pinch the bridge of my nose. Shiloh and I have had shit for boundaries our entire lives. We're one hundred percent open and honest with each other—maybe more like eighty five—and his persistence isn't anything out of the usual.

But if I'm going to make space for Blair in my life the way I want, there needs to be some clear lines drawn.

"What's the matter, Loh?"

"I need to see you," he says indigently. "I need to talk to you."

"Can it wait until I'm finished here?"

That seems to be the moment the thread snaps.

"You shouldn't have anything to finish," Shiloh says on a huff. "I thought you weren't banging my brother? Blair, I thought you said this wasn't serious?"

Blair's eyes widen, and he shakes his head. I've only ever seen him be Big Brother Blair with Shiloh around, but right now he's a deer in headlights. One that looks like he's going to hurl.

"Loh. We can talk about it later."

"We can talk about it *now*."

I press Blair back with just enough space for me to get the door open and slip out of the stall.

"Shiloh Novak."

He shivers, standing tall in his faded tee and washed out skinny jeans. *Shiloh came here to hook up tonight*.

"You ditched me," he says, the hurt leaking through his tough facade.

"I needed to be here more."

"With my brother?" His voice rises but I keep mine even.

"Yes."

"Atty." It comes out like a whine, like a petulant child. "You told me you were only sexually interested in someone you have a real connection with." He glances at the half open stall door.

"That's true," I say slowly and softly. "Blair made me realize that."

The hurt that flashes in his eyes is all the confirmation I need that Ryder is probably right. They all have been. There's something bigger between Shiloh and me that I've never noticed. Something he hasn't wanted me to know.

Or maybe something he didn't want to face himself.

"Loh..."

"Blair was right," he says, shaking his head and wrapping his arms around himself. "My head was too far up my ass. And now you... fuck, Atty."

"You're my best friend. Nothing changes that."

"Bullshit," he shouts, curling tighter in on himself. "You've been distant and dodgy... what's going to happen now that it doesn't have to be a secret? Are you going to stop being my roommate to move in with Blair?"

I throw my hands up to placate the hysteria moving in, and when I reach for him he rushes into my arms without a second thought. He buries himself in my chest, and I catch Blair slipping out of the stall, pulling his shirt over his head, and making his way to the door. Before I can call out, he gives me

a tight smile and shakes his head, and then Shiloh and I are left alone.

"I don't want to stop living with you," I say into his mess of curls. "I love you. I do. You have to believe that."

He pulls back with a light punch to my shoulder, nothing like how Shiloh hits when he actually wants to hurt you. His eyes are red and raw, but his face is dry.

"You love my brother more." He splays his hands across my chest, tracing nonsensical patterns much like he does anytime we lay in bed together. This feels different, though. He's chewing his bottom lip, shoulders sagging.

I should have talked to him before I ran off with these plans. I knew we needed to talk. About his feelings. About mine. About Blair. But I thought I'd at least get tonight. Some more time to prepare for the reality of breaking my best friend's heart—maybe in more ways than one.

"I love you in a way I could never love anyone else," I say, catching one of his hands in mine when he turns his head away to scoff. "You're like my soulmate. My other half. But I'm *in love* with Blair. He doesn't complete me, not like you do, but that isn't what I need. I need someone to support me, to push me, to understand me when I can't understand myself. Blair is that for me."

Shiloh scrunches his face, pulling his hands back to cross them over his chest. "Why couldn't I be that? I can do all of that. You just... you never told me that you..."

"Just like you never told me there was more to your feelings than friendship?"

He tugs at his hair and takes a step back. "It's not like that! Of course there's more. *You're Atty*. You're Atty, and I love you and there has never been a part of me that didn't love you." He drops his hands to his sides and tips his head back. "I was confused. About what wanting you meant. For who I am."

"Loh. There are plenty of gay and bi trans men. That doesn't mean—"

"I know. I know that. But it made me feel like... it made me wonder... if I would have been happy as a girl as long as I knew I'd get to keep you. If I could have handled it because maybe as a girl you'd.... You know."

I shake my head. Hard. "Shutting that shit down right now. You are Shiloh. You have always been Shiloh. Who you love has no bearing on that. I love you *because* of who you are. I've been here for every step of the way, and I'll be here as long as you let me. I'm sorry that I... that my feelings never evolved like yours."

This time, I hear the sniffle, but he steps back when I reach for him. I open my mouth to say something, anything, because hurting Shiloh feels like shards of glass exploding in my own chest, but the door creaking open cuts through the moment, and in steps Blair: pale and shaking.

"What's wrong?" Shiloh and I ask at the same time, and Shiloh gives me a small smile in response.

Blair holds his phone up and taps it on his shoulder. "Got a call from the hospital. I'm Dad's emergency contact."

Shiloh's smile turns into a sneer, and he huffs out an aggravated puff of air. "Why do you still bother with him?"

Blair flashes a defeated look between us, and I can tell whatever is going on—plus getting caught with his pants down in a bathroom stall with his little brother's best friend—has wiped out any and all fight he might have had.

"I have to go," he says, and something sharp tugs in my chest at the sight of him preparing to walk away.

"I'll take you," I say, digging the Jeep keys out of my pocket and holding them out to Shiloh. "Take the Jeep. Get home safe, alright?"

Shiloh wrinkles his nose but takes the keys, and I hate that I know he needs me. Right now he needs me to be his best friend. To sit and talk this shit out because his head is fucked up.

But I know that Blair has spent at least the last week struggling, and with everything that's happened tonight, I'm almost scared to let him leave alone.

"I love you, Loh."

He smiles sadly, stuffing the keys in his pocket. "Love you too, Atty." He nods towards Blair. "You too, big brother."

I throw an arm around him for half a hug, then duck into the stall for my shirt. Blair reaches for me as soon as I'm close enough, and I can practically feel the fear wafting off him. I plant both hands on his shoulders, pressing his back firmly to the doorframe, and cover his mouth for a grounding kiss. His hand flies to grip my cheek, rubbing his fingers along the stubble on my chin.

"You don't have to come," he whispers against my lips, and I kiss him harder, draw a startled moan out of him.

"I'm in this, Blair. With you. Wherever you go." I smile down at him, and my heart aches in the best possible way at how absolutely beautiful this man is. "You were wrong before. You weren't the only one to fall."

His eyes widen, but I cover his mouth with my hand and grin at the little glare he shoots my way.

"You don't have to bear it alone. Let me take it off your shoulders. Let me share the burdens. Because that's what you do for the people you love."

I kiss his scrunched brow.

"And I'm deep in love with you, Blair Novak. My Bumble B."

# Chapter 25

### BLAIR

AS SOON AS THE nurse calls me back to Dad's ER room, there's no mistaking which one is his. I'd know that southern drawl bitching and moaning anywhere.

Atlas offered to come back, but I told him to stay in the waiting room, because this likely won't take long. Dad has never stayed longer than it takes for him to sign the AMA.

"Hey." I slip in through the open door to find an exasperated nurse typing away at her computer while Dad shouts and pulls at his IVs. But this time is a little different.

He breaks out in a coughing fit between outbursts, and his voice is hoarse like he outright swallowed the whole pack of cigarettes. His efforts are in vain because he can barely lift his arm, let alone have the strength to rip the IVs out.

I know I haven't seen him in a few days, but this is extreme.

"What happened?"

The nurse looks over at me at the same time Dad does—but all he does is glare—and sighs what sounds more like a scoff.

"You the son?"

I nod, and she mutters "thank god" under her breath.

"Infection in his leg," she says, then holds up a finger and keeps going. "Pneumonia. Heart arrhythmia. Dehydration. High blood sugar that won't come down. He's on IV antibiotics and fluids. Can I have your verbal confirmation that he can receive these treatments?"

"No!" Dad shouts at the same time I say "Yes".

The nurse ignores him, typing something on her computer before pushing it aside and striding towards the door.

"Let the medicine run its course and then we'll be more than happy to let him go. It wouldn't be a bad idea for him to be admitted for the weekend, so let me know if you can get him to agree."

Then it's just Dad and me and all the stress that lives rent free in my head. He keeps grumbling, but it's nothing particularly coherent.

"You should let them keep you," I say, which earns me a glare. "Let them get you better, then you can go about your merry destructive ways until this happens all over again."

How many times have we been here? How many times have I driven him to the hospital just long enough for them to pump him full of pain meds and then take him home basically no better off? I'm exhausted.

How long can I keep someone alive who clearly doesn't give a rat's ass whether he is or not?

"They just want to rack up my insurance."

"Be grateful you have insurance! Let them pay for your negligence instead of me for once."

Dad cocks his head and squints. "What's that supposed to mean?"

I rub my temple. We've been over this. Time and time again, and he never sees the problem. "It means that while you've been falling apart, while you've given up and given in to your anger and self-hatred, I've been taking care of everything. Your bills, your bullshit weed dealer, selling your pain pills so you don't have to hobble your ass out and do it yourself—because you will—and get arrested in the process. Shiloh. You didn't raise him, Dad. I did."

"I put a roof over both of your heads—"

"And you told him to his face that Mom would be ashamed of him for being himself."

Dad slams his mouth shut, grinding his molars like I've said something irreparable. But it's the truth. Dad acted like he was tolerant because he didn't outspokenly oppose Shiloh's transition. But he withheld funds and aids to help him; he ignored Shiloh as much as humanly possible while still meeting his basic needs; and then he got drunk one day and ripped my baby brother's heart out.

Shiloh never forgave him, and I... I've just been feeding his bad habits because I was afraid of losing what little family I had left.

But I'm tired. So fucking tired of letting myself be the family punching bag. Both Shiloh and Dad think they can get away with pushing me around because I don't push back.

Maybe Atlas is right: I matter too.



I LEFT DAD TO his treatments not long after that. I needed a break, and he didn't seem to want me around anyway. Atlas is sitting with me in one of the corners of the waiting room, a hand on my knee as I lay my head on his shoulder. He's been sipping on a hot chocolate for ten minutes now, and my own is sitting at my feet, still full and steaming.

The doctor said it would take about two hours for the antibiotics and fluids to run their course, and then Dad has to decide whether to stay or go. I've spent most of my time texting back and forth with Noah, who is having a cuddle night with some friends from Knockout, and he at least sounds like he's feeling better. Time is coming close to an end, and I've got a pre-emptive headache over getting Dad out of here and home.

"You can get back and check on Shiloh," I say, burying my eyes in Atlas' shoulder. "We do this all the time."

He drapes an arm around my shoulder and pulls me in as close as these dingy plastic chairs will let him. "Then you could definitely use a person here to keep you company. Break up the monotony. I'll talk to Loh tomorrow when the alcohol works its way out of his system."

"I'm sorry. I said I didn't want to come between you, and yet \_\_"

"And yet *nothing*." Atlas slips his hand under my sleeve and drags his fingers over my bare skin. We stopped in at my apartment and grabbed a change of clothes on the way, and I wonder if he noticed the tee and sweats are ones he's left at my place. I needed comfort more than I realized.

"You can't keep taking all of this on yourself," he says. "Your dad is a grown man and can clean up his own messes. Your brother... life hasn't been *easy* but you've made it *easier*, and I don't think he fully appreciates that. Have you ever asked him to help pay for his own meds? Has he ever offered?"

I shake my head. "I've just always done it. It's not a burden I wanted to put on him. I want him to get through school, and I want him to be happy."

Atlas shifts in his seat, and I lean back to meet his eyes.

"You pay toward his tuition every year, don't you?"

I nod.

"You pay for his therapist. His bipolar meds. His hormones?"

I nod again. "I've always done all of that for him. When he was under Dad's insurance most of the meds were covered.

When that stopped, I just took over."

He scrubs a hand over his eyes, and I see just how tired Atlas must be. The last few months haven't been easy on him. Discovering yourself is a never-ending, exhausting process. You hit content moments, but then something new comes into your life and it's like a whole other experience.

"Give some of that responsibility to him. I don't know what he spends most of his defense class money on, but he can cover some of those monthly costs. You don't need to run yourself ragged to keep him running."

Atlas smiles at me like I'm that first star in the sky—the one they tell you to make a wish on. He grabs my hands and covers them with both of his, holding them in his lap.

"You need to make yourself a priority. Your body. Your heart. Your mental health. I want you to be okay. I hate..." His voice cracks, and he lowers his head as he blinks back tears. "I want to be your balm. But I need to know if I'm causing you more pain. If loving me is too hard, if it hurts too much—"

I slam my mouth over his, ripping my hands away to grip the back of his head. He gasps, and the hotness of his breath fills my lungs.

It's like every ounce of frustration, sadness, and longing hit me all at once, and I pour all of those feelings into the kiss. It's weeks of back and forth, years of repressing the things I want and need because I didn't feel like I could ask for them. This is me asking. This is me taking.

And this is Atlas giving it to me tenfold. Opening up and letting me have whatever I need without reserve. It's intoxicating. Overwhelming.

I love him so goddamn much.

Before I can say it, whisper it into his mouth so the words are trapped inside of him, Atlas pulls away. I follow his gaze as he looks off to the side, spotting Corvin standing at the entrance to the waiting room with a pinched brow and dripping apprehension.

"I have a bad feeling," Atlas mumbles and rises to his feet. When I move to follow, he puts a hand on my chest, pushing me back into the seat, and drops a soft kiss to my mouth. "I'll check it out. Wait here on your Dad."

He jogs away, and my gut does half a dozen flip flops in the time it takes him to cross the room. Corvin and I have had a couple classes together over the years, and we RA'd in the same dorm my second year, so we're at the least friendly with each other. Since he moved Shiloh into the dorms, we keep up with each other a little more via text, but we're nowhere near close.

Taking a longer look, Corvin comes off worse for wear. There's scrapes and bruises all along his legs and scuff marks on his cheeks. I think he even has the beginnings of a black eye.

Maybe I just need something to focus on other than Dad. Maybe my head wants to find a problem I can solve, someone else I can help. It's like faulty wiring in my brain. Wiring that sparks and short-circuits when Atlas drags a hand through his hair and glances at me over his shoulder. His eyes are wide, wet, and doused in worry.

I'm on my feet and across the room in seconds flat because the pounding of my heart against my ribcage is enough to crack the bones.

Shiloh drank too much again, didn't he? He picked a fight with his RA and for all I know he's getting kicked out of school? I don't need that on my plate right now. I love him, I do, but I wish for once he would just—

"Blair." Atlas' arm comes around my waist and pulls me into his side. He drops his head to my shoulder, and I card a comforting hand through his hair.

"What's going on?" I look up at Corvin, who has the most guilt-eaten expression. "Corvin? Is Shiloh okay?"

He opens his mouth but shuts it again with an aggravated grunt. "I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

Corvin looks off to the side, rubbing and scratching at his jaw like a nervous tick. "I mean he was unconscious when they took him back and wouldn't let me see him because I'm not family."

"Unconscious?"

"I don't know if he took something or if he was just really fucking drunk. We got into it, and I was just trying to calm him down, knock him on his ass until I could get a hold of Atlas, because fuck knows he's the only one capable of handling Shiloh when he gets like that. He fell down one of the hills near the studio where we hold the classes. Hit his head."

A buzzing starts at the base of my skull, expanding out until all I can hear is a static so loud it invades all my other senses.

He's fine. Shiloh does reckless shit all the time.

"I should check on him," I say, just as a nurse comes out and calls "Mr. Novak?"

I can tell the nurse is impatient, likely having dealt with my Dad and his attitude for far too long already, but my feet are planted firmly to the ground.

Maybe Atlas feels my hesitation, or maybe he knows me well enough that I don't have to stumble my way through an explanation of how out of control I feel. How finding out both my Dad and baby brother are in the hospital chips away at my fragilely put together state of mind. He squeezes my waist and brushes a kiss on my neck.

"I've got Shiloh. Go figure things out with your dad."

"But they said only family—"

"And I'm practically his brother." Atlas smiles. "Could be brother-in-law. Potato tomato."

I catch the chuckle just as it comes out, making it more of a choked back snort. "I really should be there."

"Mr. Novak?" The nurse taps her foot impatiently even as she watches me with her plastered on smile.

"I'll take care of him, then I'll come back to sit with Shiloh. Text me if there's any updates?" My chest hurts. My head is running a million miles a minute.

Atlas nods and turns me to face him. Away from the nurse. Away from the waiting room. Just me and him for a frozen second. He pulls me close and lays his lips on top of mine.

It feels like crawling into bed after a grueling day. It feels like hot chocolate in the morning in the dead of winter. It feels like coming home and falling into a pair of waiting arms and softly whispered words whispered in your ear.

"I love you," he says the second our lips no longer touch. "Do what you need to. Take care of yourself. Let me carry this one, okay?" Another sweet kiss, and then he's putting a foot of space between us. "Hurry up before we get a third Novak in the hospital."

I chuckle, the weight in my chest easing. It's still there. It still aches. But it's lighter.

"I love you too," I mouth as Corvin leads him out and around to the main desk, then turn to follow the indeed very cranky nurse to what's likely an even crankier old man.

# Chapter 26

#### BLAIR

FOR SOME PEOPLE, THERE'S a moment where all of the heartaches in their life come to a head. Where they crash into them and they realize that they've been doing everything all wrong and the right path smacks them in the face.

For me? It's more of a sinking feeling in my chest. Halfway home from the hospital, Dad yelling in the passenger seat, Atlas sends me a picture. He's sitting with Shiloh beside his hospital bed. Shiloh is still out, covered in scrapes and bruises, and Atlas is holding his hand, giving the camera a sad smile.

**Atlas:** No change, but they say everything looks good. He's okay. Just waiting on him to wake up.

In that one room are the two people I love most in this world. Two people that I could never imagine my life without. Even before falling in love with Atlas' gentle hands and quiet

words, he was a staple in my world. Now he's like permanent ink under my skin.

Lying in bed the way he is, Shiloh almost looks like our mom. He got very little of her Korean features, but peaceful and relaxed the way he is now, I see the pieces of her that I thought I'd never see again: the crinkles under her eyes, her slightly down-turned mouth, even the curve of her nose.

It reminds me of seeing her in that hospital bed fifteen years ago. Brain dead upon impact, they had said, and I was banged up by the car rolling five times, but I'd been saved by my booster seat. They let me sit with her. Let me hold her hand while we waited on Dad to arrive. He'd left Shiloh with a neighbor because he was only four.

And now it's Shiloh lying there, Atlas holding his hand. And instead of being there I'm driving away.

"Stay," I had told Dad when I got back to his room. "Let them keep you overnight, and I'll take you home in the morning. Maybe you can even come down and see your son who they just admitted."

"He doesn't need me to keep him company," Dad had grumbled. "Doesn't need you to either. I told you that aggression was going to get him hurt."

Dad insisted on going home, and instead of standing my ground, I caved. Like I always do. I could have made him get a Lyft or taxi. I could have left him to his own devices to find his way home, while I stayed behind to be with my brother like my gut keeps telling me to do.

"Are you going to sit there and burn a hole in my coat all night, or are you going to help me inside like a good son?"

*The good son.* That's who I've always been. The good son. The good brother.

"You matter. Your heart matters."

My heart wants Atlas to pull me into his arms and assure me that my brother is going to be okay. That he and I aren't leaving off on a fight. Because I never meant to hurt him. Never meant to be another person who betrays him. I love Shiloh. He's my baby brother but he's so much more. He's my world.

"I can't do this anymore," I find myself saying, and it's a mountain of truth that threatens to topple under its own weight. I throw myself back in the seat and drag a hand through my messy hair. "When was the last time you said 'thank you'? For me dropping everything to pick up your messes?"

He scoffs. "No one's making you. If you don't want to be here, by all means, son." He makes a big sweeping motion across the driveway.

I grip the steering wheel so hard the chipped plastic digs into my palm. "Do you want me here?"

"I don't need you if that's what you're asking. If you've got better things to do, do them."

That isn't what I mean, and he knows it.

"Do you want me to come inside and keep you company?"

He *hmphs* and crosses his arms, but doesn't make any move to get out of the car. "Are you itching to get out of here because of your brother or because you've got a queer to shag?"

"Christ sake, Dad!" I slam both hands down on the wheel, then press them into my eyes. "You can't just give me a straight answer. You have to use word games and play around the questions like they're landmines. I'm here because I love you—and it might be hard to believe—but I can love more than one person at a time."

I undo my seatbelt and lean across Dad to shove his door open. "And I fucking love Atlas, Dad. I love him more than I've ever loved another person and I'm goddamn terrified of what that means for me, for him, for Shiloh. I don't have it in me to worry about what that means for you. Because yes, I'm queer. Yes, the person I think I'd like to spend my life with is a man. And if you're going to shut me out and call me or my partner names over it, then I can't fucking do this."

Noise crackles through the open doorway: wind and crickets and shouting from somewhere else in the trailer park. But Dad just sits staring out the window with a tick in his jaw like he's holding his tongue. Which is an improvement. But not good enough.

"I deserve better." Finally, he looks at me, but there's nothing I see in this man that I haven't seen over the last ten. He's made of steel, and he won't budge for anyone. "Shiloh deserves better."

I climb out, pull Dad's spare wheelchair out of my trunk and thunk it on the ground beside his seat.

"Shiloh was right. I should have stood up for him years ago. I wanted to believe that you would love us the same, even if you were a cranky, grumpy old man. But you're bitter and abusive, and I'm not sure there's a heart in there at all anymore." I sigh as he wordlessly shifts himself from the car to the wheelchair. "So, I'm done, Dad. The next time you need something, don't call me. And when I go back to the hospital to check on Shiloh, I'm removing myself as your emergency contact. You've spent fifteen years building this bed, and I'm done laying in it with you."

I expect pushback. I expect yelling, denial, and blame shifting, but all he does is grumble under his breath and wheel past me. It's on the tip of my tongue to call out, to beg him to give me something, anything to hold onto. But as he rounds the trailer to the back ramp, that hope fizzles out. The lights inside come on, and five minutes later I realize this is it.

He's made his choice. And it's that neither of his sons are worth the effort.

My heart is numb in my chest by the time I climb back into the driver's seat. My resolve says if I drive out of here, I won't be coming back. Despite the pain it always brings, there's a sense of loss, something dark and greedy opening up in my soul that makes it hard to breathe.

The phone rings in the hollow space of the car—loud and insistent—and at first I think it'll be Dad. Not to give any deep

confessions, but to ask me for something stupid and that I'll cave because I have this bone deep urge to *serve*, to turn myself inside out for the happiness of those around me.

Instead, it's that little peek of sunshine that threads its way into my darkness with every smile, every brush of fingertips, or laughter like a summer breeze. Even if my voice is unsteady, even if it's on the verge of dropping into a chasm so deep it may never come out again, I still pull the phone up to my ear and murmur, "hey."

"He's awake," Atlas breathes like the rush of words is a relief to his lungs. "He's groggy as hell, but he's awake."

Just like that it's like a rubber band slaps into my chest and forces a fresh breath into my lungs. It's heavy and aches in my ribs, but it's fucking incredible.

"They said he might not stay awake." Atlas' own voice is like an ocean wavering on the verge of a storm: calm but with warning. "He has some fucked up shit in his system. They're detoxing him. Talking about a medically induced coma? I asked them to wait until you got here. This doesn't feel like a call I should make."

I swallow back the fear, the image of Shiloh in that hospital room winding up like our mom. "What call do you want to make?"

"He's your brother."

"He's yours too."

The sound of Atlas wetting his lips is crisp in my ear through the static in my head.

"I want him to be okay more than I want to yell at him. And holy fuck do I want to yell at him, Blair."

"You can yell at him when he's better, yeah?"

He laughs like the world hasn't shattered and reconstructed itself in a matter of hours. Maybe his hasn't. But mine is a dug up rose garden with the petals crushed into the dirt and thorns planted in their place.

"I need you," I say, because the darkness is roaring in my ears. It's dangerous and howling, and I stare at the keys where they sit in the cupholder. "It's dark up here."

He's quiet. There's rustling and sneakers on linoleum. A door shuts. Hushed voices.

"You at your dad's? Corvin will sit with Shiloh. Is it safe for you to stay there?"

I peer out through the windshield toward the front door. Dad's bedroom light is on, but the others are off.

"I don't think he's coming back," I choke out, dropping my head to the steering wheel. "Atlas."

"I'm coming, Bumble B. I love you. Stay on the phone with me, alright?"

I close my eyes and nod.

"Alright."

IT'S A WEEK BEFORE they wake Shiloh up. A week of silence between Dad and me. A week of Atlas wrapping around me every night and waking up to warm lips and gentle hands making sure I'm still there—still whole. When I want to numb out my mind, there he is to fill it with love and light and fucking *happiness*.

Shiloh's room has one of those uncomfortable plastic-feeling couches that juts out beneath the big window, and I'm lying on my back with my head in Atlas' lap while he runs his fingers through my hair. I'm half scrunched with my legs propped on the wall, but the two of us are sitting there quietly laughing to each other when a cough breaks through our bubble.

Both of our heads snap over to Shiloh, who's struggling to push himself more upright, and I'm absolutely frozen. Atlas doesn't move either, except to gently coax me to sit up.

He's a mess. An absolute mess in need of a shower, and likely a huge ass cup of water, but he's a conscious mess. I hate to admit I've been fragile as hell this last week, having constant nightmares of Shiloh staying asleep forever, of having to choose to pull the plug.

I don't realize I'm grinding my nails into my palm until Atlas takes it in his and forces me to relax.

"You assholes just going to stare at me?" Shiloh's voice is gruff, and it sends him into another round of coughing fits, but it spurs the both of us into motion.

Atlas pulls me up, places an automatic kiss on my mouth and mumbles, "I'll grab water," before rushing out of the room, and when my focus shifts to Shiloh I find heat climbing up my cheeks. Still, I walk to his bedside and drop down into one of the chairs beside him.

"Welcome back," I tell him, trying to keep my voice solid and failing miserably.

He blinks slowly, narrowing his eyes, then lifts a lazy middle finger at me. "Fuck you. I feel like shit."

"I would too if I spent a week in a medically induced coma."

He's still blinking like he's trying to push through a hell of a fog, but it's less aggressive and growing more curious. It's not often that I get to see my brother's softer side—not since I moved out—and the insecurity cracks something open inside of me.

The protectiveness that's felt beaten out of me this last week.

"What's the last thing you remember?"

He squints, rubbing at his temples with a groan. A few seconds turn into almost a whole minute with his head in his hands, and my fingers twitch for the call button just as he looks up at the ceiling with a huff.

"You're really going to make me relive that? My brother and best friend getting it on in a *bathroom stall?*" He makes a gagging gesture, but when he looks at me there's a soft, sad smile on his lips. "This is a serious thing then?"

"We don't have to talk about that right now." I don't know how closely related that revelation was to his accident, but the last thing I want is to make him spiral right after he's woken up.

He crosses his arms and lifts a brow almost comically well. "Dude, that's shit deflecting. You love each other. I'm remembering that right?"

Words won't come, so I only nod, and it's that moment that Atlas comes back into the room with a nurse in tow. He hands one of those giant hospital cups to Shiloh, who guzzles half of it down right off the bat.

He grumbles through the nurse's vital checks and questions, pausing only to throw on his playful charm, and when she leaves, saying the doctor will be in whenever he has a chance, his whole demeanor drops and he throws himself back in his bed and tosses an arm over his face.

"Anyone want to clue me in on what I've missed?"

Atlas glances at me before sitting on the edge of Shiloh's bed. "What do you remember?"

Shiloh sits up just enough to make sure Atlas sees his eye roll and kicks at his hip from under the covers. "Already covered that. You and my brother are swapping spit. I mean after."

"Ah." Atlas clears his throat, searching out and grasping Shiloh's hand. "We were, um, hoping you could fill that in for us."

Shiloh's brows dip together. "You don't know what happened?"

"Corvin brought you in."

At the mention of their RA, Shiloh locks up. His eyes go wide, the gnawing on his bottom lip abruptly stops, and his face drains of color.

"What did he... what did he say...?"

Atlas and I exchange a glance, and I reach over for Shiloh's other hand. "He said you both got in a fight? You hit your head. But Shiloh, you were..." I squeeze his hand, and to my surprise he squeezes back. "Your toxicology was a mess. Your alcohol level was through the roof. You had a shit ton of blow in your system."

His eyes drop to his lap, and when he tugs to pull his hand free I tighten my grip. He swallows rough, and pulls his knees to his chest. "I don't remember," he mumbles, resting his cheek on his knee.

"I know." I sigh and drape an arm around his shoulders. "You can't keep hurting yourself like this. I know getting your meds right is rough. I know that getting drunk is an easy way to drown your feelings. I know that you're struggling with all of it—but this one could have killed you. I could have lost my brother. Atlas could have lost his best friend. Do you know how devastated we'd be?"

He turns his face into my shoulder, and I see the beginnings of tears as his eyes redden. "I don't want to die," he says softly. "But why does living have to be so hard?"

Atlas joins the embrace on Shiloh's other side, and the three of us sit there wrapped in each other, just trying to breathe through one heartache at a time.

"I'm sorry I've been such a fucking brat," Shiloh rasps, keeping his face buried and muffled. "Everything is just so mixed up in my head. It feels like I don't know who I am, and all the meds jumble me up more. I'm drowning, and I can't even tell you in what."

"You don't have to apologize," Atlas mumbles into Shiloh's hair, and at the same time, he lifts a hand to stroke my cheek. "You just need to get better."

The words are for Shiloh, but they're for me too.

'I need you here. I need you to be okay. Both of you.'

Shiloh nods, and that's when I feel the first few tears escape onto my shoulder.

"Atlas and I have been talking," I hedge, and Shiloh grips my shirt in a silent confirmation to go on. "We think it would be best for you if... if you went somewhere for help."

"For the alcohol?"

Atlas starts rubbing his back in broad strokes, and I feel Shiloh's muscles relax under the touch. "For that. And so they can monitor you. Figure out where you really need to be on your meds. You're no good to anyone if you're a zombie, and I'm worried where the mania will take you if we don't treat it."

Shiloh turns his head to lock eyes with Atlas and nods. "What are the chances I can sneak you in with me?"

Atlas and I both laugh, and I tug Shiloh into me tighter. I could have lost him at any time this last week. All I want to do is wrap him up in bubble wrap and lock him in his dorm room until graduation.

"None." Atlas smiles and leans down to press their heads together. "But you can call me. Text. If we can do visits, I'll be up as much as I can, but, um..."

Atlas pulls away, and in turn Shiloh straightens out, watching his best friend with an apprehensive curiosity. "I love you, Loh. I do. I really fucking do."

Shiloh tenses, gripping the comforter into tight fists.

Atlas offers him a reassuring, albeit guilty, smile. "I need to know if you and I are going to be okay? I'll be spending a lot of time with Blair, sometimes overnight. All three of us can hang like normal when you get back, and I'll make sure you and I still have us time, but things are going to be different."

"I do have other friends, you know."

"That's not what I'm worried about."

Shiloh lets out a sigh and drops his head back. "You're my Atty. And yeah, I..." He swallows hard, eyes trained on the ceiling. "I think I've always been in love with you. Just too confused to see it. I'll get over it. I want you to be happy, and if my brother makes you happy—no matter how gross the thought is—then I want that for you." He gives us both a

strained yet playful smile. "Maybe this mini-vacation will help me reboot those pesky feelings."

Atlas throws an arm around him and noogies his bed head until Shiloh grumbles, and then they both fall into a fit of laughter.

"I do have one question, though," Shiloh says, and there's a sneaky glint in his eye that makes me wonder if he's about to throw one of those Top or Bottom questions out, which I will one hundred percent veto. "What about your thing with Noah? Aren't you two like... kissing cuddle buddies or something like that?"

I chuckle, dropping my eyes to the blanket before searching out Atlas' honey stare. Before I can find words, he beats me to it.

"I'd never make Blair give up what he has with Noah. It's intimate, sure, but it's special to them." He reaches over the bed to grab my hand, slotting our fingers together like a perfect puzzle. "I firmly believe that there's too much love inside of us to say that we can only ever have one loving relationship at a time. And it's not my place to tell Blair how he's allowed to love someone."

"So by that logic," Shiloh cuts in with a shit-eating grin, "you, Atlas Huxley, could be *my* kissing buddy when I get out, right?"

All three of us crack up at the same time, only catching our breath when Shiloh breaks out in a coughing fit. Somehow we manage to fit us all lying on Shiloh's bed together: Shiloh in the center against the pillows, Atlas tucked around him on one side, and me with my arm around Shiloh's middle and head hanging off the bed.

"I love both of you," Shiloh says after a few minutes of comfortable silence. "But if I have to watch you make out, I'll gag."

This is what I think happiness is supposed to feel like.

This is what I've been chasing with strangers behind closed doors.

It's the passionate way my love for Atlas flares with every innocent touch, combusts with each intent for *more*. It's the pure—sometimes overbearing—love for my brother that has been like a lifeline to all the pain I've harbored inside.

These are the connections I've been searching for.

The family I've needed.

Not one that hurts and takes.

One that heals. One that gives and forces me to let go.

To share the burden.

Because as much as they matter to me, I matter too.

# Chapter 27

#### **A**TLAS

WE'VE FOUND THAT MY most erogenous spots are my thighs. Blair's favorite thing is hiking my legs around his waist and dragging his nails over them, finding every hidden spot that makes me twitch and moan.

That's why I'm lying on my back in the middle of Blair's mattress, legs spread as I drag my fingers through the creases and over the quivering skin. I'm not fully hard, but my cock is sitting in a nice in-between state that makes my body buzz and drives Blair wild. He loves to touch and tease me, getting me started but stopping so I stay in a semi-aroused state, and it's a beautiful form of bliss.

My avoidance of orgasms hasn't gotten in the way of our intimacy; it's made it more intense. We don't touch one another with the intention of getting off; we do it because it deepens our desire, feeds the love we both feel until it's overflowing.

"Blair," I moan, dragging my hands up my body and fisting them into my hair. "Bumble B."

"Yes, handsome?"

I open my eyes and spot Blair in the doorway, leaning on the doorframe like he doesn't have a care in the world. My cock pulses, wanting the only touch it's ever craved. Blair grins and pushes off the doorway, and I swear it takes actual self control not to grow fully hard at how sexy he looks.

Every single tattoo on his body is on full display, but he isn't naked. I don't know where the idea came from, but I can't say I have any complaints: Pink lace cups his bulge, extending down his thighs into garters. His hair is down but pinned away from his face, and he's wearing that eyeliner that I want to make a mess of.

He stops beside the bed and leans down, tipping my chin up with a finger and brushing his lips on mine. "You green?"

I answer by threading a hand through his hair and dragging him on top of me. He chuckles but willingly moves, letting me grip his hips and guide him to straddle mine. He drops his weight down for the briefest second, stroking my cock with his covered one, but then he's back to hovering, focusing on the battle of power between our mouths.

Usually I give in, because Blair likes the control, and I like the peace it provides. Once he's made a wreck of my mouth, he pulls away and plants his hands on my chest, resting his hips on mine in a tease of friction. "You want this?" he asks, and I slide my hands from his hips to his ass where the g-string rests between his cheeks. I squeeze him firmly but gently, and he moans and rocks forward. He gives me a halfhearted glare, but it's washed out by the smile on his face and the heat in his eyes as he slides a hand down his body to grip his soft cock through the lace. "Want to do me a favor?"

I try not to grin, because we've talked about what we wanted, and I asked for this the moment I saw the underwear in his drawer. "Anything."

He bends to press a kiss to my hip, my abs, my chest, sucks little marks onto my neck, then the lightest kiss to the corner of my lips. "Get me wet, A."

I yank his hips forward, and he nearly chokes on a laugh, climbing up my body until he's positioned with his bulge directly in front of me. He grips onto the headboard, and I tighten my hold on his hips as they start to shake.

I flick my tongue against the lace where the damp head of his dick is stretching the material, and the little shudder I get in response only strengthens when I wrap my lips around the head. I can't suck him like this, so I drag my mouth up and down his length, pressing my tongue to the thick vein on the underside. When I nip at where his balls hang heavy in the lace, one of his hands comes down to dig into my hair as he grinds down on my face.

There's spit everywhere, and the sound of Blair moaning and panting above me has my body buzzing with arousal. Not with the desire to come, but with the insistent need to bring him pleasure. I want to be covered in his release. Filled with it.

Is this what sex feels like for other people? This attraction that wants him to absolutely own me, to use me?

He shifts up, and he doesn't have to say a word for me to push the underwear string out of the way and strain my neck up to lap at his hole. Blair gasps and relaxes his weight so I have easier access, and he opens to me so readily. My tongue slips inside, the muscles constricting around me, but he's pressing me closer, pushing down until I can barely breathe, and that makes it even better.

I love when he gives in. When he lets me give him what he needs.

When he presses my head into the pillow and pulls away, I'm a panting, sweating, dripping mess, but I'd dive back in for more if he gave me the chance.

"Still green?" he asks, and I look up into those dark, concerned eyes and am filled with so much love for this man that I almost want to abandon the plan and just kiss him into the mattress for the next hour.

But I want this. I want to try.

"Green, Bumble B."

He groans and slides back down my body, capturing my lips in an aggressive, powerful kiss that begs every part of me to submit. It isn't even a question. I go lax for him, and he smiles against my mouth. "So good for me. Stay relaxed, alright? I'm going to touch you. We've talked about this. If you need me to stop, just say so. I'll always welcome you into my body."

There's the click of a cap opening, and then a slick finger is pressing into me. It's not the first time he's fingered me, so it takes very little for me to open up. It doesn't hurt, but it feels strange, like when a hair is tickling your nose. Not bad, just slightly off.

It gets better when he crooks his finger and brushes something that sends electric currents up my groin. A few strokes has my dick red and hard like I've never seen it, and as Blair notches another finger at my entrance, he bends forward to take my swollen dick into his mouth.

It's a collage of pleasure/pain after that. His tongue and throat work my cock while his fingers pump inside me. And then he switches to sucking and stretching my rim at the same time.

By the time I hear the rip of foil and the squelch of Blair slipping the condom on his now uncovered cock, my hole is clenching helplessly around the emptiness.

"I'll be slow and easy. 'Yellow' if you need a break. Alright?"

I nod and reach for him, our lips colliding in a beautiful symphony of ecstasy. He positions me, hooking my ankles around his hips and fitting his dick at my hole. He explores my body with a hand as he gently rolls his hip until the tip slips inside. I gasp into his mouth, and he drags his nails down my

chest, distracting me from the pain as he pushes in deeper. When he's buried to the hilt and his balls are flush against my ass, he pulls away from my perfectly wrecked mouth and lets me gasp in a gulp of air.

He leans back, rubbing his hands over my thighs in soothing circular motions. "Look at that," he says, a little breathless, face a full flush that spreads down his chest. "You took my cock so good."

"Not done," I grunt, rocking down on him and making us both shudder. "I'm okay. Green. Fuck me, Blair. Please."

He might take it easy for my first time, but there's nothing shy or hesitant about the way he pulls back and snaps his hips forward. It knocks the breath out of me and makes my gut clench, but it also sends tendrils of pleasure dancing up my spine so I gasp out, "do that again."

He does without question, starting a slow pattern of slipping out and pumping back in. It's an intoxicating feeling, being so full of Blair. He doesn't fuck me hard or fast, careful not to rip the condom with his piercing. He's already wearing a slightly bigger size to make it less of an issue, and since this time technically isn't for protection purposes, we aren't worried about a little cum slipping out.

It's incredible, and Blair doesn't comment on how I close my eyes and throw my head back onto the pillow. Moans punch out of my chest at the movement, of how deep he slips inside, and a barrage of firecrackers goes off in my mind. Is it bad I just want to lay here and enjoy it? Enjoy my body taking his cock over and over; enjoy how good my body makes him feel?

I hardly notice my own cock slapping against my stomach, back to its semi-aroused state. It doesn't deter Blair's thrusts inside of me, doesn't falter his pace.

I reach down to hook my hands behind his thighs, slipping my fingers underneath his garters and pulling him forward until he has no choice but to bury himself inside and grind his cock against my quivering walls.

"Impatient," he mumbles, rocking his hips and throwing his head back. "I know I said I don't need sex, but fuck if I wouldn't live in your ass, Atlas Huxley."

I smile and lift my hands back to his ass, giving them a squeeze and traveling up to cup his back where a plastic wrap covers a pad of gauze. He grins down at me, angling his hips and thrusting his cock into that sweet place that makes my back bow.

"You ready to see it?" he asks, leaning over to capture my lips in a kiss that's much too soft to match the short, powerful pounding he's giving my prostate. I can't even kiss him back let alone answer his question; all I can do is moan and whine into his open mouth. "Give me a color if you want me to come."

I nip his lip as they fall on mine again, grumbling a "green, fucker," as he laughs so hard I feel the vibration in his dick that makes me whimper.

"I love you," he says through a wide grin as he kisses me again, thrusting one final time into my hole as it clenches around him. He swells and pulses inside of me, lips breaking off mine with a pleasured cry. "My galaxy. My lover. My A."

Every nerve in my body lights up. It's not an orgasm, but it's a satisfaction one could never imitate. Feeling Blair tremble all around me, hot and husky moans breathed straight into my ear, knowing that his arousal is sated—this is what heaven feels like for me.

He pulls out slow, still flushed and out of breath, and he pinches off the condom with a cheeky grin. "One last thing." He takes the condom and presses the opening to the tip of my dick, slipping it on just over the head, and when he tips it up his own cum dribbles down my length, coating it and pooling onto my balls. Once it's empty, he tosses the condom into the trashcan by the bed.

Brown eyes flick to mine, and I nod so enthusiastically there's no room for misinterpretation. His smile widens, and he drops down to lap and slurp at my cum-coated cock.

Never would I have guessed that Blair has a fetish for his own cum, but if licking it off of me was a professional sport, Blair would be a gold medalist.

"Do you want to come?" he asks, and even though there's so much blood pumping through my veins and into my dick, seeing his blissed out, flushed cheeks and satisfied smile, the need isn't there. I shake my head, and he dips his to run his tongue through the cum covering my balls and sits up, running a hand up my chest to cup my cheek.

"I love you," he says, and I cradle his palm in mine.

"I love you too. Now get up here so I can see the damn tattoo!"

Blair laughs—a sound of pure joy—and situates himself beside me on the bed. He's on his stomach, arms crossed under his head with his cheek resting on them, facing me. The bandage is above his right ass cheek and wrapping around his side, situated at the bottom of the tree trunk on his back.

It's been a couple of hours since he got back from the tattoo shop, and he wouldn't let me go or see the design until it was ready, and to say I'm impatient would be the world's largest understatement.

I gently peel the sticky gauze back, and it takes all of my self control not to immediately trace the image with my fingers, to not cover it with my mouth the way I've done to all the others.

There's a collection of stars interwoven with the tree's roots, a ball of light with rays that bleed into the stars like the galaxy swirls on his shoulder. In between those are the Hangul characters he wrote out for me weeks ago. The lettering that would be the base of the tattoo.

The stars twist around the branches and thorns that cover his side, and touching the skin just around the redness and feeling Blair shiver under my hand, my eyes begin to sting.

"You made this one?"

He nods, looking over his shoulder even though there's no chance he can see it and eyes landing on mine when I finally tear my gaze away. "My artist improves on my designs, but he lets me bring the ideas to the session."

"Do I get to know what this one means?"

Blair pushes onto his knees, reaching over and grasping the back of my neck and pulling our heads together. "My galaxy. My sun. Atlas. My spark of hope in the pain."

That's it. The tears I've been fighting spill over as I try to laugh it off. His other arm wraps around me, and his nose brushes my cheek, tracking through the wetness.

"I love you."

I take in one deep breath and then another. I swallow a sob and kiss his cheek. His nose. His lips.

"Love you, Bumble B."



#### A FEW WEEKS LATER

"ATLAS, YOU HAVE A couple of shirts in the dryer."

"Thanks, Noah," I say, running around Blair's apartment like a madman, collecting all the things I've brought over these last two months. Noah is sitting at the little kitchenette counter, and as I go to pass he hooks a finger in the waistband of my shorts. Those pleading little Bambi eyes get me every time, and I throw my autopilot on pause to bend down and drop a kiss to his forehead. "Thank you, Panda."

He beams up at me and half stands on his seat to press his lips to mine. Though I have the urge to laugh, I hold it back and let him have this kiss since I won't be around for 'casual kissing lessons' anymore.

It started as a joke whenever he'd walk in on Blair and I making out, but it's kind of become its own thing. Blair says Noah must be happy with the arrangement because he goes to Knockout way less. Says he has his own 'make out orgy' at home, so why go out for it?

It's not the same for the two of us as it is for him and Blair, but it's still nice. Sweet. There's a sense of normalcy we all seem to have fallen into, and the way I've been rushing around packing and preparing to bring my shit back to mine and Shiloh's dorm has made things feel a little stilted all day.

At the very least he's been sleeping better since I've been coming around, according to Blair. He'd hardly had any nightmares the last few weeks, whether he climbs into bed with us or is sleeping on his own, so his eyes aren't nearly as dark as usual; though he still doesn't fall asleep often until three or four in the morning.

"Noah," I laugh into his insistent kiss, gently pushing his shoulders to plop him back down in his seat. "I've gotta get this stuff to the dorm before Blair and I go pick up Shiloh."

He pouts but accepts the words even if he puffs his cheeks out like a chipmunk. "Why can't you just move Shiloh's stuff in too? You get your best friend, Blair gets his brother, and I get another kissing buddy!"

"I don't think Shiloh would be into that."

"Have you asked?"

I sigh, giving up for the time being to wrap my arms around Noah's shoulders and pull him into my chest. "He's just coming back from rehab, and I don't want any serious shocks to his system."

"About that, actually." Coming out of the hall is Blair with his hair wrapped in a loose elastic and wearing my freshmen orientation hoodie. He's sexy as hell whether he's dressed up or casual. "I was talking with Corvin the other day, and we were thinking maybe Shiloh could do with a room change."

I gently remove myself from around Noah and cross my arms with a frown. "I told Shiloh I wasn't moving out."

"I know." Blair rests his hip on the counter beside me. "We want to give Shiloh a chance to grow. Room to heal. None of us wants to see it, but you're his crutch, A. Shiloh knows that no matter how hard he screws up, you'll be there to pick up his pieces. And I love that about you." He reaches out and links our fingers together. "We can help him... but I really think he should put himself back together this time. He said he's been questioning some things about his identity. His sexuality. And

he's going to need room to work out his feelings. As much as he might not want it to be the case, it's almost impossible to stop loving someone you spend all of your time with."

I swallow a heavy lump in my throat. "He'll be angry." Worse, he'll feel betrayed, but that isn't a worry I want to put on Blair's shoulders. Not after I've spent the last two months repairing all the damage those thoughts did to him before.

"He'll be taken care of. But I won't force you."

The problem is he isn't wrong. I do basically deprive Shiloh of natural consequences. If I can help him—save him—chances are I will. I don't know how to do anything else.

"Where does that leave me?" I ask, and by the rosy hue on Blair's pale cheeks and how he strokes his thumb over my knuckles in a nervous pattern, I think I know the answer.

"There's always room for you here," he says, gesturing around to my random piles of things. "Obviously."

"Obviously? Blair Novak." I put my free hand on his cheek, and he leans into it. "Are you asking me to move in?"

Noah lets out a little "woot" behind me, and I gently pull Blair by the hand into the hallway. Once it's just us, I press his back to the wall and bury my face in his throat.

"Is this a good idea?"

He cards a hand into my hair, chuckling softly as he plays with the strands. "You've practically been living here the last two months. It feels... god, Atlas it feels *right*. Having you here is the happiest I've ever been."

"But Shiloh—"

"No 'but Shiloh'. Just give me an answer. Do you want to live here?"

"Yes," I breathe into his neck, finding his pulse points and tracing it with the tip of my nose until I brush his jaw. "Here with you feels like home."

Blair wraps both arms around my back, pulling me to him, being careful of the spot just below my left shoulder blade. The tattoo is practically healed, but the skin is still sore.

It's a smaller mimic of the galaxy that spans his entire upper back, only mine has a new Hangul: Blair. I'd actually booked this appointment with his artist before I knew about Blair's, and it's funny that they were only spaced a few weeks apart.

"Speaking of home," Blair hedges out, and I groan. "No, listen. I thought maybe we could plan something with Ryder for the holidays this year? You two have been getting along well, and I know you're itching to help hunt your brother down... I thought we could make it a family affair?"

I lift my eyes from his shoulder and place a kiss on his jaw. "You just want an excuse for me to introduce you as my boyfriend."

"Absolutely not," he says, but my lips have already found his smile.

"Absolutely, yes."

Not talking to Mom and Dad has kind of made the 'meeting the parents' stage of dating a little null and void. And Blair hasn't heard from his dad in months.

If there's anything I've learned about Blair over the last couple of months, it's that he was deprived of ever being treated like he was special. Like someone was proud of him, proud to have a piece of the heart he gives away so easily. His self worth is in the toilet, and I'm doing everything in my power to raise it up.

"Dare me, Bumble B. Dare me to show you off and I'll do it."

He laughs and it's a sound that makes my heart soar right out of my chest.

"Not the dare I had in mind."

"Oh?" I tip his head back with a gentle tug to his hair. "Like what?"

Our eyes meet, and a slow smile spreads over his lips. "I dare you to be my reason." His voice quakes. "When I need something to hold onto, I want it to be you."

Chapped, quivering lips hover over mine but don't quite close the distance. "Anchor me."

I can't hold back. Blair likes to be in charge in the bedroom, but out here he likes to be guided, pushed, consumed. I kiss him breathless. Until he's a gasping bundle of sweat and the hoodie is tossed to a nondescript corner. Until I'm tracing his map of stars with my eyes closed.

Until my fingertips have made love and laid claim to every inch of inked skin.

"Dare accepted, Bumble B."

# Epilogue

## SHILOH

## **Three Years Later**

"IF YOU DON'T STOP moving, you're going to have another scar for me to cover up."

I roll my eyes, the buzz of Blair's tattoo gun echoing in the small, private space.

"I've been sitting here for two hours. You'd be antsy, too."

"Nope," he says, not looking up from his work. "I'd take a nap."

"Sorry I don't find being repeatedly stabbed with a needle relaxing."

Blair snorts. "No, but it does make you horny."

A flush blooms up my neck, and I throw an arm over my eyes, wanting to smack my annoying as hell older brother but

not wanting to mess up his process.

"Shut the fuck up."

He's not wrong. I've been half tempted to take a break just so I can drag the man waiting on me in the lobby down the hall for a quickie. I've got a pain kink; sue me.

"How much longer, asshole?"

Blair chuckles and pulls back for what I swear is the first time in half a damn hour.

"I've got this side inked. Probably another two hours to do the other, and I'll bring you back in for color another time. If you orgasm in my chair, I'll ban you."

"Oh fuck you. As if you and Atlas haven't gotten up to some nasty shit in here."

All it took was one time barging in to find my best friend bent over the inking chair with a dick in his ass for me to swear off voluntarily hanging out at Blair's shop, or at least his room in the back.

I'd tease them about it but the last time I tried, Atlas threatened to send me some food play video they accidentally made while setting up the kitchen in the new bakery he and his brother are moving into.

"Do you need a breather?" Blair asks, brow raised, and my face must look like a flaming hot Cheetos right now because I can *see* the innuendo in that cheeky smile.

But goddamn him because I do need that breather.

"How long can you give me?"

He pretends to think on it, really just wanting to see me squirm. "Since you're the only one on my books today, technically as long as I want. But since you're my brother... you've got twenty minutes, then I need your butt back in this chair."

"No promises," I say, hopping down, but Blair knocks my shoulder before I can get far.

"Gotta cover that thing unless you want an infection. You are not ruining my work with your boyfriend's cum."

I laugh but let him take the time to cover the tattoo spanning the space under my right nipple. "Again, no promises."

When I step out into the main floor of the shop, before I can even take a look around for my boyfriend, the ball of five foot two energy known as Noah collides into me. He wraps his koala arms around my waist and buries his nose in my left pec because somehow I'm taller than this pipsqueak.

"Noah," I groan but can't put any actual force into dislodging him. He's become like the little stray puppy in our friend group, soaking up attention wherever he can get it.

He grins up at me and nuzzles his nose into my collarbone, trailing it down my sternum and brushing it over the scar under my pec. I used to fight his affection tooth and nail, but the little cub has wormed his way past my defenses.

"I'm looking for Corey."

Noah nuzzles back into my neck and squeezes my waist tighter. "Stepped outside. Can I have a kiss?"

When does Noah not want a kiss? I bend down and peck his cheek, but that obviously isn't good enough because he grabs my face and smashes my mouth into his hard enough to bruise. The little kitten licks he sneaks into my mouth stops me from being angry about it.

I gently push him back and untangle his arms from around me and look around for the scraggly old man that I know is supposed to be keeping an eye on him. I find him in the corner half reading a book—or at least pretending to—with one eye trained on Noah.

I guess he isn't really that old—forties maybe—but he still looks like a homeless man with his long black hair that looks like a rat's nest shoved into a bun in his head. I guide Noah over and deposit him in the seat next to the guy. "Keep an eye on your boy, yeah?"

As I turn, I spot just the man I'm looking for out the shop window, and I give Noah and his partner-of-sorts a salute and bound out to corner Corvin and drag his cranky ass back inside.

"The fuck you doing out here?"

He's leaning against the corner of the shop taking a slow drag of his cigarette, and when I crinkle my nose he rolls his eyes and stomps it into the ground with his boot.

"Sorry, Dimples. Holding out in there?"

My plan was to drag him inside and make him fuck me in the bathroom right outside Blair's room because *fuck him* for knowing I needed to get laid. But double fuck *this man* with his nicknames and bad ass habits I've been trying to make him kick for a damn year and a half.

I stomp over and grab his wrist, dragging him back into the alley just past the dumpster where passersby will have to break their necks to get a look at anything good.

"You're so fucking annoying," I say, to which he grins and watches with hungry eyes as I undo the button on my jeans and shove them plus my boxers down my thighs. "Get down there and suck my dick."

Corvin licks that shit-eating grin, but he drops to his knees and fits my ass-cheeks in his hands without question. "Not gonna fuck me today? Figured you'd be on an adrenaline high."

I shift and press my foot against his crotch, dick hard and straining in his shorts. "No, I didn't bring my goddamn cock to an ink appointment with my *brother*." His eyes flutter closed when I increase the pressure, and I roll mine before giving him a harder than necessary shove in the thigh and readjusting my stance. He wavers but keeps his position, fingers digging into the meat of my ass. "Now shut up before I shove my cock down your throat."

Corvin always looks like a devil down on his knees, dark coils framing his face and even darker eyes pools of liquid lust. He ducks his head, dropping his hands to the backs of my thighs to spread them wide, and then licks a long, languid stripe over my engorged dick. "I'd like to see you try." And then he closes his lips over my erection and *sucks*.

"Fuck, fuck!" I grip his head and hold him there, stomach already clenching tight at the broad strokes of his tongue that dips towards my front hole in teasing sweeps. "I'm not kissing you until you taste like my cum."

Not that it'll take long. Blair was right; that stupid tattoo gun has me all wound up. This is going to go embarrassingly fast.

"How long do we have?" Corvin mumbles, taking a break to leave little love bites along my thigh.

"Ten minutes."

There's that grin again, and even though I tighten my hands in his hair, Corvin reminds me that he only submits because he wants to by refusing to let me shove him back down.

"Then I have ten minutes to tease you and send you back a dripping, horny mess, don't I?"

Fuck him. Fuck him so goddamn hard. When we get home, his ass is getting pounded into the mattress. Because sure as shit he spends the next ten minutes driving me to the edge only to back down at the last second and wait until the need passes to do it all over again.

Right before I have to get back, when I'm sure he's going to leave me hot and bothered, he does something even worse: he pushes me over and pulls away, reaching up to pin my hands to the wall as one hell of a ruined orgasm rocks though me.

### This motherfucker.

BOOK 1 – END



WANT TO KNOW HOW Shiloh and Corvin went from aggressive acquaintances to lovers? Check out their story in **All's Fair in Dare & Domination** (coming early 2024)

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#### **Love Abroad Multi-Author Series**

Under the Twilight Rainfall

Former Foster Brothers, Grumpy/Sunshine, Hurt/Comfort, Only One Couch, Dirty Pictures, Slow Burn, Pining

## About Rikki

Rikki is a nonbinary, trans author of queer romance and is a lover of stories that tug at the heartstrings. Their stories focus heavily on hurt/comfort, mental health, and characters who can't seem to keep their hands off each other.

Living in Tennessee with their two small children and partner, you'll always find Rikki with their nose in a book (or a screen) or you might even catch the constant impromptu karaoke performances they do while daydreaming all of their ideas. (Probably best you don't; wouldn't want to scar anyone for life!)

## Follow Me

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